

Article

Epistemic Goods, Epistemic Norms, and Evangelization

Walter Scott Stepanenko

Department of History and Political Science, York College of Pennsylvania, York, PA 17403 USA;
wstepanenko@ycp.edu

Abstract: A missionary religious tradition such as Christianity is distinguished from some other traditions by a commitment to the goal of converting others. However, the very nature of this goal and the norms that govern the successful realization of this goal are not often explored. In this article, I argue that evangelization can be undertaken for several distinct reasons, including epistemic reasons, particularly in cases in which evangelizers are aiming at the multivalent goal of fellowship. I argue that this account illuminates several possible models of mission, that it can provide resources for further evaluation and modeling of evangelical efforts, and that it might signify the need for theologically informed positions in the contemporary meta-epistemological debate about epistemic reasons.

Keywords: Christianity; evangelization; epistemology; goods; norms

1. Introduction

In Christian philosophy, evangelization is a subject, paradoxically, both underexplored and well-trodden. Insofar as philosophers in general construct arguments that are intended to convince others, Christian philosophers can be said to have long engaged in the work of evangelization. Of course, a philosophical argument can be constructed to undercut an objection or demonstrate the rationality of a position without intending to convince or convert, but many Christian philosophers have advanced arguments intended as proofs of central Christian commitments. Contemporary and historical work in natural theology has often been offered in this vein and as a boon to Christian philosophers, even when the arguments have focused on the narrower goal of demonstrating the truth of theism. However, Christian evangelical missionary work has been relatively unexplored. While it is true that epistemologists in general and Christian philosophers in particular have been concerned with the nature and epistemic value of testimony (see Callahan 2023), the nature of and rational response to disagreement (see Belby 2023), and the nature of epistemic authority (see Zagzebski 2015), the nature of specifically evangelical missionary work is far less frequently explored.¹

One reason evangelical missionary work may not be frequently explored is that philosophers might assume that specifically missionary evangelizing is not philosophically interesting over and above the apologetic or other content missionaries invoke in these contexts. In my view, this is an oversight. First, it is far from clear what conversion means or what an appropriate Christian understanding of conversion is. To see this, note that an ecclesial understanding of conversion, or conversion from one tradition or denomination to another, is quite a different phenomenon compared to an evangelical understanding, or conversion of character or personality, and it is far from clear that all evangelical understandings are the same. Second, even when one focuses on the arguably more austere ecclesial understanding of conversion, questions remain about the rationality of this process for both the convertee and the convertor. Perhaps in the former case typical evidential considerations apply, but even here one wonders how those considerations might be modulated against background considerations.²

Citation: Stepanenko, Walter Scott. 2024. Epistemic Goods, Epistemic Norms, and Evangelization. *Religions* 15: 1002. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15081002>

Academic Editor(s): David Basinger

Received: 2 July 2024

Revised: 12 August 2024

Accepted: 15 August 2024

Published: date



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

In this article, I limit my focus to the nature of the evangelical process from the perspective of the evangelizer. I start with the suggestion that a missionary can evangelize for prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons. I then examine the objection that an agent cannot evangelize for epistemic reasons because there are no epistemic norms for action. I next examine two possible responses to this objection, one from epistemological value pluralism and one from a philosophical tradition that blurs the distinction between theoretical and practical cognition. I argue that neither response succeeds, but that the latter suggests we should be reticent to countenance a hard and fast distinction between representation and intervention. Given that successful representation can also count as successful intervention, I argue that goods can be multivalent and that a good can be both moral and epistemic or both practical and epistemic. It follows that an agent can evangelize for prudential, moral and epistemic reasons and that a missionary aiming at fellowship is an agent with a multivalent goal. I formalize a multivalent model of fellowship evangelization and I suggest that the myriad component parts of this model might very well illuminate further models of evangelization and perhaps even support further evaluations of various evangelical efforts.

In making this case, I do want to be clear about the scope of what follows. My central claim in this article is that evangelization can be undertaken for epistemic reasons. My claim is not that evangelization is typically performed for epistemic reasons or that epistemic concerns are always central to evangelization. Philosophers who understand faith in terms of interpersonal trust might even think that belief is not necessary for faith and thus that one can evangelize independent of any epistemic concerns, even as one encourages others to adopt positive cognitive attitudes towards one's tradition (see Jackson, forthcoming). Nothing I have to say in what follows hinges on the denial of this view. Beyond this, I would also like to bracket two further concerns. The first concern is normative and emerges from liberal or multicultural commitments. According to these views, rational disagreement about important or central ideological matters is inevitable and/or desirable and so evangelization is morally and/or politically problematic. The second concern is descriptive and emerges from atheological commitments. According to these views, religious beliefs are irrational and because irrational beliefs are potentially dangerous, evangelization is morally and/or politically problematic. In what follows, I want to bracket both of these concerns, not only because I think both concerns are misguided, but because I simply want to focus on the possible epistemic dimension of missionary evangelization. In my view, this focus is particularly important because unlike many attempts at rational persuasion, religious concerns are ultimate, and thus one might expect evangelization to elucidate the structure of normativity in a way that other attempts at persuasion might not, as I am suggesting here with my focus on the way fellowship reveals the possible multivalence of normativity.

2. The Rationality of Evangelization?

If a missionary tradition is defined as a religious tradition committed to the goal of converting others to that tradition, the immediate but often overlooked question to ask about this goal is what good or goods this achieved goal is realizing. After all, it seems reasonable to assume that every rational goal involves an agent aiming at some apparent good(s), since apparently irrational goals appear to involve an agent aiming at something other than apparent good(s). For example, an agent with the goal of undermining a friendship has an apparently irrational goal precisely in those cases in which the agent believes that friendship contributes to that agent's good. To see this, compare such a case to one in which an agent refuses contact with a friend whom the agent believes is verbally abusive. Though both agents might believe, rightly, that friendship is a good, an agent who undermines what she believes to be a non-abusive friendship is acting irrationally whereas the agent who undermines what she believes to be an abusive friendship is acting rationally precisely because of the consistency between her beliefs and goals. This is the case even in which the latter agent is somehow wrong about her view of her friendship. After all, most

epistemologists hold that rationality is a lower bar than truth. Thus, there is at least *prima facie* reason to think that rational goals involve agents aiming at apparent good(s). So, then what good(s) might missionaries be aiming at?

Here, it will help to bring a few examples into view. Consider the following short vignettes:

Francis is on a mission in southern Japan. He has braved inclement weather and a long journey to preach to the people there. Francis believes that he has been called by God to preach to the people there, and that doing so is paramount to his own salvation.

David is on a mission in south Africa. He has studied several languages to facilitate his preaching in the region. David believes that his preaching is needed to heal the broken hearts of the people in the region, and to deliver them from the captivity of sin.

Mary is on a mission in central America. She has lived and traveled throughout the region for over a year. Mary believes that her preaching is important because she values and aspires to promulgate truth.

In each of these vignettes, we have a description of an agent engaged in missionary work aiming at some specific and apparent good. Thus, in each of these vignettes, we have an agent with an apparently rational and distinctive goal.

However, in reviewing these vignettes, it is worth asking whether appearances in these cases are deceiving. Consider the apparent goods each of the above-described missionaries is aiming at. In our first case, Francis is primarily aiming at his own salvation. Thus, we might describe Francis' missionary efforts as ultimately aiming at a prudential good. In our second case, David is primarily aiming at the well-being of others. Thus, we might describe David's missionary efforts as ultimately aiming at a moral good. In our third case, Mary is primarily aiming at the spreading of information, or the promulgation of truth. Thus, we might describe Mary's missionary efforts as ultimately aiming at an epistemic good. Now, because goals can only be achieved when various procedures are followed, talk of goals gives rise to talk of norms. Thus, in arriving at these descriptions, we are apparently presupposing something akin to the following principle:

Principle of norm-kind individuation (PNI): A norm *N* is individuated on the basis of the good(s) successful adherence to the norm realizes.

PNI is itself a normative principle. It says, in effect, that an agent is rationally bound by a norm when aiming at some particular good. PNI does not say that an agent is rationally required to recognize the norm or is in fact following the norm when aiming at a particular good. All PNI says is that norms can be distinguished on the basis of what goods are realized when appropriately employed, and thus all PNI implies is that norms are procedural rules agents follow when agents successfully realize various goods.³

Applied to the cases above, PNI apparently vindicates the claim that the three missionaries are engaged in distinctive rational activities. Of course, the vignettes are brief descriptions, and so there is no reason to think that any particular missionary could not engage in mission work for a multitude of reasons. Perhaps there are even internal religious grounds for thinking that any given missionary should be engaged in mission activity for each of the reasons articulated above. However, this alone is no challenge to PNI. For in that case, PNI would simply suggest that the religiously motivated norm governing appropriate missionary activity is a sort of compound norm consisting of various norms, ultimately distinguishable by the fact that the package of goods the religious tradition is aiming at realizing are in fact discrete goods, precisely because they can be isolated and realized by following less substantial norms. If that is right, PNI corroborates the appearance suggested by the above vignettes that evangelization can be rationally undertaken for several distinct reasons.

Unfortunately, PNI is a bit too ham-fisted of a principle. As Falbo (2023) argues, a principle such as PNI that distinguishes norms on the basis of the goods successful adherence realizes seems to proliferate normative domains in a problematic way (p. 2982). If PNI is the last word on norm individuation, a chef making a dinner would be following a gourmet norm, a gardener caring for a flower bed would be following a horticultural norm, and a hockey player trying to score a goal would be following a hockey norm. Rather than finely carving up domains in this way, Falbo suggests that “all goal-directed activities” count as governed by “practical normativity” (p. 2982). However, I would argue that this proposal is a bit too indiscriminate. While we do want to avoid overly discriminating between norms, philosophers also routinely distinguish between prudential and moral norms, and it makes sense to do so even as it makes sense to recognize each as types of practical norms. So, PNI requires revision. Consider then:

PNI*: A norm N is individuated on the basis of the family to which the good(s) belongs that successful adherence to the norm realizes.

PNI* suggests that when we individuate norms, we should look not just to the good realized by the successful adherence to the norm, but to the family to which that good belongs. This blocks an overly fine discrimination of norms. Of course, it leaves open some fuzziness, but that is just the nature of family resemblance, and just as in the case of actual families, a family member might belong to more than one family.⁴ However, in our present case, this is no problem. PNI* suggests that Francis is evangelizing for a prudential reason because Francis is engaged in an activity which contributes to his own well-being and this specific type of contribution to his well-being is similar to other such contributions. Similarly, PNI* suggests David is evangelizing for a moral reason because David is doing an activity that contributes to others’ well-being and this specific type of contribution is similar to other such contributions. Finally, PNI* suggests Mary is evangelizing for an epistemic reason because Mary is aiming at the promulgation of truth and this specific good is similar to other processes that aim at truth, such as believing on the basis of evidence.

3. Epistemic Norms and Goods

The problem with the suggestion that evangelization can be undertaken for several reasons, including epistemic reasons, is that there is some philosophical reason to think that epistemic reasons of the kind appealed to in the description of the Mary case are not directly relevant when undertaking actions in general. To explain why some philosophers adopt this view, it will help to consider a distinction that is often taken to undergird the distinction between theoretical and practical reason: the distinction between beliefs and desires. According to many philosophers, beliefs and desires have an opposite direction of fit.⁵ In this view, beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit. For example, a true belief is a belief that accurately represents its object. Desires, on the other hand, have a world-to-mind direction of fit. For example, a satisfied desire is a desire that is satiated when the agent with that desire brings about a state of affairs that just is that desire’s satisfaction. Given this distinction, it appears more philosophically appropriate to say that agents undertake actions to bring about a state of affairs rather than to represent anything. If that is right, then when Mary evangelizes to promulgate what she believes is the truth, what she is actually doing is satisfying some desire of hers. Perhaps what Mary is ultimately doing then is evangelizing for a moral, prudential, or otherwise practical reason, rather than epistemic reason.

To expound this view of the matter, it will help to consider a case developed by Mona Simion (2018). According to Simion, there are no genuine epistemic reasons for action. Simion recognizes that in many or perhaps even most cases in which an agent undertakes an action, epistemic considerations are relevant. For example, an agent attempting to satisfy a desire for lunch is going to rely on several background epistemic considerations concerning such things as what foods are available, what foods are healthy, what foods are satiating, etc. However, these considerations, while epistemic, are only indirectly

relevant to the case at hand. What makes a norm an epistemic norm is the direct relevance of epistemic considerations. How can we distinguish between epistemic norms and other norms? For Simion, epistemic norms are those “concerned with guiding us in reaching epistemic goals” (p. 233). In this way, Simion distinguishes between epistemic norms and other norms by applying a principle similar to what I above described as PNI*. According to this view, an epistemic norm is an epistemic norm when successful adherence to the norm realizes a good that belongs to a family of epistemic goods.

Along these lines, Simion distinguishes between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content (p. 233). As an example, Simion appeals to the prudential maxim “Do not jump in the lake unless you know how to swim” (p. 234). This norm is a prudential norm, and PNI* explains why: the norm has a prudential goal, namely, the goal of preserving the well-being of the agent complying with the norm. However, the norm does have epistemic content. In this case, the norm specifies an epistemic condition the agent should meet in order to successfully realize some good, but it is not an epistemic norm because the norm is not aiming at an epistemic good. To see this, note that the above maxim appears to satisfy the following principle:

The Epistemic Support Principle (ESP): If a norm N determines the amount of epistemic support needed for proper ϕ -ing, then N is an epistemic norm.

However, the maxim “Do not jump in the lake unless you know how to swim” is a prudential maxim. Thus, ESP is false.

What result does this have for our Mary case described above? For Simion, because “action in general has no epistemic function, it is not governed by an epistemic norm” (p. 235). In some cases, we undertake various actions that look like they have an epistemic function, such as assertion, but in Simion’s view, “assertion is not governed by an epistemic norm in virtue of its being a type of action, but due to its characteristic epistemic function” (p. 234). In other words, assertion is governed by an epistemic norm because assertion is an expression of belief and believing is an epistemic state because it is governed by an epistemic norm insofar as belief has an epistemic goal: the representation of truth. Assertion is not governed by an epistemic norm when considered as an action in and of itself because while that act may involve epistemic content, that act has some goal other than accurate representation. This suggests that Mary is not evangelizing for epistemic reasons. Her reasons have epistemic content. Mary wants others to know what she believes is the truth, but her goal is ultimately the goal of convincing others. That is not an epistemic goal because one could convince others of very many things, including false things. Now, Mary may not be willing to undertake evangelical efforts unless she were convinced of the truth of her view, but that just means her action is governed by a principle in the neighborhood of ESP, and as we have seen, ESP is not an epistemic principle.

While I think this view of Mary’s case is quite compelling, I have to admit that I cannot quite shake the intuition that Mary is evangelizing for an epistemic reason. So, I think it is worthwhile to ask whether we can corroborate the initial assessment of Mary’s case. Clearly, it will not do to reconsider PNI*. After all, PNI* is the very principle we invoked to begin distinguishing the various motivating reasons for evangelizing. So, PNI* is actually of considerable use in any effort to vindicate Mary. Given the implicit use of PNI* in Simion’s distinction between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content, it would also be unwise to attempt to put pressure on that distinction. Instead, it seems an attempt to vindicate Mary would be better off reconsidering the prior line of thinking. Perhaps we were too quick to assume that Mary’s evangelical efforts were simply concerned with the conversion of others. After all, both Francis and David have the goal of converting others, and yet Francis and David are ultimately evangelizing for different reasons. Francis’ concerns are ultimately prudential and David’s concerns are ultimately moral. Conversion is thus only a proximate goal. Conversion is not the ultimate goal for these missionaries. For Francis, the conversion of others is ultimately a means to his own salvation. For David, the conversion of others is ultimately a means to their well-being. Why is it that the

conversion of others cannot be a means to some epistemic goal for Mary? Well, perhaps it can, but if so, we will need to specify what particularly epistemic goal conversion is a means to, for Mary. It is to such attempts we must now turn.

4. Some Possible Solutions?

To settle the question of whether there can be any epistemic reasons for evangelization, it will help to inquire further into the range of possible epistemic goods. Some philosophers are of the view that the only epistemic good is truth. Marian David (2001) has argued that truth is "*the epistemic goal*" (p. 154). According to David, truth is the sole epistemic goal for explanatory reasons. Because epistemology is the theory of knowledge, the very concept of knowledge cannot itself appear as the epistemic goal for such a conception would be uninformative, and thus "no longer provide an independent anchor for understanding epistemic concepts" (p. 154). Instead, epistemologists typically invoke another concept, such as justification, but because many philosophers think a belief could be justified, that is, gather some ample degree of evidential support, without being true, epistemologists ultimately have recourse to truth as the epistemic goal of justification, and thereby tie in the relevant elements of knowledge.

Not all epistemologists share this view. Jonathan Kvanvig (2014) has argued that David's view of epistemology is problematically reductionist. The traditional picture of epistemology has it that knowledge is justified true belief. However, contemporary epistemologists now recognize that knowledge likely requires a fourth condition, given what are now called Gettier cases, or cases in which one has a justified true belief on accident (Gettier 1963). For Kvanvig, it is more plausible to suggest that each of the elements of knowledge "isolate some epistemic good" (p. 358). Kvanvig also suggests that there are forms of theoretical cognitive success that are not truth-related, such as "the concepts of making sense of the course of an experience and having found an empirically adequate theory," where the latter is defined as "one that will never be refuted by the course of experience" (p. 360). For these reasons, Kvanvig concludes that while truth is an important and perhaps even central epistemic goal, the case for thinking that it is the only epistemic goal ultimately depends on a narrow conception of epistemology (p. 362).

The details of this debate are important and worthy of further exploration, but I rest at this opening characterization because it is far from clear how a pluralistic approach to epistemic goods is of help in our present situation. The problem raised in the previous section is that one can have the goal of converting others to a view one believes is true, and yet that goal is not necessarily an epistemic goal because that goal is just as much a candidate for a norm with epistemic content as it is an epistemic norm, if not more so. The possible counter to the claim that this evangelical goal is not an epistemic goal was to suggest that the conversion goal is a proximate goal facilitating a deeper epistemic goal. Pluralism about epistemic goods is a perhaps helpful view here, but the mainstream epistemological debate about value monism has, as the example of Kvanvig demonstrates, typically taken lesser epistemic goods than truth to have epistemic value. These goods are poor candidates for the kind of goods a missionary such as Mary is aiming at. For example, if Mary merely believed that her view was empirically adequate in Kvanvig's sense, she would not engage in the kind of missionary work her case describes, *ex hypothesi*, and in those cases in which she does so engage, these goods do not illuminate her reasons for doing so as epistemic.

Perhaps we must move beyond mainstream epistemology to give an epistemic account of Mary's evangelization. To see where we might turn, we might reflect on the fact that the problem of giving an epistemic account of Mary's evangelization arose precisely when we began to make a strong distinction between belief and desire and traced that distinction as a distinction between cognitive attitudes that represent how things are and conative attitudes that encourage interventions in states of affairs. One philosophical tradition that has questioned this latter bifurcation is the tradition of classical American pragmatism. For example, in the essay "Reflex Action and Theism," William James ([1890]

1979) critiqued what he described as “the triadic-reflex pattern” of cognition (p. 98). According to this view, the mind consists of three “departments” roughly tracing sense perception, theoretical cognition, and volition. In James’ view, philosophical tradition has too crudely stuck to this tripartite scheme and rendered the mind “a passive, reactionless sheet of white paper, on which reality will simply...register its own philosophic definition” (p. 102).

Unfortunately, it is not always clear exactly what James intends to replace the philosophical tradition with. Brandom (1987) describes what he calls “stereotypical pragmatism” as the view that truth is “a property of utility for some end, a matter of how useful, in some sense, it is to hold the belief that is a candidate for truth,” but ultimately holds that James is prefiguring an expressivist theory (p. 76). Slater (2009) offers an alternative account of James as offering the view that true beliefs are those that would be affirmed at the imagined end of the inquiry of an ideal community of observers (p. 196). Stepanenko (2020) argues that James’ mature position is that rational beliefs have phenomenal grounds and that positive epistemic status accrues to beliefs as they enjoy further degrees of practical corroboration. If that is right, we might define epistemic pragmatism as the view that practical corroboration of belief is a necessary condition for the positive epistemic status of beliefs mainstream epistemologists are typically concerned with, such as justification and knowledge.

The problem is that while epistemic pragmatism does challenge one typical way of cashing out the belief–desire distinction as problematically idealized, it is not clear how epistemic pragmatism helps us give an epistemic account of Mary’s evangelization. If the practical corroboration of Mary’s belief in the truth of her religion is arrived at antecedently to evangelization, epistemic pragmatism is clearly of no help at all. Thus, we might want to say that the practical corroboration of Mary’s belief in the truth of religion occurs upon evangelization, but in that case, we would be saying something wildly counterintuitive. In that case, we would be suggesting that Mary’s evangelization is actually a part of the etiology of the positive epistemic accrual to her belief and that evangelization is epistemically benefiting both her and the evangelized. Of course, any epistemological approach will recognize the role action plays in generating new perceptual evidence that might benefit agents, but it is strange to suggest that evangelization is etiologically contributing to the positive epistemic status of the evangelizer’s beliefs in this way. Of course, strangeness is not quite a decisive discredit to a theory, but insofar as we went in search of an epistemic account of Mary’s evangelization to save the appearance of her case, a move to this particular position would undercut this search. Thus, I conclude that whatever the merits of epistemic pragmatism, and I do think there are merits to epistemic pragmatism, this view alone cannot solve the present problem.

5. Fellowship as a Multivalent Good

However, if it is at all possible to give a genuinely epistemic account of Mary’s reasons for evangelizing, I do think one will have to have recourse to something in the neighborhood of two classical pragmatist ideas. The first idea derives from James’ contention that a hard distinction between theoretical and practical cognition is problematic. This idea has found home among some contemporary epistemologists who endorse epistemic reasons for action.⁶ For example, Fleisher (2024) advocates a social practice view of epistemic reasons, in which epistemic reasons are ultimately socially recognized considerations a population of agents with a specific history accepts as reliably leading to the realization of epistemic values. The problem with a straightforward application of this view here is that this account is strained in missionary contexts in which the evangelizer and the evangelized do not share a social history. Nevertheless, I agree that there is a problem with merely distinguishing between epistemic and practical norms on the basis of a distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning (p. 17). However, one must proceed with caution here. If we interpret the pressure James places on the distinction between theoretical and practical cognition as a denial of the distinguishing feature of direction of

fit, I find this claim hard to accept. Success in theoretical cognition is a matter of fitting the mind to the world, whereas success in practical cognition is a matter of fitting the world to the mind. However, in the preceding pages, I gave a further characterization of this distinction in terms of representing versus intervening. It is this further elaboration that I think James rightly critiques. When an agent represents a particular truth to herself, it is not the case that she has not brought about a state of affairs. Her cognitive success is as much a part of the world as anything else.⁷ To say that Mary is not acting for an epistemic reason because she is acting to bring about a further state of affairs is thus too hasty.

The second helpful idea we might have recourse to, albeit in a modified version, derives from James' contention that truth is what an ideal community of observers is fated to accept at the end of an ideal inquiry. While this is a controversial understanding of truth, this understanding involves an implicit commitment to the idea that theoretical cognition can have the genuine aim of recognition by others. In his recent work, Brandom (2022) gives a Hegelian elaboration of this aim as a "*social, historical, expressivist account*" (p. 66). According to this view, true accounts are ultimately fallible historical recollections or reconstructions given in the form of narratives that identify prior moments and momentary commitments as phenomenal appearances of a genuine reality that subsequent social practice has made later agents cognizant of and that provide narrative content for future practitioners. While I have no intention of defending Brandom-style pragmatism, Brandom's reading of Hegel and James' understanding of truth suggest there is ample philosophical precedent for the claim that theoretical cognition can aim at recognition by others. In fact, I would argue that this possibility follows from the idea just previously articulated. If cognitive success is a matter of bringing about a state of affairs, then it is possible that that state of affairs could have the aim of recognition by others. In fact, I suspect that there is also a case to be made for thinking that the aim of recognition by others is one way that our beliefs impel us to find intersubjective support, corroboration, or assurance.

This suggestion comes quite close to a suggestion Falbo (2023) describes as the zetetic view, or the view that all epistemic norms derive from zetetic considerations (p. 2978). While this view has its proponents, other philosophers find this view implausible. For example, Arpaly (2023) criticizes zetetic accounts for treating epistemic reasons as practical reasons to engage in various forms of inquiry on the grounds that this assimilation overlooks the fact that unlike the adoption of various practical goals, belief formation is not a voluntary process (p. 30). However, my claim here does not depend on a commitment to doxastic voluntarism or the zetetic turn. The point I am pressing here is consistent with the view that epistemic norms are fundamentally doxastic rather than zetetic, or some combination of both. My point is that our belief-forming processes might have the aim of producing outputs recognized by others as a means of leaving creatures such as us open to correction.⁸ Such openness could derive from a demand for adequate inquiry, but it could also amount to an admission of fallibility and thus connect to a simple evidential demand. The point is also not that our belief-forming processes are voluntary, but that they belong to theoretical cognition because of the direction of fit of their aim, not because of their involuntariness, as Arpaly seems to suggest.

With this established, we are in a better position to appreciate how Mary's aims can be epistemic. Consider the following statement:

1. Mary acts so that others will know the truth.

The previous obstacle to giving an epistemic reading of 1 concerned the verb in this statement. However, we have now seen that an action is not automatically disqualified as an epistemic event. In order to ascertain whether the action in question is occurring for an epistemic reason, we have to inquire into the aim. We cannot simply label the action as voluntary. Here, it is true that Mary has the goal of converting others, but the contrast with Francis and David reveals that this goal is merely a proximate goal. Mary's ultimate goal concerns the recognition of truth. This is an apparently epistemic goal, according to

the light of PNI*. Why is that? Because Mary's goal here is to produce an accurate representation, and an accurate representation belongs to the family of goods that we label as epistemic goods. By aiming at an accurate representation, Mary is implicitly bound by a norm that would produce a good when successfully adhered to.

To reinforce this contention, compare 1 above to the following two claims:

2. I should study so that I can pass my exam.
3. I should base my beliefs upon evidence.

1 is much closer to 3 than it is to 2. Why? Because 1 describes an agent aiming at an epistemic good like 3 and unlike 2. Of course, that is not to say that there is no difference between 1 and 3. There is a difference, and that difference concerns the recipient of the good in question. In 1, the aim is that others receive a particular good, whereas in 3, the aim is that oneself receives a particular good. The question is whether this is enough to suggest that 1 does not describe an agent aiming at an epistemic good. PNI* suggests that we should distinguish the implicit norm Mary is rationally bound to by adopting the aim described in 1 and the explicit norm described in 3 on the basis of the family to which the realized good belongs.⁹ Well, why think that the good Mary is aiming at is not epistemic because she is not the intended recipient? As far as I can tell, one possible reason depends on the following principle:

The Epistemic Isolation Principle (EIP): A good G is an epistemic good if and only if it is a token good possessed by a single agent.

However, I see no reason to accept this principle, and more importantly, it is entirely consistent with Mary's aim of converting other individuals. Perhaps then the problem is that the good Mary is aiming at is not epistemic because it becomes some other kind of good when given. Consider next:

The Moral Good Principle (MGP): A good G is a moral good if it is realized by the activity of one agent bearing on another subject.

MGP suggests that the good Mary is aiming at is a moral good. Does that mean we must reject MGP to give an epistemic account of Mary's reasons for evangelizing? I do not see why that must be the case. MGP does not suggest that a good could not be multivalent, and if the good Mary is aiming at is multivalent, a non-epistemic reading of her aim does not undermine an epistemic one. After all, Mary's aim seems to involve both a desire to bring about a state of affairs that makes the world closer to the way she wants it to be and a goal of generating an accurate representation of the world, even if it is not her own. A multivalent reading of this aim suggests that this appearance is not misleading, and perhaps such a reading even makes sense of why philosophers have been keen to both deny and affirm the possibility of epistemic reasons for action.

Is such a view plausible? I think so, and I think there is some historical precedent for such a view. Consider Augustine's (2008) claim that "[t]he human condition would be wretched if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency [because] there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow [and] intermingle with each other if human beings learned nothing from other humans" (pp. 5–6). Consider also one of the Christian tradition's great evangelists, the 18th-century British cleric John Wesley. Wesley ([1786] 1986) defined the "universal church [as] all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to...be 'one body', united by 'one spirit;' having one faith, one hope, one baptism" (p. 50). Here, Wesley's claim about being united by "one spirit" must be understood against the background of a Christian pneumatology that associates the Holy Spirit with the spirit of truth. When read this way, Wesley appears to be suggesting that the universal church is marked by a shared recognition of Christian truth. However, Wesley ([1783] 1986) was also of the view that it is "generally [God's] pleasure to work by his creatures: to help man by man" (p. 349). This suggests that Wesley believed it was the responsibility of Christian believers to establish what Christians call fellowship

with others, and by so doing, build and strengthen the universal church. When combined with an understanding of belief as both a noetic condition and a prudential good, and an appreciation for the way the effortful establishment of fellowship renders fellowship a moral good, these remarks suggest historical precedent for the view that Christian evangelization is aimed at fellowship and that fellowship is a multivalent good.

6. Modeling Evangelization

To bring this model of fellowship into clearer view, it will help to first have recourse to the truth goal. David (2014) first formulates the truth goal as follows:

$$G (\forall p) (Tp \rightarrow Bp \ \& \ Bp \rightarrow Tp)$$

Here, G stands for goal, $\forall p$ stands for the universal quantifier “for all propositions p,” T stands for true, and B stands for believes. Thus, David’s formulation of the truth goal says that it is a goal that one believes any proposition if it is true and does not believe any proposition that is false (p. 364). The obvious problem with this formulation concerns the first conjunct under the scope of the quantifier. This conjunct suggests that one has the goal to believe any true proposition. That is obviously absurd. There is a fact of the matter about how many indents are in the drop ceiling tiles in my office, but I have no goal of ascertaining and believing this fact, and it is not a goal I should have. For this reason, David suggests that this conjunct be restricted to “‘important and interesting’ propositions” (p. 365).

Now, to revise this formula to model multivalent fellowship, we can first shift our focus from propositions to agents, symbolized by the variables x and y. Next, we can restrict our concern to what we could call the fellowship goal, F. Then we can build in notation for evangelization, E, the shared recognition of a truth, S, and a contribution to well-being, or W. Thus, I suggest that we formulate a multivalent model of fellowship as follows:

$$(\forall x) (\forall y) Fx \leftrightarrow Gx (Exy \rightarrow (Sxy \ \& \ Wy))$$

This formula says that for any agent x and any other subject y, x has a fellowship goal if and only if x has the goal of evangelizing with respect to y and having this goal suffices for x having the goal of sharing a recognition of truth with y and contributing to y’s well-being. In this way, we model the multivalent good of fellowship. Here, Sxy gives us the epistemic valence of the fellowship and Wy gives us the moral valence. If we wanted to build in a prudential consideration with respect to x, we could amend the above formula so that the consequent in the conditional under the scope of our universal quantifiers included a conjunct indicating that x’s evangelizing with respect to y also redounds to x’s well-being, or Wx.

In this latter case, our formula would give us a multivalent model of the fellowship goal that captures the reasons each of our three evangelization vignettes spotlighted. Because such a model would also suggest that this multivalence is a necessary and sufficient condition for having the fellowship goal, this model would also capture the suggestion I mentioned when discussing the vignettes, the suggestion that some religious traditions hold that evangelization is only properly undertaken when various reasons for evangelizing are compounded or harmonized. This being the case, the above model of the multivalent fellowship goal might very well illuminate further models of possible evangelization. To see this, consider the following formula:

$$Gx (Exy \rightarrow Wx)$$

This formula says that x has the goal of evangelizing y because evangelizing y contributes to x’s well-being. Thus, we might call this model of evangelization simple prudential evangelizing. If our Francis case were a complete description of Francis’ motives, Francis’ evangelical efforts would be captured by this model. Something similar could also be said about our David case. Consider this following formula:

$$Gx (Exy \rightarrow Wy)$$

This formula says that x has the goal of evangelizing y because evangelizing y contributes to y 's well-being. Thus, we might call this model of evangelization simple moralistic evangelizing. If the David vignette were an exhaustive description of David's motives, David's evangelical efforts would be exhaustively captured by this model.

With this in mind, two interesting results follow from the preceding. The first interesting result is that a model of simple epistemic evangelizing would be a de facto multivalent model for the reasons given above: epistemic evangelizing is the delivering of a de facto moral good, given MGP and a de facto practical good given that one could only evangelize when evangelization is a practical goal of one's own. Of course, this good could be so insignificant that it need not be recognized by the best going ethical theories, but it would nonetheless count as a multivalent good by definition, given MGP. The second interesting result is that the multivalent model of fellowship reveals how paltry the simple models really are. Though I bracketed ethical concerns about evangelization above, I do suspect that these models could contribute to subsequent ethical examination of various forms of evangelization. For example, the universal scope of the model might signify an important ethical constraint and the multivalent fellowship model might also elucidate why some forms of evangelization can be self-righteous: some forms, such as the simple models, ignore or suppress the forms of solidarity the multivalent fellowship model makes necessary to the goal of proper evangelization.

Of course, this raises the question of whether the multivalent fellowship model is religiously adequate. While this question lies somewhat outside of the scope of this research, I do think a case can be made in this direction. Consider again John Wesley's remarks quoted above. Wesley's view can be glossed as the view that an evangelizer has the goal of being bonded by the Spirit, with others, in the truth for the well-being of all so bonded. In a Christian perspective such as Wesley's, our goals are ultimately the ends God has made us for. If God has made us for fellowship, as Christians maintain, then it makes sense that we would have fellowship as one of our aims, and if that fellowship included, among other things, recognition of God, it also makes sense that our fellowship aim would be multivalent and include an epistemic dimension. Thus, the multivalent fellowship model is quite consistent with at least a partial Wesleyan understanding of Christianity. Whether its component parts support characterizations of other Christian denominations is a topic worthy of further exploration, but I do believe that the preceding has provided some reason for optimism. In fact, I believe this view might also provide resources for addressing further meta-epistemological issues. As Fleisher notes (2024) notes, instrumental conceptions of epistemic reasons stand in some tension with the view that epistemic norms possess categorical force (p. 9). If the fellowship model means that our epistemic norms are ultimately instrumental because they are means to the end of fellowship and/or nearness to God, perhaps one could account for the categorical force of epistemic norms by appeal to God's authority and/or our design plan. After all, Christian thinkers, particularly classical and neo-classical theists, have long operated in a neo-Platonic tradition in which the good and the true are identified. Perhaps this tradition can help contemporary philosophers see that some of the options offered in the contemporary secular debate separate what God has joined together.

7. Conclusions

Christian missionaries can evangelize for many reasons and some common reasons are moral and prudential. In strict salvific exclusivist understandings, these moral reasons may be narrowly soteriological, but in other less exclusivist understandings, moral reasons might nonetheless motivate evangelizers. In both more and less exclusivist traditions, missionaries might evangelize out of a concern for their own salvation and thus evangelize for prudential reasons. Despite the implications of the claims of some philosophers, I have argued that missionaries might also evangelize for epistemic reasons, although these

reasons might also supervene on other goals. In the end, I suggested that the most robust model of evangelization may be a multivalent model in which evangelization is undertaken with the goal of establishing fellowship with the evangelized. I argued that this model might illuminate further models of evangelization and that it is particularly plausible on the assumption that Christian theism is true. I closed with the suggestion that this model might inform further meta-epistemological discussion and signify the need for more theologically informed positions in this area, particularly with respect to meta-normativity.

Funding: This research received no external funding

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

Notes

1. For example, neither Abraham and Aquino (2017) nor Fuqua et al. (2023), two excellent relatively exhaustive handbooks on religious epistemology, directly treat missionary evangelization.
2. See Stepanenko (2023) Chapter 4 for some discussion of this issue.
3. Not all epistemologists agree about the normativity of epistemic concepts. Notice however that when applied to an epistemic concept, PNI need not be given a deontic reading.
4. Admittedly, this principle leaves untouched the idea that gardeners follow horticultural norms, but pace Falbo, I see no reason to think that in and of itself is a problem. Rather the genuine problem I think Falbo raises about PNI is that PNI makes overly fine discriminations that does not support broader characterizations. In this respect, I believe PNI* is an improvement.
5. See for example Humberstone (1992).
6. In fact, contemporary philosophers question this distinction for many reasons, including postmodern reasons (Smith 2014), some for religious reasons (Cuneo 2023), and some for zetetic reasons as we will see below.
7. One might worry that this claim is inconsistent with the commitment many religious philosophers have to some form of mind-body dualism and this view's implication or presumption that individual agents have a kind of access to their mental states that others do not. However, my point here is not that our belief states are public events, but that they are parts of states of the world in the broader philosophical sense of the world and that an exhaustive account of the state of affairs at any stage in a world's history would have to include the representational success and failure of the cognitive agents in that world.
8. One might think that a view of this sort is incompatible with a view commonly taken by philosophers of religion in the epistemology of disagreement: the view that an agent can remain steadfast in her beliefs in face of opposition. However, my point here about openness to correction could be read as an openness to assessment from others about one's own beliefs rather than others' beliefs, and thus not demand any particular take in the philosophy of disagreement.
9. What might such a norm be? I suspect that the details here must be filled out by Mary's particular tradition, but some candidates include: 4 Mary should preach with the mind of Christ so that others may know the truth of who Christ is or 5 Mary should preach in a Biblically accurate manner so that others may come to know the reliability of the Bible.

References

- (Abraham and Aquino 2017) Abraham, William J., and Frederick D. Aquino. 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- (Arpaly 2023) Arpaly, Nomy. 2023. Practical reasons to believe, epistemic reasons to act, and the baffled action theorist. *Philosophical Issues* 33: 22–32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phils.12239>.
- (Augustine 2008) Augustine, Saint. 2008. *On Christian Teaching*. Translated by R. P. H. Green. New York: Oxford University Press.
- (Belby 2023) Belby, James. 2023. The Implications of Religious Peer Disagreement for Religious Epistemology. *Philosophia Christi* 25: 193–201. <https://doi.org/10.5840/pc202325219>.
- (Brandom 1987) Brandom, Robert. 1987. Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12: 75–93.
- (Brandom 2022) Brandom, Robert B. 2022. *Pragmatism and Idealism: Rorty and Hegel on Reason and Representation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- (Callahan 2023) Callahan, Laura Frances. 2023. Trust, Testimony, and Religious Belief. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology*. Edited by Jonathan Fuqua, John Greco and Tyler McNabb. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 193–207.
- (Cuneo 2023) Cuneo, Terence. 2023. Liturgically Infused Practical Understanding. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology*. Edited by Jonathan Fuqua, John Greco and Tyler McNabb. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 241–56.

- (David 2001) David, Marian. 2001. Truth as the Epistemic Goal. In *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue*. Edited by Matthias Steup. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 151–69.
- (David 2014) David, Marian. 2014. Truth as the Primary Epistemic Goal: A Working Hypothesis. In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*. Second Edition. Edited by Mattias Steup, John Turre and Ernest Sosa. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 363–77.
- (Falbo 2023) Falbo, Arianna. 2023. Should epistemology take the zetetic turn? *Philosophical Studies* 180: 2977–3002. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-02016-3>.
- (Fleisher 2024) Fleisher, Will. 2024. Epistemic practices: A unified account of epistemic and zetetic normativity. *Noûs*: 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12514>.
- (Fuqua et al. 2023) Fuqua, Jonathan, John Greco, and Tyler Dalton McNabb. 2023. *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- (Gettier 1963) Gettier, Edmund. 1963. Is Justified True Belief Knowledge? *Analysis* 23: 121–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/23.6.121>.
- (Humberstone 1992) Humberstone, I. Lloyd. 1992. Direction of Fit. *Mind* 101: 59–83. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2254119> (accessed on 28 June 2024).
- (Jackson, forthcoming) Jackson, Elizabeth. Forthcoming. Can Atheists Have Faith? *Philosophic Exchange*.
- (James [1890] 1979) James, William. 1979. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. Edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers and Ignas K. Skrupskelis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. First published 1890.
- (Kvanvig 2014) Kvanvig, Jonathan. 2014. Truth Is Not the Primary Epistemic Goal. In *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, 2nd ed. Edited by Mattias Steup, John Turre and Ernest Sosa. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 352–62.
- (Simion 2018) Simion, Mona. 2018. No Epistemic Norm for Action. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 55: 231–38. Available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45128617> (accessed on 28 June 2024).
- (Slater 2009) Slater, Michael. 2009. *William James on Ethics and Faith*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- (Smith 2014) Smith, James K. A. 2014. *Who's Afraid of Relativism? Community, Contingency and Creaturehood*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- (Stepanenko 2020) Stepanenko, Walter Scott. 2020. A new name for some old ways of thinking: Pragmatism, radical empiricism, and epistemology in W.E.B. Du Bois' 'Of the Sorrow Songs'. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 87: 173–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-019-09717-y>.
- (Stepanenko 2023) Stepanenko, Walter Scott. 2023. *Religious Experience and Religious Lives: An Epistemology*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- (Wesley [1786] 1986) Wesley, John. 1986. Sermon 74: Of the Church. In *The Works of John Wesley Volume 3: Sermons III 71-114*. Bicentennial edition. Edited by Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 46–57. First published 1786.
- (Wesley [1783] 1986) Wesley, John. 1986. Sermon 95: On the Education of Children. In *The Works of John Wesley Volume 3: Sermons III 71-114*. Bicentennial edition. Edited by Albert C. Outler. Nashville: Abingdon Press, pp. 347–60. First published 1783.
- (Zagzebski 2015) Zagzebski, Linda. 2015. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.