**My Two Cents Worth**

Many people hold that their own views about religion are uniquely rational and uniquely supported by cogent arguments. That is, many people hold that, whereas their own views about religion are both rational and supported by cogent arguments, the views of those who disagree with them are neither rational nor supported by cogent arguments. (Here, and throughout, I presuppose an ‘internalist’ understanding of rationality: my target is those who suppose that the views of those who disagree with them are neither supported by cogent arguments nor rational in an ‘internalist’ sense.)

Some people may suppose that it could hardly be otherwise: given that I am bound to suppose that my own views are true, and that the views of those who disagree with me are false, I am also bound to suppose that the views of those who disagree with me are neither rational nor supported by cogent arguments.

However, that view—that we are bound to suppose that the views of those who disagree with us are neither rational nor supported by cogent arguments—is surely mistaken. What we believe depends upon the circumstances of our lives in ways that frequently defeat straightforward attributions of irrationality and absence of support by cogent arguments. (For example, we all operate with no more than partial information; and we all rely upon what we take to be expert testimony, even though we all know that much expert testimony is mistaken.) Moreover—for all, or at least almost all, of us—we need only attend *seriously* to what is said by reflective, intelligent, well-informed people who do not share our views about religion in order to see that our own religious beliefs are not uniquely privileged with respect to either rationality or support from cogent arguments.

What goes for people in general goes for philosophers of religion in particular. Many philosophers of religion hold that their own views are uniquely privileged when it comes to rationality and support from cogent arguments. But, as for the case of people in general, this is a transparent manifestation of cognitive prejudice, or myside bias, or the like. Or so it seems to me.

In this paper, I aim to bring out the implausibility of the claim that there is a class of philosophers of religion—holders of a particular constellation of beliefs about religion—whose religious beliefs are either uniquely rational or uniquely supported by a stock of cogent arguments. My initial focus will be on models of parties to religious disagreements. These models may be simple, but I believe that there is much to be learned from them.

**I**

I start with a simple case of two-person disagreement. Suppose that A and B disagree about p: one of them believes that p, and the other believes that not p. Suppose, further, that there are *many* independent propositions that are relevant to p; i.e. many independent propositions that have argumentative bearing on p, or that have evidential bearing on p, or the like. Suppose, finally, that among propositions that are relevant to p, A and B agree on the {pi}—for each i, either they both believe pi, or they both believe not-pi—and disagree on the {qj}—for each j, one of them believes qj and the other believes not-qj. We shall say that the pA-worldview is all of the propositions that A believes that are relevant to p, and that the pB-worldview is all of the propositions that B believes that are relevant to p.

One thing that A and B can do—given their disagreement about p—is to chart their opinions about other propositions that are relevant to p. In our simple model, let’s suppose that A and B identify that they agree on the {pi} and disagree on the {qj}: the {pi} are on the conversational scoreboard as agreed items—‘evidence’—but the {qj} are not.

In our simple model, in articulating their disagreement, A and B also articulate their p-worldviews: the full extent of the disagreement between A and B about p is given by the differences between the pA-worldview and the pB-worldview. Given a full articulation of their p-worldviews, we can then ask: which worldview—the pA-worldview or the pB-worldview—is better?

In comparing the pA-worldview with the pB-worldview, there are two relevant kinds of considerations. On the one hand, there are ‘internal’ considerations about (‘formal’) consistency and (‘analytic’) coherence. If one of the p-worldviews is inconsistent or incoherent, and the other is not, then—in our simple model—that is sufficient to establish that the latter p-worldview is better than the former. On the other hand, assuming that the p-worldviews are not separated by ‘internal’ considerations, there are ‘comparative’ considerations about ‘theoretical virtue’. If one p-worldview is more theoretically virtuous than the other, then that p-worldview is better than the other.

Suppose that the outcome of comparison of the pA-worldview with the pB-worldview is that the pA-worldview is better. What follows for B? Clearly not that B must change her mind about p. After all, there are enormously many hitherto unexamined p-worldviews that may be better than the pA-worldview, but which share B’s view about p. At most, what follows for B is that, since A currently has a better p-worldview, she has a reason to move to a different p-worldview; but—as just noted—that may well be one in which her view about p remains unchanged.

Of course, in order for there to be an agreed outcome of comparison of the pA-worldview with the pB-worldview, in the case in which both p-worldviews survive ‘internal’ scrutiny, it must be that A and B agree on a list of theoretical virtues, and agree on a means of weighing those listed theoretical virtues in order to determine which p-worldview is more theoretically virtuous. While there may be some grounds for optimism about securing agreement on a list of theoretical virtues—most philosophers agree that virtuous theories find an optimal balance between minimising theoretical commitments and maximising explanatory depth—it may well be that there will only be agreement about the weighing of theoretical virtue in very special cases, e.g. those in which one p-worldview bests a second with respect to *each* theoretical virtue.

In our simple model, there are serious bounds on the ability of A and B to resolve their difference about whether p using discussion and argument. Prior to detailed examination, it is unclear that we have any reason to rule that it cannot be that the pA-worldview and the pB-worldview are both consistent and coherent, and that we are unable to determine that one of these worldviews is more theoretically virtuous than the other. That is, there is clearly nothing in our set-up that prevents A and B from being on a par when it comes to both rationality and support by cogent arguments.

Of course, our model involves simplifying assumptions. Perhaps it may turn out, when we probe some of those simplifying assumptions, that further constraints will force us to back down from the suggestion that A and B can be on a par when it comes to both rationality and support by cogent arguments.

**II**

The most obviously unrealistic assumption in the simple model is that we have supposed that A and B have definite opinions about all of the propositions that are relevant to p. Among propositions that are relevant to p, there *are* propositions {pi}—such that, for each i, either A and B both believe pi or A and B both believe not-pi—and {qj}—such that either A believes qj and B believes not-qj, or A believes not-qj and B believes qj. But, in real cases, there may also be propositions rk for which one of the following conditions obtains:

1. A believes rk and B suspends judgment about rk (or vice versa)
2. A believes rk and B has never considered rk (or vice versa)
3. A believes rk and B does not even possess the concepts required to frame rk (or vice versa)
4. A suspends judgment about rk and B has never considered rk (or vice versa)
5. A suspends judgment about rk and B does not even possess the concepts required to frame rk (or vice versa)
6. A has never considered rk and B does not even possess the concepts required to frame rk (or vice versa)
7. A and B both suspend judgment on rk
8. Neither A nor B as considered rk
9. Neither A nor B possesses the concepts required to frame rk

Where there is suspension of judgment about p-related propositions, there is suspension of judgment between alternative p-worldviews. We can use a small modification to our simple model to illustrate the considerations that arise. Suppose that everything is at it was before, except that there is one proposition r that A believes and on which B suspends judgment. While A has the pA-worldview, B is undecided between the (p&r)B-worldview and the (p&not-r)B-worldview. There are various possibilities when it comes to evaluation. If the pA-worldview is better than both the (p&r)B-worldview and the (p&not-r)B-worldview, then B needs to change her worldview with respect to propositions other than r. If the pA-worldview is better than just one of the (p&r)B-worldview and the (p&not-r)B-worldview, but is merely not worse than the other, then, while A has no reason to revise, B has reason to revise, perhaps to whichever of the (p&r)B-worldview and the (p&not-r)B-worldview is not worse than the pA-worldview . If the pA-worldview is better than just one of the (p&r)B-worldview and the (p&not-r)B-worldview, but worse than the other, then both A and B have reason to revise their p-worldviews, with B perhaps having reason to settle on whichever of the (p&r)B-worldview and the (p&not-r)B-worldview is better than the pA-worldview. If none of the pA-worldview, the (p&r)B-worldview, and the (p&not-r)B-worldview is better than the others, then either neither A nor B has reason to revise (if ‘draws’ are not reasons for revision), or both A and B have reason to revise (if draws are reasons for revision). And if both the (p&r)B-worldview and the (p&not-r)B-worldview are better than the pA-worldview, then, while B has no reason to revise, A clearly has reason to revise his p-worldview. Obviously, if there is suspension of judgment about more propositions—and on both sides—then there is greater complexity; but the same kinds of principles will apply. Adding suspension of judgment to the mix does not rein in the bounds of the ability of A and B to resolve their differences about p using discussion and argument.

Where there is a proposition that has not previously been taken into account, matters are more interesting. Again, we can use a small modification to our simple model to illustrate the considerations that arise. Suppose that everything is as it was initially, except that there is one proposition s that A believes and that B has not previously considered. While A still has the pA-worldview, B’s consideration of s must lead B either to adopt a pB’-worldview that includes s, or a pB’’-worldview that includes not-s, or to suspension of judgment between a pB’-worldview that includes s and a pB’’-worldview that includes not-s. Depending upon exactly what B does, the pattern of agreement and disagreement between A and B on p-related propositions may be different in one or more of the following ways: (1) B and A now agree on s; (2) B and A now disagree on s (perhaps because B suspends judgement on s); (3) B and A now agree on p (4) B and A now disagree on some—or all—of the {pi} on which they previously agreed; (5) B and A now agree on some—or all—of the {qj} on which they previously disagreed. Of course, if A and B do not now agree on p, then we are back to the case with which we began, and exactly the same considerations apply. Moreover, as before, it is clear that there are serious bounds on the ability of A and B to resolve their difference about whether p using discussion and argument. If B has not yet taken a p-related proposition s into account, A’s drawing B’s attention to s will give B some work to do. But drawing B’s attention to s won’t give B reason to change her view about p that is not also reason for A to change his view about p if there is—and B is aware that there is—either a pB’-worldview that includes s, or a pB’’-worldview that includes not-s that is at least as theoretically virtuous as the pA-worldview.

Where there is lack of concepts required for framing p-related propositions, the discussion follows the same direction as the discussion of the case in which there are propositions that have not been taken into account. This is hardly surprising, given that lack of concepts required for framing p-related propositions can explain why those p-related propositions have not been taken into account. If A believes s, and B lacks the concepts required to frame s, then B has some work to do: to start with, B must acquire the concepts required to frame s. But, once B has acquired those concepts, then B is in a position to consider whether s—and we are back to the case that we discussed in the previous paragraph.

While it is true that it is an unrealistic assumption of the simple model that A and B both have definite opinions about all of the propositions that are relevant to p, the making of that unrealistic assumption does not impugn the claim that, in disagreeing about p, A and B can be equal, or at least on a par, when it comes to both rationality and support by cogent arguments.

**III**

A second obviously unrealistic assumption in our simple model is that it fails to explicitly factor in ways in which A and B might appeal to expert opinion in the course of their argument and discussion.

Suppose that, while A and B disagree about p, they both recognise that neither of them is a p-expert, where p-experts are people who are experts when it comes to the assessment of p. Given that A and B both recognise that neither of them is a p-expert, it seems that A and B ought to recognise that neither of them is well-placed to evaluate considerations that bear on p. If A bases his p-opinion on advice from one set of experts, and B bases her opinion on advice from a dissenting set of experts, then—if anything—we have even more reason to suppose that A and B can be on a par when it comes to both rationality and support by cogent arguments. After all, A and B both recognise that there are considerations, of which they have neither knowledge nor understanding, that play into expert assessment of whether p. Even if A presents to B a consideration that, for all B can tell, is a decisive consideration in favour of A’s view on p, A and B ought both to reflect that p-experts who reject A’s view on p have a response that, for all A can tell, is a decisive response to that consideration.

This consideration about expertise is just the tip of a very large iceberg. It is obvious that, for some proposition p, there is no one who is an expert with respect to all of the p-related propositions that are relevant to p. Indeed, more strongly, it is obvious that, for a great many propositions, there is no one who is an expert with respect to all of the other propositions that are relevant to any chosen one of those propositions. Moreover, it is hardly any less obvious that, for a great many widely canvassed, important propositions, there is no one who is an expert with respect to all of the other widely canvassed propositions that are broadly accepted to be relevant to any chosen one of those important propositions. Experts with respect to a proposition p are, often enough, not experts with respect to some of the propositions that are relevant to p.

Perhaps the key point here is that, when we form our opinions, we very rarely form them on the basis of a careful weighing of all of the relevant considerations, or even all of the relevant considerations that have hitherto received some attention from some people. Given this point about the formation of our opinions—and given that we are aware of this point about the formation of our opinions—it is clear that there will be many cases in which we have good reason to doubt that our *own* views are either uniquely rational or uniquely supported by cogent arguments.

**IV**

Even if it is granted that, on the basis of modelling of two-person disagreement, it seems plausible that everyone is going to have good reason to doubt that some of his or her own beliefs are either uniquely rational or uniquely supported by cogent arguments—and, in particular, that everyone is going to have good reason to doubt that his or her own religious beliefs are either uniquely rational or uniquely supported by cogent arguments—it might be suggested that we should not be looking to the case of two-person disagreement in seeking verdicts about which claims are ‘rational’ and which claims are ‘supported by cogent arguments’. After all, the two-person case is idiosyncratic: each person has his or her own cognitive limitations that influence what he or she believes. Perhaps, instead, we should turn to *collective* examination of *best theories* on the subject matters that are of interest to us.

How should we collectively investigate the best theories that are relevant to an assessment of a proposition p? Here is a plausible—albeit highly idealised—procedure. First, identify all of the propositions that are relevant to p. Second, construct all of the ‘largest’ theories that contain nothing but claims that are relevant to p. Third, identify the most theoretically virtuous ‘largest’ theories that contain p. If there is just one such theory, then the best view about p is given by that theory. If there are many equally most theoretically virtuous theories that contain p, and they all give the same verdict about p, then the best view about p is given by the verdict of those theories. If there are many equally most theoretically virtuous theories that contain p, but they do not give the same verdict about p, then there is no collective verdict concerning the best view about p. If, for any theory, there is a more theoretically virtuous theory, but there is a point beyond which all of the best theoretically virtuous theories agree about p, then that is plausibly the best view about p. If, instead, it is merely the case that the frequency of occurrence of one view about p approaches unity as we consider only better and better theories, then—though perhaps more contentiously—that is plausibly the best view about p. If, to take another possibility, all views about p are present with roughly equal frequency as we consider only better and better theories, then there is plausibly no collective verdict concerning the best view about p. And perhaps there are other possible outcomes that have not been canvassed here.

Of course, this idealised account cannot be implemented in practice. Indeed, not one of the steps in this idealised account is realisable. In practice, we cannot identify all of the propositions that are relevant to p. (First, we lack the concepts required to frame some of those propositions. Second, even though we have the relevant concepts, some of those propositions are too complicated for us to grasp. Third, there are too many propositions for us—even collectively—to entertain them all; and that is likely true even if we (somehow) need only attend to a bunch of suitably independent propositions. And, fourth, there are cases where we are unable to determine whether a proposition is relevant to p—because of considerations about concept possession, or complexity, or processing speed, or the like.) In practice, in consequence, we cannot construct any—let alone all—of the ‘largest’ theories that contain nothing but claims relevant to p. In practice, in consequence, we cannot identify the most theoretically virtuous ‘largest’ theories that contain p. (Even if we could construct all such theories, the task of assessing them for consistency, and the task of comparing the theoretical virtues of the consistent theories among them, would each be impossible for us to carry out.)

Does the mean that the idealisation is useless? No. There are scaled-down versions of this project that are worth pursuing. If we are interested in determining which is the best among currently held theories about p, we can collectively engage in the following project. (1) Articulate, to an appropriate level of detail, the major, actually endorsed, theories about p—i.e., collections of claims that are relevant to p. Make sure that, when we do this articulation, we articulate all major, endorsed theories to the same level of detail, and with the same level of respect for what the best of those who endorse those theories say. (2) Check—with the same degree of thoroughness for each theory—whether any of the theories is inconsistent or incoherent. Note that, because the articulation of the theories is an on-going project—and because there are theoretical difficulties associated with demonstrating consistency—the checking for consistency and coherence is also an on-going project. (3) Compare the theoretical virtues of those major, endorsed theories that have not been shown to fail tests for consistency or coherence. At any point at which we make a comparative test of this kind, we may discover that one major, endorsed theory is at least *pro tem* theoretically superior to the other major, endorsed theories.

The most obvious point to make about this worthwhile, albeit scaled-down, version of the collective project of worldview examination is that contemporary philosophy of religion comes nowhere near fulfilling this project for a wide range of religious claims that are both (a) seriously disputed and (b) such that there are numerous other claims that bear on them.

The most obvious failure comes at the first stage. Most philosophers of religion who make claims for unique rationality and unique support from cogent argumentation do so solely on the basis of considerations about their own p-worldviews. While they spend considerable attention to the elaboration of their own p-worldviews, they give little or no attention to the elaboration of competing p-worldviews. But it is obviously impossible to provide reasons for supposing that your own p-worldview is uniquely rational and uniquely supported by cogent arguments unless you pay serious attention to competing p-worldviews. Your claim that competing p-worldviews are inconsistent deserves to go on the philosophical scoreboard only if you derive inconsistencies from sets of claims all of which belong to the best competing p-worldviews. And your claim that best competing p-worldviews are less theoretically virtuous than your own p-worldview deserves to go on to the philosophical scoreboard only if you have done the detailed work involved in comparing the theoretical virtues of your own p-worldview with the theoretical virtues of best competing p-worldviews.

There is also often failure at the second stage. Many philosophers of religion suppose that they can demonstrate the unique rationality of their own p-worldview, or that they can provide cogent argumentative support for their own p-worldview, by deriving the claim that p from a bunch of other claims that belong to their own p-worldview. But, obviously enough, deriving the claim that p from a bunch of claims that belong to a best p-worldview does nothing at all towards showing that *other* p-worldviews are inconsistent or incoherent, unless *all* of the premises involved in the derivation belong to those other p-worldviews. In order for a derivation to be worthy of a place on the philosophical scoreboard, that derivation must be—or must genuinely appear to be—a *reductio* of a p-worldview that is claimed to be a best p-worldview by philosophers whose opinions deserve to be taken seriously.

And there is also often failure at the third stage. Many philosophers of religion suppose that they can demonstrate the unique rationality of their own p-worldview, or that they can provide cogent argumentative support for their own p-worldview, by making claims about the theoretical virtues of their own p-worldview. But, obviously enough, non-comparative claims about the theoretical virtues of a single p-worldview do nothing at all towards establishing that that p-worldview is more theoretically virtuous than competing p-worldviews. For example, the claim that a particular p-worldview exhibits a high degree of explanatory depth—even if defensible—tells us nothing about how that p-worldview compares to other best p-worldviews; in particular, it brings nothing to debate about whether other p-worldviews achieve a more virtuous trade-off between explanatory depth and theoretical commitment.

Reflection on suitably scaled-down versions of collective p-worldview examination, in the light of contemporary practice in philosophy of religion, does *not* promise to bear out claims about possession of views about religion that are uniquely rational and uniquely supported by cogent arguments. Indeed, on the contrary, reflection on suitably scaled-down versions of collective p-worldview examination, in the light of contemporary practice in philosophy of religion, promises rather to deliver reasons for doubting that there are contested p-worldviews in philosophy of religion that are uniquely rational and uniquely supported by cogent arguments.

**V**

Currently popular views about the state of philosophy of religion include (a) the *triumphalist* view—common among some kinds of Christian theists—that philosophy of religion is currently booming, in a way that it hasn’t done for centuries; and (b) the *jaundiced* view—common among some kinds of naturalist philosophers—that philosophy of religion is in terminal decline and not worthy of a place in the academy. On the triumphalist side, there are Christian theists who suppose that recent advances in philosophy of religion provide them with powerful reasons for thinking that *their* views are uniquely rational and uniquely supported by cogent arguments. On the jaundiced side, there are naturalists who suppose that it has long been established—largely, or perhaps even entirely, beyond the bounds of philosophy of religion—that *their* views are uniquely rational and uniquely supported by cogent arguments.

While there are various defects that are common to both of these positions, the main point that I want to emphasise here is that proponents of both of these positions make a very poor fist of contributing to the scaled-down collective project that I sketched in the previous section of this chapter. On both sides, those *partialists* who suppose that their views are uniquely rational and uniquely supported by cogent arguments typically (a) operate with ‘strawman’ conceptions of opposing worldviews; (b) suppose that arguments from premises that their opponents reject vindicate their views, while opponents’ arguments from premises that the partialists reject are simply to be dismissed as ‘question-begging’; and (c) suppose that observations of the theoretical virtues of their own views vindicate those views while their opponents’ observations about the theoretical virtues of those opponents’ views are simply to be dismissed on the grounds that they are ‘outweighed elsewhere’.

It’s London to a brick that if someone says ‘opposing worldviews are just silent on this matter’, they have made no serious accounting of the best things that proponents of competing worldviews have said on the matter, and they have made no serious attempt to work out the best things that proponents of competing worldviews can say on the matter. It’s London to a brick that if someone says that a major opposition worldview—‘Christianity’, or ‘theism’, or ‘naturalism’—is shown to be inconsistent by a logically valid derivation, many—or most, or even all—of the reflective, intelligent, well-informed proponents of that worldview *already* reject one or more of the claims that are used to generate the contradiction. It’s London to a brick that if someone says that his worldview is *demonstrably* more theoretically virtuous than competing worldviews, that the demonstration in question makes no serious attempt to assess the theoretical virtues of competing worldviews; and it’s not far short of London to a brick that he doesn’t even get as far as setting up strawman competitors to the touted worldview.

In the unlikely event that you agree with my assessment of the current state of philosophy of religion, you might wonder whether there is any serious prospect of improvement. There are clearly grounds for pessimism. Many of the partialists whom I have been considering are evangelists: what they would most like is to bring people to share their worldview. Of course, the motives vary: some want people to share in the repudiation of all religions, because all religions are the roots of serious moral evils; others want people to receive the good news, because receipt of the good news is a requisite for eternal life. But, however the motives vary, they do not conduce to serious engagement in the scaled-down collective project that I sketched in the previous section of this chapter.

Matters may be even worse than I have just suggested. What the scaled-down collective project that I sketched in the previous section of this chapter really requires of individual investigators is a kind of imaginative engagement with *other* worldviews, i.e. with competing worldviews of *other* people. Imaginative engagement with views other than one’s own is hard at the best of times; but it is particularly hard if your own worldview encourages you to respond to competing worldviews with disgust, or revulsion, or contempt, or the like.

Although this is not currently the case, it seems to me that we should particularly value philosophers of religion who are able to make serious contributions to the advancement of worldviews other than their own: if you understand other worldviews well enough that you make contributions to those worldviews which proponents of those worldviews approve, then you likely have what it takes to contribute to the scaled-down collective project that I sketched in the previous section of this chapter. Achievements of this kind should be celebrated; if enough philosophers of religion are able to make these kinds of achievements, then perhaps philosophy of religion will become a much more worthwhile enterprise than it is currently.