

Religious Disagreement

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In this essay I try to motivate and formulate the main *epistemological questions* to ask about the phenomenon of religious disagreement. I will not spend much time going over proposed answers to those questions. I start with some fiction and then, hopefully, proceed with something that has at least a passing acquaintance with truth.

1. Introduction

In R. Scott Bakker's novel *The Warrior-Prophet*, Achamian is a sorcerer who is occasionally hired by kings to tutor their sons in academic subjects such as history, composition, and mathematics (but not sorcery, the education of which is closely guarded). One of Achamian's students, Prince Proyas, becomes a king as a relatively young man. Achamian is skeptical about the epistemic lives of most people. Proyas, affectionately known as Prosha, grows to be a fervent believer in the established religion of his time and culture. As an adult Proyas reflects on his childhood education under Achamian.

Beliefs were the foundation of actions. Those who believed without doubting, he would say, acted without thinking. And those who acted without thinking were enslaved.

That was what Achamian would say.

Once, after listening to his beloved older brother, Tirummas, describe his harrowing pilgrimage to the Sacred Land, Proyas had told Achamian how he wished to become a Shiral Knight.

"Why?" the portly Schoolman [Achamian] had exclaimed....

"So I can kill heathens on the Empire's frontier!"

Achamian tossed his hands skyward in dismay. "Foolish boy! How many faiths are there? How many competing beliefs? And you would *murder* another on the slender hope that yours is somehow the *only one*?"

"Yes! I have *faith*!"

"Faith," the Schoolman repeated, as though recalling the name of a hated foe. "Ask yourself, Prosha ... What if the choice isn't between certainties, between this faith and that, but between faith and *doubt*? Between renouncing the mystery and embracing it?"

"But doubt is weakness!" Proyas cried. "Faith is strength! Strength!" Never, he was convinced, had he felt so holy as at that moment. The sunlight seemed to shine straight through him, to bathe his heart.

"Is it? Have you looked around you, Prosha? Pay attention, boy. Watch and tell me how many men, out of weakness, *lapse* into the practice of doubt. Listen to those around you, and tell me what you see ..."

He did exactly as Achamian had asked. For several days, he watched and listened And in the midst of innumerable boasts, declarations, and accusations, only rarely did he hear those words Achamian had made so familiar, so commonplace ... The words Proyas himself found so difficult! And even then, they belonged most to those Proyas considered wise, even-handed, compassionate, and least to those he thought stupid or malicious.

"I don't know."

Why were these words so difficult?

"Because men want to murder," Achamian had explained afterward. "Because men want their gold and their glory. Because they want beliefs that *answer* to their fears, their hatreds, and their hungers." (374-5)

This excerpt contains several ideas regarding our topic. First, Achamian seems to be saying that Proyas would be foolish to be so confident in his religion that he go and kill the heathens with respect to that religion. Achamian's offered reason for doubt appears to be the diversity of religions. In response, Proyas thinks having faith is enough justification for those murders. He seems to think that one simply must have *some* worthwhile religion, and any worthwhile religion will demand the murder of its opponents. Achamian replies that one does not have to choose among the various murderous religions; agnosticism, which means embracing the mystery of the universe without corresponding belief, or at least murderous belief, is a genuine alternative. Proyas responds with the accusation that such agnosticism goes hand in hand with weakness. Achamian disagrees. Under Achamian's recommendation Proyas then observes that doubt appears to be both favorably linked with wisdom, compassion, and even-handedness, and opposed to stupidity and maliciousness. Doubt no longer looks like it's linked with weakness. Achamian has a harsh diagnosis: those who adopt confident religious beliefs, at least those that recommend murder, do so out of fear, hatred, and hunger—not anything like evidence.

I think every reader of this essay will go along with most of what Achamian has to say. One should not be so confident in the truth of a religion that tells one to murder the heathens. If your faith is telling you to bomb an abortion clinic, for instance, it's time reassess those beliefs, as one needs to be pretty darn sure of one's beliefs before one goes around murdering people.

So much is obvious to enlightened folk, many of whom are happy to adopt less violent religious beliefs. But I think Achamian's basic point applies to those beliefs as well: how can you justify any religious belief at all, pro *or* con, given that you know full well that there are a great many highly intelligent and well informed people who reject that belief? The religious belief might be something relatively specific, such

as 'Jesus rose from the dead', 'Salvation occurs only through Jesus', or 'The soul is reincarnated'. Or it might be something more fundamental, such as 'God exists'. It could be something scientific such as 'Humans were created in pretty much their present form in the last few thousand years', 'There is no afterlife for humans', or 'The earth was covered in water several thousand years ago'. It could also be opposing beliefs: 'Jesus didn't rise from the dead', 'Salvation can occur through non-Christian means', 'God doesn't exist at all', or 'Humans evolved from other sorts of animals over a great many millennia'. Even if in *some* cases apparent disagreement is merely apparent (e.g., so-called disagreements about "salvation" might be artifacts of different understandings of that term), it's clear that in an enormous number of cases only one group can be right: Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn't, we either are or are not conscious after the death of our bodies, and either a person created the physical universe or no one did. In each case if you aren't culturally sheltered then you are perfectly aware that there are many very intelligent people who disagree with you. If you believe X is true and they think X is false, well then you're definitely saying that they are wrong and you are right. But what makes you think you and your co-believers are right and all those other folks are wrong? Is your group smarter or more careful in its reasoning? Does your group have key evidence the other group lacks—and if you think that's the case, then how do you know they don't have key evidence that you lack? Has your group evaded some bit of irrationality that infects the other group? If you think your group has got the issue right, and everyone who disagrees has got it wrong, you probably think that your group has some epistemic advantage the other group fails to have—but do you?

It can be difficult to be rationally confident in answering those questions in the previous paragraph in a way that reflects happily on oneself. In particular, it will often be difficult if you are familiar with the diversity of, and epistemic credentials of members of, religious viewpoints. Suppose I have the following beliefs: God exists, Jesus is God, and some of us have eternal life in Heaven. I know perfectly well that there are a great many philosophers who have examined the publically available evidence for these claims and have found it highly defective; indeed, many think the evidence against my beliefs is very strong. In fact, I'm aware that a clear majority have this skeptical view about my religious beliefs. I am not oblivious, living under a rock; and I am not in denial, fooling myself with wishful thinking. I know perfectly well that my religious beliefs are highly controversial in the uncomfortable way: they are denied by a great number and percentage of the *best thinkers around* who have studied the publically available information that might be relevant to the rational assessment of my beliefs.

Despite all that, I think it's pretty clear that a great many people are utterly reasonable in sticking to their beliefs in the face of religious disagreement—in one familiar sense of 'reasonable'. For instance, a child with religious belief B might be told by her parents and *all* the other people she looks up to that although there are people who doubt or even reject B, they are screwed up in any of various ways: horribly irrational, biased, brainwashed, ignorant, insane, etc. She believes them on this score; why on earth would she not do so given that she is sheltered from reality, she has always unreflectively trusted those adults, and those adults have proven reliable about so many issues before? She has a false belief—it's far from true that all those people are screwed up in those ways—but she is completely reasonable in accepting it and then, as a consequence, sticking with her belief in B. Nothing relevant

changes if the believer is a sheltered adult instead of a child. Neither is this verdict dependent on the belief being a pro-religious one: it applies to atheism and other anti-religious views.

Those are the easy cases. Of course, we still have the task of telling an informative story about the kind of reasonability in question—the kind that applies to her sticking with her belief in B. The kind of reasonableness the child has means we can't truthfully accuse her with the charges 'she should know better' and 'if she doesn't change her view, then she's being foolish'. The theistic child has strong testimony that there is good evidence for her religious beliefs; more simply, she just has strong testimony for the truth of her theistic beliefs. Note that the testimony suffices for an ordinary type of epistemic reasonableness in her religious beliefs *independently of the testimony's origin*, where the origin might be someone who directly perceived God but also might be someone who was insane and deluded. For comparison, even if the whole idea of electrons and protons is a stunningly successful and long-running gag perpetrated by generations of twisted physicists and chemists, it remains true that in ordinary senses of 'testimony' and 'epistemically reasonable' we non-scientists have excellent testimony for our shared belief that trees contain atoms and atoms contain electrons and protons—testimony good enough to make our belief reasonable in an epistemically robust manner.

2. *Awareness of Religious Disagreement*

The topic of religious disagreement gets most interesting when the believer isn't sheltered. She need not actually *meet* anyone who disagrees with her. Instead, her problems often begin with a simple train of thought that can be expressed as follows.

Hang on. There are loads of religions out there: dozens and dozens if you separate different kinds of Christianity, Buddhism, etc. They can't all be right: they conflict in many ways. If the Catholics are right about X, then the Protestants are wrong about X and the Buddhists are so far off it's almost comical. How do I know mine is the right one? I think Jesus rose from the dead; lots of other people say he didn't; we can't both be right! Of all the dozens of religious views out there, how do I know I've managed to latch on to the right one? Is it okay [practically? morally? epistemically?] for me to just *have faith* or *hope* that I've got the true one?

As soon as one is well aware of and reflects seriously on the diversity of religious opinion, pro and con, one is put in what looks to be an epistemically uncomfortable position. *If* one manages to rationally come to think that the folks on the other side are the epistemic inferiors to the folks on one's home team (one's home team is the people who share one's belief), *then* one usually can be reasonable in sticking to one's religious belief. For instance, I am rationally confident that Hell is not located in the center of Earth, even though that belief might be quite controversial among 10 year olds who have been brought up in certain primitive religious communities. The problem, of course, is that the more worldly one becomes the harder it is to always rationally think that one's home team has the advantage over the people one disagrees with. And please keep in mind that this applies to atheists as well as theists.

Let's look a little more carefully at how awareness of religious disagreement usually comes about, focusing on pro-religious belief. In most cases one acquires the pro-religious belief B via testimony when one is young, where (i) the testimony comes from people one would regard as one's superiors on the matter (for one thing, they are adults) and (ii) one learns pretty quickly that *a great many people* have that belief B, usually including many people one would judge to be one's epistemic superiors on the belief. It is usually later that one learns of people who disbelieve B, and this realization has several distinct stages. First, one learns of other religions—ones that differ from one's own. That's stage 1. Next, one learns that these other religions have different beliefs: whereas mine has beliefs B1 and B2, that other one has beliefs B3 and B4. That's stage 2. Note that these are different stages: there could be religions that differed in numerous significant ways but had the same beliefs. (In fact, I suspect that many people don't consider beliefs to be central to religions.) Third, one learns that the other religion denies what one's own religion affirms: we think their B3 is false and they think our B1 is false. That's stage 3. So, finally, the person becomes aware of religious disagreement as such: we can't all be right in our religious beliefs, so someone is wrong. These stages might all occur in one conversation, but then again their unfolding might occur over a span of years; it depends on the child's intellectual sophistication and curiosity, as well as the remarks of her conversational participants. And when one learns about the disagreement, one typically learns that there are *a great many people* who disbelieve B (e.g., one learns of multiple *world* religions). When you disagree with your sister about which relative played the piano at your grandmother's house when you were little children, there is a *disagreement-with-one* case; religious disagreement is virtually always a *disagreement-with-many* case.

Finally, after reaching stage 3, one *can* proceed to the "Wait a minute" stage 4 described above—but this doesn't always happen. Even at stage 3, the problem of religious disagreement might not arise with much force. A great many Catholics, for instance, will acknowledge that there are millions of people who think the central tenets of Catholicism are false, but *no reflection at all* goes along with that knowledge. The same holds for other faiths of course. (This can be difficult to comprehend for philosophers, since they are hyper-reflective.) Only when the "Wait a minute: how do we know we're right and they're wrong?" attitude passes through one's consciousness with some force does the epistemic challenge become acute—or at least has the *potential* for being such.

If my students are at all representative (at Fordham University, which has academically inclined students), then the "Wait a minute" stage 4 of awareness is fairly uncommon. For what it's worth, when I teach the topic I encounter a significant percentage of students who by their behavior and facial expressions have clearly not reached stage 4 even though they have managed to reach stage 3. Just because the challenge of religious disagreement has been served on silver platter does not mean that people will catch a whiff of it. From now on I will address only those people who have reached the "Wait a minute" stage of awareness and reflection.

One natural thing to do upon reflecting on disagreement is wonder whether your group has some advantage over the disagreeing group. For instance, although I think that global warming is happening I know that there are many people who disagree with me. I stick with my belief in the face of disagreement because I think my group—the group of people who agree with me—is more likely than

the opposing group to have come up with the right answer to 'Is global warming happening?' For one thing, my group has much better epistemic credentials regarding the relevant topics. Here is another apt example: although I think Jones is going to win the political election, and I base this belief on my readings of sophisticated statistical analysis of many polls, I know that many prominent political pundits disagree with me based on their alleged insider knowledge of how the election is going. Even so, I rationally stick with my belief because I rationally think the statisticians are more likely to get the right answer than the pundits. Similarly, I might think Jesus is the Messiah because I think Christians "know something others have missed", where that phrase indicates some crucial piece of evidence (e.g., I think Christians have had personal experiences of Jesus that suggest or show he's the Messiah).

However, it's not true that in all cases of reflective religious disagreement the person who sticks with her belief after significant reflection thinks that her group is better positioned to judge B. There are a couple other categories of cases to consider for the person who reaches stage 4.

- Category 1: You think that your group is in a significantly *better position* to judge B correctly compared to the disagreeing group. For instance, you think the experts are clearly on your side.
- Category 2: You think your group is roughly just as likely to judge B correctly as the disagreeing group. You think the experts are split, or there are no experts and the people who accept B are the epistemic peers of those who reject B.
- Category 3: You have thought about the better position issue but realize that you have no idea which group has the advantage.

3. *Primary Questions About Religious Disagreement*

With respect to each category there are at least two questions worth asking, one epistemological and one social:

The Disagreement Question: Suppose a person in that category reflects intelligently on the fact that her religious belief B (pro or con) is rejected by a huge number of people—many of which she knows to be intelligent, sane, and informed. She also realizes that her belief is endorsed by yet another huge number of intelligent, sane, and informed people. Suppose further that after reflecting about it (via the "Wait a minute" idea) she sticks with her belief in B. One question is this: is this *intellectual response* to the realization of disagreement reasonable (assuming, if you like, that her belief B started out reasonable)?

The Frequency Question: How often do the religious disagreements we find pressing for personal, political, or social reasons fall into the category in question?

To be sure, there are other philosophically worthwhile questions to ask, such as 'If someone satisfies the description in the (first three sentences of the) Disagreement Question, how should she *behave* towards

people who disagree with her and who she respects?', 'If someone satisfies the description in the Disagreement Question, and her belief was *justified* or amounted to *knowledge* beforehand, is it justified or does it amount to knowledge afterwards, assuming she retains that belief?', 'If someone satisfies the description in the Disagreement Question, is her belief retention *wise*?' This essay treats only the matter of the *epistemic reasonability* of the retaining of belief.

It's easy to misunderstand the Disagreement Question. Consider a case in which a person starts out with a belief that is irrational (e.g., her overall evidence suggests it's false, not true; and she believes it based on wishful thinking), obtains some new relevant evidence concerning that belief, responds to that new evidence in a completely reasonable way, and yet ends up with an irrational belief.

Bub believes J, that Japan is a totalitarian state, despite his poor evidence because he has a raging, irrational bias that rules his views on this topic. His "evidence" regarding Japan is what he reads about it, and what he reads certainly does not suggest that Japan is a totalitarian state. He has let his bias ruin his thinking on the matter. Then he gets some new information: some Japanese police have been caught on film beating government protestors. After hearing this, Bub retains his old confidence level in J.

I take it that when Bub learns about the police, he has not acquired some new information that should make him think 'Wait a minute; maybe I'm wrong about Japan'. He shouldn't lose confidence in his belief J merely because he learned some facts that do not cast any doubt on his belief!

The initial lesson of this story: *Bub's action of not lowering his confidence in his belief as a result of his new knowledge is reasonable even though his retained belief itself is unreasonable.* Bub's assessment of the original evidence concerning J was irrational, but his reaction to the new information was rational; his subsequent belief in J was (still) irrational. The question, 'Is Bub being rational after he got his new knowledge?' has two reasonable interpretations: 'Is his retained belief in J rational after his acquisition of new knowledge?' (answer: no, as his total evidence is still quite unsupportive of J) vs. 'Is his response to the new knowledge rational?' (answer: yes, as he was given no reason to lower his confidence in J).

The question 'What does rationality demand when one discovers disagreement (or learns some other relevant information)?' is a *bad* question: it's ambiguous and, crucially, the ambiguity is important—it *matters*. On the one hand, "rationality demands" that upon his acquisition of new knowledge Bub drop his belief J that Japan is a totalitarian state: after all, his overall evidence for it is very weak. On the other hand, "rationality demands" that upon his acquisition of new knowledge Bub keep his belief J *given that he has not revisited the basis of his old belief and he has not received any new reason to revise that belief*. This situation still might strike you as odd. After all, we're saying that Bub is being rational in keeping an irrational belief! But no: that's not what we're saying. The statement 'Bub is being rational' is ambiguous: is it saying that Bub's retained belief J is rational or is it saying that Bub's retaining of that belief was rational? The sentence can take on either meaning, and the two meanings end up with different verdicts: the retained belief is irrational but the retaining of the belief is rational.

Therefore, we have to distinguish two questions about the acquisition of new information such as that regarding disagreement:

- After you acquire some new information relevant to a certain belief B of yours, what should your new level of confidence in B be in order for *your new level of confidence regarding B* to be rational?
- After you acquire some new information relevant to a certain belief B of yours, what should your new level of confidence in B be in order for *your response to the new information* to be rational?

The latter question concerns an *intellectual action* (an intellectual response to the acquisition of new information), whereas the former question concerns the *subsequent level of confidence* itself, the new confidence level you end up with, which comes about as a causal result of the intellectual action.

For my money, the rationality of the intellectual action of belief retention is the main issue in the epistemology of disagreement; the question of the rationality of the subsequent confidence level in the retained belief is less important.

4. *Recent Epistemology*

Epistemologists have recently looked at a variety of disagreement cases, not limited to religion. For instance, there has been a great deal of work on the *epistemic peer problem* (e.g., Feldman 2006, Kelly 2006, Elga 2007, Christensen 2007, Lackey 2010a and 2010b, Frances 2012), which can be formulated thus:

You believe B and you don't know what Jones thinks about B. You then come to think that Jones is *just as likely as you* to have correctly figured out B's truth-value. You may think this because you believe all of the following: Jones is about as smart as you are, Jones is about as informed as you are regarding the topics relevant to B, Jones has all your evidence and you have all her evidence, you and Jones are about the same when it comes to relevant biases, and Jones has thought about B for about as long as you have and under about the same quality of circumstances. (Alternatively, you think you surpass Jones on some of those factors but she makes up for it by surpassing you on other factors, so you still come out about even.) And then you learn that she thinks B is false, whereas you had concluded that B is true. Given that you already judged her to be your epistemic equal when it comes to figuring out whether B is true, should you now trust your judgment over hers and stick with your belief in B? Or should you suspend judgment? Or should you just lower your confidence in B—and if so, by how much?

Articles have been written on the peer problem by instantiating B with various religious claims (e.g., Kraft 2007, Feldman 2007, Oppy 2010, Thune 2010, Audi 2011, DePoe 2011, Lackey forthcoming, Bogardus forthcoming). Although these cases are theoretically interesting, in my view it is tricky to apply

the theoretical issues of interest to epistemologists to the *real-life* cases of religious disagreement. There are several primary reasons for this, each of which throws light on the epistemology of the types of religious disagreement that are actually most common.

First, most of the pressing cases of religious disagreements are many-on-many, not one-on-one as is suggested by the recent epistemology literature. If I'm Jewish and I wonder whether the Christians are right about Jesus being the Messiah, I'm going to ponder whether *we Jews* have some evidence or some other factor that gives us an advantage over *the Christians*. I won't be too concerned whether *I* happen to have an advantage over *my neighbor* who is Lutheran.

Second, in an enormous number of cases people think, at least implicitly, that their group is in a better position to judge B. I will think that my group knows something the critics have missed (e.g., we Christians have experienced Jesus in a certain epistemically fruitful way; we atheists understand science and critical thinking better than theists). So an enormous number of religious disagreements won't be recognized peer cases on either an individual *or* group basis. In another large number of cases people realize that they have no idea which group is better positioned (e.g., on how to interpret the book *Genesis*). Hence, focusing on the peer category 2 makes one miss the enormous number of cases in the other two categories (the two: 'My group is better positioned' and 'I have no idea who is better positioned'). And don't forget the many millions of people who don't reflect at all on the fact of disagreement, beyond merely noting that religions disagree on some matters. In my judgment the peer category 2 is small compared to the others.

Third, for the central religious belief—'God exists'—it's arguable that the vast majority of people will insist that they are in the better position to judge the belief (and as a result these disagreements will fall into category 1, not 2). A great many theists will think that the atheists are just missing out on experiencing God; the atheists will generally think the theists have let any of a variety of epistemic weaknesses infect their judgment. I'll examine this phenomenon in the next section.

Fourth, although there are category 2 cases of peer disagreement when it comes to religion, the notion of peerhood has to be extremely loose, allowing for a great deal of difference in the two groups, in order for there to be a significant number of category 2 cases. For instance, two disagreeing theists might consider themselves peers over whether Jesus really raised anyone from the dead, whether an afterlife Heaven really exists, whether evolution is true, whether God is really perfectly good, whether God ever changes, whether salvation occurs through Jesus or other means, whether the Pope's decisions and views are substantially influenced by God, etc. However, in those real-life cases I doubt whether people often have any opinion regarding "peerhood" beyond that expressed by 'Well, I figure we're very roughly equal'. They probably won't think the two groups have the *same evidence* or are equal on other epistemically relevant factors such as time devoted to the issue, intellectual ability, relevant background knowledge, and circumstances of investigation. How would anyone ever have good reason to think two groups are about equal on those factors when it comes to religious beliefs? Not only that: it's not difficult to realize that humans are extremely diverse in their exposure to arguments, experiences, and evidence, pro and con, regarding religious claims; they are also diverse in general intellectual qualities;

finally, the amount of time spent in relevant reflection will vary greatly as well (in addition to varying in qualities such as intensity).

This essay will not address the question of whether religious beliefs typically, or ever, *start out* rational or overall justified, before the realization of and reflection upon disagreement. For the sake of argument I will assume that both theistic and atheistic beliefs very often start out epistemically rational and even overall justified (in any of several senses of those terms).

I will now comment on the first two categories defined earlier, omitting the third due to space limitations.

5. *Category 1: We are the Epistemic Superiors*

I begin with category 1, in which the protagonist thinks her group is in a much better position to judge B. If after going through the “Wait a minute” idea I come to firmly believe that my group is in a much better position to judge whether B is true, then by and large it will be reasonable for me to stick to my belief B as a consequence to making that comparative judgment. So it’s arguable that the answer to the Disagreement Question will be ‘yes’. This kind of situation breaks down into two species: my belief in my group’s superiority *may or may not* be well supported by my overall evidence. In the ‘may’ case it seems pretty clear that at least in most cases my sticking with B will be reasonable (it will be similar to the global warming case mentioned above).

What is surprising is that the same might be true for the ‘may not’ case. To be sure, the person who sticks with B when *unreasonably* thinking her group is in the superior position has made an epistemic error; that’s logically true. But her error isn’t in the retaining of the belief: it’s in the *prior* judgment of superiority. *Given that* she has made the unreasonable judgment of superiority, the reasonable thing for her to do next, in updating her position on B, is stick with B. If someone believes B, she knows that many others disbelieve B, she is quite convinced that she has absolutely key evidence that the others lack, and she is convinced that the others have no relevant epistemic advantage over her, then she would be irrational to suspend judgment just because those people disagree with her. The rational thing for her to do is stick with her belief, even though her *retained belief* in B will still be irrational. Her *overall* dealings with the disagreement are flawed, but the flaw happened *before* the retaining of belief B. This is similar to the Japan story described above.

Hence, if one has an unreasonable judgment about epistemic superiority, this judgment might make reasonable one’s sticking with one’s belief in the face of disagreement—although one’s overall dealings with disagreement contain important irrationalities. I suspect this is true and a common occurrence: a great many people do indeed have unjustified beliefs in epistemic superiority when it comes to religious beliefs, pro and con. For instance, many atheists are confident that theists just don’t understand much of anything about science or reason, whereas theists do. Of course, there is *some* truth to this: many adult theists, at least in the USA, are young earth creationists even though they are intelligent enough to know that that position is idiotic. But a great many theists are quite familiar with science and reason, to

put it mildly, and atheists rarely have much reason to think all, or even almost all, theists are fools about science or reason (and when they do it's testimonial and they are living a sheltered life). So, their judgment of superiority is usually unjustified. On the other side, theists often too quickly believe that their experiences of seeing the starry skies or the birth of a baby provide excellent evidence for various theistic claims (e.g., 'Jesus understands and loves me'): they have little reason to accept such an idea and often have decent evidence that such a belief might be the product of wishful thinking or something similarly epistemically defective.

So judgments of epistemic superiority are often unjustified. Whether they are true is a controversial matter in a great many real-life cases. For instance, reflective theists often claim C_T that many of them experience God in such a way as to generate justified theistic beliefs and then transmit reasonableness to other theists via testimony. These alleged perceptions make up a diverse class: a dramatic cognitive "lightning bolt" sent from God (think of the account in *Acts* of St. Paul's experiences on the road to Damascus), an enlightenment experience as the result of years of disciplined meditation, the witnessing of something common but extraordinarily moving such as the birth of a baby, or a more general perception that results from reflecting on one's overall life, allegedly seeing God guiding one in subtle ways that will usually not be convincing to outsiders. On the other hand, atheists often claim C_A that all theistic belief is grounded in some combination of wishful thinking, groupthink, testimony that is poorly grounded, fatally flawed arguments, and other factors excluding perception and impressive scientific or philosophical evidence.

Needless to say, both C_T and C_A are highly controversial. My main point here is that *if* someone believed either claim, C_T or C_A , *then* they would fall into category 1; and *if* they did fall into that category, then it's plausible to think that the answer to the Disagreement Question would be affirmative for them whether or not C_T or C_A was justified for them.

The fact that many people embrace the two claims, C_T and C_A , shows two more things. First, it shows that there are a great many category 1 cases, as was mentioned above. Second, it shows how certain fundamental epistemological questions about religious belief— C_T and C_A for instance—are important when evaluating how reasonable it is to stick with one's religious beliefs in the face of reflective disagreement.

We have seen that it's controversial whether the claims of epistemic superiority regarding religious beliefs are true. It's also controversial whether people often have epistemically justified beliefs in those superiority claims—provided we ignore testimony. However, when we don't ignore testimony it's less controversial whether people often have justified beliefs in superiority concerning religious claims. As I mentioned earlier, many people have been told, over and over by the people they most look up to, that their group has got it right and the other group is infected with such-and-such epistemic deficiencies that their group largely avoids. For instance, atheists are told by other atheists that many people become theists merely due to brainwashing and wishful thinking, even though the theists may have high IQs and good educations. Theists tell other theists that the reason there are so many atheists is that the atheists have yet to experience God, perhaps through no fault of their own. Whether the testimony is

grounded in something epistemically good is an important manner, but it's not hard to see how an ordinary person could be pretty reasonable, via testimony, in falling into category 1 provided they were sheltered.

6. *Category 2: We are Epistemic Peers*

In category 2 we find the people who think their group is roughly *just as likely* to judge B correctly as the disagreeing group. These are cases of peer disagreement. Such cases will be very rare for fundamental beliefs such as 'God exists': as mentioned above theists are going to insist that atheists are missing out on evidence theists have, and by and large atheists are going to think that theists either don't appreciate science as well as they do or theists are unable to rein in their wishful thinking and related epistemic weaknesses when it comes to religion.

The basic situation for category 2 cases is the following. You start out with religious belief B, your first belief. Then you acquire the belief P that so-and-so is your peer when it comes to judging whether B is true or not; that's your second belief. More realistically, P is the belief that the other group is just as likely as your group to have judged B correctly. After that, you come to think that she disagrees with you on B: she thinks it's false whereas you think it's true. (The temporal order varies somewhat from case to case, but our set up captures a good many real-life cases and can be adjusted to fit others.) That's your third belief, belief D (so D is 'She disagrees with me about B'). You end up with *three* relevant beliefs, B, P, and D, and our main question is whether you can reasonably stick with B (or P or D for that matter). As we will see below, in order to answer the question we will need to pay close attention not only to B but to P and D as well.

Thus, when you hear someone sincerely say 'Well, I think B is false, contrary to your view', you have three claims to juggle: B, P, and D. If you started out confident that both B and P are true but then heard her say that she disagrees with B, you end up faced with a puzzle:

The Peer Puzzle: Given that you think that B is true and that she is your peer, so you think P is true too, you would expect her to judge B the same way you judged it; but it seems that she didn't judge it the same way as you did, as she said 'B is false'.

That's the puzzling situation of peer disagreement. So what are you supposed to conclude at this point? There are several possibilities one might think about:

- Does she really not disagree with you, so D is false?
- Or were you wrong about her being your peer, so P is false?
- Or is it the case that she's your peer, B is true just like you thought, the two of you really disagree, and she just happened to foul up when judging B?
- Or were you wrong that B is true?

I think there are cases in which you are reasonable in sticking with your belief B even if before the discovery of disagreement you were convinced that the person in question was your peer when it comes to judging B.

Vivianna and Mark are twins who as adults are reminiscing about their childhood—in particular, the times that the extended family got together for holidays. Vivianna has always thought that Mark was about as good as her at remembering events from childhood, although of course she doesn't have anything like scientific data as proof. She thinks she and Mark are peers when it comes to most claims of the form 'When we were kids ...'. Then Mark says 'I really miss how Uncle Frank played the piano every Christmas. That was such a great thing'. Vivianna thinks this is nuts. According to her memory, and it is quite vivid (she can recall detailed visual images of the scenes), it wasn't Uncle Frank but Aunt Maria who played the piano, it was always Easter and never Christmas, and Aunt Maria divorced Uncle Frank when she and Mark were only about four years old (so for most of their childhood Frank wasn't even around to play the piano even if he happened to know how to play). So according to Vivianna's vivid memory Mark has got things completely mixed up: wrong relative and wrong holiday.

Most people would say that Vivianna is within her rights—her *epistemic* rights—to stick with her belief B 'Uncle Frank did not play the piano every Christmas when we were kids'.

That was a one-on-one disagreement. The same holds for many-on-many cases.

In a college class the students break into two groups of ten students in order to independently investigate some complicated matter. Student Stu thinks the groups are evenly matched, based on his modest knowledge of their abilities (pretend this is a small college and Stu knows a great many of his fellow students). After a week of work the two groups have representatives give oral progress reports to the whole class. The representative from the other group says that her group has figured out several things regarding the topic of gay marriage, including the idea that gay marriage is legal, in January 2013, in 22 states in the US. But this strikes Stu as totally off-base. He briefly wonders whether the student in question is accurately presenting the verdict of her group, but when he sees the members of her group nodding their heads he knows that his group definitely disagrees with their group. Stu is extremely confident the number is far less, as he and his group members have read many reports on the issue. He sticks with his belief B 'The number of states in which gay marriage is legal is less than 22 in January 2013' and starts to doubt whether the other group has done much work on the project.

I suspect that in the two cases the factor that secures the rationality in sticking with B is the fact that the protagonist *has much better overall evidence for B than for P*. In the piano case, although Vivianna had a reasonable amount of evidence that Mark was her peer on the matter of piano playing relatives on holidays, she had much better evidence that Uncle Frank didn't play the piano every Christmas when she and Mark were kids. Analogously, Stu had much more evidence for his belief about the legal status

of gay marriage (that's B) than for his belief that the other student group is about as good at judging B as his group (that's P).

So the crucial factor appears to be the *disparity* between one's overall evidence for B and one's overall evidence for P: when the former vastly outweighs the latter, it's reasonable to stick with one's belief B in the face of disagreement. It isn't relevant that she has lots of evidence for B. The crucial factor isn't 'She had lots of evidence for B' but 'She had *much more* evidence for B than for P'.

If these verdicts are sound—which is a *colossal* 'if', considering how new the topic of disagreement is—then it follows that if a person had much greater overall evidence for a religious belief B than a peer belief P, then she would be evidentially reasonable in sticking with B after the discovery of disagreement.

However, even if the disparity of evidence isn't present, there still might be an important kind of rationality in sticking with B.

Jo is an economist who is very confident that nuclear power is more promising than solar power when it comes to weaning the world off fossil fuels. She has this extreme confidence despite the fact that she has little evidence for it (e.g., she has read a few opinion pieces in the *New York Times* and *The Economist* each of which presented little evidence for the idea even though they were rhetorically impressive). She thinks scientists should be able to judge the question of which power source is better as well as she and her fellow economists can—although the *only* reason she has this peerhood belief is that she respects the intelligence of scientists and knows that they know about both technologies. But then she learns that most scientists think solar is more promising than nuclear. She concludes that the scientists just don't understand the economics of the situation, even though they understand the science and technology of it.

Given that she has such extreme confidence in B and a relatively low confidence in P, it makes sense, in some epistemic sense, that she would stick with B upon discovery of disagreement. This might not be the direction her overall evidence points in, but *given that she started with too much confidence in B compared to P*, the epistemically reasonable thing for her to do is stick with B. This case is similar to the Japan one from above. It isn't hard to imagine how it would apply in religious cases.

None of the above arguments or theses should be taken as even close to established, as the topic of the epistemology of disagreement is extremely young compared to other philosophical topics and consequently in a large state of flux. (For what it's worth, every time I write an article on disagreement I end up defending theses very different from ones I've defended in the past.) The next few years should witness some real progress on the topic.

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