

Religious Disagreement

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Abstract: Many people with religious beliefs, pro or con, are aware that those beliefs are denied by a great number of others who are as reasonable, intelligent, fair-minded, and relatively unbiased as they are. Such a realization often leads people to wonder, “How do I know I’m right and they’re wrong? How do I know that the basis for my belief is right and theirs is misleading?” In spite of that realization, most people stick with their admittedly controversial religious belief. This entry examines the epistemology of such belief retention, addressing issues of disagreement, agnosticism, skepticism, and the rationality of reflective religious belief.

Keywords: Disagreement, rationality, epistemic peers, epistemic superiors, religious belief, atheism, skepticism, agnosticism

If you believe that Jesus (see [wbice0193](#)) rose from the dead, or even that he did not rise from the dead, and you’re not a fool, then you also know that an enormous number of highly intelligent, reasonable, fair-minded, and relatively unbiased people think you are wrong. What does this mean for the rational status of your belief about Jesus?

When you learn that a large body of highly intelligent, fair-minded, reasonable, and relatively unbiased thinkers disagree with you, doesn’t that give you good if inconclusive reason to think you’re wrong? Shouldn’t it make you think “Wait a minute. Maybe I’ve missed something here?” Should it make you suspend judgment on that obviously controversial belief—or at least drastically reduce your confidence in it?

There is a general epistemological problem regarding controversial beliefs here, one that has nothing especially to do with religious belief. But the application to religious belief transforms the problem in unexpected and interesting ways.

1. Introduction

The basic question is simple: how can you have an epistemically reasonable religious belief, pro *or* con, given that you know full well that it’s highly controversial? The religious belief might be something relatively specific, like “Jesus rose from the dead,” or it might be something more fundamental, such as “God exists”. It could be something scientific such as “Humans were created in pretty much their present form in the last few thousand years” or “There is an afterlife for humans.” It could also be opposing beliefs: “Salvation can occur through non-Christian means,” “God doesn’t exist at all,” or “Humans evolved from other sorts of animals over a great many millennia.” Even if in *some* cases apparent disagreement is merely apparent (e.g., so-called disagreements about “salvation” might be artifacts of different understandings of that term, so the both of the “opposing” beliefs could well be true (see [wbice0333](#) and [wbice0335](#)), it’s clear that in an enormous number of cases only one group can be right: Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn’t,

and we either are or are not conscious after the death of our bodies. If you believe X is true and they think X is false, then you're definitely saying that they are wrong and you are right.

But what makes you think you and your co-believers are right and all those other folks are wrong? Is your group smarter or more careful in its reasoning? Does your group have key evidence the other group lacks—and if you think that's the case, then how do you know they don't have key evidence that you lack? Has your group evaded some bit of irrationality that infects the other group? If you think your group has got the issue right, and everyone who disagrees has got it wrong, you may think that your group has some *epistemic advantage* the other group fails to have—but do you really have that advantage?

It's tempting to think that such reflections should lead one to a thoroughgoing religious agnosticism (see *wbiee0364* and *wbiee0009*). However, it's clear that a great many people are utterly reasonable in sticking to their beliefs in the face of religious disagreement—in one familiar sense of “reasonable.” For instance, a child with religious belief P might be told by her parents and *all* the other people she looks up to that although there are people who doubt or even reject P, they are screwed up in any of various ways: horribly irrational, biased, brainwashed, ignorant, insane, etc. She believes them on this score: why on earth would she not do so given that she is sheltered from reality, she has always unreflectively trusted those adults, and those adults have proven reliable about so many issues before? Nothing relevant changes if the believer is a sheltered adult instead of a child. Neither is this verdict dependent on the belief being a pro-religious one: it applies to atheism and other anti-religious views. Even so, there are much harder and more interesting cases to ponder.

2. Responses to the awareness of religious disagreement

For most people, and most pro-religious beliefs, one acquires the belief via testimony when one is relatively young, where the testimony comes from people one would regard as one's superiors on the matter (authors, speakers, religious elders, etc.) and one learns that *a great many people* share that belief, usually including many people one is disposed to judge to be one's epistemic superiors on the belief. It is usually later that one learns of a great number of people who disbelieve it—and one realizes that we can't all be right in our religious beliefs, so it's clear that a great number of people are wrong. If one is reflective, then one will eventually ask oneself, “Wait a minute: how do we know we're right and they're wrong—especially since a lot of those people are intelligent, reasonable, and fair-minded?”

Suppose one retains one's religious belief after posing the “Wait a minute” question. Whether this belief retaining is epistemically reasonable is probably dependent on what one thinks of in response to the question.

For instance, many religious people will go back over their reasons for the religious belief and find them convincing enough that the worry about disagreement fades away entirely. Call the group of such people G1.

But some people will not be psychologically satisfied by merely finding their old reasons for the religious belief convincing. These folks will realize that the people who disagree with them have *their* reasons too, ones that strike *them* as convincing even upon reflection. Now the epistemic challenge becomes acute, as they will ask themselves, “How do we know that the basis for our belief points to truth while theirs does not?”

Many of them will subsequently latch onto the idea that *they are in a better position to judge this issue*, leading them to retain their controversial belief. This is group G2. For instance, a person might retain her belief that Jesus is the Messiah because she thinks Christians “know something others have missed,” where that phrase indicates some crucial piece of evidence (e.g., she thinks Christians have had personal experiences of Jesus that show he's the Messiah (see *wbiee0332*)).

Yet others will end up thinking that they have no idea which group is in a better position to judge P. For instance, a Muslim may realize that many other Muslims have a different view about how to interpret one of the sutras—and she hasn't the foggiest idea who has more expertise in interpretation.

For each group the question, "Are they reasonable in retaining their belief in P?" will be addressed. However, it is first worth noting that for most people the "Wait a minute" question never comes up, or only very dimly, with no subsequent thought behind it. Just about any person is reflective enough to realize that there is a large body of more or less intelligent and reasonable people who deny her religious beliefs, but most people never get beyond that bare realization.

3. *Recent epistemology*

Epistemologists have recently looked at a variety of disagreement cases, not limited to religion. For instance, there has been a great deal of work on the *epistemic peer problem* (e.g., see papers and references in Feldman and Warfield 2010, Frances 2014), which can be formulated thus:

You believe P and you don't know what Jones thinks about P. You then come to think that Jones is *just as likely as you* to have correctly figured out P's truth-value. You may think this because you believe all of the following: Jones is about as smart as you are, Jones is about as informed as you are regarding the topics relevant to P, Jones has all your evidence and you have all her evidence, you and Jones are about the same when it comes to relevant biases, and Jones has thought about P for about as long as you have and under about the same quality of circumstances. (Alternatively, you think you surpass Jones on some of those factors but she makes up for it by surpassing you on other factors, so you still come out about even.) And then you learn that she thinks P is false, whereas you had concluded that P is true. Given that you already judged her to be your epistemic equal when it comes to figuring out whether P is true, should you now trust your judgment over hers and stick with your belief in P? Or should you suspend judgment? Or should you just lower your confidence in P—and if so, by how much?

Essays have been written on the peer problem by instantiating P with various religious claims (e.g., Kraft 2012, Feldman 2007, Oppy 2010, Thune 2010). Although these cases are theoretically interesting, it is tricky to apply the theoretical peer issues of interest to epistemologists to the *real-life* cases of religious disagreement. There are several primary reasons for this, each of which throws light on the epistemology of the types of religious disagreement that are actually most common.

First, in an enormous number of cases people take no stand on the peerhood issue even though they are vividly aware of the disagreement. That includes, but is not limited to, group G1. Second, there are the group G2 people, who think, at least implicitly, that their group is in a better position to judge P. For instance, for the central religious belief—"God exists"—it's arguable that the vast majority of people will insist that they are in the better position to judge the belief: a great many theists will think that the atheists are just missing out on experiencing God; and many atheists will think the theists have let any of a variety of epistemic weaknesses infect their judgment. So an enormous number of recognized religious disagreements aren't recognized peer cases.

The epistemology of the three groups described earlier will be investigated below.

4. *G1: the group that is satisfied with their old reasons*

These people asked themselves the “Wait a minute” question, went over their old reasons for their admittedly controversial belief, found those reasons convincing, retained the religious belief P, and then didn’t think about the issue any more. Was their retaining of P epistemically reasonable?

It’s not clear. On the one hand, before the “Wait a minute” reflection, the basis B for their belief P may well have been objectively good enough to make P very well supported overall. On the other hand, it seems that when they learned that an enormous number of highly intelligent, reasonable, fair-minded, and relatively unbiased people think P is false, they have thereby obtained excellent reason R to think P is false. Doesn’t the combination of R + B fail to support P, even if B alone *did* support P?

If the people in G1 had some special knowledge about the “disagreeers” that made it reasonable to think they had missed something key to the issue of P, then perhaps the retaining of P would be reasonable for the G1 people, but by (realistic) hypothesis, no such knowledge or reflection is present in group G1.

Whether the retaining of P is reasonable probably depends on the details of the knowledge of disagreement. If a G1 person knew that 98% of people who were experts about P thought P was false, then she would be unreasonable to stick with P. For virtually any religious belief, this extreme situation won’t apply, but it does show that the addition of R to B can make the retaining of P unreasonable: the more epistemically impressive R is, the less reasonable it is for G1 people to retain P.

5. *G2: the group that thinks they are in a better position to judge P*

The people in this group go through the “Wait a minute” reflection and then come to believe that their group is in a much better position to judge P than the group who reject P. This kind of situation breaks down into two species: their belief in their group’s superiority with respect to P *is* or *is not* well supported by their overall evidence.

What is surprising is that at least in most cases their sticking with P will be reasonable in the “is not” case—and if that’s right, then it will apply to the “is” case as well. To be sure, the person who sticks with P when *unreasonably* thinking her group is in the superior position has made an epistemic error; that’s logically true. But her error isn’t in the retaining of the first-order religious belief P: it’s in the *prior* judgment of superiority. *Given that* she has made the unreasonable judgment of superiority, the reasonable thing for her to do next, in updating her position on P, is stick with P. If someone believes P, she knows that many others disbelieve P, she is quite convinced that she has absolutely key evidence that the others lack, and she is convinced that the others have no relevant epistemic advantage over her, then she would be irrational to suspend judgment on P just because those people disagree with her. The rational thing for her to do is stick with her old belief. Her *overall* dealings with the disagreement are flawed, due to her unreasonable belief in the superiority of her epistemic position regarding the religious belief, but the flaw happened *before* the retaining of belief P.

This is probably a common occurrence when it comes to religious beliefs: a great many people do indeed have unjustified beliefs in epistemic superiority when it comes to their religious beliefs, pro or con. For instance, many atheists are confident that theists just don’t understand much of anything about science or reason, whereas atheists do. Of course, there is *some* truth to this: many adult theists, at least in the USA, are young earth creationists even though they are intelligent enough to know that that position is without merit (which is not to say it’s false). But a great many theists are quite familiar with science and reason, to put it mildly, and atheists rarely have much reason to think all, or even almost all, theists are fools about science or reason (and when they do it’s usually testimonial and they are living a sheltered life). So, their judgment of superiority is often unjustified. On the other side, theists often too quickly believe that their experiences of seeing the starry skies, witnessing the birth of a baby, having an amazing internal psychological experience upon praying, or

catching a lucky break provide excellent evidence for various theistic claims: they have little reason to accept such an idea and often have decent evidence that such a belief might be partially the product of wishful thinking or something similarly epistemically defective.

6. *G3: the group that admits they have no idea who is in a better position*

The people in this group go through the “Wait a minute” reflection and then come to think that they have no idea which group is in a better position to judge P: the group that believes P or the group that disbelieves P. Maybe the groups are peers, but maybe one is quite the superior of the other. This person thinks about it and realizes she has no idea. At this point, she retains P. Is she reasonable in doing so?

G3 people look irrational: if you *admit* that for all you know you have no epistemic advantage over the other group—and as far as you know they might even be in the superior situation—then why trust your judgment on P over theirs?

Even so, it’s not clear that their retaining of P is epistemically unreasonable. If as a matter of fact they have excellent overall evidence for P, then their confusion over the facts of disagreement might not be so bad as to cancel out that good basis for P. This is the type of philosophical issue that lies beyond this article.

See also:

EOPR0009

EOPR0332

EOPR0333

EOPR0335

EOPR0364

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