

Katherine Dormandy
University of Innsbruck

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Religious Disagreement

Abstract. *Religious disagreement* describes the fact that religious and secular beliefs exhibit massive variety, and cannot all be perfectly accurate. It yields a problem and an opportunity. The problem is that, especially given the apparent epistemic parity of many who hold other beliefs, you cannot suppose that *your* beliefs are accurate. This arguably puts pressure on you to weaken or abandon your beliefs. Responses include denying the parity of those who disagree, or denying that religious disagreement speaks strongly against your beliefs. I criticize these, defending an alternative epistemology to those employed by both the problem and the responses. My epistemological view finds a middle-ground between them, and positions us to benefit from the *opportunity* that religious disagreement offers to improve our beliefs. I address the objections that the opportunity mentality is unnecessary if God supports our beliefs, that it risks our (true) beliefs, and that it is disloyal to God.

Keywords. Religious disagreement, worldview disagreement, epistemology of disagreement, epistemic benefits of religious disagreement, evidence and religious beliefs

1. Introduction

Religious belief systems provide orientation, and they contain information about what their adherents think is true and important. But they come in massive variety, and many are logically incompatible with others. They cannot all simultaneously be perfectly accurate. Even within religions there is significant disagreement, and atheist beliefs say that *no* religious beliefs are accurate. We may call this situation *religious disagreement*.

Many philosophers regard religious disagreement as a problem. For having beliefs usually means taking reality to be as they describe. But how do you know *your* belief system is accurate, instead of one of the many others? Other philosophers regard religious disagreement as an opportunity. For engaging thoughtfully with alternative beliefs may help improve your own. I'll discuss both mindsets in turn: the threat mindset (section 2) and the opportunity mindset (section 3).

A few clarifications. Beliefs about religious matters, as construed here, have at least one of the following features. They pertain to ontology, either affirming or denying something about a transcendent reality (such as God). Or they pertain to practical matters, specifically the consequences of the ontological beliefs on our lives, for example, what (not) to eat, or whether certain people may become religious leaders.

Although the following concerns religious disagreement, many of the ideas apply equally to disagreement over other complex belief systems, such as ethical or political ones. Where an argument is unique to religious disagreement should be clear.

2. Religious Disagreement as an Epistemic Threat

Many people with mutually incompatible beliefs about religious matters seem highly intelligent and personally admirable. Yet most of their belief systems (there being so many) must be inaccurate. How can this be? And can you be sure yours is not among the mistaken ones? This is the *epistemic problem of religious disagreement*.

It can be expressed as the following argument.

The Argument from Religious Disagreement

1. There are many people whose beliefs about religious matters are incompatible with mine, yet whose epistemic qualifications are on a par with mine. **(RD-Evidence)**
2. RD-Evidence, against the backdrop of my other total evidence, speaks against my own beliefs about religious matters.
3. If premises 1 and 2 are true, then I (epistemically) should weaken or even abandon my own beliefs about religious matters.
4. Therefore, I (epistemically) should weaken or even abandon my own beliefs about religious matters.

Consider premise 1. A person's *epistemic qualifications* are factors that are relevant for forming true beliefs or knowledge, particularly evidence and epistemic competences. Two people's epistemic qualifications can be on a par without being identical: Each person may have excellent but different evidence, for example religious experience versus philosophical argumentation. And each person may be equally but differently competent, for example in emotional perception versus logical argumentation. Religious matters are multifaceted, generating highly varied evidence (tradition, experiences, arguments...), and one can form beliefs about them through different evidence or competences. If a person's epistemic qualifications are on a par with yours, then even if they are different, her chances at obtaining truth and knowledge on religious matters would, without further information, seem as high as yours.

Some authors endorse a narrower understanding of epistemic parity, on which two people possess *exactly the same* evidence and competences (Feldman and Warfield, 2010, 2). This would imply that, in the highly complex area of religion, there are virtually no epistemic peers (King, 2012). Defining epistemic parity this way is one strategy for rejecting premise 1. But it fails to take the problem of religious disagreement seriously (Lackey, 2014). For a major aspect of this problem is that you may be missing something, be it certain evidence or competences. Articulating the problem of religious disagreement requires the broad notion of parity, or peerhood, outlined here.

Much speaks for premise 1. Religious matters are complex, and nobody can have all the relevant evidence about them – not least because there is some evidence that you can only get by *practicing* a religion (Cottingham, 2005, chapter 5). Nor can a single person develop all the relevant competences in one lifetime. And we likely know and respect people with incompatible beliefs about religion to ours. Even if not, we have sufficient evidence that they exist. It would be the height of intellectual arrogance, the thought goes, to suppose that our evidence and competences are superior to everyone else's.

Now consider premises 2 and 3. Taken together, they form the view known as *conciliationism*: that religious peer disagreement requires both parties to weaken their confidence or even abandon their beliefs (Christensen, 2007; Elga, 2007; Feldman, 2007). This view stands opposed to the *steadfast view*, which holds that peers can legitimately maintain their beliefs at their original levels of confidence despite RD-evidence (Plantinga, 2000a; Kelly, 2005; Conee, 2010; Bergmann, 2015, 2017). We'll see how these general epistemological views play out in the case of religious disagreement.

Consider premise 2, the claim that RD-Evidence, against the backdrop of your other evidence, speaks against your beliefs. I am thinking of *evidence* broadly, as a person's representational experiences and (internally) justified beliefs¹ (Conee and Feldman, 2004). Premise 2 says that RD-evidence makes your beliefs less likely to be true than otherwise, given your other evidence. For a piece of evidence does not speak alone, but only against the backdrop of one's other evidence. For example, even the experiential evidence of the shining sun, supporting your belief that the sun is shining, works alongside your implicit belief that your eyes are functioning. Because of this, the extent to which RD-evidence speaks against your beliefs depends partly on your other evidence. Premise 2 assumes that most everyone has the sort of background evidence, for example about the complexity of the world, that makes RD-evidence speak against their beliefs at least somewhat.

There are two ways in which RD-evidence might speak against your beliefs about religious matters. One is direct: The sheer number of belief systems incompatible with yours, adhered to by admirable people, makes it statistically unlikely that *yours* is the accurate one. The second is indirect. Rather than impugning your beliefs themselves, it impugns the way you formed them. Compare: if you believe that $436 + 387 = 816$ because you added in your head, and an epistemic peer insists instead that the answer is 823, you have reason to second-guess your calculation. Similarly, religious disagreement by epistemic peers gives reason to suspect that your evidence or competences misled you.

Premise 3 makes a claim about the epistemic consequence of premises 1 and 2, supposing they are true: that you should weaken your own beliefs about religious matters – that is, hold them less confidently than before (Gutting, 1982; McKim, 2001; Quinn, 2000), or completely abandon them in favor of belief suspension (Feldman, 2007; Schellenberg, 2007).

Why endorse premise 3? Because you think that a person's total evidence exerts a legitimate epistemic influence on his beliefs, which he (epistemically) ought to abide by. After all, from our internal perspective, evidence is our biggest clue to the way things are. And the fact that an epistemic peer forms a belief that is incompatible with yours indicates that something has gone wrong somewhere. At most one of two incompatible beliefs can be true, and because we cannot take a God's-eye view of the situation, we are not in a position to conclude that it is definitely ours.

¹ Those who construe evidence as knowledge or as externally justified beliefs can substitute for "evidence" "the considerations internal to one's perspective that one has to go on in forming beliefs."

So the Argument from Religious Disagreement threatens your beliefs about religious matters. At least, it does if you care about evidence. Otherwise you might adopt a *strong fideist* response: You might agree with the premises, and conclude that you epistemically ought to adjust your beliefs – but deny that epistemic oughts matter most. For example, an atheist may prefer to maintain her strong atheist beliefs despite RD-evidence because of peer pressure. Or a religious person might prefer to maintain his strong religious beliefs because he thinks this is what faith requires.

But if you do care about evidence, you must respond in another way.

2.1 Denying the Evidence (Denying Premise 1)

One strategy for resisting this argument is to deny premise 1 – to deny that RD-evidence obtains.

Religious pluralists deny the first conjunct of premise 1. They hold that belief systems pertaining at least to the major world religions are simultaneously accurate at a general level (Hick, 1989; Harrison, 2006). But even supposing this is true, it cannot dissolve the problem of religious disagreement. First, there are other less common religious belief systems, beside the major religions. Second, there are disagreeing atheists. Third, many people disagree with religious pluralism itself. Fourth, there is still intra-religious disagreement.

A more promising route is to deny the second conjunct of premise 1, that those who disagree with you about religious matters are on an epistemic par with you. This *denial-of-parity* strategy takes on many forms. When it comes to large worldview questions, it typically has a negative and a positive component. The negative component maintains that *disagreeing interlocutors are epistemically disadvantaged*, the positive one says that *you (or your community) are epistemically advantaged*. These components can be offered separately, but typically they form a package.

One such package is intended for religious believers. It is part of a more general religious epistemology that we may call *divine-help epistemology* (Plantinga, 2000; Moser, 2010; Bergmann, 2015). It claims that the world suffers from a theologically significant form of imperfection, typically called “sin”, which manifests itself in our behavior, but also our cognition. People cannot obtain knowledge about God unless God helps us overcome sin’s effects. The *negative* part of this package says that those who disagree with you about religion do so because God has not (yet) helped their cognition, making them epistemically disadvantaged on religious matters. The *positive* part says that God has specially inspired the cognition of your belief community, making you epistemically advantaged on religious matters.

A similar package is available to the non-religious (Rini, 2017). It claims that your epistemic community shares your values. Naturally, you take these to be good values, so they should influence your beliefs. *Negatively*, this package says that you may regard community outsiders, because they do not share your values, as epistemically disadvantaged. *Positively*, it lets you regard your community as epistemically advantaged.

Either package, if true, falsifies premise 1. For they say that those who disagree with you about religious matters are not on a par with you epistemically – they are worse off and you are better off.

The starting premises of these packages are not inherently problematic. The theological story about sin has been developed with nuance. And the idea that group values can promote epistemic aims is familiar in science, the epistemic success of which can be explained by values such as self-criticism and respect for evidence (Anderson, 1995).

But the denial-of-parity strategy as a whole is epistemically problematic. It separates people into epistemic in-groups and out-groups: the epistemically privileged and the rest. It is a “discrediting mechanism” (McKim, 2001, 136), epistemically demoting outsiders a priori, without evaluating the merits of their views. Discrediting mechanisms are problematic. For often people reject community beliefs not just due to epistemic shortcomings, but for reasons the community could learn from (Lougheed, 2018; Dormandy, 2018a). For example, outsiders may be uncomfortable with the way an accurate doctrine is communicated, with its being misused to hide wrongdoing, or with supposed implications that it may not have. (Think of how religious texts were misused to justify slavery and eugenics.) Dialoguing with dissenters may epistemically benefit the community – in many religions epistemically valuable dissent is provided by prophets. This does not obligate communities to heed all dissenters (think of neo-Nazis); but they should not be demoted en masse.

One might object that demoting people from parity a priori does not commit you to ignoring insights they do have – you can learn from them when the occasion warrants. But matters are not so simple. Once an insider/outsider division has been established, it encourages in-group members to perceive out-group members through the lens of implicit, epistemically demoting, stereotypes (Fricker, 2007). The result is twofold. First, insiders are less apt to judge outsiders as having worthwhile insights at all. Second, even if an insider does deem an outsider’s views worth engaging with, she is disposed to evaluate them more negatively than if they were given by an in-group member (Saul, 2013). Because this psychological process is implicit, she will mistakenly take herself to be evaluating the out-group member’s view on its merits (*ibid.*). This disposition is very hard to uproot without eliminating the in-group/out-group mentality that creates the stereotypes to begin with. But the denial-of-parity strategy does the opposite – in sanctioning the epistemic in-group/out-group distinction, it promotes such stereotypes.

One might object that some claims to epistemic privilege are true. For example, scientists legitimately claim epistemic superiority when non-scientists disagree with well-established scientific claims, such as that the Earth is round. The denial-of-parity claim about religious matters, says the objection, is no epistemically different from the claim that Flat Earthers are not on a par with scientists.

But there is an important epistemic difference between scientific communities and communities defined by religious or secular adherence. Science builds dissent among scientists into its belief-forming practices, and these practices enjoy broad acceptance outside the scientific community – Flat Earthers and the like being rare exceptions. In contrast, communities defined by religious or secular adherence do not typically have belief-forming methods about religious matters that are broadly accepted outside their community. When on top of this they epistemically demote outsiders a priori, they take on the character of *echo chambers*, deliberately and systematically excluding outside evidence and viewpoints (Nguyen, 2018).

Echo chambers are epistemically problematic. First, they desensitize their members against nuanced thinking and perceiving. For the cognitive categories they use to make sense of new information become, for lack of challenge, oversimplified. To see how, note that a healthy way to respond to challenging new information is to find an equilibrium between adjusting one’s cognitive categories in light of it, and interpreting it in light of one’s categories. Echo chambers do only the latter.

Second, epistemic “insiders” in an echo chamber, who demote anyone who disagrees with them, thereby threaten their own epistemic reliability. They risk becoming more self-assured than they deserve, and may be lulled into overlooking their epistemic shortcomings

(Medina, 2013). And because their community is an echo chamber, they face little accountability. This is so even if their beliefs are generally accurate. Think of epistemic communities, who for argument's sake we may suppose have largely accurate beliefs, who cannot bring themselves to believe (truly) that their leaders have committed abuse.

Of course, this does not mean that religious or secular communities do not enjoy any epistemic privilege. On the contrary, whichever communities (if any) are aided by God, or employ the most truth-conducive values, are in better shape than others. But the way to stay in epistemic shape, I'll argue, is not to demote outsiders a priori from epistemic parity. It is to engage with them hoping to learn something (section 3).

In summary, a community that applies the denial-of-parity strategy risks overlooking important insights from community outsiders and becoming an echo chamber.

2.2 Denying that the Evidence is a Big Deal (Denying Premises 2 or 3)

Even if you accept premise 1 and thus acknowledge the existence of RD-evidence, you might deny that it is a big deal. This makes you a proponent of the steadfast view. Depending on which version you adopt, you might deny premise 2 or 3.

Consider premise 3, the claim that, if there is RD-evidence and this speaks against your beliefs, you should adjust or even abandon your beliefs. One might deny this by claiming that respecting your evidence is not the most important thing, epistemically speaking. But what else would make beliefs epistemically good? A frequent answer points to some externalist factor, such as the reliability (Goldman, 1979), competence (Greco, 2010), or proper functioning (Plantinga, 2000) of the way you formed your beliefs, or whether your beliefs are reasonable, apart from the evidence of disagreement, from a God's-eye view (Kelly, 2005). Some steadfasters who deny premise 3 argue that, because your beliefs have one of these qualities, you are epistemically permitted to maintain them even though RD-evidence speaks against them (e.g., Kelly, 2005; Bergmann, 2015, 2017).

But even if epistemic goodness does hinge mainly on external qualities, evidence is part of your internal perspective. And many externalists regard a coherent internal perspective as a minimum epistemic constraint (Goldman, 1979; Plantinga, 2000b). Because of this, even they typically claim that you must reconcile RD-evidence, as well as other counterevidence, with your original beliefs (e.g. Plantinga, 2000). One might think that this is doable. After all, your beliefs have a good chance of being true given their externalist merits, making RD-evidence likely misleading. For example, suppose God exists. In this case, the existence of atheist epistemic peers is just misleading evidence against his existence that arises from a fallen world. Or suppose there is no God. In this case, evidence *for* God's existence may come from perceptions laden with cultural baggage.

But RD-evidence, even if it is misleading, is particularly hard to counter. After all, by hypothesis your disagreeing interlocutor is your epistemic peer: he has evidence or competences that you lack. Addressing the RD-evidence so that it no longer speaks against your beliefs may be a tall order.

For this reason, some steadfasters deny premise 3 in a different way. Rather than rely on an external source of epistemic goodness for your beliefs, they agree that evidence is important – but they claim that it is *permissive*: it can be interpreted variously. This means that any given body of total evidence – including RD-evidence – can support a range of incompatible doxastic attitudes (i.e., levels of confidence, beliefs) toward a given proposition (Kelly, 2014). For example, it might support strong or weak belief in some religious doctrine, or weak belief and suspension of judgment. Just as science is not always clear about which

hypothesis scientific findings support, evidence about religious matters can be similarly ambiguous. So RD-evidence, together with your other evidence, might on one interpretation speak against your beliefs, whereas on another interpretation it might not. One interpretation might make conciliation inevitable, but another might legitimate keeping your belief. Premise 3, the claim that RD-evidence *requires* conciliating, would be falsified.

However, even if evidence is permissive, not anything goes. Any body of evidence will support a *limited range* of doxastic attitudes toward a given proposition. Which doxastic attitudes fall within that range depends on what is reasonable given your total evidence – of which RD-evidence is only one part. So if epistemic permissiveness is to support the steadfast view, we must say more about a person’s total evidence about religious matters.

This brings us to premise 2, the claim that RD-evidence, against the backdrop of your other evidence, speaks against your beliefs about religious matters. One version of the steadfast view denies this premise. This view tends to be limited to the special case of *religious* disagreement, although variations could be applied to moral or political disagreement too. This view divides evidence about religious matters into two mutually exclusive categories, where one category tends to support your own beliefs about religion more than the other does. It then argues that evidence in the former category can be weighted more heavily than evidence in the latter. In this case, supposing you have the right background evidence, RD-evidence need not speak against your beliefs at all, making premise 2 false.

The two categories of evidence may be called *impartialist* and *partialist* (Dormandy, 2018b). Impartialist evidence includes beliefs that even those who disagree with you can affirm, and experiences that they too could predictably undergo in the right circumstances. Examples include philosophical arguments, empirical investigations meeting standards of intersubjectivity, and common experiences such as mundane sense perception or suffering. Partialist evidence includes all other evidence: beliefs that those who disagree with you would *not* affirm, and experiences that – for example because of the different cognitive framework through which other people perceive reality – others would not predictably undergo in certain circumstances. Examples include religious experiences (Alston, 1991), community doctrines, and the testimony of community authorities on religious matters (Zagzebski, 2012). In addition, van Inwagen posits “incommunicable evidence” that supports your view even though you cannot explain it to others (2009); and Plantinga and Bergmann posit a feeling of veridicality that you have in entertaining your beliefs, which Plantinga calls “doxastic experience” and Bergmann calls “epistemic intuitions” (Plantinga, 2000, 203-204; Bergmann, 2017). Every person tends to have a mixture of impartialist and partialist evidence in their total evidence.

Partialist evidence is more likely to support your beliefs, since it consists of experiences and beliefs colored by them – all the more so if it legitimately includes incommunicable evidence, doxastic experiences, and the like. Impartialist evidence, though it can support your beliefs, is more likely to include considerations speaking against them. For impartialist evidence is *not* particularly colored by your own belief system.

RD-evidence is impartialist. To have it you need only recognize that there are various incompatible belief systems concerning religious matters, and adopt a notion of epistemic parity that does not exclude others a priori simply because of their disagreement with your community-specific beliefs.

This brings us to the steadfast strategy for denying premise 2. It starts with the claim that beliefs about religious matters should reflect your total evidence. This is a common evidentialist claim; the steadfast strategy adds a further claim. It says that you are entitled to

assign partialist evidence a good deal of evidential weight, whereas you typically need not assign much weight to impartialist evidence (Alston, 1991; Gellman, 1993; Plantinga, 2000; Moser, 2010). So your partialist evidence, when weighed against your impartialist evidence (including RD-evidence), can count for more. As a result, your total evidence as a whole is apt, to a greater or lesser extent depending on what precise partialist and impartialist evidence you have, to lend greater support to your original beliefs. If you are an atheist, your total evidence is prone to support atheist-friendly beliefs; if you are a religious believer, it is prone to support your religious beliefs.

Why should partialist evidence receive greater weight? For religious believers, for whom this view was developed, the idea is that God communicates in a more detailed and direct way through partialist evidence. Think of divinely gifted community tradition, scripture, and religious experiences. Impartialist evidence, in contrast, is less tradition-centered and more ambiguous. Moreover, evidence *against* religious beliefs tends to draw on impartialist considerations. For example, everyone can agree that there is suffering (impartialist evidence), but non-believers use this to argue for God's non-existence. And everyone can agree that scientific methods are applicable to the natural world (the results of science amounting to impartialist evidence), but non-believers use this to argue against the supernatural. So supposing, as religious communities do, that there is a God and that their partialist evidence reliably points to him, weighting it more heavily promotes accurate beliefs about religious matters.

This strategy might seem promising for those whose beliefs *are* reliably formed and thus largely accurate. But what if your beliefs are not accurate? In this case, privileging your partialist evidence, colored by a largely inaccurate belief system, will likely make your beliefs more inaccurate yet. For example, permitting Flat Earthers to privilege their partialist evidence will entrench their flat-earth beliefs. So this strategy carries great costs for those starting off with inaccurate beliefs (Dormandy, 2018b).

But perhaps surprisingly, this strategy is epistemically problematic for those with accurate beliefs too. Privileging partialist evidence over impartialist evidence (including RD-evidence) risks complacency or even dogmatism. The risk of echo chambers (section 2), with their desensitizing of people against nuanced thinking and perceiving, arises here too. Even when you start with accurate beliefs, if you rely too heavily on partialist as opposed to impartialist evidence, you risk perceiving more things as fitting neatly with your beliefs than really do. For example, even if you are right that there is a God, you may incline too much toward interpreting events as divine intervention. Thus allowing people to systematically give greater weight to partialist evidence is likely to gradually corrode the accuracy even of belief systems that start off accurate.

One might think that being aware of this risk can position you to avoid it. Certainly, being aware of it is better than not. But even if you are aware of the general risk, a partialist evidence-weighting policy will make it hard for you to recognize specific instances where this risk plays out. For your partialist evidence will typically support your already existing beliefs.

In summary, denying any of the premises of the Argument from Religious Disagreement – at least in the ways canvassed here – comes with epistemological problems. Is our only option to accept the conclusion, that you should weaken or even abandon your beliefs about religious matters? This is epistemically problematic too. For it would result in no one's having beliefs, at least confident ones, about religious matters at all – to say nothing of morality, politics, and philosophy. Widespread agnosticism about complex and important matters would result. This would significantly *reduce* knowledge about them – all the more

so given that certain knowledge, especially about religion, is only available through the lens of committed belief (Cottingham, 2005, chapter 5).

I have two proposals in response. The first is an alternative epistemology to the steadfast strategies just discussed. To see what it is, note that I criticized the privileging of partialist evidence over impartialist. But one can take this criticism too far, and instead weight *impartialist* evidence more heavily than partialist (e.g., Locke, 1690; Schellenberg, 2005; Philipse, 2012). This impartialist epistemology may be right for science, which examines aspects of the world that are accessible to anyone with the requisite tools and expertise. But there are other aspects of reality to which it does not apply. One is knowledge of other people, which draws on individual – partialist – experiences of a person that come from special relationship. Another is religious matters. For transcendent reality, if there is one, cannot be assumed – being transcendent – to answer to empirical science.

Privileging impartialist evidence is one error made by conciliationists, who endorse the Argument from Disagreement. Specifically, conciliationists privilege one type of impartialist evidence – RD-evidence. In so doing, they undervalue a person's other evidence, especially but not limited to partialist evidence, that provide a backdrop for assessing the import of RD-evidence (Kelly, 2010). I suggest that, instead of privileging one kind of evidence (or worse, a single instance of one kind of evidence, RD-evidence), we should give both types of evidence approximately equal weight,² a view I call *egalitarianism* (Dormandy, 2018b; Pittard, 2019).

Both partialist and impartialist evidence are important. Partialist evidence reflects important insights from individual and community perspectives. Impartialist evidence reflects a common reality to which any belief system must do justice. Privileging one over the other yields the problems just discussed. Giving both types approximately equal weight allows us to take seriously the unique insights of partialist evidence, while using impartialist evidence to restrain dogmatic excess. When RD-evidence is part of our total evidence, egalitarianism is apt to yield more belief adjustment than the steadfast responses discussed above. But it will not typically yield as much as impartialist epistemology might, and certainly not as much as the conciliationism, which only takes account of RD-evidence. Exactly how much adjustment, if any, egalitarianism calls for depends on your total evidence, including but not limited to RD-evidence – so we may think of Egalitarianism as issuing in a version of Kelly's Total Evidence View (2010). If you wind up conciliating to a greater or lesser extent, the reason will be because your total evidence guides you this way. If you wind up steadfastly maintaining your view, the reason will *not* be because you have succumbed to an echo chamber, but because this is what your total evidence recommends.

My second proposal is a shift of frame. Until now we have construed religious disagreement as a *threat* to your beliefs. But what if we changed the frame to one of *opportunity*? Religious disagreement could then be something we might learn from – about our own beliefs, about others' beliefs, or about ultimate reality.

The opportunity mindset moves away from the question of how to respond to the bare fact of RD-evidence. It asks a different question entirely: how you can make the most, epistemically, of the remarkable fact that there are people on an epistemic par with you who nonetheless think dramatically different things about religious matters.

² Egalitarianism is not to be confused with the Equal-Weight View, a form of conciliationism about peer disagreement (Elga, 2007). Egalitarianism says you should ascribe equal evidential weight to partialist and impartialist evidence generally. Elga's Equal-Weight View is limited to RD-evidence, and says that each disagreeing interlocutor should respond to it by moving their degree of belief equally toward the other person's.

3. Religious Disagreement as an Epistemic Opportunity

The threat mindset is more psychologically natural. Our minds seek coherent beliefs, especially on worldview matters, and religious disagreement presents claims that upset coherence. The opportunity mindset is more psychologically challenging. It requires a tolerance of ambiguity and cognitive dissonance, for example between the comfort of one's familiar beliefs and the acceptance that they may not tell the whole story (Festinger, 1957; Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski, 1991).

I'll argue that the opportunity mindset is epistemically preferable to the threat mindset. But first, why must we choose one over the other? The reason is that the two mindsets have diametrically opposed affective profiles. The threat mindset is characterized by negative emotions such as anxiety or defensiveness, the opportunity mindset by positive emotions such as excitement or curiosity. These affective profiles activate incompatible neurological and physiological circuits. As a result, they have different, incompatible, effects on our belief-formation.

Why is the opportunity mindset epistemically preferable? Because it is apt to reduce the psychological stress of the ambiguity and cognitive dissonance associated with religious disagreement. And so it can help disagreeing interlocutors engage with each other less defensively than otherwise. This matters, because when we are feeling defensive, we are more prone to cognitive distortions such as confirmation biases and stereotyping (Kahneman, 2011). Transitioning from the threat mindset to the opportunity mindset can help excise dogmatic tendencies, helping us appreciate insights in interlocutors' views and weaknesses in our own. This claim is subject to empirical confirmation, but it stands to reason given the psychological power of positive re-frames.

I'd like to highlight one epistemically advantageous behavior facilitated by opportunity mindset, engaging respectfully in religious disagreement. My claim is this (Dormandy, 2020):

The Epistemic-Potential Claim: Engaging respectfully in religious disagreement for the sake of learning new things about ultimate reality has the strong potential to promote epistemic aims concerning religious matters, to a greater extent than avoiding it does.

The idea is that you and disagreeing interlocutors discuss your respective beliefs charitably and open-endedly – not to persuade but to appreciate how the world appears from the other perspective. You might pursue various epistemic aims, such as knowledge, evidence, or understanding.

The Epistemic-Potential Claim is analogous to a claim about science: that engaging in respectful disagreement helps you hone hypotheses by yielding evidence, objections, and alternative perspectives (Longino, 1990). But the analogy is not complete. One difference is that scientists ideally regard their hypotheses with neutral detachment, whereas people are often *committed* to many of their beliefs about religious matters. But this is not the hindrance that one might think. Recall that we are dealing not with isolated beliefs but with belief *systems*. So even if you cordon off certain core beliefs you are unwilling to revise, there is likely an outer layer that are revisable without significant disruption.

The Epistemic-Potential Claim does not state an epistemic requirement. It is thus unlike Basinger's rule, which posits an epistemic duty in the face of RD-evidence to re-examine your beliefs (Basinger, 2002). Rather, the Epistemic-Potential Claim – in the spirit of the opportunity mindset – issues an invitation. For those interested in improving their epistemic situation vis-à-vis religious matters, engaging in religious disagreement is a promising way.

I'll discuss two epistemic advantages of the opportunity mindset – specifically of engaging in religious disagreement.

First, engaging in religious disagreement can provide constructive external criticism of your beliefs, which you could not easily generate alone (Dormandy, 2020). To see how, note that belief systems are held together by a network of background beliefs, many of which remain implicit unless attention is called to them – and many of which can be mistaken (Longino, 1990). Take for example the belief, long operative in the Christian church, that Scripture is authoritative on scientific matters. This proved false, at least as the church understood it, when scientific disagreement produced overwhelming evidence for heliocentrism. Recognizing this helped the church better understand how authority is best ascribed to religious texts. Moreover, belief systems about religious matters rely on beliefs *not* directly pertaining to religion, but that serve as *auxiliary beliefs*. Some auxiliary beliefs concern metaphysics; assumptions about God's relation to time, for instance, may affect our understanding of how God relates to us. Others, as in the heliocentrism case, are empirical. Yet others are epistemological. For example, many of the arguments presented in this chapter do not draw on religion but are highly relevant to it. It often takes a disagreeing interlocutor to notice implicit auxiliary beliefs that you are unaware of, and that may or may not be essential to your core beliefs.

Second, engaging in religious disagreement can expand your evidential basis (Dormandy, 2020). It provides you not just with bare RD-evidence, but more interestingly, with information about your interlocutor's evidence. This matters, because evidence is not "out there" in the world; it consists of experiences filtered through another's perspective, together with beliefs it comprises. Your evidence is just as filtered as your interlocutor's, just differently. So learning about the evidence of someone with radically different filters to you can significantly expand your evidential basis, providing a more representative sample of the kinds of evidence one can have. This will challenge your belief system – in the positive sense of the opportunity mindset – to accommodate this radically different evidence.

The Epistemic-Potential Claim faces objections from religious non-believers and believers alike. A non-believer might endorse the *not-worth-taking-seriously* objection. Surely, this says, engaging seriously with people who believe in a transcendent reality is like a scientist engaging seriously with a Flat Earther. Some views are just too outlandish to learn from. In response, flat-Earth disagreement differs significantly from religious disagreement. Scientists and Flat Earthers, ostensibly both working from an impartialist epistemology, are answerable to publicly available evidence – which heavily favors the scientists. But non-believers and believers operate (or should operate, I've argued) with an egalitarian epistemology, which recognizes the importance of personal experiences and community testimony. Atheists no less than religious believers should, and do, incorporate these in their total evidence for atheism, and by parity of reasoning are not in a position to dismiss the partialist evidence of religious believers.

Many objections against the Epistemic-Potential Claim come from religious believers. The *divine-help* objection says that God has already graced you or your community with reliable belief-forming processes (Plantinga, 2000b). Because of this, engaging in religious disagreement would merely provide *misleading* evidence – so you shouldn't do it if you want epistemic benefits. In response, suppose for argument's sake that the believer or her community does receive divine epistemic help. Nonetheless, if she is to deny the Epistemic-Potential Claim, she must construe divine help very strictly (Dormandy, 2020). First, it must make her or her community *impervious* to error – on non-religious as well as religious matters. For as we saw, religious beliefs hang together with non-religious auxiliary beliefs;

and it would be a highly micromanaging God – not portrayed in any major traditions – who would *guarantee* true beliefs on politics, science, and so forth. Second, the believer must deny that God would use religious disagreement to provide insight. This requires construing the history of most religious belief systems, which drew on massive religious disagreement with outsiders, as well as heretics or marginalized prophets inside religious communities, as aberrations not to be repeated.

The *objection from risk* says that, even if the Epistemic-Potential Claim is true, it is still epistemically better to avoid religious disagreement. For disagreement may yield evidence against one's religious beliefs – and the prospect of a few epistemic improvements is not worth the risk of compromising the (true) beliefs you already have.

In response, engaging in religious disagreement does involve risk. But whether this risk is prohibitive for religious believers depends on how it weighs against the risks you take with the alternative course of action, avoiding religious disagreement (Dormandy, 2021). For this courts substantial risks too. First are those discussed above, associated with the threat mindset in response to the Argument from Disagreement. The most extreme risks include cultivating echo chambers, or foregoing important discoveries – for example, that certain moral or political beliefs that you think your religious beliefs imply are in fact extraneous add-ons. (Again, think of the idea that Christian scriptures legitimated slavery.)

Second, deliberately avoiding disagreement might create the impression that your religious beliefs *could not* withstand scrutiny – which could be more epistemically and psychologically troubling than disagreement itself.

Third, deliberately avoiding religious disagreement in a community may generate the impression that acceptance in the community is linked to epistemic conformity. And this is epistemically dangerous. It risks promoting a warped view of God (or whatever you call ultimate reality) as valuing strict doxastic obedience over understanding powered by love.

Finally, the *loyalty objection* comes from religious traditions positing a personal God. It says that, because religious beliefs are a gift from God for knowing and relating to him, treating them like any other hypothesis by engaging in religious disagreement is disloyal.

In response, engaging in disagreement does not entail treating your religious beliefs like a hypothesis. First, we saw that this is compatible with maintaining core beliefs while being open to adjusting others, including beliefs that turn out to be human add-ons. Second, engaging in religious disagreement might be motivated not by disloyalty, but by fascination to learn how God operates outside your immediate experiences. This could actually be loyal: Rather than expecting God to speak through the filter of your concepts, beliefs, and community, you trust him to be who he is and to reveal aspects of himself in other contexts too. For if God really is ultimate, he (or she, or they) will explode our categories anyway. A loyal fascination with knowing God better may include hunger to experience how God does so (Dormandy, 2021).

In summary, the opportunity mindset, and with it the Epistemic-Potential Claim, present an epistemically richer and more promising alternative to the threat mindset.

3. Conclusion

Religious disagreement can be troubling. There are strategies for blocking any epistemic significance it may have. You can deny the epistemic parity of most or all people who disagree with you, or you can insist on according their disagreement very little epistemic weight. But I argued that these strategies create more epistemic problems than they solve –

even if the belief system that you are defending is largely accurate. Religious disagreement should only be evaluated alongside your other evidence, where partialist and impartialist evidence are weighted equally – with more varied results than conciliationist or steadfast views allow. But rather than frame religious disagreement as a threat to be defended against, I advocate embracing it as an opportunity. Whatever the truth about religious matters, it is better served not by defensiveness, which hampers our rational capacity, but by curiosity, which expands it.

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