Recent Work on the Epistemology of Religion[1]

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1. Introduction

The epistemology of religion is the branch of epistemology concerned with the rationality, the justificatory status and the knowledge status of religious beliefs – most often the belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and loving God as conceived by the major monotheistic religions. While other sorts of religious beliefs – such as belief in an afterlife or in disembodied spirits or in the occurrence of miracles – have also been the focus of considerable attention from epistemologists, I shall concentrate here on belief in God.

There were a number of significant works in the epistemology of religion written during the early and mid Twentieth Century. The late Twentieth Century, however, saw a surge of interest in this area, fuelled by the work of philosophers such as William Alston, Alvin Plantinga and Linda Zagzebski amongst others. Alston, Plantinga and Zagzebski succeeded in importing, into the epistemology of religion, various new ideas from mainstream epistemology – in particular, externalist approaches to justification, such as reliabilism, and virtue theoretic approaches to knowledge (see, for instance, Alston, 1986, 1991, Plantinga, 1988, 2000, Zagzebski, 1993a, 1993b). This laid fertile ground for new research – questions about the justificatory and knowledge status of belief in God begin to look very different when viewed through the lens of theories such as these. I will begin by surveying some of this groundbreaking work in the present article, before moving on to work from the last five years – a period in which the epistemology of religion has again received impetus from a number of ideas from mainstream epistemology; ideas such as pragmatic encroachment, phenomenal conservatism and externalist theories of evidence.

2. The Turn Away From Evidentialism

The idea that justified beliefs must be grounded in evidence is one that epistemologists have long held dear – it is a crucial part of classical foundationalism, in both its empiricist and rationalist guises. It is also a maxim that is often endorsed, in one form or another, by non-philosophers. Let *evidentialism* be the thesis that, if one justifiably believes P then one must have evidence that adequately supports P. One very familiar way of criticising belief in God is to allege that it is not supported by adequate evidence (see, for instance, Clifford, 1879, Russell, 1957, Flew, 1976 and Mackie, 1982). The proposition that there is an omnipotent,

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omniscient, loving God can, from a certain perspective, seem an extraordinary thing for someone to believe. Extraordinary beliefs require extraordinary evidence to back them up – and yet, the evidence that is commonly produced to support of the existence of God seems to be very tentative and disputable. But even if we grant that belief in God is not supported by adequate evidence, it doesn't follow that belief in God is unjustified unless we assume that evidentialism is true – unless we assume that justification requires adequate evidence. As such, Alvin Plantinga has dubbed this the 'evidentialist objection' to belief in God.

In contrast to mainstream epistemology, evidentialism has long had a somewhat ambivalent status in the epistemology of religion – William James, for instance, is often interpreted as rejecting evidentialism in 'The will to believe' (1897) and John Henry Newman also appears to the reject the idea in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). But evidentialism began to come under significant pressure in mainstream epistemology in the 1970s and 80s with the rise of reliabilist theories of justification. According to reliabilism, roughly speaking, the justificatory status of a belief is a function of the reliability or truth conduciveness of the cognitive process or faculty that produced it. According to one simple reliabilist theory, a belief will count as justified just in case the cognitive process by which it was produced is one that reliably produces true beliefs (Goldman, 1979, defends a theory close to this). On reliabilist views, the justificatory status of a belief is not something that can always be determined by armchair reflection – rather, it may depend upon empirical facts that are external to the believer's mind. It's for this reason that reliabilist theories are described as *externalist*. Reliabilist views lay down sufficient conditions for justification that make no mention of evidence – and, thus, are usually portrayed as rivals to evidentialism (see, for instance, Feldman and Conee, 1985). In fact, I think it is far from clear that reliabilism per se really is inconsistent with the evidentialist thesis stated above – a point I will return to.

Plantinga defends a version of reliabilism that he terms *proper functionalism*. It's important to note that Plantinga conceives of proper functionalism primarily as a theory of *warrant*, rather than a theory of justification. Plantinga defines warrant as the property that transforms true belief into knowledge (Plantinga, 1993, 2000). Prior to Gettier, many epistemologists would have taken it for granted that justification is the property that transforms true belief into knowledge, but Gettier cases show that warrant, as defined by Plantinga, is a stronger, more demanding, property than justification. With this in mind, Plantinga analyses warrant as follows: A belief is warranted just in case it is produced by a properly functioning cognitive faculty that has the purpose of producing true beliefs in an environment in which it the faculty was designed to function and there is a high objective probability that a belief produced by the faculty in the present environment would be true (Plantinga, 1993, chap. 1)[2].

Plantinga's theory would appear to be inconsistent with evidentialism. That is, Plantinga's theory seems to allow that a belief could be warranted even if it's not supported

[2] While Plantinga presents proper functionalism as an analysis of warrant, others have defended proper functionalist analyses of justification – see for instance Bergmann (2006, 2008).

by evidence. After all, a properly functioning cognitive faculty with the purpose of producing true beliefs could, in principle, give rise to a spontaneous, immediate belief, unaccompanied by any evidence that one could cite in support of it. If belief in God were to fall into this category, then the evidentialist objection would immediately be called into question.

Plantinga goes on outline a possible picture of the origins of religious beliefs that he terms the Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model (Plantinga, 2000, chap. 6, section I). On this picture, human beings are endowed with a special cognitive faculty, the purpose of which is to deliver true beliefs about God. Following Calvin, he terms this the *sensus divinitatis*. The sensus divinitatis may operate in a range of circumstances – when one is overcome with awe at the grandeur of nature, when one is in overwhelming fear for one's own life or when one confesses or repents. In such circumstances, according to Plantinga, one may simply find oneself believing that there is a God. Plantinga is careful to emphasise that such a belief will not be based upon any evidence, adequate or otherwise – rather, it will simply arise immediately or spontaneously. Nevertheless, if the belief is the product of a properly functioning, reliable sensus divinitatis operating in an environment in which it was designed to function then, in accordance with Plantinga's theory, the belief will be warranted and justified. As Plantinga puts it, the belief will count as *properly basic* (Plantinga, 2000, chap 6, section I). The idea that belief in God may serve as a kind of basic belief that enjoys immediate justification is sometimes referred to as *reformed epistemology* alluding to its connections with Calvinist reformed theology.

Plantinga does not argue that the A/C model is correct (no doubt it will strike many as fanciful) – he uses it, rather, to *illustrate* something about his theory of warrant. While Plantinga's theory of warrant does not imply that belief in God is warranted, it does imply something conditional: *If* the A/C model is true *then* belief in God is warranted – or, at least, will be warranted when formed under the right circumstances. On Plantinga's theory, whether belief in God is warranted or justified turns upon whether another kind of religious belief is *true* – namely, belief in the A/C model and in the sensus divinitatis. What the A/C model illustrates is that, if Plantinga's theory of warrant is accepted, then it is simply not possible to criticise the justificatory status of religious beliefs while remaining neutral on their truth, as the evidentialist objection attempts to do. Rather, the question of whether religious beliefs are warranted or justified will quickly implicate the question of whether or not they are true (Plantinga, 2000, chap. 6, section III).

One potentially unsettling thing about Plantinga's strategy for resisting the evidentialist objection to belief in God is that it could, it seems, be adapted in order to resist an evidentialist objection to any belief whatsoever, no matter how outlandish or superstitious (Martin, 1990, pp276, DeRose, ms). Consider a belief in the existence of a 'Great Pumpkin' who visits every Halloween. It should be possible to describe a model which, when combined with Plantinga's theory of warrant, implies that belief in the Great Pumpkin will be warranted, if formed under the right circumstances. Plantinga's reply to this is to stress that belief in the Great Pumpkin will nevertheless not be warranted, since the model in question will not be true (Plantinga, 2000, chap 10). This may be right – but it seems to miss the true

force of this objection. Plantinga's theory of warrant does not imply that belief in the Great Pumpkin is warranted, any more than it implies that belief in God is warranted – but it does seem to place one who believes in the Great Pumpkin in *just as strong* a dialectical position, when it comes to resisting evidentialist objections, as one who believes in God. But surely evidentialist objections should *sometimes* be compelling – and should be compelling when directed at belief in something like a Great Pumpkin.

Some recent work on Plantinga's project draws upon certain findings in the cognitive science of religion – findings to the effect that humans may have an innate tendency to believe in the existence of God or of other supernatural beings. Some take these findings to cast further doubt upon the rationality or justificatory status of belief in God – but others find within them connections to the idea of a sensus divinitatis, or the idea that belief in God might be properly basic (for some discussion see Clark and Barrett, 2010, Clark and Rabinowitz, 2011, Leech and Visala, 2011, Thurow, 2013).

3. The Turn Back to Evidentialism

So far we have examined one kind of strategy for responding to the evidentialist objection to belief in God. This strategy concedes the initial point that belief in God is not supported by adequate evidence, but seeks to insulate the justificatory status of the belief by denying evidentialism. Many epistemologists of religion, I imagine, would still regard this as the most promising strategy to adopt. There are however two further ways in which one might respond to the evidentialist objection – neither of which involve abandoning evidentialism. One of these involves conceding that belief in God is not supported by adequate evidence *and* that the belief in unjustified, but then seeks to limit the damage by suggesting that the belief may qualify for some, more dilute, epistemic status – it's 'reasonable' or 'excusable' or some such (for some discussion of this strategy see Avnur, 2012). Recent years, though, have seen a renewal of interest in what is perhaps the most straightforward response – a response that engages the evidentialist on his own terms, suggesting that belief in God may be supported by adequate evidence after all. Some recent work that broadly falls into this category includes Moser (2008), Clark and Rabinowitz (2011), Pace (2011), Smith (2011), Evans (2011, 2012), Tucker (2011), Buchak (2012) and Holley (2013).

Some of this work will be reviewed here – but before doing so it may be worth examining, in a little more detail, the evidentialist thesis stated above: If one justifiably believes P then one must have evidence that adequately supports P. One question that might be prompted by this claim is just what is meant by 'adequate support' – 'adequate *for what*?' we might ask. Presumably the only answer we can give to this question is 'adequate *for justification*' – it's difficult to see what other kind of answer could be given. And yet, this answer might be thought to reduce evidentialism to a kind of tautology: If one justifiably believes P then one must have evidence that provides P with support that is adequate for justification. This claim however is not a trivial one – it enshrines the idea that the only way

to secure justification is via evidence. This is precisely what philosophers such as Plantinga mean to deny. For Plantinga, a belief in God could be justified even though one's evidence is *not* adequate for justification – its justification derives from a non-evidential source.

But what if justification for believing in God *could* derive from evidence? What is the evidence that might be thought to support this belief? When philosophers consider such a question, the first things that may spring to mind are the classical arguments for God's existence – the ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments and the numerous variants thereof. Ordinary religious commitments, though, rarely owe much to arguments like these. If ordinary religious believers are asked to provide evidence in support of the existence of God, most likely they will respond by citing religious experience or religious testimony. There is, undeniably, a certain impression that evidence like this is somehow weak or speculative – but this impression does not really settle the question of whether or not the evidence may be 'adequate', in the relatively precise sense at play here. This question turns out to be sensitive to a range of further questions and issues.

Consider again the simple reliabilist theory described above – the theory according to which a belief is justified just in case the cognitive process by which it was formed is one that reliably produces true beliefs. As critics of reliabilism often point out, any belief will be the product of a number of different cognitive processes of varying degrees of generality and, indeed, varying degrees of reliability. My belief that there's a tree outside the window is, for instance, the product of perception, of visual perception, of visual perception under good lighting conditions, of visual perception impeded by a solid barrier etc. Which of these is *the* process by which the belief was produced – the process that must be assessed for its reliability in order to determine the justificatory status of my belief? The reliabilist, it seems, owes us some kind of principled answer to this question. This has come to be known as the *generality* problem for reliabilism (Conee and Feldman, 1998) and is widely regarded as one of the most significant problems that the theory faces.

In a series of recent papers, Juan Comesaña proposes an ingenious response to the generality problem that exploits the notions of *evidence* and *basing* (Comesaña, 2006, 2010). According to Comesaña, if one believes P on the basis of evidence E then the process by which the belief is formed – the process that must be assessed for its reliability – is simply the process of believing P on the basis of E. If this is a reliable process, then the belief will be justified. If this is not a reliable process, then the belief will not be justified.

One might complain that Comesaña's theory does not represent much progress on the generality problem. After all, the question of how to determine the process by which a belief was formed has just been replaced by one which may seem just as intractable – namely, how to determine the evidence upon which a belief is based. But, intractable or not, this is a question that any theorist of justification must ultimately face. It is not enough, in order for a belief to be justified, that one possess evidence that adequately supports it – for one's belief might be held for completely different reasons. The basing relation is the relation that fills the gap between adequate evidence and justified belief – a belief will be justified iff one possesses evidence that adequately supports it and it is *based* upon this evidence. Any theory

of justification – and certainly any theory that seeks to understand justification in terms of evidence – must include some account of the basing relation. By tethering the notion of a cognitive process to the notion of basing, Comesaña has not succeeded in *solving* the generality problem as such – rather he has succeeded in *assimilating* it to a broader problem.

In Comesaña's hands, reliabilism is effectively reconfigured as a theory of what it takes for a body of evidence to provide *adequate support* for a proposition – E provides adequate support for P just in case the process of believing P on the basis of E is a reliable one. Comesaña's theory is in no tension with evidentialism – indeed, Comesaña describes the view as an 'evidentialist reliabilism'. There is a widespread assumption in epistemology that the significance of a body of evidence is something that can always be determined by careful armchair reflection. On Comesaña's theory, though, the significance of one's evidence may depend upon certain empirical facts that are external to one's mind. It's for this reason that Comesaña's theory might be described as an *externalist* theory of evidence.

Whether religious experiences and testimony are able to provide adequate support for the existence of God will not, according to an evidentialist reliabilist, be something that can be settled just by reflecting on how strong these kinds of evidence *seem* – rather, it will depend on whether religious experiences and testimony are, in actual fact, reliably correlated with God's agency. A religious sceptic may deny that there is any such correlation but, for a religious believer, convictions about the origins of religious experiences and testimony will likely form a part of his overall worldview. As such, it may be impossible for a religious believer and a religious sceptic to arrive at some shared evaluation of the significance of the relevant evidence, no matter how carefully they reflect. The sceptic's charge that the evidence in question provides inadequate support for the existence of God will, then, be question begging – it will already take for granted a kind of nonreligious worldview[3]. Both Smith (2011, section II) and Holley (2013, section 2) argue for this conclusion by deploying externalist accounts of evidence.

If we endorse an evidentialist reliabilism, we will be in a position to make a similar dialectical move to Plantinga – describing a possible *model* of the world which will yield the result that belief in God is justified, at least when formed in the right sort of way. This model would have to differ in some respects from Plantinga's A/C model, but may involve a role for something akin to a sensus divinitatis. Given an appropriate model, we will be in a position to make a conditional claim: If the model is true, then belief in God, when formed in the right circumstances, will be justified. The present strategy, unlike Plantinga's, will not force us to abandon evidentialism, for we will also be in a position to make the following conditional claim: If the model is true then, in the right circumstances, one will possess evidence that adequately supports the existence of God (see Smith, 2011, section III).

[3] The dialectical situation here may of course be perfectly symmetrical, in that a believer's insistence that the evidence in question *does* provide adequate support for the existence of God will also be question begging and take for granted a kind of religious worldview. Evidentialist reliabilism may, in this case, leave us with a kind of dialectical impasse.

The present strategy will, of course, face its own version of the 'Great Pumpkin' objection noted at the end of the last section. That is, it may be possible to describe a model which, when combined with evidentialist reliabilism, implies that we possess adequate evidence for the existence of the Great Pumpkin. One thing to note though is that there is far less putative evidence for the existence of the Great Pumpkin than for the existence of God. Perhaps all that evidentialist reliabilism implies is that, were there comparable evidence, in the form of experience, testimony etc., for the existence of the Great Pumpkin, then it might be possible to describe a model of the world that would make this evidence adequate. Such a prediction is not clearly unacceptable.

Phenomenal conservatism is a prominent view from recent mainstream epistemology that portrays *seemings* as an important source of epistemic justification. According to phenomenal conservatives, a seeming is a familiar kind of mental state that bears propositional content – but what distinguishes seemings from other kinds of mental states with propositional content is partly their distinctive phenomenology. I could vividly imagine that I'm in a darkened room looking at a beam of red light but, phenomenologically, this is very different from its actually seeming to me that I'm in a darkened room looking at a beam of red light. Both of these mental states may have the same propositional content, but the latter presents this content in a way that is more 'forceful' than the former. It is this forceful phenomenology that is supposed to set seemings apart from other mental states – and to underlie their epistemic potency.

As formulated by Huemer (2001, 2007), phenomenal conservatism is the view that if it seems to one that P is true then, in the absence of defeaters, one has justification for believing that P is true. But phenomenal conservatism can also be interpreted as a view about *evidence*. As formulated by Tucker (2011) phenomenal conservatism is the view that, if it seems to one that P is true then, in the absence of defeaters, one has evidence that adequately supports P (Tucker, 2011, section 2.1)[4].

As Tucker argues, if phenomenal conservatism is true, then it may be relatively easy for ordinary religious believers to acquire evidence that adequately supports the existence of God. According to phenomenal conservatism, if it seems to one that God exists then, in the absence of defeaters, one possesses evidence that adequately supports the proposition that God exists. But seemings of this kind will plausibly accompany religious experiences, or the reading of scripture or the receipt of religious testimony from a trusted source. Tucker goes on to argue that the evidence provided by these seemings will typically not be defeated or outweighed by any contrary evidence, leaving ordinary religious believers with evidence that adequately supports the existence of God (see Tucker, 2011, section 4.2).

Tucker even suggests that phenomenal conservatism might be quite naturally combined with the idea that human beings possess a sensus divinitatis, albeit one conceived in a slightly different way to that proposed by Plantinga. Tucker suggests that the sensus divinitatits could be understood as a faculty that delivers religious seemings, rather than directly delivering religious beliefs. That is, rather than generating spontaneous religious

[4] Elsewhere Tucker defends phenomenal conservatism as more standardly formulated (Tucker, 2010).

beliefs that are unconditioned by evidence, the sensus divinitatis could be understood as generating evidence for religious beliefs – evidence in the form of seemings (Tucker, 2011, section 3.3).

One complaint that is often levelled at phenomenal conservatism is that it leads to a kind of extreme epistemic permissiveness – it would make it possible for one to acquire adequate evidence for believing almost anything. Suppose I desire so passionately that a proposition P be true, it ultimately comes to seem to me that P is true. Provided I possess no defeaters, phenomenal conservatism predicts that I have now successfully acquired adequate evidence for P. But surely wishful thinking cannot generate evidence in this way – surely a seeming with this kind of source should have no epistemic efficacy (see Markie, 2005). This point may be particularly pressing in the present context, since one might allege that religious seemings often originate in this way.

According to Tucker, the source of a seeming has no bearing on its capacity to provide adequate evidence – but if a seeming originates in, say, wishful thinking or self-delusion this might prevent it from providing *warrant* in Plantinga's sense (Tucker, 2011, section 5). While religious seemings may provide evidence adequate to make religious beliefs justified, whether they provide evidence adequate to make religious beliefs *warranted* will, on Tucker's view, depend upon whether they originate in something like a sensus divinitatis or something more akin to wishful thinking.

A problem that confronts anyone who accepts the evidentialist thesis is that of specifying just how strongly one's evidence must support a proposition in order for that support to be regarded as adequate for justification. If we suppose that evidential support strength can be measured by evidential probabilities, then the problem becomes one of specifying an evidential probability threshold for adequacy. Any value that one chooses is bound to seem somewhat arbitrary or baseless. This is sometimes known as the 'threshold problem'. One proposed solution to the threshold problem – one that has attracted a good deal of attention in recent epistemology – exploits *practical* or *pragmatic* considerations to fix the threshold (Owens, 2000, Fantl and McGrath, 2002, 2009)

Falsely believing a proposition will generally carry certain costs for the believer. How high these costs are will depend upon one's practical interests. According to Fantl and McGrath, roughly speaking, the higher these costs, the higher the threshold for adequacy – the more strongly one's evidence must support a proposition in order for that support to be adequate for justification. I believe, for instance, that the brakes in my car are currently functioning and, as such, am perfectly willing to drive the car. If the belief turned out to be false, then the consequences for me could be dire. This contrasts with my belief that the radio in my car is currently functioning. If this belief turned out to be false, the consequences would be relatively insignificant. On Fantl and McGrath's view, then, it should take stronger evidence to make the former belief justified than the latter. This view opens the door to what is sometimes called *pragmatic encroachment* in epistemology – whether a belief is justified or qualifies as knowledge depends not only on the strength of one's evidence for the belief, but also upon the practical consequences of holding it.

While the costs of falsely believing a proposition might drive the threshold for adequacy up, Pace (2011, section IV) argues that this may be only half of the pragmatic encroachment story. Just as falsely believing a proposition generally carries costs for the believer, truly believing a proposition generally carries *benefits*. How high these benefits are will depend upon one's practical interests. One might think that the higher these benefits, the *lower* the threshold for adequacy – the *less* strongly one's evidence must support a proposition in order for that support to be adequate for justification. More generally, one might think that the threshold for adequacy should be determined by weighting the costs of being wrong against the benefits of being right – it will tend to be higher in situations in which the former outweigh the latter and lower in situations in which the latter outweigh the former.

As Pace points out, this kind of pragmatic encroachment view may have consequences for the epistemology of religion. The claim that truly believing in God would carry practical benefits, and benefits that would far outweigh the costs of falsely believing in God, is one that is often made – and is most readily associated with Pascal's Wager (Pascal, 1670, §233). But to argue directly from this premise to the conclusion that one would be epistemically justified in believing in God, as Pascal is sometimes understood as doing, would generally be regarded as fallacious. In Pace's hands, however, this premise might turn out to bear upon the justificatory status of belief in God in a more subtle way. If it's correct that the practical benefits of truly believing in God far outweigh the practical costs of falsely believing in God then, in accordance with the pragmatic encroachment view, the standards for adequacy will be forced particularly low, such that the support provided by religious experience, testimony, scripture etc. might be regarded as adequate, even if one did have certain reservations about these sources. If one thought that practical considerations could literally *provide* justification for believing in God, then this would be inconsistent with evidentialism. On the pragmatic encroachment view, however, one's justification for believing in God wouldn't be *provided* by practical considerations – it would be provided by one's evidence, as evidentialism demands. The practical considerations would merely act as a kind of catalyst, making it *easier* for one's evidence to do so.

Pascal's claims about the practical benefits of believing in God have, of course, themselves been challenged. Pace is less concerned with the putative practical benefits of belief in God than with another benefit that is sometimes claimed for the belief – namely, a *moral* benefit. Believing in God is sometimes thought to provide moral motivation and to cultivate virtuous traits such as humility and charity (for some discussion see Clark and Samuel, 2011). Further, if God does exist, then believing in God opens up the possibility of morally valuable attitudes towards God, such as awe, praise and thankfulness. And even if God does not exist, the moral cost of adopting such attitudes may only be slight. Pace suggest that moral considerations might bear upon the standards of adequacy in the same way as practical considerations have been thought to – if the moral benefits of believing a proposition when true outweigh the moral costs of believing the proposition when false, then the standards of adequacy will be pushed down. This leads to a view that Pace terms *moral*

encroachment: Whether one is justified in believing P depends not only on the strength of one's evidence for P, but also upon the moral consequences of believing P.

If the moral benefits of truly believing in God far outweigh the moral costs of falsely believing in God then, in accordance with Pace's view, the standards for adequacy will be forced particularly low, such that the support provided by religious experience, testimony, scripture etc. might well be regarded as adequate. The moral encroachment view can, however, cut in both ways. One might deny that believing in God really does confer moral benefits and claim, on the contrary, that it tends to foster harmful traits such as intolerance, narrow-mindedness and self-righteousness. If that's right, then the moral encroachment view might make it even more *difficult* for belief in God to be justified.

I have focussed here on one prominent theme within recent epistemology of religion – namely, the revival of evidentialism and the increasing willingness to tackle evidentialist objections to belief in God head on. Like the fading of evidentialism in the late Twentieth Century, the recent renewal of evidentialism has been prompted in part by developments in mainstream epistemology. In concluding, it is important to acknowledge that there is of course much important recent work in the epistemology of religion that does not particularly fit this narrative and which I have not been able to cover here.

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