

CHAPTER 19

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DISAGREEMENT AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THEOLOGY

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NATHAN L. KING AND THOMAS KELLY

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INTRODUCTION

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PHILOSOPHERS of religion and theologians have long discussed the following question:
Q1: Should awareness of disagreement about religious questions lead a theist to lose confidence in his or her own religious convictions?

This question spawned a vast literature in the 1980s and 1990s—a literature that both anticipated and partially inspired an explosion of more recent work in epistemology on the topic of disagreement.¹ In this chapter, we seek to glean insights from this more recent work in epistemology and apply what can be applied to the topic of religious disagreement. We are particularly interested in the prospects for vindicating an affirmative answer to Q1 by appealing to so-called *conciliationist* views about disagreement that currently enjoy significant popularity among epistemologists, and in some of the obstacles that arise for that project. Given that much of our focus will be on Q1, it is worth making explicit two ways in which taking this question as a starting point inevitably tends to colour subsequent inquiry.

First, note that Q1, though a fair and legitimate question, is hardly a *neutral* question with respect to philosophically interesting issues in the vicinity. Q1 raises the possibility

¹ For a representative sampling of work on religious disagreement, see Gutting 1982; Alston 1991: Ch. 7; van Inwagen 1996; Hick 1997; Plantinga 2000: Ch. 13; Quinn and Meeker 2000; and Hick 2004. For guides to this literature, see Quinn 2005; King 2008; and Basinger 2010. For a representative sampling of more recent and general work on the topic of disagreement within epistemology, see Feldman and Warfield 2010, Christensen and Lackey 2013, and Machuca 2013. For a book-length discussion of religious disagreement that is informed by recent work in general epistemology, see Kraft 2012.

that religious believers should revise their views in response to the diversity of opinion that obtains with respect to religious questions, without raising the analogous possibility that the same facts ought to make religious non-believers less confident of their own views. Moreover, inasmuch as Q₁ makes salient the possibility that theists ought to revise their views in response to what other people think, the only possibility broached is that they should *lose* confidence in their prior opinions. That is, Q₁ obscures the possibility that a theist might actually *gain* rational support for some of her religious convictions via her awareness of the distribution of opinion on some religious matters (for an extended discussion of this possibility, see Kelly 2011). In these respects, it is helpful to contrast Q₁ with the following, more general question:

Q₂: How should an awareness of the distribution of opinion with respect to religious questions affect a person's views on those questions?

Q₂ suggests a broader range of possible answers than Q₁. It carries the added advantage of raising the possibility that it is not only theists, but also atheists and agnostics, who might have reason to revise their views in the light of facts about the distribution of opinion. Thus, though most of what follows will focus on the epistemic standing of religious *belief* (and will therefore address Q₁), it should be borne in mind that to some extent this approach sacrifices neutrality and generality in order to allow for a more focused inquiry, and that the issue examined here must ultimately be part of a larger discussion.

Second, Q₁ concerns the possibility that theists should revise their religious views in response to disagreement, without in any way addressing the *prior status* of those views. No doubt, many of those who have argued that disagreement about religious matters gives the theist good reason to lose confidence in her religious beliefs have also thought that such beliefs would lack respectable rational credentials *even in the absence of disagreement*. Typically, however, those who have argued that Q₁ should be answered in the affirmative have not appealed to any such substantive judgements about the prior status of religious beliefs. Rather, their claim is that even if the theist would be justified in holding her religious convictions in the absence of disagreement, the theist is not justified once the facts about disagreement are taken into account. On this view, our awareness of disagreement is *sufficient* to make confident religious belief unreasonable or unwarranted. In short, the idea is that religious disagreement provides a powerful *defeater* for religious belief, something that can undermine whatever rational credentials such belief would otherwise enjoy. In fact, recent epistemology has devoted a great deal of attention to the circumstances in which an awareness of disagreement can play this defeating role. It is to this literature that we now turn.

CONCILIATIONISM

Clearly, learning that another person disagrees with something that you believe does not *always* provide you with a reason to revise your view. For example, learning that a young child adamantly denies that $2 + 2 = 4$ should inspire no revision at all. It is equally clear that learning of a disagreement sometimes *does* provide you with a reason to change

your mind. To proceed again by example: if you are a student who has just begun to study biology, and you discover that you disagree with hundreds of experts about the cause of photosynthesis, it is time to revise your view.

Once we move beyond such clear-cut cases, however, the import of disagreement is itself a contentious matter. Among contributors to the epistemology of disagreement literature, it is common to draw a rough but serviceable distinction between *conciliatory* and *steadfast* views. Proponents of conciliatory views tend to see the phenomenon of disagreement as mandating relatively extensive revisions to our opinions about many controversial matters. In contrast, steadfast views are relatively hospitable to maintaining one's opinions in the face of disagreement. Since it is conciliatory views that are most likely to deliver an affirmative answer to our guiding question Q₁, let us begin by focusing on them.

Although conciliationists see disagreement as calling for significant belief revision in a relatively wide range of cases, they will allow that you can rationally retain your view in certain circumstances. In particular, conciliationists will allow that you can rationally retain your view in cases in which you have some special reason to think that the person with whom you disagree is more likely to have made a mistake (presumably, this condition is satisfied in the case of the mathematically challenged child mentioned above). Moreover, even in a case in which you find yourself in a disagreement with a person who is ordinarily just as reliable as you are, conciliationists will allow that you can rationally retain your view if you know that (e.g.) the other person has arrived at his view while inebriated or under the influence of mind-distorting drugs, while you've arrived at yours in a state of sobriety and clear-headedness. In such a case, you have evidence that you are more likely to be correct that is *independent* of the disagreement, and independent of your original reasons for holding your view. According to conciliationists, evidence of this sort suffices to make it rational for you to stick to your guns. However, conciliationists characteristically claim that such evidence is also *necessary*. The thought that independent evidence is *not* necessary in such cases, conciliationists say, would license the following sort of reasoning: 'The other person believes *p*. But inasmuch as the evidence supports not-*p* (which I believe) I can conclude that she is the one who has made a mistake on this occasion.' Conciliationists reject such reasoning as question-begging. This leads them to claim that, in the absence of any independent reason to think that you are right, the discovery that others disagree rationally requires significant belief revision. This emphasis on the importance of having independent reasons to discount the views of those with whom one disagrees is at the heart of conciliatory approaches to disagreement (cf. Christensen 2009).

One motivation for conciliatory views is that they deliver what strike many as the intuitively compelling verdicts about certain concrete examples. For example, consider the following case from David Christensen (2009: 757):

Mental Math: You and your friend have been going out to dinner together regularly for many years. You always tip 20% and split the check (with each person's share rounded up to the nearest dollar), and you each do the requisite calculation in your head upon receiving the check. Most of the time you have agreed, but in the instances

when you have not, you have taken out a calculator to check; over the years, you and your friend have been right in these situations equally often. Tonight, you figure out that your shares are \$43, and become quite confident of this. But then your friend announces that she is quite confident that your shares are \$45. Neither of you has had more wine or coffee, and you do not feel (nor does your friend appear) especially tired or especially perky.

Intuitively, under such conditions you ought to abandon your belief that your share is \$43 (or move to a middling credence regarding this claim), and increase your confidence that your share is \$45. Conciliationists note that their view delivers this intuitive verdict, and think that the verdict will generalize widely. Thus, they argue for a strong analogy between cases like *Mental Math* and disagreements that arise over such topics as morality, politics, science, and religion. This casuistic argument, they claim, gains theoretical support from the idea that steadfast views allow the problematic kind of question-begging reasoning mentioned earlier. Moreover, it is sometimes argued that steadfast views would license the *repeated* use of such reasoning in dismissing the opinions of one's peers—a result that would make steadfast views border on absurdity (see Elga 2007).

Consider also the way in which one might try to motivate conciliatory views by appealing to examples involving inanimate measuring devices. For example, suppose that I form my beliefs about the ambient temperature in some room by consulting my thermometer. (To avoid complications, we can suppose that I have no other access to the temperature of the room. Perhaps I am in an adjacent room, looking at my thermometer through a window, and I know that the temperature of the room that I am in is not reliably correlated with the temperature of the room in which the thermometer is located.) I have no reason to think that anything is amiss with my thermometer, so the beliefs that I form in this way are perfectly reasonable. However, I then discover that the reading returned by my thermometer is inconsistent with the reading returned by your thermometer, which is also clearly visible in the adjacent room. Unless I have some special reason to trust my thermometer over yours, it seems as though I should be agnostic about whose thermometer is correct. Certainly, it would not be defensible to favour the reading of my thermometer simply because that's what *my* thermometer says, or because that is what I justifiably believed before I learned about your thermometer. Moreover, the same seems to be true even if your thermometer really is the one that is malfunctioning on this occasion, and mine is functioning perfectly. So long as I have no independent evidence that that is what is taking place, the mere fact that my thermometer is the one that's functioning properly on this occasion does not justify favouring what it reports over what yours reports. But, one might think, what holds for thermometers holds for believers as well: when I find myself in a disagreement with someone else, then, in the absence of some independent reason for thinking that I am the one who is correct, I should suspend judgement, even if my original opinion was fully reasonable before I became aware of the disagreement.

For our purposes, a notable feature of these examples is the way in which they suggest that even beliefs with seemingly impeccable rational credentials can be undermined

when a certain kind of conflict emerges. Suppose that in Mental Math, you were the one who arrived at the correct answer via an impeccable calculation. In that case, it is very natural to credit you with *knowing* the correct answer prior to learning that your friend arrived at a different answer. Similarly, if I arrived at my original belief about the temperature by relying on a thermometer that was in fact functioning perfectly, then it is natural to credit me with knowing the temperature prior to the discovery that your thermometer says something else. In the preceding section, we noted that those who answer Q₁ in the affirmative see religious disagreement as a *defeater* for religious belief: that is, they maintain that such belief is unreasonable *given* the kind of disagreement about religious matters that we find, even if such beliefs would be reasonable in the absence of disagreement. Examples such as Mental Math and the thermometer case seem to provide good models for what such theorists have in mind. For these examples seem to show that the emergence of a certain kind of conflict is enough to make it rationally mandatory to give up one's belief, even if that same belief would have qualified as knowledge if no such conflict had emerged. Indeed, even for those who take seriously the possibility of theological knowledge, it is natural to think that the epistemic standing of beliefs arrived at via flawless arithmetical reasoning or via reliance on accurate thermometers generally compares favourably with the epistemic standing of beliefs to the effect that a given theological position is correct. But if knowledge that has been arrived at via flawless arithmetical reasoning or via reliance on accurate thermometers can nevertheless be undermined by the emergence of disagreement, then (one might think) surely the epistemic credentials of one's theological opinions can be undermined by the knowledge that seemingly competent others have arrived at incompatible views.

A conciliationist who answers Q₁ in the affirmative will thus see the case of religious belief as relevantly analogous to Mental Math and the conflicting thermometer case. However, as we will see, even if one shares the view that suspension of judgement is called for in the latter two cases, there are any number of ways in which one might resist the invitation to draw the same conclusion about the case of religious belief.

RATIONAL PLURALISM

One general strategy for resisting the conciliationist thought that you should lose confidence in your controversial opinions involves appealing to a *permissive* conception of rationality. It is characteristic of epistemic permissivists to see the norms of rationality as at least somewhat lax and undemanding, in a way that allows for a significant range of conflicting answers to disputed questions to count as fully reasonable or justified. It is uncontroversial that, although the members of an inconsistent set of views cannot all be *true*, they might nevertheless all be *reasonably believed*, provided that those who believe them differ sufficiently in the evidence that they have to go on. Epistemic permissivists go beyond this uncontroversial thought and insist that the standards of rationality are liberal enough to allow for a rational diversity of opinion even in cases where other

theorists see no room for it. For example, a permissivist might insist that the norms of rationality are liberal enough to allow for the possibility that the parties to a disagreement can each be fully rational even if they possess the *same* total evidence, or even if their total evidence includes the information that they have similarly situated peers who have arrived at incompatible views. Consider, for example, the view endorsed by Gideon Rosen in the following passage:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. Paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most of the parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators.

(Rosen 2001: 71–2)

Here, Rosen suggests that palaeontologists who accept rival theories about the dinosaurs on the basis of shared evidence might be fully reasonable in steadfastly maintaining their views, despite being aware that their views are not shared (and indeed, are explicitly rejected) by a significant number of their professional colleagues. But, one might think, what holds for the palaeontologists holds also for at least some theists, atheists, and agnostics, and also for religious believers who differ in their more specific theological commitments. Thus, an epistemic permissivist might answer Q1 in the negative, on the grounds that many, most, or even all disputed religious questions constitute *permissive cases*.

Whether a permissive conception of rationality is viable is a hotly debated issue within contemporary epistemology. Much of this debate has centred on the status of the so-called *Uniqueness Thesis* (on the Uniqueness Thesis, see especially White 2005; for a recent exchange, see Kelly 2013 and White 2013). According to the Uniqueness Thesis, for any given body of evidence and any proposition, there is at most one fully rational attitude that any believer can take towards that proposition given that evidence. The Uniqueness Thesis is frequently endorsed by conciliationists (see Feldman 2007; Christensen 2007; Matheson 2009). Notice that if the Uniqueness Thesis is correct, then the situation that Rosen takes to obtain among the palaeontologists is in fact incoherent: given that the palaeontologists share a body of evidence, this is enough to ensure a uniformity of opinion if they respond to that evidence in the rational way. Moreover, even if the Uniqueness Thesis is false, and there are cases in which a given body of evidence can render a range of opinion fully reasonable, it is a further step to claim, with Rosen, that there are cases in which believers can *knowingly* disagree with one another on the basis of a single body of evidence while remaining fully rational (cf. Ballantyne and Coffman 2012). Given the unsettled nature of these debates, it might appear that anyone who appeals to the putative possibility of reasonable pluralism about religious questions in this context is giving a significant hostage to fortune.

However, notice that the picture endorsed by Rosen is much stronger than what is needed by someone who answers Q₁ in the negative on the grounds that a steadfast response to religious disagreement is licensed by considerations having to do with the possibility of reasonable pluralism. In the passage above, Rosen is concerned with a very special case: a case in which the parties to the dispute share *all* of their evidence (i.e. the total evidence that is possessed by any party to the dispute is the same as the total evidence possessed by every other party). Perhaps there are some real-life cases of disagreement that at least closely approximate this ideal. The examples mentioned by Rosen provide plausible candidates: cases in which the members of a jury are presented with the same evidence in court, or cases in which the members of a professional scientific community end up with the same evidence in virtue of following disciplinary norms that encourage any member of the community to share relevant evidence with every other member of the community (although even here, questions might be raised about just how closely such cases approximate the ideal). Moreover—and significantly for our purposes—the kinds of examples that are used to motivate conciliatory views about disagreement are naturally understood as cases in which the parties who end up with conflicting opinions have the same evidence to go on. For example, in *Mental Math*, the individuals who ultimately arrive at different answers presumably have access to the same basic information that is relevant to the calculation (e.g. they know the amount of the total bill that is to be divided into equal shares, as well as the number of people among whom it is to be divided).

There are, then, at least some disagreements that are naturally understood on the model of different individuals drawing different conclusions on the basis of a body of shared evidence. But how appropriate is this model for understanding typical *religious* disagreements?

We think that typical religious disagreements are *not* best understood in terms of this model, and that this fact complicates attempts to argue for an affirmative answer to Q₁. First, the arguments and considerations that are offered for and against many disputed religious claims are notoriously numerous and complex. For this reason alone, it will in practice be difficult for two reflective individuals to share exactly the same evidence with respect to such claims, even when attention is restricted to the kind of evidence that is at least *in principle* publicly available, such as arguments that one person might offer to another. Moreover, many religious believers claim that their religious convictions are grounded at least in part on religious experiences or incommunicable insights, token events that cannot literally be *shared* in the same way that arguments can. Should such experiences be excluded from counting as evidence, on the grounds that they fail to satisfy the conditions for being evidence in some honorific sense? In that case, it seems like a religious believer might reply that it is uninteresting that an argument for an affirmative answer to Q₁ can be constructed once the very factors that she herself takes to play an essential role in justifying her religious convictions are excluded. (Indeed, she might add that at this point the appeal to interpersonal disagreement is superfluous, since she herself would agree that her religious convictions would not be justified in the absence of the relevant experiences.)

To say that it is extremely likely that there will be at least some differences in the evidence possessed by different individuals with respect to controversial religious questions is not to deny that their evidence will include common elements. For example, given that Q₁ concerns the significance of religious disagreement for individuals who are *aware* of such disagreement, the knowledge that there is disagreement about religious questions is itself a significant piece of common ground. But even with respect to more fine-grained information about the diversity of religious opinion, individuals will generally differ significantly in the information that they possess. After all, it is not simply that one knows an existential proposition to the effect that there is disagreement about, say, God's existence; rather, one also knows propositions to the effect that such-and-such a particular individual believes that God exists, while another is convinced that God does not exist, and so on. For some of these individuals, one might have information that bears on their reliability, information that is itself relevant to the epistemic probability that what they believe is true. Thus, even at the level of sociological facts about the distribution of religious opinion—facts that any conciliatory view will see as relevant to questions about what we should believe—the information that is available to any particular individual will be quite complex and highly sensitive to how he or she is embedded in the world. For that reason, it is extremely likely that any two individuals will differ in the evidence of this kind that they possess. (Again, contrast the Mental Math case, in which the distribution of opinion in the relevant two-person population is common knowledge among the two friends, and in which it is also stipulated to be common knowledge that the two have equally good track records with respect to the relevant kind of calculation.)

In the epistemology of disagreement literature, a great deal of attention has been devoted to disagreements between subjects who acknowledge each other as *epistemic peers*—that is, subjects who (i) are aware of the same arguments and evidence relevant to the target proposition, and (ii) are equals with respect to their capacities and dispositions for responding rationally to evidence (for similar definitions, see Kelly 2005; Feldman 2007; Matheson 2009; Christensen 2009; Elgin 2010; Goldman 2010; and Kornblith 2010). If we are right in what we have said thus far, then typical religious disagreements seem like particularly bad candidates for peer disagreements in this sense, even compared to many other, actual, real-world disagreements (for a sceptical discussion of how many actual disagreements are plausibly understood as peer disagreements, see King 2012).

If our claims in this section are substantially correct, what follows? First, one who defends a steadfast response to religious disagreement on the grounds that a significant diversity of views about religion can be fully reasonable is *not* committed to denying the 'Uniqueness Thesis'. That is, even if it is true, as a point of general epistemology, that no single body of evidence could justify a range of incompatible views about religious questions, this is perfectly consistent with the possibility that the world contains many fully rational Christians, Muslims, Jews, atheists, and agnostics, simply because different individuals will typically differ significantly in the evidence that they possess. Similarly, even if there is some true conciliatory principle according to which *epistemic peers* are

rationally required to give up their views upon discovering that they disagree, *that* principle will not be a useful premise in an argument for an affirmative answer to question Q1; for individuals who differ in their views about religious matters will in practice not satisfy the conditions for epistemic peerhood.

Crucially, however, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that, when it comes to religious beliefs, the phenomenon of disagreement is epistemically irrelevant, or that there is some straightforward route to a *negative* answer to Q1. Indeed, as we will see in the next section, the fact that individuals will typically differ significantly in the evidence that they possess with respect to religious questions is a point which the conciliationist might very well attempt to turn to her advantage.

DISAGREEMENT AND THE VARIETIES OF HIGHER-ORDER EVIDENCE

A major theme in recent work on the epistemology of disagreement is the distinction between *first-order evidence* and *higher-order evidence*. Intuitively, first-order evidence *E* is evidence that bears directly on some target proposition or hypothesis *H*. Higher-order evidence is evidence about the character of *e* itself, or about subjects' capacities and dispositions for responding rationally to *E*. Suppose that a trained meteorologist carefully surveys the available meteorological data and concludes that *it will rain tomorrow*. Here, the meteorological data (*E*) is first-order evidence that bears on the hypothesis (*H*) that *it will rain tomorrow*. Now consider the fact that *the meteorologist arrived at the view that it will rain tomorrow on the basis of E*. This fact is higher-order evidence, inasmuch as it is evidence about the content and import of the original meteorological data *E*. In particular, given that the meteorologist is generally competent when it comes to assessing the relevant kind of evidence, the fact that she has arrived at the view that *H* on the basis of *E* is evidence for the epistemic proposition that *E supports H*. Moreover, in many contexts, the fact that the meteorologist arrived at the view that *H* on the basis of evidence *E* will count as evidence, not only for the epistemic proposition that *E supports H*, but also for the hypothesis itself, that is, *it will rain tomorrow*. This will be especially clear—and will be common ground among both conciliationists and anti-conciliationists—in cases in which a third party lacks access to the original meteorological evidence *E* (or is incompetent to assess that evidence) but does know that the meteorologist arrived at the verdict that *it will rain tomorrow* on its basis. In those circumstances, both conciliationists and anti-conciliationists will agree that it makes sense for the third party to increase his credence that it will rain tomorrow, once he learns what the meteorologist has concluded. In effect, in these circumstances, one treats the fact that the meteorologist arrived at the belief that it will rain tomorrow as a kind of *proxy* for the meteorological evidence to which one lacks access, or which one is incompetent to assess (Kelly 2005). The general lesson is that higher-order evidence often serves as evidence that should

make a difference not only to what you believe about the first-order evidence, but also to your beliefs about the world itself (Christensen 2010; Kelly 2010).

A conciliationist who is concerned to argue for an affirmative answer to Q₁ might seek to exploit this point. In the last section, we noted that it is unlikely that individuals will share all of their evidence with respect to controversial religious questions. There, we suggested that this fact supports the thought that a range of incompatible views about religious questions might be fully reasonable, given the diverse epistemic situations in which individuals find themselves. However, the fact that individuals do not typically share their evidence with respect to such questions is also a point that the conciliationist might attempt to turn in his favour. For insofar as one is prepared to admit that some of those with whom one disagrees about religious questions are generally reasonable people, one should see their beliefs as a kind of evidence about what it is reasonable for them to believe given their epistemic situations, or as evidence that they have evidence that supports the truth of their views. The conciliationist, then, might argue that this gives you a reason to revise your own view in the direction of theirs, on the grounds that this is a case in which you have higher-order evidence that counts against your own view and in favour of theirs.

Indeed, when we bear in mind that higher-order evidence is evidence either about the character of first-order evidence or about subjects' capacities and dispositions for responding rationally to their first-order evidence, it is clear that there is a variety of kinds of higher-order evidence that is potentially relevant to the epistemic status of religious beliefs (See King 2016 for further discussion). This variety includes at least the following:

- *Evidence of unreliability*: Billions of people in the world hold beliefs about religious matters. And many of these beliefs are incompatible with others. At most one religious belief system is entirely correct. This suggests that many of those with opinions on religious topics either (a) have misleading evidence supporting their beliefs, or (b) have assessed non-misleading evidence inappropriately.
- *Difficulty in assessment*: Many of the grounds offered on behalf of religious views are difficult to assess. The difficulty of such assessment—and thus the probability of making mistakes—only increases when we move from single arguments to cumulative cases comprised of several arguments.
- *Disagreement about assessment*: There is disagreement about the character and quality of the arguments offered for and against various religious claims. Among those who disagree about such matters are many well-informed and intelligent persons.
- *Evidence we do not possess*: Even those who are very well-informed of evidence and arguments relevant to religious claims do not possess even close to *all* of the relevant evidence. Even the best-informed epistemic agents possess only a small subset of the total available evidence. For reflective epistemic agents, awareness of these facts calls into question whether the relevant evidence they possess is *representative* of the total relevant evidence available.

- *Elsewhere and elsewhen*: Many people who hold attitudes towards religious claims would have held different attitudes if they had been born at another time or somewhere else. For if these individuals had been born in other times or places, they would have been exposed to different bodies of evidence and would have been disposed to evaluate that evidence differently.

It seems plausible that many reflective religious believers (along with reflective atheists and agnostics) are aware of higher-order evidence of the kinds just listed. Arguably, awareness of such higher-order evidence renders (e.g.) theistic belief less rational than it would otherwise be. To put the point differently, it is *prima facie* plausible that awareness of each of the various pieces of higher-order evidence merits at least *some* doxastic attitude adjustment. And when these pieces of higher-order evidence are accumulated, their effect may be quite significant. In light of this, it can be difficult to see how someone aware of the amount and variety of such higher-order evidence could be rational in retaining belief (or disbelief) in the disputed claim. The apparent force of this higher-order evidence, coupled with the plausible claim that many religious persons are aware of it, raises the spectre of wide-ranging religious scepticism.

Assume, then, that many religious subjects are aware of the higher-order evidence discussed above (or some significant subset of it). Here are two key questions regarding the epistemic import of such evidence for such believers: (1) How much epistemic weight do the various pieces of higher-order evidence merit *on their own?*; and (2) How much epistemic weight do these pieces of evidence merit when considered *collectively?*. Let's take these questions in turn.

In the philosophical literature, one can find varying assessments of the separate pieces of higher-order evidence listed above (on disagreement as evidence of unreliability, see Hick 2001: 26 ff., and Kornblith 2010. On evidence we don't possess, see Ballantyne 2015. On the 'elsewhere, elsewhen' problem, see Hick 2001: 26 ff.; White 2010; Ballantyne 2013; and Bogardus 2013). Some argue that the individual elements by themselves carry significant epistemic weight. Others argue that the individual pieces of evidence carry very little (if any) epistemic weight on their own. Nevertheless, there is reason to think that each of the individual pieces of higher-order evidence mentioned above should be accorded *at least some* epistemic weight, where according such weight expresses itself in at least a modest doxastic attitude change. To see this, consider someone, S, who holds a religious belief that *p* on grounds G and who subsequently becomes aware of one of the pieces of higher-order evidence mentioned above—for example Evidence of Unreliability (EU). Even if G supports S's belief that *p* quite strongly, it is plausible that (G and EU) will support *p* to a lesser extent than G itself. For EU is evidence that many subjects like S have heeded misleading evidence or have failed to heed non-misleading evidence. To be sure, EU does not entail that S herself has a false belief for either of these reasons. But because many subjects like S *do* believe falsely, awareness of EU would seem to counsel S to be at least somewhat more circumspect in her attitude towards *p*. Compare the following: Suppose six patients walk in to the doctor's office for a normal check-up. Each feels very good, and each believes he is healthy on the basis of this feeling. After some

routine tests, the group is sitting in the lobby awaiting test results. Suddenly, the doctor enters and informs the group that five of them have been infected with a dreadful disease whose mortality rate is 50 per cent. He has not yet informed the patients *which* of them is infected, nor has he identified the disease. Plausibly, each of the patients should be less confident of his health than he was the moment before the announcement. But this case seems analogous to that of the religious believer who has just learned of EU.

Here is another way to put the point. Notice that EU alerts S to the possibilities that S has misleading evidence or has assessed non-misleading evidence incorrectly. These possibilities are in effect explanations for her believing that *p*—explanations that compete with S's having rationally assessed non-misleading evidence in coming to a *true* belief that *p*. So given her awareness of EU, S must now consider three possible explanations of her belief:

- *True because non-misleading*: S believes *p* (which is true) because S has assessed non-misleading evidence rationally.
- *False because misleading*: S believes *p* (which is false) because S has rationally assessed misleading evidence for *p*.
- *False because poorly assessed*: S believes *p* (which is false) because S has made a mistake in assessing evidence relevant to *p*.

Rational belief does not *in general* require that a subject rationally take the Truth explanation to be the best explanation for her belief that *p*. But when one becomes aware of competing explanations, the latter can erode the epistemic status of an otherwise rational belief. Crucially, there need not be a great deal of positive evidence for these competing possibilities in order for these to cast doubt on the Truth explanation. Indeed, the rival (falsehood-involving) explanations might both be inferior to the Truth explanation and yet still undermine this explanation. This is just an instance of a more general epistemological point: Merely by being in the field of available explanations, a hypothesis can 'steal away' rational credibility from even the best available explanation.

And arguably, the situation is similar with respect to the Truth explanation of S's belief vis-à-vis its rival explanations. Just by 'being there', so to speak, these explanations undermine the Truth explanation—and thus S's belief that *p*—at least to some degree. Because EU makes these rival explanations salient, it plays a role in undermining S's belief, at least to some extent. The other pieces of higher-order evidence listed earlier arguably play similar roles. That is, once a subject is aware of them, *difficulty in assessment*, *disagreement about assessment*, *evidence we don't possess*, and *elsewhere and elsewhere* each make salient explanations for S's belief that rival the Truth explanation. Thus, even if it is the best available explanation, the Truth explanation loses at least some of its credibility given the presence of alternatives. And this fact undermines the target belief for reflective subjects who are aware of it.

Next consider to what extent the relevant pieces of higher-order evidence carry when they are *accumulated*. At least initially, the evidential impact of this collective evidence would seem quite impressive. Consider a subject who is aware of evidence of

AQ: Please confirm italicizing is OK (here and for the subsequent instances as carried out).

unreliability in the relevant field, difficulty and disagreement over assessment of the relevant evidence, the relative paucity of this evidence, and the fragile contingency of her belief. Given all this, it may seem that whatever the epistemic status of her religious beliefs apart from the higher-order evidence, the latter must ensure that this status dwindles significantly.

Though the issue is too complex for a comprehensive treatment here, it's worth noting two ways in which the above line of thought can tend to overestimate the cumulative impact of higher-order evidence.

First, the cumulative effect of the various kinds of higher-order evidence will depend significantly on the extent to which they are independent of each other. To the extent that the individual pieces of evidence are independent, their cumulative force will tend to increase. On the other hand, to the extent that they are dependent on each other, their cumulative force will be mitigated. For in that case, treating the pieces of evidence as though they were independent will involve double-counting of evidence. On this point, it is worth noting that *difficulty in assessment* is linked to *disagreement about assessment*—for surely the fact that some of the relevant issues are difficult partly explains why there is disagreement about them. Similarly, it is plausible that *evidence we do not possess* and *elsewhere and elsewhen* are linked. For one thing, it seems that part of the reason the *elsewhere and elsewhen* phenomenon is epistemically worrisome is precisely because it dictates what evidence we do and do not possess. Of course, none of this implies that the various pieces of higher-order evidence we have considered *do not* have a cumulative effect—it is very plausible that they do. However, it should also be clear that estimating that cumulative effect is by no means straightforward; there is ample opportunity to overestimate by double-counting here.

Second, the extent to which the accumulated higher-order evidence disconfirms some particular belief p will depend on how likely that evidence is on p as opposed to not- p ; but when p is some substantive religious claim, how likely the higher-order evidence is on p as opposed to not- p will itself often be a controversial matter. For example, some believe that rampant disagreement about whether God exists is very improbable on the hypothesis that God exists but unsurprising on the hypothesis that God does not exist. If this is so, then the fact that there is rampant disagreement about the existence of God is strong evidence against the existence of God. However, whether it is true that *disagreement about God's existence is improbable on the hypothesis that God exists* is itself a controversial matter, especially in the light of debates over the likelihood of divine hiddenness on theism. If disagreement about God's existence is *not* more surprising on the hypothesis that God exists than on the hypothesis that God does not exist, then the existence of such disagreement is *not* evidence against God's existence. This is one point at which one's assessment of the normative significance of higher-order evidence (including that of disagreement) depends on one's assessment of other substantive issues. This in turn casts doubt on views of disagreement that divorce the assessment of the normative significance of disagreement from related substantive issues.

Moreover, notice that even if certain kinds of higher-order evidence are unlikely on certain versions of theism, they may not be unlikely on others. For example, on

certain versions of Christianity, human cognitive faculties have been marred by sin, so that one might very well expect us to be prone to religious disagreement, errors in reasoning in religious matters, and so on. If this is right, then, other things being equal, some versions of theism (e.g. Christianity) may be less vulnerable to defeat via higher-order evidence than others (King 2016 develops this point). Indeed, if rampant religious disagreement is more probable on some specific version of theism than it is on alternative views, then disagreement may actually tend to confirm that view over its rivals.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have explored at length the normative significance of disagreement and other varieties of higher-order evidence. It is *prima facie* plausible that such evidence is sometimes, even often, significant for the epistemic status of religious beliefs. However, it also seems that higher-order evidence is not always *all* that's epistemically significant. Additional relevant factors include:

- the extent to which a subject's belief is rational apart from her awareness of higher-order evidence;
- the extent of evidential overlap between subjects involved in religious disagreements;
- the extent to which rationality is or is not permissive (which partly determines which varieties of rational pluralism are plausible);
- the extent to which the varieties of higher-order evidence are independent of one another; and
- the extent to which the relevant higher-order evidence is to be expected (or not) conditional on some particular religious belief and its competitors.

Weighing these factors in concrete cases can be a very complicated matter—a matter on which general epistemological theories can not reasonably be expected to weigh in.

This result is bound to be disappointing to anyone looking to epistemologists for definitive cognitive guidance for navigating an epistemically treacherous religious landscape. The guidance this result suggests would point those weary from their exploration of religious diversity into equally rough terrain. The main thing that can be said in defence of this advice is that its alternative—seeking a shortcut that sidesteps the factors listed above—is even more dangerous. Rather than ignore such considerations, the present account urges both believers and non-believers to base their judgements about the epistemic significance of religious diversity on all of the relevant considerations (higher-order evidence, first-order arguments, experiential grounds, etc.) of which they are aware. The claim that judgements about the significance of religious disagreement should be based on all such considerations, though perhaps not as helpful as one might like, carries at least one advantage: it is true.

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