

The Virtue of ‘I Don’t Know’: Uncertainty as a Rational Alternative to Faith — 25

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Revised August 2026

Central claim

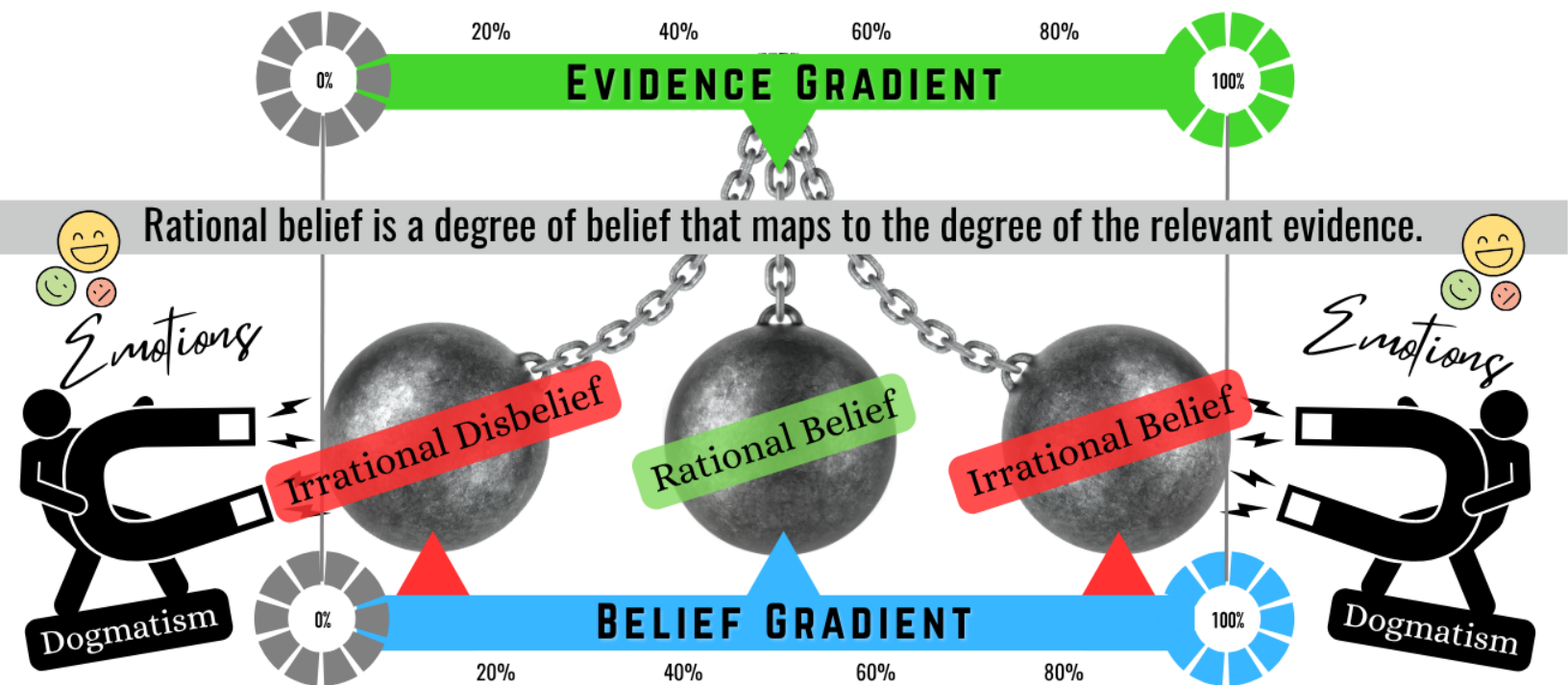
Existential uncertainty is not positive evidence for categorical faith in a specific God-concept. Such faith needs a truth-directed bridge—discriminating evidence or an independently defensible warrant—strong enough to justify the confidence claimed. When no such bridge is available, calibrated credence or suspended judgment—“I do not know”—is epistemically superior, although theism and practically rational hope, trust, or commitment remain open.

Preview: Argument at a glance

Target inference	Bridge test	Why it fails	Rational response
Unresolved ultimate questions are treated as support for categorical faith in one chosen God-concept.	Evidence or independent warrant must favor that conception over live rivals strongly enough for the confidence claimed.	Mere uncertainty is shared by incompatible faiths and nonreligious accounts; comfort and usefulness do not discriminate truth.	Match confidence to the support or suspend judgment. Act, hope, or trust without redescribing commitment as evidence.

The paper tests default-to-faith as an epistemic inference; it does not deny theism or practically rational religious commitment.

Visual preview:



The evidence and belief gradients display the paper’s calibration norm; the magnets depict pressures that can pull confidence toward categorical belief or disbelief. The image illustrates a risk of miscalibration, not a claim that emotion explains every religious or nonreligious commitment.

Abstract

Existential uncertainty is not positive evidence for categorical faith in a specific God-concept. This paper compares that default-to-faith inference with calibrated credence or suspended judgment by applying one bridge test: what truth-directed reason favors the selected conception over live rivals, and is it strong enough for the confidence claimed? A cumulative case favors disciplined uncertainty. Mere lack of an answer is shared by incompatible religious and nonreligious explanations, so it discriminates among none of them. Psychology identifies pressures to mistake closure, perceived pattern, or protected commitment for such a bridge, although those pressures prove no worldview false. Bayesian odds express the same comparative requirement without demanding false precision. Strong accounts of faith then sharpen the result: they either propose an independent warrant or locate faith’s rationality in trust, hope, resilience, or practical commitment rather than extra evidence. Absent a sufficient truth-directed bridge, “I do not know” better preserves calibration, symmetry, and inquiry. This rejects a default-to-faith inference; it does not disprove theism, require equal confidence in all alternatives, or classify every form of faith as irrational.

Keywords: epistemic humility; uncertainty; credence; suspended judgment; faith; philosophy of religion

1. The Inference Under Pressure

Uncertainty is difficult to inhabit. Questions about death, purpose, consciousness, moral reality, and the possibility of transcendence do not remain in a seminar room. They shape grief, identity, allegiance, and action. A settled answer can therefore feel like relief, while “I do not know” can feel like failure. This paper argues that the feeling reverses the epistemic order. Where truth-directed reasons do not favor one answer strongly enough for the confidence claimed, acknowledging that limit is not intellectual surrender. It is accuracy about one’s present position—and that accuracy is the virtue defended here.

The intended reader is a religious inquirer or apologist who treats unresolved existential questions as a reason to default to faith in a particular conception of a deity. A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity, including attributed powers, intentions, character, and relations to human beings. *Theism* is the more general position that at least one deity exists. The distinction matters because uncertainty about ultimate reality does not by itself select one God-concept, one tradition, or even theism from the larger set of possibilities.

The target can be stated as a rule:

The default-to-faith rule

When ultimate questions remain unresolved and categorical faith supplies meaning, stability, or a workable way of life, it is epistemically reasonable to affirm a chosen God-concept rather than remain uncertain.

The criticism is not that every person of faith claims certainty, that practical commitment must wait for proof, or that all evidence favors nonreligious views. Nor does the argument infer falsity from psychological origin. It asks one prior question: what bridge turns lack of an answer into epistemic support for this answer, at the confidence claimed? That is the paper’s *bridge test*. If the bridge is evidence, the evidence must favor the selected conception over live rivals strongly enough for the attitude adopted. If the bridge is an independent source of warrant, that source must be identified and defended. Discomfort, usefulness, and inherited familiarity do neither by themselves.

The governing thesis is therefore comparative and conditional. When no truth-directed bridge favors a specific God-concept strongly enough for categorical confidence, disciplined uncertainty is epistemically superior to adopting that conception by default. Further discriminating evidence or a defensible independent warrant could change the comparison.

2. What Kind of Faith Is at Issue?

The bridge test applies directly to truth-directed confidence, so the kind of faith at issue matters. Debate becomes confused when several attitudes are compressed into the word *belief*. *Credence* is a degree of confidence. Categorical belief is the coarser attitude expressed by flatly accepting a proposition as true. Acceptance can also be a policy for reasoning or action. Trust is directed toward an agent; hope can orient action without predicting success; and commitment can remain stable while risk is fully acknowledged. These attitudes interact, but they are not interchangeable.

Contemporary philosophy of faith makes this point forcefully. Audi treats religious commitment as a form of life involving belief, conduct, emotion, and hope rather than bare assent (Audi, 2011). McKaughan distinguishes belief-centered faith from trusting acceptance and hopeful affirmation, all compatible with different levels of confidence (McKaughan, 2013). Jackson argues that categorical belief and credence can play different roles in faith, while Buchak and Howard-Snyder with McKaughan explain why steadfast or resilient commitment may survive counterevidence without being reducible to maximal confidence (Buchak, 2017; Howard-Snyder & McKaughan, 2022; Jackson, 2019). Any serious critique must therefore reject the simple equation *faith* = *certainty*.

The phrase “I do not know” also names more than one state. It may report low confidence, a broad confidence interval, unresolved higher-order doubt, or suspended judgment. Suspension is itself a doxastic attitude rather than an empty gap: a person withholds categorical judgment because inquiry has not earned one (Friedman, 2013). It need not mean that every option is equally likely. One may judge one account more plausible while declining to treat it as settled.

These distinctions yield the paper’s central fork. If faith is offered as truth-directed confidence in a proposition, it must pass the bridge test. If faith is instead hope, trust, loyalty, acceptance, or a policy for action, it may be rational for practical or relational reasons, but its rationality does not automatically raise the proposition’s probability. Moving between the two senses makes commitment appear to do evidential work it has not done.

3. Why Ignorance Does Not Favor a Specific Answer

3.1 The symmetry test

Suppose an inquirer says: “I cannot resolve why anything exists, so I will take my uncertainty as permission to affirm my inherited God-concept.” Another inquirer could use the same unresolved question to affirm an incompatible God-concept. A third could affirm impersonal ultimism, simulation, idealism, or a naturalistic stopping point. If the premise is only that the question remains open, the premise is shared by all of them.

That symmetry is decisive against uncertainty as positive evidence. A consideration that equally licenses incompatible conclusions does not discriminate among them. It may explain why a decision is needed or why several positions remain permissible. It cannot pass the bridge test by confirming one of them over the others.

The non-discrimination argument

Premise 1. A state of evidence supports one answer over incompatible rivals only if it contains or connects to a consideration that favors that answer strongly enough for the confidence claimed.

Premise 2. Mere existential uncertainty is shared by a specific God-concept, incompatible God-concepts, and nonreligious alternatives; it favors none just by being uncertainty.

Conclusion. Existential uncertainty alone cannot epistemically justify defaulting to one specific God-concept.

The form is valid: if comparative favoring is required and uncertainty supplies none, the default conclusion does not follow. The controversial work lies in the premises. Someone may deny that public evidence is the only

source of warrant, as Plantinga's proper-function account does (Plantinga, 2000). That reply is legitimate, but it proposes a different bridge. The warrant must then come from the reliability of the relevant faculty or experience, not from uncertainty itself. Ignorance cannot be counted as evidence simply because a separate theory might warrant belief.

3.2 The every-outcome problem

A second problem appears when both clarity and confusion are treated as support. If an answer feels compelling, that feeling is counted as guidance. If no answer feels compelling, the need for faith is counted as guidance. If counterevidence appears, perseverance is counted as virtue. A rule under which confidence, doubt, confirmation, and disconfirmation can all be narrated as reasons to maintain the same conclusion does not distinguish success from failure.

The every-outcome argument

Premise 1. Public confirmation requires some possible evidence to favor or disfavor a claim relative to live rivals.

Premise 2. A rule that treats clarity, confusion, confirmation, and disconfirmation as support assigns no possible result contrary weight.

Conclusion. Such a rule cannot discriminate success from error and cannot bridge uncertainty to categorical faith.

This does not show that the selected conclusion is false. It shows that the rule is evidentially idle: it protects a conclusion instead of testing it.

4. Psychology Explains the Pressure, Not the Truth

Psychology helps explain why people may skip the bridge test; it does not decide whether any God-concept is true. Intolerance of uncertainty includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral difficulties in responding to unknown outcomes (Carleton, 2016). Research on need for closure describes "seizing" on an available answer and then "freezing" against alternatives when decisiveness is valued (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). Experiments also indicate that reduced control can increase perception of patterns in noisy material (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Once a commitment is identity-laden, motivated reasoning can make scrutiny directionally uneven (Kunda, 1990).

These findings do not establish that religious belief in general is caused by anxiety, that a particular God-concept is false, or that nonreligious people escape the same pressures. The evidence concerns broad human tendencies, and a genetic fallacy—rejecting a claim solely because of how it arose—would remain a fallacy. The proper conclusion is procedural: domains combining high stakes, weak feedback, ambiguous evidence, and identity are exactly where confidence needs explicit checks.

The strands form a cumulative caution. Uncertainty can make closure attractive; loss of control can make patterns easier to see; and commitment can make contrary evidence harder to absorb. None is decisive alone, and none supplies or defeats a truth-directed bridge. Together they make a default rule hazardous because the rule rewards the very movement that the risk factors predict: from discomfort to a salient answer, then from the answer to protected commitment. The remedy is not suspicion of believers. It is a symmetric demand that every worldview state what would count for it, what would count against it, and why its favored evidence discriminates among rivals.

5. Calibration Without False Precision

5.1 The bridge in probabilistic form

Formal epistemology supplies discipline, but not an oracle. Coherence and accuracy-based arguments explain why degrees of confidence should obey probabilistic constraints and remain sensitive to truth across possible outcomes (Joyce, 1998; Pettigrew, 2016). They do not mechanically generate one uniquely rational prior, one complete hypothesis space, or one exact credence from ordinary evidence. Epistemic permissiveness—the possibility that more than one attitude is rationally allowed by the same evidence—remains a serious position (White, 2005).

The modest norm needed here is weaker: confidence offered as truth-directed must be vulnerable to comparative evidence. Let H denote a specific God-concept, let R denote the relevant live rivals taken together, and let E denote the consideration offered as evidence. Bayesian odds display the bridge test in quantitative form:

$$\frac{P(H | E)}{P(R | E)} = \frac{P(H)}{P(R)} \times \frac{P(E | H)}{P(E | R)}. \quad (1)$$

The first ratio on the right represents prior odds; the second is the likelihood ratio, or how much better the evidence is expected under the target than under its rivals. The formula does not decide those values. It reveals why ignorance is not a free multiplier. If the consideration offered—for example, that ultimate questions remain unresolved—is about equally expected under the target and its rivals, the likelihood ratio is near one and contributes little discrimination. If the rival class is poorly specified, the proper response is wider uncertainty, not automatic transfer of confidence to the most familiar option.

5.2 Imprecision and suspension

Evidence can support a range rather than a point. Moss argues that probabilistic contents can be objects of knowledge, and work on accuracy shows why graded confidence has epistemic structure even when categorical judgment is unsettled (Joyce, 1998; Moss, 2018). One need not manufacture a precise probability for every God-concept. It is enough to represent the direction and limits of support honestly: “plausible but weakly discriminated,” “favored within a broad range,” or “not settled enough for categorical judgment.”

“I do not know” is rational when it reports that structure. It is not a ritual of modesty applied after a conclusion has already been protected. Nor is it mandatory skepticism about ordinary matters. The posture is local to a question and answerable to new evidence. Intellectual humility is best understood as owning limitations while remaining engaged in inquiry, not as lowering confidence indiscriminately (Whitcomb et al., 2017). Recent work also shows that Christian faith can incorporate such humility rather than treating it as an external threat (Callahan, 2025).

6. The Strongest Replies: Supply the Bridge or Change the Question

The strongest replies succeed in one of two ways. They supply an independent truth-directed bridge, or they locate faith’s rationality in action, trust, hope, or resilience rather than in additional evidence. Either route can preserve rational faith. Neither makes mere uncertainty evidence for a selected God-concept.

6.1 Pragmatic permission

James’s defense of the right to believe concerns forced, live, and momentous options that cannot always wait for decisive evidence (James, 1897). That insight blocks a bloodless picture in which rational agents never commit until inquiry is complete. Life imposes deadlines. Friendship, vocation, moral resistance, and religious practice may require action under uncertainty.

The reply does not turn practical need into evidence. Epistemic rationality concerns whether an attitude accurately answers to truth-directed reasons; practical rationality concerns what it is reasonable to do given

values, costs, and opportunities. The two can interact without collapsing into each other (Kelly, 2003). A person may rationally participate in a community, pray, hope, or live experimentally while saying that the governing metaphysical claim remains uncertain. Action can outrun knowledge without pretending to become knowledge.

6.2 Properly basic or experiential warrant

Plantinga argues that Christian belief could be warranted non-inferentially when produced by properly functioning faculties in an appropriate environment under a successful truth-aimed design plan (Plantinga, 2000). This is not defaulting from ignorance. It is a substantive externalist account of warrant. If sound and satisfied in a case, it could defeat the paper's conditional antecedent that no independent warrant privileges the belief.

But the account cannot use uncertainty as its evidence and then also use the theory of warrant as a second route. The relevant questions become whether the faculty is reliable, whether defeaters are present, and whether incompatible religious experiences receive a principled comparative treatment. A private-warrant proposal may explain how belief could be rational without supplying a public reason that another inquirer should adopt it.

6.3 Faith as resilience, trust, or hope

Buchak's account of steadfast faith explains why long-term projects may require resistance to reopening a commitment after each adverse signal (Buchak, 2017). Howard-Snyder and McKaughan similarly connect faith with resilience, and McKaughan emphasizes acknowledged risk rather than the erasure of doubt (Howard-Snyder & McKaughan, 2022; McKaughan, 2013). These are the strongest corrections to the claim that faith is simply binary certainty.

They also sharpen the category boundary. Resilience can be practically wise while credence remains responsive. A marriage, research program, or religious life may need stability, but rational stability has stopping conditions. Evidence can become strong enough to require reconsideration; loyalty does not make every interpretation equally defensible. If steadfastness is a policy for action, it should not be advertised as extra proof. If it is a rule fixing propositional confidence regardless of evidence, the original objection returns.

Route	What the route may rationally preserve	What it does not supply by itself
Evidentially responsive faith	Trust, hope, practice, and commitment while confidence remains open to material evidence and defeaters	Automatic certainty or public confirmation of the trusted proposition
Independent-warrant account	Non-inferential warrant if its reliability conditions are actually satisfied	A license to count ignorance, familiarity, or comfort as evidence
Evidence-insulated faith	Psychological stability and immunity from repeated reconsideration	A truth-tracking method capable of distinguishing success from protected error

Table 1: Three routes under the bridge test. The first two can escape the criticism by preserving evidential responsiveness or supplying independent warrant; the third preserves commitment at the cost of evidential force.

Table 1 shows why the argument is not a blanket condemnation. Faith can remain rational by occupying a category other than evidence-insulated certainty or by supplying the missing bridge. What it cannot do is move between categories opportunistically: practical when evidence is requested, evidential when confidence is praised, and immune when counterevidence arrives.

7. What Disciplined Uncertainty Requires

Disciplined uncertainty is the practice of keeping claimed confidence aligned with whatever passes the bridge test. An honest “I do not know” is therefore active rather than empty. It should govern inquiry in at least five ways.

1. **Name the proposition.** Replace an undefined ultimate answer with a specified God-concept or alternative whose implications can be examined.
2. **Keep live rivals visible.** Include incompatible religious accounts and nonreligious explanations instead of comparing one favored conception only with blank ignorance.
3. **Separate confidence from action.** State what the evidence supports, then make practical decisions using values and costs without redescribing the decision as proof.
4. **State update conditions.** Identify observations, arguments, or defeaters that would raise or lower confidence. A commitment with no possible downward update has left evidential inquiry.
5. **Preserve the option value of inquiry.** Avoid settling an explanatory question merely because a present narrative is emotionally or socially complete.

This discipline applies symmetrically. Categorical disbelief can outrun evidence just as categorical belief can. The title-page visual’s two magnets make that point: dogmatism can pull in either direction. The rational alternative is not compulsory agnosticism forever. It is calibration now, revision when reasons change, and refusal to make ignorance carry a favored conclusion.

There is also a constructive religious implication. A tradition need not treat uncertainty as betrayal. Callahan’s account of intellectual humility within Christian faith and the wider literature on resilient, risk-aware faith show resources for commitment without counterfeit certainty (Callahan, 2025; Howard-Snyder & McKaughan, 2022). A believer can say, “This is the path I trust and practice, while my confidence remains fallible and answerable to evidence.” That sentence may be spiritually less triumphant than certainty. It is epistemically cleaner.

8. Conclusion

Existential uncertainty is not positive evidence for a specific God-concept. It is a description of what the inquirer has not yet resolved. Because that same state is compatible with incompatible religious and nonreligious answers, defaulting to one answer requires a truth-directed bridge: discriminating evidence or an independently defended source of warrant strong enough for the confidence claimed. Without that bridge, the inference fails.

The cumulative case reinforces the point. Symmetry shows that mere uncertainty cannot favor one incompatible answer; psychology explains pressure to skip the bridge without deciding truth; and Bayesian odds make the comparative requirement explicit. The best accounts of faith then clarify the alternatives: faith may rest on non-inferential warrant or function as trust, hope, resilience, or practice rather than certainty. Those accounts make room for rational faith, but they do not transform practical or relational value into extra evidence.

The rational change requested of the reader is simple and demanding: stop treating “I do not know” as an embarrassment to be escaped. Use it when the evidence is genuinely underdetermining. One may still act, hope, belong, and search. What one may not do is turn the discomfort of ignorance into support for a preferred conclusion. Disciplined uncertainty leaves theism open, leaves particular God-concepts open, and leaves inquiry open. That is precisely its virtue.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central inference applies the bridge test to a comparative question. It does not conclude that theism is false or that every form of faith is irrational.

- P1.** If total truth-directed support does not favor one live rival strongly enough for categorical confidence, adopting that rival categorically exceeds the support.
- P2.** Mere existential uncertainty does not favor a specific God-concept over incompatible God-concepts or nonreligious alternatives.
- P3.** Psychological comfort, practical usefulness, hope, trust, and resilient commitment can supply reasons for action or allegiance without adding truth-directed support for the proposition adopted.
- P4.** Absent further discriminating evidence or a defensible independent warrant, calibrated credence or suspended judgment remains proportioned to this non-discriminating support, whereas categorical default faith exceeds it.
- P5.** Other things equal, an attitude proportioned to total truth-directed support is epistemically superior to an attitude that exceeds that support.
- C.** Therefore, absent further discriminating evidence or a defensible independent warrant, calibrated credence or suspended judgment is epistemically superior to defaulting to categorical faith in a specific God-concept.

Validity. Premises P1–P5 jointly entail C. P1–P3 establish why the target default lacks a sufficient truth-directed bridge; P4 identifies how the two compared attitudes relate to the available support; and P5 supplies the comparative epistemic principle. Applying P5 to P4 yields C. The conclusion remains explicitly defeasible by discriminating evidence or an independent warrant.

Support for the premises. P1 states a proportionality requirement on comparative support. P2 is an interpretive claim about what mere uncertainty contains; it can be defeated by identifying genuinely discriminating evidence, which the conclusion explicitly allows. P3 is supported by the distinction between epistemic and practical rationality and by accounts of faith as trust, hope, or commitment. P4 applies P1–P3 to the target comparison but remains case-sensitive because an inquirer may possess independent warrant unavailable to others. P5 is the governing normative bridge, grounded in work on credence, suspension, and intellectual humility. The inference is deductively valid, while the soundness of its application depends on the person's total evidence and warrant.

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