

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 15 | Issue 2

Article 11

4-1-1998

Epistemic Peer Conflict and Religious Belief: A Reply to Basinger

Jerome I. Gellman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Gellman, Jerome I. (1998) "Epistemic Peer Conflict and Religious Belief: A Reply to Basinger," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol15/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

EPISTEMIC PEER CONFLICT AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF: A REPLY TO BASINGER

Jerome I. Gellman

David Basinger has defended his position on the epistemology of religious diversity against a critique I wrote of it in this journal. Basinger endorses the principle that in the face of pervasive epistemic peer conflict a person has a prima facie duty to try to adjudicate the conflict. He defends this position against my claim that religious belief can be non-culpably “rock bottom” and thus escape “Basinger’s Rule.” Here I show why Basinger’s defense against my critique is not satisfactory, and I argue against accepting Basinger’s Rule.

In a previous article of mine in this journal, I presented a critique of David Basinger’s view of the epistemology of religious diversity.¹ Now Basinger has replied to that critique by claiming that I misunderstood his position.² As a result, he says, most of what I wrote was not relevant. In addition Basinger provides a reply to the part of my critique that he thinks was relevant.

I hereby admit that, for whatever reason, I did not present Basinger’s position correctly. For that I apologize. However, now that I understand Basinger correctly (I hope), I see there remains a clear difference between us in the ways we approach the epistemology of religious diversity. It is this difference that I want to clarify here.

In my article I defined a “rule epistemology” as one whose judgments were guided solely by reference to rules, where a rule is “a(n implicitly or explicitly) universally quantified proposition which states under what conditions one is justified in taking a proposition as true, or in believing it, or in taking it to be rational to believe it; or which sets out one’s epistemic obligations with regard to one’s given epistemic situation.”³ I then argued that at least some religious believers subscribe to a different epistemological conception. I could put the same point by saying that at least some religious people have a partly different conception of *rationality* than do others. They have what I called a “*religious epistemology*,” which recognizes more than rules. Their epistemology includes religious *propositions* that are *rock-bottom*, where a rule or proposition is *rock-bottom* when it helps determine the acceptability of belief candidates while it itself is not subject to deeper epistemic justification. A religious belief, I contended, could be rock-bottom and serve an epistemological role akin to that of rules, by, for example, requiring the rejection of any proposition inconsistent with it.



I further claimed that for some religious believers, at least, a religious belief enjoys *strong priority* in a religious epistemology, meaning that its acceptance is *prior* to considerations of rules of rationality. A belief or rule *p* is epistemically *prior* in my epistemic hierarchy than *q* when I accept the application of *p* regardless of the results of applying *q*, where, that is, I do not allow the results of applying *q* to change my mind about accepting the result of applying *p*. (I “apply” a belief when, for example, I invoke it to disqualify propositions inconsistent with it.) *P* is *strongly prior* for me when it is for me prior to rules of rationality. Another way to put this would be to say that *p* participates in the enterprise of judging what is rational, and is itself not subject to being so judged. For some believers, I contended, some religious belief, *R*, could be strongly prior in their epistemology.⁴

My goal was to defend the legitimacy of religious exclusivism in the face of religious diversity. The idea is that the believer could invoke her belief as epistemically strongly prior and thus avoid an obligation to abandon, suspend, or question her belief in the face of that diversity. In particular I argued that the epistemic situation as regards the clash between a rule-epistemology and a religious epistemology was exactly the same as that between different religions. So if religious diversity was really a problem then so was epistemological diversity, and if one may not be a religious exclusivist, one may not be an epistemological “exclusivist” (recognizing only rules) either. So rule epistemology could not defeat religious exclusivism.

In my article I leveled criticism at Basinger as an anti-exclusivist. I attributed to him the view that in the face of religious diversity unless one could come up with evidence favoring one’s own beliefs, one’s beliefs were “epistemically defective.” I also wrote that Basinger thought it was not rational to believe without evidence or without relying on one’s natural faculties. I then went on to counter Basinger with my view of what I was calling “religious epistemology.”

This was a mistake. Basinger’s real position is this: if the theist has the goal of maximizing truth and avoiding error, then when faced with religious diversity, she is under a *prima facie* obligation to try to resolve the conflict before deciding finally about the epistemic status of her belief. If the theist does not attempt to meet this obligation, she is in violation of her epistemic duty. If after trying to find evidence for and against her religious belief the theist finds none, she may continue in her belief if she feels that it best organizes and explains the relevant parts of reality. Thus, Basinger holds that a religious belief *can* be epistemically legitimate even if a believer does not have evidence in its favor relative to conflicting religious beliefs and is not relying on her natural “religious faculty” for forming beliefs, but relying instead on what seems to her to best organize and explain the facts. If, however, a theist does not at least *try* to adjudicate the conflict by seeking evidence, she violates an epistemic obligation.

Basinger thus rejects the “pluralist” contention that a person may not be an exclusivist in the face of religious diversity, as well as the “reform-epistemologist” position that in the face of such diversity a believer need

engage only in “negative apologetics,” that is, need only engage in turning back defeaters to her belief, but has no obligation, even *prima facie*, to seek positive evidence that favors her belief. So Basinger is no anti-exclusivist.

Nevertheless, Basinger and I continue to disagree. According to Basinger if the theist dedicates herself to maximizing truth and avoiding error, then in order to fulfill her epistemic obligations she must at least attempt to resolve significant “epistemic peer conflict.” Let’s call this “Basinger’s Rule.” So she must attempt to resolve the pervasive epistemic conflict of religious diversity. On my view as presented in the earlier paper, on the other hand, a religious person can non-culpably think of her belief as epistemically prior to all rules of rationality including Basinger’s Rule, and determine that she need not attempt to resolve the conflict, because her belief is *rock bottom* and *strongly prior*.

In his reply to me, Basinger argues against my position as follows: if we assume that the theist is dedicated to maximizing truth and avoiding error, then there follows that at least one rule of rationality is epistemically prior to one’s religious belief, namely the rule *that one’s beliefs be self-consistent*. Let’s call this the “Consistency Rule.” As Basinger puts it:

While there may have been...some individuals who have actually believed...that their religious beliefs need not be self-consistent, I deny that anyone who wishes to maximize truth and avoid error could actually affirm this position.”⁵

Basinger continues:

I do not see how Gellman (or anyone) could argue convincingly that a truth-seeking believer is not required to avoid simultaneous affirmation of beliefs acknowledged to be inconsistent.⁶

Hence, he says:

I do not consider Gellman’s claim that justified, rock bottom religious beliefs need not satisfy *any* rules of rationality to be defensible and thus a valid challenge to my position.⁷

I cannot, it seems, affirm that religious belief could be epistemically prior to *all* rules of rationality. It cannot be prior to the Consistency Rule, in particular. If so, then other rules of rationality also might be epistemically prior to religious belief. In particular Basinger’s Rule might be. Since I must in any case deny the strong priority of religious belief the rug is pulled out from under my defense of *religious epistemology*.

That is Basinger’s argument. In response, I begin by endorsing the dictum that “One should maximize truth and avoid error.” Let’s call this the “Golden Rule of Epistemology” or “GRE.” GRE deserves a more careful formulation, though. I doubt there is a categorical, universal obligation to truth and against error (and I do not mean just that the obligation can be over-ridden by other considerations). We should refor-

ulate GRE so as to take account, for example, of the degree of momentousness and liveness of the issue in question. However, since I believe that GRE reformulated should apply to the issue under discussion, the reformulation need not delay us. We will pretend it has been successfully accomplished.

GRE, though, is not, a rule of epistemology. (It seems that Basinger would agree with this.) We mean the rules of epistemology to provide substantive directives on how to go about implementing the meta-rule, if you like, GRE. GRE gives no clue as to *how* one is to go about maximizing truth and avoiding error. That's where epistemology comes in. A rule-epistemology says that the way to implement GRE is to follow certain *rules*. It is rules that give substance to the meta-rule GRE. A *religious epistemology* says that it is not only rules that do this, but also some religious beliefs. That is to say, a *religious epistemology* will take it as rock bottom that there is a religious belief, R, such that if you want to make sure you are maximizing truth and avoiding error, make sure your belief is consistent with R.

What, though, of my claim that a *religious epistemology* can consider R to be epistemically prior to *all* rules of rationality? Does GRE not yield the Consistency Rule? Indeed, GRE, by itself, does not yield the Consistency Rule. To see this, note that GRE says nothing about the relevant weight to give to gaining truth as opposed to avoiding error. Now, suppose I wish to follow GRE and also believe that it's far more important to maximize truth than to avoid error. I am willing to risk error for the possibility of gaining truth. In addition, I am willing to hold a false belief, everything else being equal, if that is the only way to guarantee me a true one. Then, suppose, after careful consideration I have no idea whether p is true or false. Since I value believing truly over the avoidance of error there will be at least *some* cases where the most rational thing for me to do would be to hook myself up to a machine which will induce in me both a belief that p and a belief that not-p, preferably so as to prevent the two beliefs from meeting in my mind. True enough, that way I will not get full benefit from my true belief (whichever it is) in having it influence my behavior and responses, since it must share my (split) attention with a contradictory false belief (whichever it is). However, I am a lover of truth, and am willing to be guided by the truth (whichever it is) at least part of the time at the price of being guided by the false (whichever it is) at other times. Admittedly, this is not too practical a stance when the belief in p or in not-p is quite relevant to my life. But otherwise it suits me fine. (Of course, I will also have to deny that I have an obligation to believe, on appropriate occasions, what follows from the conjunction of my beliefs. However, this denial need extend only as far as the accommodation of false beliefs in cases similar to the above.)

So GRE by itself, does not yield the Consistency Rule. To get the latter from GRE we would have to formulate GRE so that it excludes gaining a true belief at the price of gaining a false belief. We do, though, normally endorse the Consistency Rule. We do so, I imagine, because we have an in-principle aversion to believing falsely. Also, we think that we should

believe, on appropriate occasions, what follows from the conjunction of our beliefs. (There is also the fact that given human psychology, believing not-p might interfere with believing p, and vice versa. So a false belief might harm a true belief.) So I am not adverse to reformulating GRE accordingly.

So let's pretend now that we have once more reformulated GRE so as to make me happy, so as to rule out gaining truth at the price of gaining falsity. Then the Consistency Rule is a direct logical consequence of GRE. No one could violate the Consistency Rule without being in direct violation of GRE. And I would quite agree that the *religious epistemologist* is committed to the Consistency Rule. She uses it, for example, when she rejects any belief inconsistent with her cherished religious belief.

So I do agree that the *religious epistemologist* is committed to the meta-rule GRE and its logical consequences. This much the religious epistemologist is committed to insofar as she has an epistemology at all.

So I should not have said in my article that for the religious epistemologist her religious belief could be prior to all rules of *rationality*. Her religious belief is not prior to GRE and its logical consequences. However, I consider GRE and its logical consequences to be meta-epistemological rules and not epistemological rules proper. The latter are not logical consequences of GRE but substantive directives for fulfilling GRE. So what I should have said, and now do say, is that a religious belief can be prior to all *epistemological rules* proper. From now on this is what I shall mean by saying a religious belief can be "strongly prior" in a believer's epistemology. Hence, in particular it can be prior to Basinger's Rule that one has an obligation to attempt to resolve epistemic peer conflict.

Isn't it just self-evident, though, that if one is bound to maximize truth and minimize error that one simply must at least *try* to resolve the epistemic peer conflict of religious diversity? Doesn't Basinger's Rule follow logically from GRE as much as does the Consistency Rule? Well, no. It would be self-evident only if truth were an open question. Then in order to maximize truth and minimize error one should at least *try* to adjudicate the conflict. But if one already has the truth the attempt to find the truth would be superfluous. It is the mark of what I am calling a "religious epistemology" that it takes certain religious propositions, and not just rules, as epistemically rock-bottom and strongly prior. So it maintains right from the start that it has the truth. In that case, it need not attempt to resolve the peer conflict. If the strongly prior belief that one has the truth in R can be conjoined to GRE to neutralize Basinger's Rule, then Basinger's Rule is not a logical consequence of GRE.

The situation of a believer facing religious diversity is no worse than that of the same believer who comes across what seems to be a sound proof that her favored religious belief is false. In the latter instance, she could do a G.E. Moore Switch and conclude, in light of her religious belief, that the proof though it *seemed* sound was not, and that there must be something wrong with it somewhere, she knows not what nor where. She might even believe her faith was being tested to see whether she would submit to the temptations of rule epistemology or remain true to God.⁸

A problem with my position does arise: if religious belief can be rock-bottom and prior to all epistemic rules, then by the same token cannot any crazy fantasy enjoy the same status? In my previous article I dealt with this problem at length. I will not repeat here what I wrote there.⁹

Until now I have not addressed Basinger's Rule that one has a prima facie obligation to "attempt to resolve pervasive epistemic peer conflict." I do not think Basinger's Rule is true in general. Why should the mere fact that others happen to hold a position in conflict with mine place upon me a (prima facie) obligation to try to find evidence that would resolve the conflict? I should think that I have such an obligation only when I have at least some reason for thinking they have some justification for their belief, justification that might render my belief untenable or that weakens it. Otherwise, why should I bother with what "they" say? So I would prefer a rule that goes *something* like this: "A person S has a prima facie obligation to try to resolve epistemic peer conflict when the conflict is live and momentous for S and when S has reason to think that the opposing epistemic agents in the conflict have or might have some justification for their belief that renders S's belief untenable or weakens it."¹⁰

How does the "religious epistemologist" fare with religious diversity on this rule relative to a rock-bottom strongly prior religious belief, R? For her, R is prior to all epistemic rules. Recall that to say this is to say she accepts the application of R regardless of the results of applying these rules, that is, she does not allow the results of applying an epistemological rule to affect her accepting the result of applying R. (In this regard R functions for her as does the Consistency Rule.) Recall that she "applies" R when she rejects a result inconsistent with it. Since R is strongly prior for her, R gives her good reason to believe that the opposing view is false. So why should she be obligated (prima facie) to engage the opposing view? After all, the holders of that view are reasoning without the benefit of R. So even if they were to have evidence contrary to R, which might include what is for them a rock bottom strongly prior religious belief R', she has reason to believe it could not be decisive against R. She has good reason not to engage in what Basinger calls "positive apologetics," trying to find evidence that will favor R over R'.

Suppose, though, we adopted a Principle of Charity to the effect that when there is pervasive epistemic peer conflict we should assume, everything else being equal, that the other side has some justification. So in practical terms, Basinger Rule's would be correct. Or suppose I am just wrong in rejecting Basinger's Rule. And suppose I am wrong about the standing of the Consistency Rule. Suppose, against my denial, we should regard it as an *epistemological rule*. What if Basinger was to contend then that since the claim that justified, rock bottom religious beliefs need not satisfy *any* epistemological rules is not true, no valid challenge has been made to his position? Would this be a good response? It would be to that claim. However, contrary to the way I have been arguing until now, the believer need not derive the priority of R to Basinger's Rule from its priority to all epistemological rules. She could derive it instead from a rule that R is to be prior to a rule, E, if and only if the violation of

E does not *entail* her gaining a false belief. This rule reflects the degree of R's strength in her epistemology, and grants a status to the Consistency Rule similar to that of R there: to believe "against" R too entails believing a falsehood. Since the violation of the Consistency Rule does entail gaining a false belief, R is not prior to it. Since the violation of Basinger's Rule does *not* entail gaining a false belief, R is prior to it.

So the believer can be portrayed as having an epistemological generalization that lets in the Consistency Rule and keeps out Basinger's Rule.¹¹

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

NOTES

1. Jerome Gellman, "Religious Diversity and the Epistemic Justification of Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993), 345-364. Basinger presents his position in David Basinger, "Plantinga, Pluralism and Justified Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991), 67-80.

2. David Basinger, "Pluralism and Justified Religious Belief: A Response to Gellman," *Faith and Philosophy* 13 (1996), 260-265. (Hereafter: "Basinger").

3. Gellman, p. 354.

4. This is, of course, only a skeleton description of the believer's attitude toward R, including only the epistemic status of the belief. We can expect the believer to have other attitudes and beliefs about R, for example, a feeling of gratefulness to God for granting her the gift of true faith.

5. Basinger, pp. 263-264.

6. Basinger, p. 264.

7. Basinger, p. 264.

8. Once I heard from William Rowe that he had a teacher who told him that his conviction that God did not exist was so strong that if it could be proved to him that God's existence followed from " $2+2=4$," he would sooner deny the premise than accept the conclusion! So atheists too do the G.E. Moore switch!

9. I now believe that I should supplement what I wrote with additional considerations, but I will not enter into this topic here.

10. Notice that when we state the rule in this way, that others hold an opposing belief is not an operative epistemic factor. All that counts is that there is or may be evidence against one's own belief.

11. I am grateful to Ira Schnall and William Wainwright for their helpful comments and suggestions.