

Part 2a: Virtuous Religious Dogmatism: A Response to Hook and Davis

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Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself.

Culture and Value (1980)

Ludwig Wittgenstein, 34e.

I think we owe a debt of gratitude to Joshua Hook and Don Davis for helping us think through some difficult issues surrounding intellectual humility and religious conviction. Their psychological perspective was both illuminating and deeply challenging.

While there are certainly areas that I will want to push back on, I was happy to see just how much agreement there seems to be between our two opening statements. I think our respective definitions of intellectual humility might very well be largely compatible (though, of course, the devil is in the details).³³ What is more, I think Hook and Davis do an excellent job helping us see at least three reasons why religious beliefs and convictions can be so very prone to dogmatism: First, religious beliefs are often epistemically foundational and “load-bearing” for large swaths of people’s belief structures about themselves and the world around them (call this the *load-bearing reason*). Second, religious beliefs often serve as signals of group loyalty and membership—signals that regulate who we listen to, who we trust (call this the *group loyalty reason*). And third, religious beliefs are often taken to be most valuable when held with certainty (call this the *assumed certainty reason*).

That said, however, Hook and Davis seem to think that this propensity towards religious dogmatism is incompatible with intellectual humility. I don’t think that’s necessarily the case. While I would agree that religious dogmatism *often* leads to intellectual arrogance (assuming, of course, that most religious views are mutually exclusive), I want to stress that this isn’t *necessarily* the case.³⁴ As I argued in my opening statement, there is theoretical space for virtuous religious dogmatism.

Dogmatism Is Compatible with Intellectual Humility

Consider my belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ and my belief that the Holocaust really did happen. Both of these beliefs seem to bear the same hallmarks of dogmatism as those identified by Hook and Davis in religious beliefs. Both of these beliefs are going to play an important role within the belief structure I use when trying to understand myself and the world (load-bearing reason). If $2 + 2 \neq 4$, then my entire

33. To be sure, there are certainly aspects of their account that I am not ready to accept. For example, it’s not at all obvious to me that intellectual humility is really a “subdomain” of humility. While I think it is perfectly natural to think that intellectual humility is a special sort of humility, this may very well not be the case. For example, if humility is, according to Hook and Davis, “not thinking of oneself too highly or lowly” and if intellectual humility involves “having an accurate view of...one’s ideas,” then we might instead think humility is actually a subset of intellectual humility—we might think that humility is simply having an accurate view of one’s idea about oneself.

34. If the diversity of religious perspectives is largely mutually exclusive (such that, for example, Hinduism can’t be true if Judaism is true and vice versa), then that seems to mean that most people are drastically misinformed regarding their religious beliefs and convictions. And seemingly that will mean that such people will be attributing far more positive epistemic status to their religious beliefs than such beliefs actually enjoy, which matches my definition of intellectual arrogance.

understanding of mathematics, science, logic, and rationality (and everything I apply it to, including my understanding of self) would seem to be drastically undermined. Likewise, if the Holocaust really didn't happen, then my entire understanding of history, my trust of others, and the role of authority would be drastically undermined. Additionally, I'm guessing most of us would be inclined to alienate anyone who seriously denied that $2 + 2 = 4$ or that the Holocaust happened (group loyalty reason). And I suspect most of us would agree that these sorts of beliefs really should be held with an extremely high degree of confidence (the assumed certainty reason). Does this mean that my extremely high confidence that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that the Holocaust really happened is somehow intellectually vicious? Absolutely not. These sorts of beliefs *should* be held dogmatically, and, I'd suggest, that such dogmatism is perfectly compatible with intellectual virtue, with intellectual humility.

As I noted in my opening statement, it may very well be the case that some religious beliefs are also compatible with virtuous dogmatism. Just as we can "see" that $2 + 2 = 4$, many philosophers of religion would want to claim that we can just "see" that God exists. And if all this is right, then some religious beliefs might just be the sort of things—like the belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ —that we can believe with a virtuous dogmatism, with unwavering epistemic commitment, while remaining intellectually humble.

Widespread Disagreement

But someone who wants to resist the claim that intellectual humility is conceptually compatible with religious dogmatism might very well point out some salient differences between beliefs like $2 + 2 = 4$, the Holocaust occurred, and so on, and religious beliefs. In particular, such a person could highlight the fact that most every rational and sufficiently informed person believes that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that the Holocaust occurred, while, in contrast, there is very little agreement when it comes to religious matters.³⁵ Rational and sufficiently informed people *can* and *do* disagree widely regarding the vast majority of religious claims and beliefs. So perhaps it is not so much the fact that religious beliefs are taken to be load-bearing group-loyalty identifiers that are prone to enjoy assumed certainty that makes them incompatible with intellectual humility. Perhaps it's those features *in conjunction with widespread disagreement*—a phenomenon that Hook and Davis seem rightly concerned about—that forces such religious dogmatism away from intellectual humility.

But then again, perhaps there are cases where dogmatism is permissible even in the face of widespread disagreement. Consider the following case from Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*:

FRISIAN FLAG: The police haul me in, accusing me of a serious crime: stealing your Frisian flag again. At the police station, I learn that the mayor claims to have seen me lurking around your back door at the time (yesterday midafternoon) the crime occurred; I am known to resent you. I had means, motive, and opportunity; furthermore there have been other such sordid episodes in my past. However, I recall very clearly spending the entire afternoon on a solitary hike near Mount Baker.³⁶

The protagonist's belief in FRISIAN FLAG that he is not a thief is presumably fairly foundational and epistemically "load-bearing." After all, it would be quite the epistemic blow if it were the case that his distinct memory of hiking Mount Baker and his distinct lack of memory of stealing a Frisian flag were somehow deceptive. And such a belief could easily be imagined to be central to the protagonist's group identification. Presumably the protagonist would expect his friends and family to believe him when he says he didn't steal the flag, and presumably he would feel extremely alienated if they didn't, despite his pleading. Finally, the protagonist's clear and distinct memory of hiking Mount Baker presumably affords him something close to certainty, and that such conviction is perfectly warranted and expected. As such, the protagonist's belief that he didn't steal the flag seems to be a load-bearing

35. Though arguably there are some areas of widespread agreement. The belief that at least one god exists, for example, is one belief that the vast majority of people around the world happen to agree on.

36. Plantinga, 2000, p. 450.

group-loyalty identifier that is assumed to enjoy something close to certainty. And, more importantly for our current purposes, this is a belief that most people disagree with him about.

Most people, let's assume, who are availed of the information surrounding the protagonist's "means, motive, and opportunity" for purportedly stealing of the flag believe that he actually stole it—they believe that he is the thief. Does this mean that if the protagonist were to remain steadfast and dogmatic in his insistence that he didn't steal the flag, that he would be guilty of intellectual vice? Surely not! Because he didn't steal the flag, and he *knows* he didn't steal the flag. And so it looks like even a belief that is a load-bearing group-loyalty identifier that is assumed to enjoy a level of certainty and faces widespread disagreement *can nevertheless be dogmatically held while remaining intellectually virtuous*.

And again, it's possible some religious beliefs are like this. Suppose a group of people really do, truly "see" that God exists and that the convictions of their specific religious tradition are true. Such people, it seems, could be just like the protagonist in FRISIAN FLAG. Their religious beliefs would be load-bearing group-loyalty identifiers that are assumed to enjoy a level of certainty, even in the face of widespread disagreement; even so, if they really see that God exists, if they *know* that God exists, then it seems as though they can remain dogmatic regarding their religious beliefs and remain intellectually virtuous, even intellectually humble.

Conclusion

So, in conclusion, I want to suggest that there is nothing *necessarily* incompatible with intellectual humility and dogmatically holding to religious beliefs that are load-bearing group-loyalty identifiers that are assumed to enjoy a level of certainty while facing extensive and widespread disagreement. But it is important to note just how *weak* this conclusion is. I'm not suggesting that all instances of religious dogmatism are compatible with intellectual humility. Far from it! I am happy to agree that most people end up attributing to their religious beliefs (including anti-religious beliefs) far more positive epistemic status than they really deserve; I'm happy to agree that most people end up holding their religious beliefs with a degree of intellectual arrogance. Nevertheless, what I want to suggest is that it is at least possible to be in a situation where one can be dogmatic about one's religious beliefs while being intellectually humble.

But how can I know if I'm *in* such a situation? Someone might claim to just "see" that a god of a certain sort exists. And someone else might claim to "see" that a very different god exists. How can we tell who's in the right sort of relationship with the truth? That's the trick. That's the rub.³⁷ And as I think Hook and Davis have shown us, we're notoriously bad at judging these sorts of things. As Wittgenstein said, "Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving oneself."³⁸ So while I think an understanding of intellectual humility can help us appreciate just what is going wrong in cases of intractable religious disagreements, perhaps it cannot ultimately resolve such disagreements. Personally, I'm okay with that. It leaves room for *other* virtues to play their role—virtues like kindness, honesty, and plain old humility.

References

- Hawthorne, John, & Srinivasan, Amia. 2013. "Disagreement without Transparency: Some Bleak Thoughts." In *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays*, edited by David Christensen, & Jennifer Lackey (pp. 9–30). Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.
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37. And this might actually be the case for disagreements in general. See Hawthorne and Srinivasan, 2013.

38. Wittgenstein, 1980, 34e.