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# **Disagreement and the rationality of religious belief**

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## **Declaration**

I, Kyle Irwin Andrew Scott, hereby declare the following. The present thesis, submitted for examination in pursuit of a PhD in Philosophy, has been entirely composed by me, and it has not been submitted in pursuit of any other academic degree, or professional qualification.

15<sup>th</sup> December 2014

## Acknowledgements

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Philosophy is not the only area where my life has changed in recent years. I have been pleased to see my family grow over the course of writing this thesis. My wife and I have had a daughter Elspeth, and a son Samuel. My family have been a welcome distraction from Philosophy – reminding me that my work is not everything. Chloë, my wife, has been a constant encouragement to me, and believed in me when I doubted myself. The uncertainty that comes from pursuing a career in Philosophy is difficult for both of us, but she has made it easier for me by sharing the load.

Family has always been important to me and often played a role in my pursuit of an education in Philosophy. My parents have always taught me about the importance of education and encouraged me to learn. I have my Father to thank for first turning me

towards Philosophy as a teenager, when he gave me books to read and talked with me about Metaphysics and Epistemology.

## Abstract

Concerning religious matters there are a wide variety of views held that are often contradictory. This observation creates a problem when it comes to thinking about the rationality of religious belief. Can religious belief be rational for those who are aware of this widespread disagreement?

This is a problem for a view in religious epistemology known as reformed epistemology. Alvin Plantinga, one of the leading defenders of this view, has argued that there is no successful argument to show that religious belief is irrational or in any other way epistemically unacceptable – he calls these arguments *de jure* arguments. I respond to this claim by seeking to develop two new versions of *de jure* argument that Plantinga has not dealt with. The first of these I call the return of the Great Pumpkin; and the second, the problem of religious disagreement.

The return of the Great Pumpkin is an objection that develops an earlier objection that Plantinga has considered called, simply, the Great Pumpkin objection. This objection is that Plantinga's methodology for defending the rationality of religious belief could be adopted by anyone, no matter how strange their beliefs – even someone who believed in the Great Pumpkin could use it. I develop this objection further by showing that it would be possible for a person with clearly absurd beliefs to find themselves in the same situation as the hypothetical Christian whom Plantinga is seeking to defend. There is, however, a response available to Plantinga, which involves showing how the historical and sociological context in which the person finds themselves makes a difference to the rationality of some of the beliefs that they hold.



This discussion naturally leads into the second version of the *de jure* argument which asks whether knowledge of several religious communities who hold incompatible beliefs undermines the rationality of religious belief. This discussion engages with work in religious epistemology, but also more widely with the literature on the epistemology of disagreement. I consider whether, and in what circumstances, finding out that others disagree with you could ever rationally require you to give up one or more of your beliefs. This issue involves discussion of epistemic peers and defeaters.

One of the arguments I consider is that if a religious believer continues to hold on to her religious beliefs in the face of disagreement then that will give her a reason to think that she is epistemically superior, which will lead to dogmatism, and a sort of epistemic arrogance. I respond to such an argument by showing that there is a problem with the inference involved in this argument.

# Foreword

There are two ways to read the current work. The first is as an attempt to describe the views of a prominent philosopher and address some important objections to that view. Alvin Plantinga has articulated a view on religious epistemology which has been very influential. In this thesis I lay out the main claims of this view – reformed epistemology – and show that there are still two important objections that Plantinga has not adequately addressed. I then go on to offer responses to these objections.

On the second way of reading this work, it is an attempt to grapple with one of the deepest problems of religious epistemology: How is the religious believer supposed to view her own beliefs, and the beliefs of others? Given that it is quite obvious that many people hold different views on religious matters, is it possible to come to a settled view on which we consider our own religious beliefs are rational, while the beliefs of others are sometimes irrational, and sometimes rational, but mistaken? The purpose of this thesis is to argue that this is possible.

There are, broadly speaking, three alternatives, each of which I wish to avoid:

- All beliefs are equal and rational.
- The beliefs of others are irrational.
- All beliefs are equal and irrational.

These alternatives are caricatures, but they are worth thinking about as contrasts to the view that I wish to defend – they are not being treated as genuine contenders but as problems to be avoided. The first of these holds that all beliefs on religious matters are equal and all are in some sense rational. This seems wrong because it is clear that some

people hold irrational, ill-thought-out and strange beliefs on religious matters. Adopting this view would require a significant revision to what we consider to be rational. The second option is also unpalatable, but for the opposite reason. It involves regarding the beliefs of all those who disagree with you as irrational, but just as it seems obvious that there are others with irrational religious beliefs, it also seems obvious that there are others with different beliefs on religious matters who have been conscientious when forming their beliefs and whose beliefs are well-thought-out and generally well integrated with their other beliefs. To group all these people together seems quite wrong. It also creates a sort of epistemic isolation where one becomes uninterested in listening to the views of those who disagree. The third and final alternative is that all religious beliefs are equal and they are equal in being irrational. This is perhaps more of a serious contender than the previous two. On some versions of agnosticism this seems to be the claim of the agnostic: we are all equally well-placed regarding religious matters, so if we cannot agree then it is not reasonable to think that any of us are right. This third view is not as ridiculous as the previous two, but it is still one that I will attempt to avoid because it requires giving up the claim that religious knowledge is possible.

The work of Alvin Plantinga is a helpful starting point for this discussion because it has been claimed at one time or another that his view in religious epistemology commits him to each of the claims above.

My purpose is to make progress towards developing a view in religious epistemology that allows for the possibility of religious knowledge; but also makes it reasonable to think that some of those who disagree with you are irrational, and some are rational.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, what we really want is a scale from most reasonable to most unreasonable, but for now it will do to be able to grasp the two ends of the scale.

## The outline

This thesis is divided into three parts. In the first part I describe Alvin Plantinga's religious epistemology by charting its development from his 1967 book *God and other Minds* through to his more recent, and most significant contribution to this topic, *Warranted Christian Belief*. Throughout, Plantinga has maintained that religious belief can be rational even if those beliefs are not supported by evidence. The reason for this, he argues, is that what it is reasonable for us to believe depends upon the sorts of beings that we are and the faculties that we have. If, for example, we have been created by God with a faculty that is designed to produce beliefs about him in certain circumstances, then those beliefs will be rational when produced in those circumstances.

This view is a version of an epistemological view known as externalism. Externalism – in contrast to internalism – is the view that whether or not S knows that p depends upon factors that S is unaware of, such as the nature of the belief forming process involved or the environment she is in. This aspect of Plantinga's religious epistemology is particularly important for the discussions throughout this thesis because when assessing the beliefs of others it will be important to consider more than just their internal state, but also external factors as well.

Part II is devoted to thinking about an important objection to Plantinga's religious epistemology that has become known as the Great Pumpkin objection. This objection can be understood as the claim that Plantinga is committed to endorsing the view, mentioned above, that all beliefs are equal and rational. The objection is that Plantinga's defence of the rationality of Christian belief could be used in defence of any belief including beliefs such as that the Great Pumpkin visits the most deserving pumpkin patches each Halloween.

I develop a response to this objection by showing that there is an important difference between those beliefs that are judged to be rational and those judged to be irrational in these cases, which is that the rational ones occur within a stable historical and social environment. I go on to show how this can make a difference to the rationality of the beliefs in question and to how we should judge those beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

This response is interesting, not just in the context of defending Plantinga's religious epistemology, but more generally. Religious beliefs, from the point of view of someone who does not share those beliefs often seem to be grounded in experiences, or insights that are not shared; or to rely on potential sources of information such as scriptures or testimony that others do not recognise. Recognising these beliefs as rational seems to involve recognising the possibility that the world could be very different to the way that we take it to be. But if it could be so different, then perhaps it could be different in a very great variety of ways. By considering the historical and social environment that beliefs occur in we can limit the possibilities that we are willing to take seriously. Even if one is not concerned about the objection to Plantinga's religious epistemology, this is a debate worth considering.

The third and final part of the thesis is devoted to the issue of disagreement between those who, at least at first, seem to hold rational beliefs. Disagreement has received a lot of attention recently in epistemology, and it has been argued that the existence of widespread disagreement on a topic is reason to withhold belief on that topic. I argue for three key claims in order to diffuse such an argument: that we can describe an instance of two people who reasonably believe each other to be rational even though they disagree; that there is an important difference between epistemic peers

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<sup>2</sup> A paper that includes my description of the Great Pumpkin objection and response to it has been published in *Religious Studies*. It appears under the title "Return of the Great Pumpkin".

and epistemic equals that has not been acknowledged in this debate; and that disagreement sometimes generates a potential rebutting defeater, and sometimes a potential undercutting defeater which makes a difference to how we ought to respond to it.

A follow-on objection to this view is considered. By continuing to believe that you are right and that others are wrong on a wide variety of matters then you seem to be able to construct a track-record argument for thinking that you are superior to those that disagree with you. This seems to lead to the sort of epistemic isolation that we worried about above. In order to respond to this objection I consider the structure of the argument involved and argue that the inductive inference is flawed.

The arguments in this thesis, taken together, show how it is possible to be a conscientious religious believer while reasonably judging that some people who disagree with you are rational, and some are irrational.

# Part I

# Chapter One – Plantinga’s Religious Epistemology

Alvin Plantinga has often turned to topics in religious epistemology in his writing. Over his career he has, along with others,<sup>3</sup> developed a position known as reformed epistemology. Proponents of this view have sought to show that there is no good reason to think that religious belief is irrational even if those beliefs cannot be supported by neutral arguments and evidence – by neutral I mean evidence and arguments that people of different religions and none all have reason to accept.

Plantinga’s defence of this claim has developed over a number of years. It will be helpful to begin by taking a look at some of Plantinga’s key writings in religious epistemology. There are three important stages in Plantinga’s religious epistemology, each one marked by the publication of an important piece of work: *God and other Minds*, “Reason and Belief in God” in *Faith and Rationality* and *Warranted Christian Belief*. I will outline and critique each of these in the following sections in order to get a better understanding of Plantinga’s work.

## 1.1 God and Other Minds

In his 1967 book *God and Other Minds* Plantinga surveyed some of the major arguments for and against belief in God,<sup>4</sup> and found them all wanting.<sup>5</sup> To some this may indicate that the rational thing to do is to withhold belief on whether or not God

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<sup>3</sup> Other proponents of this view include Nicolas Wolterstorff and William Alston.

<sup>4</sup> Strictly speaking, belief *in* God and belief that God exists are not the same thing. Belief that God exists merely involves assent to the proposition that God exists; whereas, belief in God suggests trust or faith of some kind. In spite of this distinction I will use the two phrases interchangeably, and this also seems to be Plantinga’s practice.

<sup>5</sup> In subsequent work Plantinga has defended his own versions of some theistic arguments, most notably the ontological argument (Plantinga 1974). Plantinga’s later view on natural theology is that there are some arguments that can be made to show that God exists, but he maintains that none of these arguments are required to show that theistic beliefs is rational.



exists, but rather, Plantinga asks us to consider another belief: the belief that there are other minds. Plantinga claims that the case for other minds cannot be adequately made, but that the best argument for it – the analogical argument – provides as much support for that belief as the teleological argument does for belief that God exists. This leads him to conclude:

“[I]f my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter.” (Plantinga 1967, p271)

I do not wish to examine here his arguments for or against belief in God, or his treatment of the analogical argument or the other arguments for belief in other minds. Instead, I wish to consider, assuming his assessment of the arguments is correct, what has been established, and in particular, has Plantinga established the conclusion quoted above?

According to Plantinga the analogical argument and the teleological argument each set out establish a certain group of propositions. In the case of the teleological argument:

- (a) The universe is designed.
- (b) The universe is designed by exactly one person.
- (c) The universe was created *ex nihilo*.
- (d) The universe was created by the person who designed it.
- (e) The creator of the universe is omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good.
- (f) The creator of the universe is an eternal spirit, without body, and in no way dependent on physical objects.

In the case of the analogical argument:

- (a) I am not the only being who feels pain.
- (b) There are some pains that I do not feel.
- (c) Sometimes certain areas of my body are free from pain.
- (d) There are some pains that are not in my body.
- (e) There are some cases of pain that are not accompanied by pain-behaviour on the part of my body.
- (f) I am the only person who feels pain in my body.
- (g) Sometimes someone feels pain when I do not.

Plantinga claims that both the teleological argument and the analogical argument fail to establish their conclusions, because in both cases only some of the relevant propositions can be said to be more probable than not on our evidence, therefore, the conjunctions of these propositions are not supported by the evidence. This means that we do not have an adequate answer, in either case, to what he calls the “epistemological question”: “how do you know that p; what are your reasons for supposing that p is true?” (Plantinga 1967, pp268-269). Plantinga does not conclude from this that it is best to withhold belief in both cases; instead he concludes that since belief in other minds is obviously rational, so is belief in God.

The argument seems to go as follows:

- (1) The belief that God exists and the belief that there are other minds are both equally supported by arguments.
- (2) If two beliefs are equally supported by arguments then, if one is rational to believe, so is the other.
- (3) It is rational to believe that other minds exist.

Therefore,

- (4) It is rational to believe that God exists.

The claim is that the arguments, although they are not sufficient to answer the epistemological question, still play an important role in making the respective beliefs rational. And since belief in God and belief in other minds both have the same going for them in respect of supporting arguments, they both either stand together, or fall together, as far as rationality goes.

This argument is very vulnerable to objection because one can avoid the conclusion simply by finding some disanalogy between the case for God and the case for other minds. A number of possibilities have been suggested such as that belief in other minds does not relate to the analogical argument in the same way that belief in God relates to the teleological argument.<sup>6</sup>

Even if it turns out that the two arguments are analogous, Plantinga's argument is a hostage to fortune, since it requires that the cases for other minds and belief in God to be equal and to remain equal. Some writers have suggested that there are other promising arguments for belief in other minds (Richman 1972, pp53-54); still others suggest that we should conclude from Plantinga's argument that since belief in other minds is rational, that there must be better arguments for that belief (Slote 1970, p45). These problems show that the job of those who oppose this argument is not a great one, but perhaps these problems are not that insurmountable; after all, if others are

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<sup>6</sup> See Felder (1971). David Felder argues that there is a disanalogy between the analogical argument for the existence of other minds and the teleological argument for the existence of God. This is because, claims Felder, the case for the existence of other minds stands or falls entirely on the success or failure of the analogical argument; whereas, the case for the existence of God depends upon other arguments as well as the teleological argument. Felder claims that one can rationally believe that the teleological argument supports belief in God, yet still disbelieve because of some other argument like the Problem of Evil; but the same is not true of the analogical argument because if one accepts that the analogical argument is successful then one ought to believe that other minds exist. It is not entirely clear why Felder thinks this is the case, but the general point remains – that if someone can find a disanalogy between the two cases then Plantinga's argument will be undermined.

hoping for a better argument for the existence of other minds, then there seems no reason why the theist should not also place her hope in the discovery of some future argument for the existence of God.

The real problem for this argument is premise (2). This premise is only true if it is true that beliefs only get epistemic support from arguments.<sup>7</sup> If this were true then it would be preferable to conclude that neither belief in other minds nor belief in God were rational, or at least, that one still needed to find better arguments to show that either of them is rational. If it is the case that belief in other minds is rational because of the analogical argument then Plantinga has severely lowered the standards for a good argument, and this risks making far too many beliefs rational. Plantinga has argued that the analogical argument does not show that its conclusion is any more likely than its denial, and yet we know that the conclusion is rational; but it does not follow from that that the argument is still nonetheless sufficient to support rational belief in that conclusion. If Plantinga really does want to endorse premise (2) then most likely he ought to give up premise (3). But without premise (2) and (3) the conclusion will not follow.

There is, however, an alternative way to understand Plantinga's argument:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, more realistically, one could say that there are certain beliefs that only get epistemic support from arguments, if they have any at all. If this is so then it would need to be the case that both belief in God and belief in other minds would need to be part of this set of beliefs. Whichever way we chose to understand it, my comments will only apply to the relevant set of beliefs.

<sup>8</sup> There is textual evidence in support of both versions of the argument. For example, Plantinga continually emphasises parallels between the analogical and teleological arguments which suggests that he has the first version in mind. Furthermore, this is the way critics, such as Robert Richman (Richman 1972), seem to have understood the argument as they seek to counter it by offering ways to break the parallel. In favour of version 2 we have comments from Plantinga like:

“Then we must conclude, I believe, that a man may rationally hold a contingent, corrigible belief even if there is no answer to the relevant epistemological question.” (Plantinga 1967, pp269-270)

Rather than weighing up the evidence for the two interpretations, perhaps it is better to see the ambiguity as being present in Plantinga's own thought at this time. He would later

- (5) There is no answer to the epistemological question about belief in God, or belief in other minds.
- (6) If it is rational to believe that there are other minds, then it is sometimes rational to believe something even if one cannot answer the relevant epistemological question.
- (7) It is rational to believe that there are other minds.
- (8) It is sometimes rational to believe something even if one cannot answer the relevant epistemological question.

Therefore,

- (9) It is rational to believe that God exists.

So, if these beliefs do not derive their rationality from these arguments, then this means that the parallels between the analogical and teleological arguments are not as important as we had been assuming when considering the first version of Plantinga's argument. The alternative version may fare better as it does not rely so heavily on these parallels. Instead, in this version of the argument the only important parallel is that neither argument is sufficient to show that the target belief is rational.

Some will want to challenge premise (5) of this argument, claiming that there are good arguments for belief in other minds, but let us assume that Plantinga has shown that this is not the case. Given the truth of (5), (6) is straightforward, and combined with (7), gives us (8). Nevertheless, the conclusion does not follow. Plantinga has not shown that *any* belief can be rationally justified without answering the epistemological question, and so, the argument is invalid.

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comment on *God and Other Minds* that "I was somehow both accepting but also questioning what was then axiomatic: that belief in God, if it is to be rationally acceptable, must be such that there is *good evidence* for it." (Plantinga 2000, p70).

In fact the gap between (8) and (9) is so obvious one might wonder whether it is worth us considering the argument – perhaps it is even slightly offensive to Plantinga to attribute it to him. Although it is doubtful that Plantinga would have endorsed such an argument, it points us forward to the sort of line of reasoning that is beginning to emerge in Plantinga’s work, and that will be developed in future works. That is because this version of the argument, although it does not establish the conclusion of the book, has shown us something important: that there are beliefs that can be rationally justified even without sufficient arguments to support them.

On this understanding the parallels between belief in God and belief in other minds are not that important, as long as there is no good case against either. The point of the discussion of belief in other minds is not to show that belief in God and belief in other minds stand or fall together, but it is to show that we already accept that there are beliefs that can be rational even if they are not adequately supported arguments. The parallels only serve to deflect a certain sort of counter argument – that there is something about the argument for other minds, that the argument for God lacks, that means it ought to be judged by a lower standard. However, unlike the first version, it will not be good enough to simply point out any disanalogy; one must show that the disanalogy is sufficient for us to conclude that the two beliefs should be judged differently. What the discussion does not achieve, however, is to demonstrate that belief in God is rational. Rather it shows that our discussion of rationality will be impoverished if we restrict it to merely talking about arguments and evidence.

Plantinga does have one thing to say which may help to bridge the gap between the premises and the conclusion:

“Of course there may be other reasons for supposing that although rational belief in other minds does not require an answer to the epistemological

question, rational belief in the existence of God does. But it is certainly hard to see what these reasons might be.” (Plantinga 1967, p271)

The suggestion seems to be that since neither of the beliefs are adequately supported by arguments, and we can see no epistemologically relevant differences between the two, we should treat them similarly. This goes too far as it would seem to justify too many beliefs. It would be preferable, at this stage, to conclude that more must be done to enquire into the nature of rational justification. Fortunately Plantinga has since done much to further this enquiry.

What Plantinga has shown is that, if belief in other minds is rational, then rationality is not derived solely from arguments. This raises the question: What is it derived from? But it does not show that whatever it is, both belief in other minds *and* belief in God have it. It does show that the failure of natural theology to prove that God exists does not mean that belief in God is irrational. This is an important point, but it is not the one we find in Plantinga’s conclusion.

At this stage in Plantinga’s work some of the distinctive characteristics of the view that will come to be known as reformed epistemology are recognisable but it is also clear that we have not yet reached a fully articulated position. At this point we should see Plantinga as advancing two important claims:

(RE1) Religious belief ought to be judged by the same standards as other beliefs.

(RE2) Some beliefs are rational even in the absence of adequate arguments in support of them.

The most important thing for us to take away from the discussion so far is that we need to have a better understanding of rationality, and what it requires of us, if we are to answer the question of whether or not belief in God can ever be rational without the

support of arguments. In the next section we will look at Plantinga's attempt to continue this discussion.

## 1.2 Reason and Belief in God

In "Reason and Belief in God" Plantinga's intention is to respond to the evidentialist objection to belief in God. Plantinga identifies this objection as being present in the writings of a number of philosophers,<sup>9</sup> and the objection can be stated very briefly as something like this: it is irrational to believe that God exists because there is insufficient evidence to support this belief.

Plantinga sees the objection as relying upon two claims:

- (A) It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.
- (B) There is no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence in support of the proposition that God exists.

I shall refer to the argument from these two claims to the conclusion that belief in God is irrational as the evidentialist objection, and to the thesis that (A) is true as evidentialism.<sup>10</sup>

There are many who have either explicitly or implicitly attempted to answer this objection by providing evidence and arguments in support of the conclusion that God exists and thereby challenging (B); this, however, is not the approach that Plantinga adopts here. Rather, Plantinga wishes to question the suggestion that theistic belief

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<sup>9</sup> Plantinga writes "Many philosophers – W. K. Clifford, Brand Blanshard, Bertrand Russell, Michael Scriven, and Anthony Flew, to name a few – have argued that belief in God is irrational or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or somehow noetically below par because, as they say, there is *insufficient evidence* for it." (Plantinga 1983, p17)

<sup>10</sup> My use of the term evidentialism is not to be confused with the much broader position is epistemology known as evidentialism, though the two are related.



needs evidence in order to be rational. His argument comes in two stages: a negative stage in which he seeks to undermine what he takes to be the epistemic theory that underpins this objection, and a positive stage where he seeks to give an account of how it could be that theistic belief is rational even without evidence.

Plantinga seeks to question why it is that the objector believes that belief in God must be supported by evidence. He dismisses the suggestion that it is because all beliefs must be supported by evidence since he takes it as a shared assumption between himself and the objector that this is not rationally possible. Plantinga and the objector agree that there must be some beliefs that do not require evidential support – these beliefs form the foundation of one’s noetic structure, they are the basic beliefs. All other beliefs must be supported by these foundational beliefs, they are non-basic beliefs.

This position, is, of course, known as foundationalism. It is a normative thesis about how a rational person will arrange their beliefs. This position does not command universal assent, but since both the evidentialist objection and Plantinga’s response both rely on it we can safely pass over the objections for now.

It will be worth stopping here to describe the way that Plantinga uses a number of key terms in order to be clear later on about what he is saying in response to the evidentialist objection.

### *Evidence*

Plantinga treats evidence as being only other beliefs. This is far from an obvious position to hold; in other places he speaks of basic beliefs as being grounded in experience, and one may wonder why this is not also evidence. This discussion should not distract from the main issue, since it is not Plantinga’s intention to give an analysis of evidence, rather, he is seeking to question whether theistic belief is only rational if

one can offer sufficient evidence in support of it – if you were to ask me to tell you what evidence I have for one of my beliefs, I can share with you the beliefs that I take to support that first belief and in that way you can come to know the content of what it is that I am basing my belief upon, and from that it is possible to know what the belief evidentially supports. If, however, my belief is based upon some experience I have had I can tell you about it, but you will not thereby come to know what the content of your experience is. It may be possible for me to share with you my experience, such as if it is a perceptual experience of something nearby, but there will be cases where this is not possible such as if the experience is of an event in the past, or if you lack a certain faculty necessary for having that experience. In cases where you have not had the experience I have had I can tell you that I have had an experience as of X, but knowing that someone has had an experience as of X will not necessarily support the same beliefs as actually having the experience.

We can side-step worries about Plantinga's understanding of evidence by simply talking about propositional evidence instead (whether or not one think that all evidence is propositional). What we are interested in is a case where someone has a belief in God but has no evidence that they could share with others that would adequately support that belief. We want to know: can such a belief be rational in those circumstances?

### ***Basic beliefs***

According to Plantinga basic beliefs are those beliefs that we hold, but not on the basis of any other beliefs. It is possible to have evidence for a basic belief, or to believe that there are other beliefs your basic belief could be based upon, but this will not be sufficient for your belief to be non-basic. A belief is basic if it is believed independently of its relationship to other beliefs. Our basic beliefs may be rational or irrational, and

what it is reasonable for one person to hold in the basic way may only be reasonable for others to hold on the basis of other beliefs.

Plantinga also claims that beliefs can change from being basic to non-basic and *vice versa*. For example:

“[A] belief can easily change its status from non-basic to basic and vice versa. *Now* the proposition that  $21 \times 21 = 441$  is not basic for me; I accept it on the basis of the belief that I have just calculated it, and that is how it came out. Later, however, I may remember that  $21 \times 21 = 441$  and forget that I calculated it. In that case I will simply remember it and no longer believe it on the basis of other beliefs; it will be basic for me.” (Plantinga 1983, pp50-51)

On Plantinga’s usage of the basic/non-basic distinction this only marks a psychological distinction in the way that an agent holds their beliefs. The more interesting question is whether or not a belief is properly basic.

### ***Properly basic beliefs***

Properly basic beliefs are beliefs that are basic and also grounded. What it means for a belief to be grounded is that it is formed in response to some experience, and that response is a rational one. Plantinga does not attempt to explain what exactly this connection is and how it is that an experience can ground some beliefs but not others. Instead, he observes that there are plenty of examples of this taking place. He uses examples such as: “I see a tree”, “I had breakfast this morning” or “that person is in pain”. These beliefs are typically psychologically direct – when we observe a person acting in pain we do not generally note their behaviour, and then infer from that that they are in pain, instead upon observing their behaviour we immediately form the belief that that person is in pain. This belief is basic, but it is also grounded, and the experience it is grounded in makes the belief rational.

It is over the issue of which beliefs are properly basic that Plantinga thinks the disagreement lies between himself and the evidentialist objector.

### 1.2.1 The negative project

In his negative case, Plantinga seeks to question the reason for thinking that theistic beliefs cannot be properly basic, he believes that the objector's arguments rest on an unjustified assumption about what can properly be a basic belief.

Plantinga sees the evidentialist objection as resting upon a particular type of foundationalism that he refers to as classical foundationalism.<sup>11,12</sup> According to Plantinga classical foundationalism restricts what can be properly basic to only those beliefs that meet the following criteria:

“**CF:** A proposition  $p$  is properly basic for a person  $S$  if and only if  $p$  is either self-evident to  $S$  or incorrigible for  $S$  or evident to the senses for  $S$ .”  
(Plantinga 1983, p59)

A self-evident belief is any belief that one cannot doubt such as simple arithmetical claims like ‘ $2+1=3$ ’ or simple logical truths like ‘something cannot be both a square and a circle’. Incorrigible beliefs are beliefs about one's own mental states that one cannot be wrong about, such as ‘I am now in pain’ or ‘it seems to me that there is a tree’. The final group of beliefs are those that are evident to the senses and this includes beliefs that ordinarily arise from perceptual experience like ‘it is sunny today’ or ‘someone is coughing in the next room’.

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<sup>11</sup> Plantinga identifies Thomas Aquinas, Rene Descartes and John Locke as holding some version of this view. See Plantinga (1983) p58.

<sup>12</sup> This is a historical point rather than a conceptual point. Classical foundationalism does not permit beliefs such as God exists to be properly basic, and Plantinga thinks that this view has dominated thought about the rationality of religious belief. His response to this view is an attempt to undermine what he believes to have been the motivation behind the evidentialist objection, rather than undermining all possible motivations for the evidentialist objection.

Plantinga's argument is that **CF** is a complete failure when it comes to capturing what it means to be properly basic. There are two reasons that Plantinga has for rejecting **CF**, one is that it classes a large number of beliefs as irrational and non-basic, beliefs that we normally take ourselves to know, and secondly, it is self-referentially incoherent.

The first problem Plantinga raises against **CF** is that it classes beliefs such as 'the world has existed for more than five minutes', 'other persons exist' and 'humans can act freely' as not properly basic. These beliefs, claims Plantinga, and a great many others are accepted by the vast majority of rational humans, yet the arguments for these beliefs are remarkably weak. Most people who believe these things can offer no arguments for their belief, and those who can still seem to hold the belief with a greater degree of certainty than the argument would seem to warrant. Plantinga again returns to his discussion about other minds, he writes that the problem of other minds is to explain how it is that the very common belief that other humans have a mental life could be justified. Plantinga thinks that the best argument is the argument from analogy – that we observe that our own mental events such as being in pain are accompanied by certain behaviours, such as grasping the area where the pain is located, and then infer from this that when others are exhibiting similar behaviour, they are also having the associated mental event. This inference from a single case hardly seems to justify the belief that there are other minds, but if it can be shown to be sufficient it would still be implausible to claim that only those who have knowledge of the argument are rational in their belief that other minds exist. This, perhaps, would not be so troubling if it were not the case that so many beliefs that do not meet the requirements set down by **CF** are believed in a basic way by most rational humans. Anthony Kenny has pointed out that there are many beliefs that, although we can find some evidence for them, should not be thought

of as being based upon that evidence because the evidence is believed with less strength than what it is evidence for. He suggests that the belief that Australia exists is just such a belief:

“If any one of the ‘reasons’ for believing in Australia turned out to be false, even if *all* the considerations I could mention proved illusory, much less of my noetic structure would collapse than if it turned out that Australia did not exist.” (Kenny 1983, p19)

The same goes for beliefs such as ‘I am awake’ or ‘human beings die’. If these beliefs can be rational only if they are based upon evidence then the **CF** seems to suggest that we should hold many of our beliefs with much less certainty, and give up many other very strongly held beliefs.

Plantinga’s second objection is that **CF** self-referentially incoherent. **CF** itself is not self-evident, neither is it incorrigible, and it is certainly not evident to the senses. This means that if it is to meet its own standards there must be an argument from premises that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. No argument presents itself, and it is certainly difficult to see where one would start, especially in light of some of the counterintuitive consequences of the **CF** highlighted above.

There are two main lines of criticism that can be made to Plantinga’s arguments against **CF**. The first is to question the link between **CF** and the evidentialist objection, and the second is to claim that Plantinga has failed to show that **CF** is an untenable position.

This first criticism can be found among Plantinga’s fellow reformed epistemologists:

“[I]f [Plantinga] is saying that no one has explicitly presented [the evidentialist objection] as following from some other developed and articulated position that is probably true, but it remains to be shown that anyone has done that with respect to classical foundationalism either. But if the claim is that no other epistemological theory could plausibly serve as a

reason for the evidentialist denial, that is palpably false.” (Alston 1985, p296)

“[Plantinga’s] discussion puts us in the position of seeing that the most common and powerful argument for evidentialism is classical foundationalism, and of seeing that classical foundationalism is unacceptable. But to deprive the evidentialist of his best defense is not yet to show that his contention is false.” (Wolterstorff 1983, p142)

The criticism here is that that Plantinga has done nothing to persuade us that the evidentialist objection has no force; at best he has shown that no previous articulation of the objection is successful (supposing that it is correct that all previous versions of the argument rely on something very much like **CF**).

The second response to Plantinga can again be found in Alston (Alston 1985, pp296-299). Alston observes that Plantinga has not shown that the defender of **CF** cannot argue for **CF** from premises that are properly basic by her lights. Alston agrees that it is hard to see how this might be done but denies that this supports the conclusion that it cannot be done.

Plantinga seems to over state his conclusion but perhaps this discussion has achieved enough for Plantinga’s purposes. This discussion of classical foundationalism and evidentialism has helped to highlight that there is no obvious epistemological theory that entails that belief in God must be supported by arguments in order to be rationally believed. What this shows is that in order to make progress we must ask what the correct epistemological account is and judge belief in God by those standards that have been argued for. This opens up space for Plantinga to argue for his own epistemology; which leads us on to his positive project.

### 1.2.2 The positive project

Plantinga offers a different approach to the issue of proper basicity. Rather than select criteria, and then categorise our beliefs accordingly, we should amass examples of beliefs that we take to be properly basic, and the circumstances in which they are considered properly basic, and then to propose criteria following reflection on these examples. It may be that we come to conclude that some of our examples are not genuinely properly basic, they merely appeared to be. And once we have proposed candidate criteria for proper basicity these may suggest that other beliefs are in fact properly basic.

But who is to decide the set of examples, and how do we weed out bad examples without any criteria?

Plantinga deliberately has no definitive answers to these questions. According to Plantinga, it is the responsibility of each community to decide what it considers to be properly basic and to take that as a starting point; there can then be an exchange between the examples and the criteria that they are used to justify, each refining the other. The claim is not that those beliefs that are held by one's own community to be properly basic *are* properly basic; rather, the claim is that that this is the best starting point for enquiry. It may be that your community has got it wrong about what beliefs are properly basic, but hopefully this will be revealed by further reflection.

James Beilby has observed that this aspect of Plantinga's thought is closely connected to his general thinking about how Christians should approach any academic pursuit (Beilby 2005, p48). Beilby summarises Plantinga's approach as follows:

“The Christian scholar does not have to accept only those things deemed acceptable to the broader academic community. Rather, she may accept core Christian beliefs and reason from those beliefs in her academic work.”  
(Beilby 2005, p19)



According to Plantinga, there is no neutral starting point for philosophical enquiry, so it is up to each community to assess their own starting point, and take that as a defeasible foundation for enquiry. Communities are not free, however, to decide what beliefs are basic for them. According to Plantinga, what we believe is rarely within our own control – for example, one cannot simply decide to believe that the moon does not exist. This means that there is an objective fact about what each community does take as its starting point.

It might be objected that this is arbitrary, but Plantinga contends that there is no set of beliefs that will be entirely uncontroversial, and there is no criteria of proper basicity that is more convincing than the beliefs that most people take as properly basic. Or perhaps some will agree that although this method is correct, it is still implausible that belief in God should be properly basic. In the case of perceptual beliefs the ground for them is obvious, even if how they are grounded is not clear. God, if he exists, is surely much more remote, and his existence is not the sort of thing that can be known in the basic way.

Plantinga responds by pointing out that, within the Reformed tradition at least, belief in God is considered to be grounded.<sup>13</sup> According to John Calvin, one of the important figures in the Reformation, humans each have a natural tendency to believe that God exists when placed in certain circumstances, in fact he claims that God “daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe.” (Quoted in Plantinga 2000, p66) Plantinga does not argue for the truth of such a position, rather, he mentions it to show that his claim that belief in God can be properly basic is not ad hoc, but is in fact implicitly the view held by a large number of people, and the Reformed tradition

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<sup>13</sup> Although Plantinga has mainly sought his inspiration from John Calvin, he acknowledges that similar insights can be found in other thinkers outside the reformed tradition, such as Thomas Aquinas.

more specifically. It is not necessary that Plantinga know, or even have good reason to believe the claims made by Calvin and others, as long as it is true that there are experiences that serve to ground belief in God then that belief will be properly basic on those occasions. It is due to Plantinga's appeal to reformed thinkers that this view has come to be known as reformed epistemology.

On the surface reformed epistemology bears some similarity to fideism. Fideism is the claim that belief in God is not rational, but must be accepted upon faith; it is usually claimed that this belief is independent of reason, or in more extreme cases that it is opposed to reason. The reformed epistemologist will agree with the fideist that arguments are not needed to justify belief in God, but what about the relationship between reason and belief in God?

It is clear from what has already been discussed that the reformed epistemologist will not subscribe to the more extreme fideism because to believe what is properly basic is not to believe what is opposed to reason. What is, at first, less clear is whether to believe in God in the basic way is to believe independently of reason. Plantinga considers a distinction between reason and faith suggested by Abraham Kuyper (Plantinga 1983, p88), that the deliverances of reason are those beliefs that are based on argumentation and inference, whereas the deliverances of faith are beliefs that are held independently of argument and inference. On this understanding of faith, anything held in the basic way will be taken on faith. For example, this definition would suggest that  $2+1=3$ , external objects exist and I am awake, are all held on faith. This is not the understanding of faith that the fideist has in mind, since it does not serve to draw a distinction between faith and reason. Plantinga explains that there is no reason for the reformed epistemologist to think that belief in God is independent of, or opposed to, reason:

“Belief in the existence of God is in the same boat as belief in other minds, the past, and perceptual objects; in each case God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we form the belief in question. But then the belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of reason as other beliefs.” (Plantinga 1983, p90)

At the end of *God and Other Minds* the claims of reformed epistemology had not yet been clearly stated, but at this stage a fuller view is starting to take shape. We can add to the earlier claims the following:

- (RE3) In trying to understand proper basicity we should begin with examples of properly basic belief, not with proposed criteria.
- (RE4) It is up to each community to decide what they take to be properly basic.
- (RE5) The Christian community holds belief in God in the basic way, and according to a significant part of the tradition of this community that belief is grounded when held that way.

### 1.2.3 Objections

Now that reformed epistemology is a much more clearly defined position than what we saw in *God and Other Minds* the position began to attract many more objections. This section will present a selection of objections and some responses to them.

#### *Other forms of evidentialism*

In this essay Plantinga takes the evidentialist objection to be based upon classical foundationalism, yet as we have already seen there seems to be no reason to think that this objection needs to be based upon classical foundationalism, and Plantinga offers no such reason. It seems instead that Plantinga considers that as a matter of historical fact the evidentialist objection has relied on the truth of classical foundationalism. This may

explain why he spends so much time on classical foundationalism, but it will not be enough for those who wish to motivate the evidentialist objection without relying on classical foundationalism.

I will consider below some alternative ways of motivating the evidentialist objection to belief in God without endorsing classical foundationalism, and consider the prospects for a response to these other versions of evidentialism. For our purposes I will consider a view to be evidentialist if it follows from these views that theistic belief is only rational if it is supported by evidence. These objections can be understood as a response to Plantinga's negative project by attempting to find an alternative way to motivate the evidentialist objection.

### *Sensible evidentialism*

Stephen Wykstra has made the claim that the debate between evidentialists and what he calls basicists has been poorly framed (See Wykstra (1989) and (1995)). He has sought to relocate the debate about the proper basicity of belief in God by contrasting Plantinga's position, not with what he calls Extravagant Evidentialism (EE), but with Sensible Evidentialism (SE).

EE is the claim that a person's belief is only rational if it is either basic, or that person can present propositional evidence for their belief. If we recall the discussion above about foundationalism we can see that this is the sort of evidentialism that Plantinga has in mind. Plantinga defines basic beliefs as being those that are psychologically direct. If this is the way that basicity is defined then beliefs that arise from testimony or memory will be basic. Since these beliefs are trivially basic and belief in God often derives from memory or testimony, then in most cases the EE Objection to belief in God will not come to much.

Wykstra, however, claims that EE is not the best way to understand the notion of needing evidence. He highlights this by using the example of belief in electrons. Most adults believe in electrons, but very few do so on the basis of evidence. Most of us believe in electrons because we have been told that they exist by scientists, or teachers or some other knowledgeable person. On Plantinga's understanding this belief will often be basic, and so it will be immune to the evidential objection. This is only true if we understand evidentialism as a demand that evidence be produced for each belief by the believer. This fails to take into account that, although the believer in electrons need not be able to produce evidence, the belief is still in some sense in need of evidence. Wykstra asks us to consider the following possible situation:

“Suppose we were to discover that no evidential case is available for electrons – say, that the entire presumed case for electrons was a fraud propagated by clever con-men in Copenhagen in the 1920s. Would we, in this event, shrug our shoulders and continue untroubled believing in electrons? Hardly. We would instead regard our electron belief as being in jeopardy, in epistemic hot water, in (let us put it) big doxastic trouble.”  
(Wykstra 1989, p485)

The electron belief may not need evidence to be rational in an individualistic sense, but evidence must be available somewhere in the community. The testimony is defective if it does not connect you to a person, or persons, who do have evidence for the existence of electrons. This is what Wykstra refers to as a much more sensible way of construing the notion of needing evidence.

We can distinguish SE from EE in two ways. Firstly, according to EE beliefs that need evidence need it for the sake of rationality, whereas, according to SE beliefs that need evidence need it for the sake of epistemic adequacy. A belief is epistemically adequate if it is connected to the truth in the right way. Secondly, EE requires that

evidence is possessed by the individual, whereas SE requires that the evidence is possessed by the believer's community.

Sensible evidentialism gives us a much more plausible evidentialist objection to belief in God. The sensible evidentialist constraint will be that belief in God is only epistemically adequate if the religious community has sufficient evidence for the belief that God exists. The "interesting basicist" will then be someone who claims that belief in God is not in need of evidence even in this sense; that belief in God is based upon our native faculties. Wykstra observes that even if belief in God is derived from some God-given faculty it may still be the case that belief in God is in need of evidence. Belief in electrons is in need of evidence because our native faculties do not give us access to them, but beliefs based upon our native faculties, such as testimony, are also sometimes in need of evidence in a rather different way. Wykstra draws attention to some of the insights of Thomas Reid concerning testimony:

"When brought to maturity by proper culture ... Reason learns to suspect testimony in some case, and to disbelieve it in others ... But still, to the end of life, she finds a necessity of borrowing light from testimony ... And as, in many cases, reason even in her maturity, borrows aid from testimony, so in others she mutually gives aid to it, and strengthens its authority. For, as we find good reason to reject testimony in some cases, so in others we find good reason to rely upon it with perfect security." (Quoted in Wykstra 1989, p489)

According to Reid, we each have a natural tendency to believe testimony, however, over time we learn that not all testimony is reliable and we learn to find reasons to give some testimony greater weight and others much less. Although inferences are playing a role in forming testimonial belief, it is still testimony that gives support to the belief; inference only plays a refining role.

In light of varied religious beliefs and experiences, both across and within particular religious traditions, we must conclude that evidence is needed to discriminate

between different religious beliefs. This does not mean that religious experience cannot ground belief in God. It may be that some religious faculty grounds the belief, but that the faculty is in need of refinement, just like testimony can be a basic source of knowledge, but still in need of refinement. This continues to draw on the teachings of the Christian tradition because although some Christians hold that we have access to God through our native faculties, they have been marred by sin, so it should not be surprising that we can err in our knowledge of God, or that our native faculties alone are not sufficient.

This sensible evidentialist objection should not really be called an objection; perhaps the sensible evidentialist problem would be better. That is because Wykstra is not urging the reader to give up belief in God, but rather to properly acknowledge the role that evidence can and does play in knowing God. There is some reason, as we will see below, to think that Plantinga has moved from responding to the extravagant evidentialist objection to exploring the sensible evidentialist problem.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Social evidentialism***

The next kind of alternative evidentialism I wish to consider is Social Evidentialism. This sort of evidentialism can be found in Gary Gutting's *Religious Belief and Religious Scepticism* but was given the name by Nicholas Wolterstorff (1988). According to Gutting one requires evidence for a belief if one of your epistemic peers disagrees with your belief.

Gutting asks the reader to consider a situation in which the following are true:

- (a) Person A believes p

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<sup>14</sup> Wykstra (1995, p118) expresses a desire not to resolve the debate between evidentialists and basicists, but to relocate it. He reports in a footnote (fn14) that he has received the following verbal communication from Plantinga: "Consider it relocated".

- (b) Person B believes  $\neg p$
- (c) A and B are epistemic peers
- (d) Neither A nor B can give reasons for their respective beliefs

According to Gutting in such a situation both persons are obliged to give up their belief, or at least try to bring it about that they no longer believe. One should not believe something simply because it is one's own belief, to do so, claims Gutting, is *epistemological egoism*. One should imagine how an independent observer would react to the situation, and since the independent observer would have no reason to prefer person A's belief to person B's, the correct and rational response is to not have any belief about  $p$  until some reason can be found to support one belief over the other.

This sort of evidentialism avoids many of the counter-intuitive consequences of classical foundationalism by only requiring that one give reasons for belief when an epistemic peer has a contradictory belief. Gutting points out that this does not include the lunatic or eccentric philosopher who believes that he is the only person who exists, or some other strange belief, since such a person should not be considered an epistemic peer. An epistemic peer concerning some issue is someone who has access to the same evidential base as yourself relevant to the disagreement, and who is of a similar intellectual capability. This means that we no longer require arguments in support of beliefs such as that other minds exist, or the world has existed for more than five minutes. Concerning beliefs such as these, social evidentialism is much more permissive than classical foundationalism.

The issue of the epistemic significance of disagreement with epistemic peers is one that continues to puzzle philosophers and there has been a significant amount of debate about this issue since Gutting raised his objection – not only concerning religious



beliefs, but about many other issues where epistemic peers disagree. This is an important objection that requires much more discussion and it is one that I will return to later in much greater detail (see Part III).

### *The Great Pumpkin objection*

In “Reason and Belief in God” Plantinga discusses an objection that he calls the Great Pumpkin objection. This is the objection that the method employed by Plantinga sanctions obviously irrational cognitive practices. This objection, unlike the previous ones, is in response to Plantinga’s positive project. It concerns whether his method is a viable one in epistemology.

Plantinga asks whether claiming that belief in God is properly basic means that one is justified in thinking that any belief is properly basic. Could one, for example, believe that the earth is flat or that the claims of voodoo are true, or even that the Great Pumpkin rises from the pumpkin patch each year to bring gifts to the most deserving?

Plantinga claims that the reformed epistemologist need not believe that there are no conditions that a belief must meet to be properly basic. Beliefs must be held in response to the correct circumstances. Even if the reformed epistemologist cannot specify criteria for deciding which belief-circumstance pairs are acceptable does not mean that their rejection of certain beliefs as properly basic will be arbitrary. For example, one may not have any criteria of meaningfulness, but it will still be obvious to most that “T’was billig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymblye in the wabe” is meaningless. Likewise, the reformed epistemologist is free to accept and reject certain belief-circumstance pairs before she has any criteria for doing so.

Plantinga dismisses this objection rather quickly, and it has seemed to many, that he has construed this objection in an unnecessarily weak way (DeRose unpublished2). I intend to return to this objection later and in much more detail in Part II.

### *Disanalogies*

This objection, like the last, also concerns Plantinga's positive project. But, instead of questioning Plantinga's method, it questions whether belief in God will turn out to be properly basic under his method. The objection has been most forcefully put by Richard Grigg. Grigg agrees with Plantinga that classical foundationalism has failed, but he does not think that theistic beliefs will turn out to be properly basic because of the disanalogies between theistic beliefs and more widely recognised properly basic beliefs.

Grigg interprets Plantinga as arguing that the Christian community is within its epistemic rights in holding that certain theistic beliefs are properly basic because these beliefs are analogous to other beliefs that are more widely regarded to be properly basic. Examples of these include (1) I see a tree, (2) I had breakfast this morning, and (3) That person is angry. Grigg identifies three important disanalogies between these beliefs and theistic beliefs.

Firstly, Grigg points out that although beliefs such as (1)-(3) will often be properly basic, they are constantly still being confirmed:

“For example, when I return home this evening, I will see some dirty dishes sitting in my sink, one less egg in my refrigerator than was there yesterday, etc. This is not to say that (2) is believed because of evidence. Rather, it is a basic belief grounded immediately by memory. But one of the reasons that I take such memory beliefs as properly basic is that my memory is almost always subsequently confirmed by empirical evidence.” (Grigg 1983, p126)

This, on the other hand, is not true of theistic belief. Beliefs, such as God created the world, Grigg suggests, are not confirmed by observation, and may even be disconfirmed if the problem of evil is a successful argument.

The second disanalogy is that there is a certain universality enjoyed by beliefs such as (1)-(3), but not by theistic beliefs. That is, when a person has a perceptual experience such as being appeared to treely, they will naturally form the belief I see a tree, and this is the case, claims Grigg, for the vast majority of people. The situation is not the same for theistic beliefs; take, for example, Plantinga's suggestion that one might have an experience of being awed by the beauty of the universe and form the belief that God created the universe. Grigg claims that many people have this experience yet there is no universally shared belief that typically comes with this experience, unlike in the case of perceptual beliefs.

The third, and final, disanalogy that Grigg raises is that people have a bias towards theistic beliefs, but not usually with less controversial examples of properly basic beliefs. Grigg points out that there is a psychological benefit to be gained from believing that God exists, whereas, there will not usually be any obvious benefit for beliefs like (1)-(3).

There is plenty that can, and has been, said about whether these are genuine disanalogies.<sup>15</sup> I do not wish to rehearse that debate here, rather I wish to point out the similarity between this objection and one that was raised earlier against *God and Other Minds*.

In *God and Other Minds* Plantinga placed an emphasis on the similarities between the case for other minds and the case for belief in God. This led to objections about whether the arguments in support of each of these beliefs really were analogous. Similarly, in "Reason and Belief in God" Plantinga this time places his emphasis on the

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<sup>15</sup> See McLeod (1987) and (1988). See also a response to these papers Grigg (1990).

similarities between the ways that people come to have theistic beliefs, and the way they come to have memory beliefs, perceptual belief and other basic beliefs. But as we have seen here, this, once again, leads to objections about the alleged analogy.

Rather than shore up the case for analogy I want to question whether it really is important to Plantinga's argument. Just as in *God and Other Minds*, I wish to suggest that there is an ambiguity in Plantinga's work still, that makes it unclear just how important the analogies are between theistic beliefs and other examples of basic belief.

In responding to the evidentialist objection Plantinga is seeking to suggest that we should treat theistic belief in much the same way that we treat other beliefs – one of the main lines of argument in his response to the evidentialist objection is that it is based upon a very strict epistemology, one where very few of our beliefs turn out to be rational. Instead, he suggests, we should be assessing theistic beliefs in much the same way that we assess other beliefs.

What does this mean for the disanalogies? It means that Plantinga has not shown that theistic beliefs *are* properly basic, but it does not show that they are not or couldn't be. Disanalogies are to be expected when one is comparing beliefs from different sources – no doubt there are also disanalogies between memory beliefs and perceptual beliefs – that will not be sufficient to cast doubt on any belief. Yet, it raises the question: how should we treat these theistic beliefs, and can they be adequately accommodated into a complete epistemology?

Plantinga does not, at this stage, have an answer to that question. The disanalogies show that there is work still to be done, but they do show that Plantinga's project has failed.

#### 1.2.4 Is belief in God rational?

Like at the end of *God and Other Minds* we are left feeling somewhat unsatisfied, and we do not yet have a full answer to the question “Is belief in God rational?”. Plantinga has done a good job of showing that belief in God need not be supported by arguments in order to be rational and has made some steps towards presenting a different way of thinking about the rationality of religious belief, but his positive proposals for how we ought to think about it instead seem incomplete.

Following this Plantinga produced a significant body of work in epistemology developing his own positive proposals, not just of relevance to religious epistemology but much more widely. Armed with these new positive proposals he returned to the issue of the rationality of religious belief in *Warranted Christian Belief*. It is to that that we now turn.

### 1.3 Warranted Christian Belief

*Warranted Christian Belief* forms the third and final part of Plantinga’s Warrant trilogy. The first part – *Warrant: The Current Debate* – gives an overview and critique of some of the most important theories in epistemology; the second book – *Warrant and Proper Function* – then lays out Plantinga’s own epistemological theory. In *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga makes use of the work in these two books to return to the issue of the rationality of religious belief.

This book is a long book, and it touches on many subjects, it is, however, united by one central aim which Plantinga highlights in the first line:

“This book is about the intellectual or rational acceptability of Christian belief.” (Plantinga 2000, pvii)

Given the title, one might have expected him to say that this book about demonstrating that Christian belief is warranted. Plantinga does not intend to do that because to do that he believes one would need to show that Christian belief is true and this he does not believe to be possible, or at least, he has no idea how to do that. The reason that the book is called *Warranted Christian Belief* is because he argues that a discussion of warrant, and how Christian beliefs might be warranted, is of central importance to the question about the acceptability of Christian belief.

“Accordingly, our question is this: is [Christian belief] intellectually acceptable? In particular, is it intellectually acceptable for *us*, *now*? For educated and intelligent people living in the twenty-first century, with all that has happened over the last four or five hundred years? Some will concede that Christian belief was acceptable and even appropriate for our ancestors, people who knew little of other religions, who knew nothing of evolution and our animal ancestry, nothing of contemporary subatomic physics and the strange, eerie, disquieting world it postulates, nothing of those great masters of suspicion, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, nothing of the acids of modern historical biblical criticism. But for us enlightened contemporary intellectuals (so the claim continues) things are wholly different; for people who know about those things (people of our rather impressive intellectual attainments), there is something naive and foolish, or perhaps bullheaded and irresponsible, or even vaguely pathological in holding onto such belief.” (Plantinga 2000, pviii)

Plantinga uses the word acceptable to cover all the many epistemic statuses that it has been claimed that Christian belief lacks. So, Christian belief will be acceptable, according to Plantinga, if it is not in any way unacceptable. Some of the ways that writers have sought to show that Christian belief is unacceptable is by arguing that all talk about God is meaningless, or that it is unacceptable because it is not supported by argument, or that the belief is unacceptable because it is produced or sustained by some method or faculty that is not truth-directed. Plantinga argues that each way that someone has tried to show that Christian belief is unacceptable, one of the following can be shown:

- (A) That the understanding of acceptability in question is flawed, that is, beliefs can be acceptable even when they fail to meet that proposed understanding of acceptability.
- (B) That Christian belief can be shown to meet that standard of acceptability.
- (C) That Christian belief cannot be shown to be unacceptable in the proposed way without first assuming that the belief is false.

It would take far too much space to discuss all the various arguments that Plantinga considers. Instead we will focus on what Plantinga takes to be the most important one: Christian belief is unacceptable because it is unwarranted. It will, however, be helpful when assessing that discussion to refer to some of Plantinga's comments on other arguments, so a number of them will also be covered.

I will divide my comments on this work into four sections. The first section will be a brief outline of Plantinga's proper functionalist epistemology, where I will highlight the key points that are relevant to our discussion. The second section will describe the primary problem that concerns Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief*. Following that, I will, in the third section, present Plantinga's response to this problem. In the fourth and final section, I will take a look at some of the objections to Plantinga's proposal and draw particular attention to the problems that will be the subject of this thesis.

### 1.3.1 Warrant and Proper Function

In his *Warrant* trilogy Plantinga is interested in the question "What is knowledge?", and more specifically in what it is that makes the difference between mere true belief and knowledge. He calls this, whatever it is, warrant.

Warrant is just one of a number of epistemic terms that are used in epistemology, others include justification, rationality and evidence. Warrant is of particular importance, however, because if we can answer the question “what is warrant?” then we will have an answer to the question “What is knowledge?”.

Plantinga argues that warrant results from the proper functioning of your cognitive faculties:

“a belief has warrant for me only if (1) it has been produced in me by cognitive faculties that are working properly (functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for my kinds of cognitive faculties, (2) the segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief is aimed at the production of true beliefs, and (3) there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true.” (Plantinga 1993b, pp46-47)

Key to Plantinga’s analysis of warrant is that a belief can only be warranted if it is produced by a cognitive faculty that is functioning properly, which means that it must not be diseased or broken or hindered. In order to make sense of what it means for our cognitive faculties to be functioning properly we must introduce the notion of a design plan, which determines the way our cognitive faculties are supposed to work. Just as the human heart is supposed to beat at 50-80 beats per minute while at rest, so too, there is a way that our cognitive faculties are supposed to work. This, claims Plantinga, should not be thought to necessarily invoke the notion of conscious design (by God, or anyone else), rather he means to invoke the common idea shared by many theists and non-theists, that parts of our bodies have a function, such as one of the functions of our legs being to allow us to move through our environment.

As well as having cognitive faculties that are functioning properly those faculties must also be operating in the right cognitive environment – the one for which they are designed. This means that one might have warrant for a perceptual belief that is formed



about a nearby medium sized object on a clear day, but not for a perceptual belief about a far-away object in a badly lit, smoke-filled room.

It must also be that the part of the design plan governing the production of the belief in question must be aimed at truth. Our faculties are designed for a number of different purposes, not just the production of true beliefs, which means that it may be that there are times when our cognitive faculties are functioning properly in the correct environment, and yet produce a false belief, or a belief that is only accidentally true. For example, it may be that case that when a person discovers that they have a life-threatening illness that they are designed in such a way that they will come to believe that they will recover, even if this unlikely to be true – this may perhaps be the case because one is more likely to recover if one believes that this is true. That would be a case of cognitive faculties functioning properly in the correct environment, but not a case of the belief being warranted because the design plan, in this instance, does not aim at truth.

The final requirement is that there is a high statistical probability that a belief that is produced by the cognitive faculty in question is likely to be true when it is functioning properly in the environment for which it was designed – which is to say that the design must be a good one. Plantinga imagines a situation in which our faculties have been designed by some lesser deity, and that this deity has done such a poor job, that even when our faculties are functioning properly, in the correct environment, according to a design plan that is aimed at truth, we still form mostly false beliefs because the design is so poor. If this was the case then our beliefs would not have warrant, even in cases where they did turn out to be true. For this reason a reliability condition is required as well.

Any defence or critical assessment of this view is beyond the scope of the present work. I do wish to draw attention to one particular aspect of this account that will be important to bear in mind for the discussion below. That is, that this account is an externalist one. This means that, on Plantinga's view, warrant involves, not just facts that the agent is aware of, but also facts that the agent may not be aware of, such as whether her own faculties are functioning properly and facts about the environment. This will be important because it means that on Plantinga's account whether or not some theist has warrant for her religious beliefs may depend on facts that she is unaware of, not just her internal state.

### 1.3.2 The de jure objection

In *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga divides all objections to belief in God into two types: *de facto* objections and *de jure* objections. *De facto* objections are those objections that seek to show that God does not exist, such as the Problem of Evil or the Paradox of the Stone. *De jure* objections, on the other hand, are those with the conclusion that one ought not to believe that God exists because to do so is in some way irrational – examples of this sort of argument include the evidentialist objection to belief in God and Freud's objection that belief in God is based upon wishful thinking. One of Plantinga's main aims in *Warranted Christian Belief* is to better describe the *de jure* argument and present a response to it.

Versions of the *de jure* argument vary according to the way they answer two questions: firstly, in what way is belief in God irrational or defective; and secondly, how can it be shown that belief in God is defective in that way. The first of these questions is the most important, according to Plantinga, because he thinks that it can be shown that for a number of epistemic statuses that it is clear that in many cases belief in God does

have that status. Plantinga considers three candidates for the epistemic status that is being debated, and concludes that only one of these will generate a plausible *de jure* objection. The three candidates are: justification, rationality and warrant.

These three candidates can be seen as particular ways of describing what it means for a belief to be acceptable, so what he has to say about these arguments will be of central importance to his stated aim for the book.

### *Justification*

Justification is a widely used term in epistemology, and philosophers have used it in incompatible ways. Plantinga specifies that he is using it to mean doing your epistemic duty, that is, S is justified in believing that p if and only if, S has not failed to follow any of her epistemic duties when forming or maintaining her belief that p.

If the *de jure* objection concerns justification then it must be that holding Christian beliefs goes against some epistemic duty. Plantinga considers the claim that Christian belief is unjustified because it is not based upon propositional evidence. His response to this is very similar to what he had previously discussed in “Reason and Belief in God” which we have looked at in greater detail in section 1.2 above. He concludes that there is no epistemic duty to hold Christian beliefs only if they are supported by propositional evidence. But that does not show that Christian belief is justified. In order to persuade us that Christian belief is justified Plantinga asks us to consider the following possible believer: we are asked to imagine a Christian believer who reads the likes of Nietzsche, Freud and Marx on religion, who weighs their objections, but is unconvinced by them. This believer is also aware theistic arguments, but does not believe on the basis of any of them. Instead she has a rich inner spiritual life, and is aware of the Holy Spirit at work in her life. Plantinga writes that “[a]fter long, hard, conscientious reflection, this all

seems to her enormously more convincing than the complaints of the critics” (Plantinga 2000, p101).

Plantinga claims that such a person would be justified in her belief, and *obviously* so. He claims that she is justified because she is doing her best; and that this is the case even though she may be suffering from some malfunction that is not apparent on the surface, or she might be the victim of an illusion, or she might simply be wrong. None of that matters, according to Plantinga, because these factors do not indicate that one has failed to do one’s epistemic duty. This, however, should not be seen as a very great step forward in Plantinga’s attempt to show that Christian belief is intellectually acceptable because it is more a reflection on Plantinga’s weak definition of justification than a significant breakthrough in religious epistemology. Plantinga does seem to acknowledge this because he points out that it possible even for a person with very crazy beliefs to be justified in this sense; so long as this person is careful with respect to their epistemic obligations they will be justified.

From this we can conclude that any *de jure* that seeks to show that Christian belief is not justified (at least in the sense that Plantinga understands justification) will be easily refuted. We will now move on to look at more demanding epistemic statuses in the hope that these will yield a more plausible, more worrying, *de jure* objection.

### ***Rationality***

Plantinga considers a number of ways that rationality has been characterised and concludes that Christian belief is rational in the specified senses. I will not discuss each

of these possible ways of understanding rationality.<sup>16</sup> Instead I will focus on Plantinga's preferred definition of rationality, which is in terms of proper function.

In line with his proper function account of warrant, Plantinga also claims that proper function is important for understanding rationality. He distinguishes between two types of rationality: internal and external. Internal rationality is described by Plantinga as being when all of your belief-forming processes are functioning properly "downstream from experience". What this means is that one is doing a good enough job of forming and managing ones beliefs given the experiences one is having.

One important part of what it means to be internally rational is that the belief-forming processes of a person who is internally rational will function properly in response to the experiences they are having. Plantinga identifies two important types of experience: sensuous imagery and doxastic experience. Sensuous imagery is a matter of being appeared to in a certain way and it is the sort of experience that features in sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Doxastic experience is the sort of experience that one has when a certain proposition seems true. Examples that Plantinga offers of this sort of experience include the experiences that typically go with memory beliefs and *a priori* beliefs. When I remember that today is Friday there may be some sensuous imagery that goes with that belief, such as the image of a calendar or just the word 'Friday', but this imagery need not be present, and the belief will not be based upon this imagery. Instead, writes Plantinga, the belief will just feel right.

The second important component of internal rationality is coherence of beliefs. A person who is exhibiting internal rationality will have a certain level of coherence among her beliefs. Perfect coherence is not required – it seems unlikely that anyone has ever

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<sup>16</sup> Plantinga also considers Aristotelian rationality, rationality as conforming to the deliverances of reason, means-end rationality and William Alston's practical rationality. For Plantinga's discussion of these see Plantinga (2000) ch4.

attained that – but it is difficult to specify exactly how much coherence proper function requires; we should assume that whatever the level is, it is one that most people have achieved. Coherence involves such things as eliminating contradictions and drawing appropriate inferences.

Like with justification, Plantinga thinks that this epistemic status is achievable by those with some very strange beliefs. For example, suppose that someone believes that they have an earthenware head; this belief could be internally rational. Perhaps the person has a very strong and overwhelming doxastic experience that she has an earthenware head – it seems to her as obvious as that  $3+1=4$ . So long as she doesn't also believe that her head is made of flesh and blood, and perhaps she will also be required to believe that wearing headgear is very important for her, and that she should avoid taking part in boxing and other similar activities. Such a person would be internally rational, but they would fail to be externally rational.

External rationality is a matter of having the correct experiences – the experiences that a person with properly functioning faculties would have in those circumstances. This means that, for example, one would have an experience of seeing a tree in a normal environment where there is a tree several feet away from you in your eye-line, rather than having an experience of seeing a lion or hearing a symphony. With respect to doxastic experience it means, for example, having the doxastic experience that “this is true” when you consider whether  $2+1=3$ , but not when you consider whether  $2+1=5$  (in that case it ought to seem false, or wrong).

Being externally and internally rational does not guarantee knowledge because there can still be environmental factors that can deprive your belief of warrant, or that mean you have ended up with a false belief. If you are in the presence of a very clever hologram of a tree, and you are unaware of this, then a person who is internally and

externally rational will form the belief that there is a tree before them on the basis of having an experience of there being a tree there; this belief will be internally and externally rational, but it will be false and it will not be sufficiently warranted for knowledge.

When it came to justification and internal rationality (as Plantinga understands them), it was fairly clear that Christian belief could have those epistemic statuses. It is less clear, however, that this is true of external rationality. Perhaps the Christian is having very strong doxastic experiences when she thinks about certain claims that form the basis of her Christian beliefs, so long as this is the case, and her beliefs are sufficiently coherent, then her beliefs will be internally rational, but this will not guarantee that they are externally rational. Perhaps she is having these experiences because she is suffering from some sort of cognitive malfunction. In the search for a viable *de jure* this looks much more promising, before trying to state this objection more fully we will also take a look at what Plantinga has to say about warrant and the *de jure* objection.

### ***Warrant***

Plantinga defines warrant as whatever it is that makes the difference between true belief and knowledge, and we have briefly looked at his account of warrant above in section 1.3.1. Plantinga's account of warrant has three components:

A belief *p* is warranted only if:

- (i) *p* is produced and maintained by properly functioning cognitive faculties in the environment for which those faculties were designed.
- (ii) The design plan governing the production of *p* is aimed at producing true beliefs.

- (iii) There is a high statistical probability that a belief produced in those circumstances would be true (i.e. the design plan is a good one).

I will now present three possible *de jure* objections that proceed by denying that Christian belief fulfils one of these three components. Each of these *de jure* objections seeks to show that Christian belief is intellectually unacceptable because it lacks warrant.

### *Challenging (i)*

A version of the *de jure* objection can be made by claiming that Christian belief fails to be warranted because it is not produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties in the environment for which they were designed. One could do this by arguing that Christian belief results from a malfunctioning cognitive faculty perhaps due to mental illness – in this case the beliefs would lack external rationality as well as warrant. Another way to make this objection is to claim that these beliefs result from cognitive faculties that are operating in the wrong environment. An example of this would be Karl Marx’s claim that religious belief results from the people living in a state of oppression and being in “an unhealthy and perverted social order”.<sup>17</sup> The idea here seems to be that religion arises when people are being oppressed – when there is something wrong with their social environment – this results in the construction of a far-reaching illusion in order to make the world seem less awful. Marx suggests that this illusory happiness needs to be thrown off in order to achieve real happiness. It is not quite clear whether the environment is leading otherwise properly functioning cognitive faculties to produce false beliefs, or whether the environment is affecting our cognitive faculties, so that they

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<sup>17</sup> This quotation is Plantinga’s paraphrase of Marx’s critique. See Plantinga (2000) p141.



no longer function properly; in any case, if Marx's account, or something like it, is correct, then Christian belief will lack warrant.

### ***Challenging (ii)***

Another version of the *de jure* objection is to claim that there is nothing wrong with the way Christians are functioning when they form Christian beliefs. Instead it is that these beliefs are produced by cognitive faculties that do not aim at truth. Sigmund Freud makes this claim:

“The [religious beliefs], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking; they are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind.”  
(Quoted in Plantinga 2000, pp138-139)

Freud claims that religious beliefs result from wish-fulfillment; that belief in God stems from a desire for a father-figure – someone who protects us and loves us. This way of forming belief can be seen not as a failure of proper function but as a case of a cognitive faculty that is not aimed at truth; it is aimed at something else instead, perhaps well-being. For this reason, whether the beliefs are true or not, they lack warrant, and do not amount to knowledge.

### ***Challenging (iii)***

Plantinga focuses on the challenges offered by Freud and Marx, but there is another type of challenge that seeks to show that Christian belief lacks warrant because the cognitive faculty involved is unreliable.

An example of this type of argument uses recent findings in the Cognitive Science of Religion to argue that belief in God is produced by an unreliable faculty. Justin Barrett in his book *Why would anyone believe in God?* Has argued that humans possess what

he calls a hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD). HADD gives humans a strong tendency to believe that events are caused by an agent. Such a tendency, it is argued, is evolutionarily advantageous because if you believe that there is an agent nearby and this turns out to be false very little is lost, but if you do not believe this and there is an agent you could lose a lot (for example, if there is a hungry tiger nearby). If belief in God comes about because of HADD then that seems to provide the beginnings of a *de jure* argument against belief in God because the HADD produces so many false positives that it is unreliable.<sup>18</sup>

These examples offer us a way of articulating a viable *de jure* objection – an objection to show that Christian belief is not intellectually acceptable:

- (1) Christian belief can be shown to lack warrant
- (2) Any belief that can be shown to lack warrant is not intellectually acceptable

Therefore,

- (3) Christian belief is not intellectually acceptable

Plantinga accepts premise (2), so the focus of the debate will be premise (1). Premise (1) is supported by the accounts offered above. These accounts involve naturalistic explanations of religious belief. They seek to show where our religious belief come from, that is, the cognitive mechanisms that govern their production and maintenance, and in doing so to show that these cognitive mechanism are in some way lacking, from an epistemic point of view.

It might be objected that this way of articulating the objection biases things towards Plantinga since it is articulated in terms of his account of knowledge. This is

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<sup>18</sup> A significant amount of detail has been left out here. For much more thorough descriptions of these arguments and responses to them see Thurow (2013) and Clark & Rabinowitz (2011).

done, however, only to simplify the discussion. Each of these challenges is potentially troubling, no matter what epistemic theory turns out to be correct – beliefs that are the result of cognitive malfunction, wish-fulfillment or that are produced by unreliable cognitive faculties do not amount to knowledge on any account.

### 1.3.3 Plantinga's response

Plantinga's response to the *de jure* objection comes in two steps: the first is a negative approach, which is to undermine the reasons for thinking that Christian belief is not warranted; and the second is a more positive approach, which is to argue that Christian belief is warranted-if-true.

#### *The negative approach*

Plantinga observes that the *de jure* objection involves questioning, not the belief itself, but the origin of the belief.<sup>19</sup> This is achieved by either suggesting the belief originates in a faculty that is malfunctioning, one that is not aimed at truth, or one that is unreliable. But it is not enough to merely suggest that this might be the case. In order to mount a successful objection one must present evidence for two claims:

- (A) The proposed account of the origin of the belief is the correct.
- (B) The cognitive faculty identified as the origin of the belief is flawed in the way proposed.

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<sup>19</sup> Plantinga points out that when one realises this one might be tempted to suggest that this is an instance of the genetic fallacy, which is to argue that a belief is not true because of its origin. Plantinga claims that this response is not open to someone who is responding to the *de jure* objection because the objection is not intending to show that Christian belief is false, but that it is not warranted, and when it comes to the issue of warrant the origin of the belief is relevant. For Plantinga's discussion of this see Plantinga (2000) p194.

The examples that we looked at above can be seen as a sort of hypothesis about what the origins of Christian belief are and about the appropriateness of forming beliefs in that way.

Marx's suggestion is that theistic belief is due faculties that have been corrupted by oppression. It is difficult to see how one could get evidence for this sort of hypothesis without engaging in some rather unethical human experimentation, and in any case, the hypothesis clashes with some evidence that we do have – that there are plenty of people who are not oppressed, and yet hold religious beliefs. But even if we grant that this is the correct account of the origin of religious beliefs, it is still not clear that beliefs are produced by a malfunctioning cognitive faculty. Perhaps God has created human beings in such a way so that when they are being oppressed it will trigger an awareness of him, so that in their oppression they can seek comfort. This shows us that there is little reason to accept Marx's account of the origin of theistic belief, and even if we do it is not obvious that Christian belief lacks warrant when produced in that way.

A similar response can be given to Freud's claim that Christian belief results from wish-fulfillment. It is not clear that Freud's hypothesis fits the data. Although some people might have a desire for a benevolent father who is all-powerful and all-knowing, others find the idea unappealing – they do not like the idea of there being someone who is aware of everything they say and do, who passes judgements on all our actions, and who we are supposed to repent to. Furthermore, even if we grant Freud's claim that religious belief stems from wish-fulfillment it is again not obvious that these beliefs would not be warranted. Perhaps God has created us with a strong desire for him so that this desire will lead us to the true belief that he exists.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Plantinga suggests that something like this idea can be found in St. Augustine and Jonathan Edwards. See Plantinga (2000) p198.

The unreliability claim is a bit more complicated. Though there is some evidence that people do form beliefs about God (or at least about gods or supernatural beings) on the basis of something like the HADD, this does not show that this is the sole origin of the belief. It may be that the belief lacks warrant when it is the result of HADD but that it is also the result of another faculty that is reliable. Furthermore, it may be unreliable in the population in general, but this would not show that it an unreliable faculty for a particular individual – perhaps some people are more experienced in forming beliefs on the basis of the HADD and are sensitive to defeaters such that they do not accept so many of the false positives. Much more time and space would be needed to do this topic justice, but hopefully this indicates that there are promising lines of response to an argument of this kind.

### *The positive approach*

Plantinga's positive approach to the *de jure* objection involves arguing for the following three claims:

- (A) There is model under which Christian belief is warranted and that model is logically and epistemically possible.
- (B) Given the truth of Christian belief, there are no philosophical objections to the model's being not only possible, but true.
- (C) If Christian belief is true, then it is likely that it has warrant, and in some way similar to the model.<sup>21</sup>

Below I will explain in more detail each of these claims.

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<sup>21</sup> This is similar to the way that Plantinga summarises his response. See Plantinga (2000) p350.

## *The Model*

Central to Plantinga's response is his attempt to offer a model of theistic belief having warrant. A model, in Plantinga's sense, is a possible description of a way the world could be in which some target proposition has warrant sufficient for knowledge. A model must be epistemically possible, that is, it must be compatible with what we know. Plantinga's aim is to offer a model in which theistic belief has warrant in the basic way. This is not quite the same thing that we saw above that Plantinga was attempting to argue for in "Reason and Belief in God". In *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga no longer speaks of a belief being basic or non-basic *simpliciter*, instead a belief is basic or non-basic with respect to a certain epistemic status. This means that a belief is justification basic iff it does not need to be based upon other beliefs to be justified; whereas for a belief to be warrant basic means that it does not need to be based upon other beliefs to be warranted. In "Reason and Belief in God" Plantinga seems to have had in mind justification basic, whereas in the model he is seeking to offer a way that theistic belief could be warrant basic.

Plantinga takes his model from some suggestions that he finds in the works of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, and for this reason he calls it the Aquinas/Calvin Model (A/C Model for short).<sup>22</sup> Both Aquinas and Calvin agree that we all have a sort of natural knowledge of God. Here is how Calvin puts it:

"There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity." (Quoted in Plantinga 2000, p171)

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<sup>22</sup> It will turn out to be important later on that this model is suggested by influential Christian writers, and not just of Plantinga's own invention.

Following this and other passages in Calvin, Plantinga suggests the following model: Humans have been created with a *sensus divinitatis*. The *sensus divinitatis* is a cognitive mechanism that in a wide variety of circumstances produces beliefs about God. The circumstances could be such things as when we become aware of the beauty of nature: such as gazing at the stars or looking down into a valley from the top of a hill. Other occasions may include listening to a sermon in church; having a sense of his disapproval when we do wrong; or a sense that he is listening when we are in trouble and begin to pray. The *sensus divinitatis* may require a certain level of maturity before it functions properly or it may be that it is malfunctioning in many (perhaps due to the effects of sin), but according to the model everyone has this capacity, even if no theistic beliefs result from it for some reason. These theistic beliefs are not based upon any other beliefs; it is not the case that one notes the grandeur of the heavens and then uses that as a premise in an argument, the belief is formed immediately and gazing at the stars acts as the occasion for that belief.

So, does this model meet the requirements set out in (A) above? Well, under this model theistic beliefs will be warranted according to Plantinga's account of warrant: the beliefs will result from properly functioning faculties in the environment for which they were designed, the design plan is aimed at truth, and the faculty is reliable. Next, the model seems quite clearly logically possible – there doesn't seem to be anything inconsistent about it. Is it epistemically possible? This is a little more difficult to determine. Perhaps some will say that it is in conflict with our best science since no *sensus divinitatis* has ever been discovered. But that would be to misunderstand what the *sensus divinitatis* is supposed to be – it is not the sort of thing that one can find. It is simply a disposition to form beliefs in certain circumstances, and the claim that some people have a tendency to form beliefs about God is not in conflict with science. Or

perhaps it will be claimed that this faculty cannot originate with God because we know that all of faculties are products of evolution. But again, there is no conflict here since the model need not require that the faculty result from direct intervention; instead it could be that the faculty arises from evolution perhaps with some oversight from God. In light of this we should consider the model to be epistemically possible, unless a more serious worry can be found.

This A/C model is quite sparse, so Plantinga also goes on to offer an extended A/C model. The extended model also takes into account such things as the noetic effects of sin, the work of the Holy Spirit and scripture. This extended model is designed to better explain actual Christian behaviour and to accommodate the fact that a significant proportion of people do not seem to have a tendency to form theistic beliefs. The differences between the extended and the plain model are not important for our purposes so I will mostly only discuss the A/C model even though it has a more limited scope.

### *Objections to the Model*

The second thing that Plantinga intends to show is that, in the case of Christian belief, there is an important connection between the *de jure* objection and the *de facto* objection. According to Plantinga, whether or not theistic belief is warranted depends upon the sorts of beings human beings are. It depends upon how we originated and upon what cognitive faculties we have. If the Christian account is correct then it seems likely that we could have knowledge of God, whereas, if you think that there is no God, then one is likely to prefer accounts of the origins of your theistic beliefs that suggest that these beliefs are not warranted. Plantinga suggests that if Christian belief is false, then it likely that it is not warranted because it is then more likely that Christian belief



arises from some faculty that is malfunctioning, not aimed at truth, or unreliable. On the other hand, if Christian belief is true then it is likely that those beliefs are warranted since if Christian belief is true, then it is true that there is a God, that he created us, and that he wishes us to have knowledge of him. This means that questions about the truth of Christian beliefs have a certain priority over questions of rationality. This is because the question as to whether Christian beliefs are true has important implications about what sorts of being we are, and therefore, implications about what it is rational for us to believe. This is why Plantinga includes his second claim, that given the truth of Christian belief, there are no philosophical objections to the model being true; that is, there are no objections to the model that are not also objections to the truth of Christianity. This means that (B) has been satisfied.

### *Is the model supported by Christian theology?*

It is not for mere convenience that Plantinga seeks to find something like his model in the works of Calvin and Aquinas. These are two influential Christian thinkers from different traditions, and so if this model can be found in their writings then that is good reason to think that the model would be endorsed by a wide number of Christian thinkers. This is important because Plantinga needs it to be the case that if Christianity is correct then the model (or something like it) is also correct.<sup>23</sup> Finding the model in the

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<sup>23</sup> Plantinga does not say how close the model needs to be to the truth but he has suggested a number of differences that would be acceptable. One is that it could be that belief about God are not themselves properly basic, but that what is properly basic are beliefs that suggest very simple arguments with conclusion about God. For example, perhaps what is properly basic is a belief such as that the stars could not exist if God did not exist; this belief would allow a very quick and simple argument to the conclusion that God exists. Other ways that the model could vary have been suggested by Stephen Wykstra (2002). Plantinga has responded to Wykstra, writing:

“One valuable feature of Wykstra’s discussion is that it highlights the fact that there are whole families of models in the nearby bushes, aligned along a couple of axes. ...Other models can differ along at least two different dimensions. First, the beliefs for which the [Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit] provides warrant

works of other Christian writers suggests that this is the case. Plantinga's model of how Christian belief is warranted has not been universally accepted by all Christians, and some have questioned his interpretation of Calvin in particular (Jeffreys 1997). It is beyond the scope of this work to fully discuss this issue, but it is worth noting that there is a concern here about whether the truth of Christianity suggests that the model is likely.

Plantinga summarises his positive approach as the attempt to show that Christian belief is warranted-if-true. This means that there is an important connection between the truth of these beliefs and whether or not they have warrant. One cannot, according to Plantinga, fully answer questions about the rationality of Christian belief without answering the question as to whether those beliefs are true.

### *What has Plantinga achieved?*

We noted above that Plantinga's aim was to show that Christian belief was intellectually acceptable – that is there is no reason to think that Christian belief is epistemically lacking in any way (or at least in any way that matters). Plantinga also believes that he has shown that the only way to go about showing that Christian beliefs are intellectually unacceptable would be to show that they are false, and obviously that is a debate that will continue.

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may be more or fewer than in the A/C model. But second ..., models can differ with respect to the degree of warrant provided by the [Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit] for a given such belief." (Plantinga 2002, p124)

### 1.3.4 Objections

Since its release *Warranted Christian Belief* has received a lot of attention and attracted a number of objections. In this section I wish to highlight two important objections that will be the subject of the rest of this work.

These two objections have a common core: that Plantinga's religious epistemology has counter-intuitive results when applied to the beliefs of those outside the community of Christian believers, and that as a result it calls into question whether or not he has adequately dealt with the *de jure* objection.

#### *The Great Pumpkin objection*

The Great Pumpkin Objection has already been noted above, but there is a further version of this argument that Plantinga has dubbed the Son of the Great Pumpkin objection. It was originally raised by Michael Martin:

“Although reformed epistemologists would not have to accept voodoo beliefs as rational, voodoo followers would be able to claim that insofar as they are basic in the voodoo community they are rational and, moreover, that reformed thought was irrational in this community. Indeed, Plantinga's proposal would generate many different communities that could *legitimately* claim that their basic beliefs are rational.” (Martin 1990, p272)

Martin suggests that Plantinga's approach could be adopted by any other community, and so it seems that Plantinga would have to concede that the beliefs of any other group are also rational – no matter how weird.

This objection can also be developed in order to question Plantinga's response to the *de jure* objection. This sort of objection aims to show that Plantinga has not successfully argued that Christian belief is intellectually acceptable because others, who have clearly unacceptable beliefs, could adopt his defensive strategy. This argument is not itself a form of *de jure* objection because it does not have the conclusion that

Christian belief is unacceptable in some way, instead it has the conclusion that the *de jure* objection has not been adequately responded to by Plantinga. Part II of this thesis will be devoted to this objection. In chapter 2 I will take a look in more detail at versions of this objection and go on to develop the strongest version of it. In chapter 3 I will then offer a response to that argument and defend it against objections.

### *Religious diversity*

The objection from religious diversity is a family of objections that seek to question the rationality of Christian belief by arguing from the observation that there are numerous incompatible religious belief systems. In Part III I will consider these objections further and develop a response to them. In chapter 4 I will present and critique Plantinga's comments on the issue of religious diversity. Chapter 5 will consider the objection that religious diversity constitutes a problem for religious belief because finding out that others disagree with gives you a reason to give up your belief. In chapter 6 we will consider the final objection which is that Plantinga's view leads to a certain sort of epistemic arrogance because his view forces him to endorse the claim that Christians are epistemically superior to all those who disagree with them.

### **1.4 What is reformed epistemology?**

Throughout his work in religious epistemology Plantinga has maintained that belief in God is rationally acceptable, and it is rationally acceptable even if the arguments for his existence are not strong enough to support that conclusion. He argues that those who claim otherwise are guilty of assessing belief in God by standards that many very widely held beliefs do not meet. This claim raises the question: What

standards are our beliefs to meet? This has led Plantinga to develop a more positive proposal concerning the rationality of religious belief.

Most recently, Plantinga has sought to argue that belief in God should be considered intellectually acceptable by others, even if the religious believer can not present adequate evidence or arguments for her belief, because the belief is warranted-if-true. This, claims Plantinga, shows that there is no successful *de jure* argument that does not rely on there already being a successful *de facto* argument.

We are now in a position to lay out some of the key claims of reformed epistemology:

- (RE1) Religious belief ought to be judged by the same standards as other beliefs.
- (RE2) Some beliefs are rational even in the absence of adequate arguments in support of them.
- (RE3) In trying to understand proper basicity we should begin with examples of properly basic belief, not with proposed criteria.
- (RE4) It is up to each community to decide what they take to be properly basic.
- (RE5) The Christian community holds belief in God in the basic way, and according to a significant part of the tradition of this community that belief is grounded when held that way.
- (RE6) Christian belief is warranted-if-true.
- (RE7) There is no successful *de jure* argument against belief in God.

The remainder of this thesis will focus on developing and responding to two versions of the *de jure* argument that Plantinga has not successfully responded to.

## Part II

## Chapter Two – Return of the Great Pumpkin

As we have already seen there is an important sort of objection that has been consistently raised in response to Alvin Plantinga's religious epistemology – this objection has often been referred to as the Great Pumpkin objection. In this chapter I will survey some different versions of this objection that have been offered, and develop what I take to be the strongest version.

### 2.1 The Great Pumpkin objection so far

Before looking at these objections it will be important to make some comments about what it is that these objections have in common. It is not simply that they all make mention of the Great Pumpkin – that is not philosophically interesting, and in any case, not all of the philosophers who have articulated version of this objection do make reference to the Great Pumpkin.<sup>24</sup> Instead we are looking for arguments that object to Plantinga's strategy for showing that Christian belief is acceptable by showing how his strategy (perhaps with some non-essential modifications) could be adopted by someone to defend some very strange beliefs – beliefs that are clearly unacceptable. It should be noted that these beliefs are not unacceptable in virtue of their contents – had the world turned out rather differently from the way it has then the Great Pumpkin belief would be very reasonable. Instead, beliefs are unacceptable relative to certain bodies of evidence, or given certain background beliefs and experiences. The claim is not that the

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<sup>24</sup> The objection gets its name from the example that Plantinga first used to describe this objection. In "Reason and Belief in God" (1983) Plantinga chose as an example of a clearly objectionable belief the belief held by the character Linus in the comic strip Peanuts, that the Great Pumpkin is a creature who visits pumpkin patches at Halloween. Each year Linus is disappointed that the Great Pumpkin does not visit him, but he continues to believe that he exists.

Great Pumpkin belief is unacceptable because a belief with that content could never be acceptable; it is rather, that given what we know about the world and given the description of Linus in the Peanuts comic strip we reasonably believe that Linus does not hold his Great Pumpkin beliefs in an acceptable way – perhaps he is ignoring evidence, or has malfunctioning faculties, or is being misled.

The Great Pumpkin type arguments have the conclusion that Plantinga’s strategy must be flawed, incomplete, or that Plantinga will be forced to endorse a very extreme sort of epistemic relativism whereby it will not be possible for any of us to criticise the beliefs of those from another community.

### 2.1.1 The original objection

The first version of the objection was raised by Plantinga himself in “Reason and Belief in God” (Plantinga 1983, pp74-78). Above (in Section 1.2.2) we saw that Plantinga rejects giving any criteria for proper basicity as a starting point. Instead, he advocates that each community ought to assemble examples of what they take to be properly basic beliefs, which they then use to form hypotheses about criteria for proper basicity. Plantinga supposes that someone might object to this by claiming that this method means that the community in question will have no reason to accept any belief over any other. This community could take belief in God to be properly basic, but they might instead take the belief that the earth is flat or that I can run at the speed of light if I try really hard, or the belief that the Great Pumpkin will return at Halloween to the most deserving pumpkin patches. There is no reason, so the objection goes, to choose one belief over another without first offering some criteria for proper basicity.

This objection is not too troubling. The Christian community, or any other community, will still be able to take a principled approach to assembling examples of



properly basic beliefs. This is because, although some belief  $p$  may be basic, it will not generally be true that ‘ $p$  is properly basic’ is a basic belief. This belief will occur at a higher level in the noetic structure, and will be based upon other beliefs, such as, that  $p$  seems to you to be true, and that you are holding  $p$  in the basic way. It will be an empirical matter for each community to discover which beliefs are considered to be properly basic by those in the community; and since the Christian community will most likely regard belief in God as an example of a properly basic belief, and the Great Pumpkin belief as an example of a belief that could not be properly basic, they will be able to accept the former and reject the latter in a perfectly principled way, even if they are not appealing to some general criteria.

Plantinga, furthermore, points out that we are in other areas able to discriminate between two things even if we are not able to give criteria for how that discrimination is to be done. The example he gives is the meaningfulness of sentences. Plantinga observes that we can easily tell that the sentence “ $T$  was billig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymblye in the wabe” is meaningless even if we cannot appeal to some general criteria of meaning. Likewise, claims Plantinga, there is no reason to think that something similar will not be possible for properly basic beliefs. This example is perhaps not very helpful since there are clear differences between identifying meaningfulness and proper basicity. The former is a rather better understood phenomenon and there is much wider agreement when it comes to identifying meaningful statements, than identifying properly basic beliefs. But we shouldn’t take these differences to be very important for present purposes; all that Plantinga is attempting to show with this example is that there is nothing mysterious about the suggestion that we might be able to tell which candidates belong to a certain class, and which do not, without also being able to state criteria for inclusion.

For these reasons this objection need not trouble Plantinga. In fact this objection seems rather weak; it is so weak that it is perhaps surprising that the objection has attracted such sustained attention. The reason for its continued interest is, I believe, that it is clear to most that there is deeper concern lurking in the area. It is to some of these attempts to articulate this deeper worry that we now turn.

### 2.1.2 The Son of the Great Pumpkin objection

Michael Martin offers a more troubling version of the argument. He does not label his objection as a Great Pumpkin objection, but Plantinga refers to it as the Son of the Great Pumpkin objection.<sup>25</sup> Here is how Martin phrases the objection:

“Although reformed epistemologists would not have to accept voodoo beliefs as rational, voodoo followers would be able to claim that insofar as they are basic in the voodoo community they are rational and, moreover, that reformed thought was irrational in this community. Indeed, Plantinga’s proposal would generate many different communities that could *legitimately* claim that their basic beliefs are rational.” (Martin 1990, p272)

Whereas the previous objection concerned whether or not a community could discriminate for itself among beliefs in a principled way, this second objection concerns whether or not a community can make judgements about the basic beliefs of other communities in a principled way. They may be able to argue that the believers in some other community are not justified in holding some of their non-basic beliefs, because they are not adequately supported by their basic beliefs, but since the basic beliefs are not supported by other beliefs, there seems to be no way for those outside the community to criticise them. If this is correct, it is a very strange and counter-intuitive result. There are various beliefs that we think are objectionable, even if they are held in the basic way; for example, belief that the Great Pumpkin will return every Halloween,

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<sup>25</sup> For Plantinga’s discussion of this objection see Plantinga (2000) pp342-351.

that the Earth is flat and the claims of astrology all seem to be objectionable from the epistemic point of view, whether or not they are held in the basic way.

Plantinga regards the process of assembling examples of properly basic beliefs to be the responsibility of each community, and so, it would seem, at least at first, that Plantinga is committed to a sort of epistemic relativism whereby the most one can do to criticise the beliefs of a person from a different community is to point out internal inconsistencies. This would not necessarily be a major problem for Plantinga, except for the fact that the sorts of communities that seem to be included are ones that hold bizarre, irrational or superstitious beliefs – beliefs like astrology, voodoo or perhaps even the Great Pumpkin belief.

There are, however, at least two ways that, according to Plantinga's methodology, one could criticise the basic beliefs of another community. The first is that it may be possible to show that, although the theorists of a certain community claim that a particular belief is basic, those in the community do not typically hold that belief as a basic belief; but instead infer it from other beliefs, or perhaps do not even hold the belief at all. For example, it seems implausible that any community might hold a belief such as "David Cameron is the current Prime Minister" as a basic belief, even if the theorists of the community claim that they do.<sup>26</sup> So, one way to object to the claim that a certain belief is properly basic is to show that the belief is not in fact held as a basic

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<sup>26</sup> Plantinga does not distinguish between a belief being basic-for-a-person, and being basic-for-a-community. A belief is basic-for-a-person iff it is not necessary that that person base the belief upon other beliefs for it to be held rationally; whereas a belief is basic-for-a-community iff it is not necessary that anyone in that community base the belief upon other beliefs for it to be rationally held by a member of that community. This seems to be an important distinction because just about any belief could be basic-for-a-person if they hold it in the basic way and it is grounded in the testimony of a trustworthy speaker. The relevant sense here is that the belief in question be basic-for-a-community.

belief by the relevant community. However, it is rather difficult to see how this might be done in all but a few cases.<sup>27</sup>

A second, and more promising, way that one could challenge the basic beliefs of another community is by finding a defeater. According to Plantinga, our basic beliefs are defeasible, and therefore open to revision in light of further information. This means that, just because you are permitted to treat a belief as properly basic if it seems to you that it is, it does not follow that you will continue to be permitted to hold that belief no matter what. You may gain a defeater for that belief and come to believe that it is no longer true. A person may be justified in taking a belief such as the Great Pumpkin belief as properly basic if she has been raised to believe that the Great Pumpkin exists, but when she comes to learn more about the world – e.g., when, yet again, the Great Pumpkin fails to arrive on Halloween – she will obtain a defeater for that belief, and it will no longer be reasonable for her to hold that belief.

Plantinga is thus not endorsing an epistemic free-for-all, since, just because a belief is basic, that does not mean that it is immune to epistemic appraisal. It is still perfectly possible for anyone to argue against the basic beliefs of another community, and to show them that one of their beliefs is false or unjustified.

### 2.1.3 Rational recognisability

Linda Zagzebski has articulated, what I will argue is, a version of the Great Pumpkin objection in her paper “Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* and the

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<sup>27</sup> Plantinga has never argued that the Christian community in fact holds belief in God in the basic way, although he does seem to believe this. Instead he argues that if they in fact do, then there is no good reason to think that there is anything epistemically amiss in doing so. If someone were able to show that Christians do not believe in God in the basic way then this would mean Plantinga’s arguments are purely hypothetical. However, as far as I am aware, no-one has seriously challenged the suggestion that belief in God is held in the basic way by many, which suggests that most philosophers find it plausible.

Aquinas/Calvin model”. In that paper she offers what she believes to be a platitude: “Rationality is a property of all humans *qua* humans”(Zagzebski 2002, p120). She means by this that all normal humans share something in common – they are all rational to some degree. This shared rationality transcends individual and cultural differences and it is what makes it possible for us to talk to others and make ourselves understood, even to those from very different backgrounds. This leads her to offer a principle of rationality:

**Rational Recognition Principle (RRP):** If a belief is rational, its rationality is recognisable, in principle, by rational persons in other cultures.

Zagzebski’s use of the word rational is not the same as what Plantinga means when he discusses either internal or external rationality. She seems to suggest that what she means by rationality is what Plantinga means by warrant because she describes Plantinga’s project as the attempt to demonstrate that Christian belief is rational-if-true, when in fact Plantinga explicitly states that he wishes to show that Christian belief is warranted-if-true. This is important because if rationality is the same thing as warrant then the **RRP** looks implausible. Given the way Plantinga understands warrant it will not usually be possible to show that a belief is warranted without showing that it is true, so this would mean that the **RRP** requires that we must show that a belief is true if we are to show that it is rational, but there is no reason to think that rationality places such a high demand upon us. Let us leave aside this confusion in order to try to get at Zagzebski’s objection.

Zagzebski claims that Plantinga has not fulfilled the **RRP**, that is, he has not shown that Christian belief is rational (in the relevant sense). This is a problem for Plantinga because what Zagzebski calls rationality seems to be related to what Plantinga

means when he states that his aim is to show that Christian belief is intellectually acceptable. The way that she argues for this is using a version of the Great Pumpkin objection, though this is not what she calls it. She writes that Plantinga's strategy:

“violates the Rational Recognition principle. It does not permit a rational observer outside the community of believers in the model to distinguish between Plantinga's model and the beliefs of any group, no matter how irrational and bizarre—sun-worshippers, cultfollowers, devotées of the Greek gods . . . , assuming, of course, that they are clever enough to build their own epistemic doctrines into their models in a parallel fashion. But we do think that there are differences in the rationality of the beliefs of a cult and Christian beliefs, even if the cult is able to produce an exactly parallel argument for a conditional proposition to the effect that the beliefs of the cult are rational if true. Hence, the rationality of such beliefs must depend upon something other than their truth.” (Zagzebski 2002, p122)

This argument states that Plantinga's strategy must be flawed because it is one that could be adopted by various other groups, but even if those groups used Plantinga's strategy we would not think that their beliefs were rational. This means that the strategy cannot be sufficient to show that some belief, or set of beliefs, is rational; and therefore, Plantinga has failed to show that Christian Belief is intellectually acceptable.

This version of the argument is more troubling than the previous two because it locates the problem in how a neutral observer should view Plantinga's strategy. The problem is not that Plantinga will no longer be able to do epistemology, or that he won't be able to critique the beliefs of others, but that Linus – the Great Pumpkin believer – could use this strategy to defend his beliefs.

Plantinga has responded to this, claiming that, contrary to what Zagzebski says, his strategy cannot be employed by these other groups:

“My argument depends essentially upon premises about God's knowledge, intentions, and power; parallel premises about the sun or the moon or Greek gods will be manifestly false. Naturalists, furthermore, will also be unable to construct such an argument, as, indeed, will non-theists of any stripe.” (Plantinga 2002, pp130-131)

As has already been noted above, it is clear from Plantinga's writing on the subject that premises about God's knowledge, intentions and power are essential to his argument, and that many other belief systems will contain the denials of these premises, but what is less clear is that there are not some other clearly objectionable belief systems that have premises that will play a similar role, and can be defended in a way similar to the way Plantinga defends theistic belief. We will return to this question below, but first let us take a look at our final version of the Great Pumpkin objection.

#### 2.1.4 The "real" objection

In an unpublished essay entitled "Voodoo Epistemology" Keith DeRose attempts to articulate what he takes to be the "real" problem at the heart of the Great Pumpkin objection. He claims that Plantinga has interpreted the objection in a needlessly weak way and that this has made it easier for him to respond to the objection (he has in mind here the objections that we looked at above in sections 2.1.1 and 2.1.2). DeRose develops his objection through a series of questions and answers:

"The Pointed Question: Now couldn't [Plantinga's defensive strategy] be argued with equal cogency with respect to any set of beliefs, no matter how weird?" (DeRose unpublished2)

DeRose points out that Plantinga has already responded to this objection by drawing our attention to various beliefs that could not be defended using his strategy. For example, "No beliefs have warrant" is not warranted-if-true, and so, someone who believes that will not be able to avail themselves of Plantinga's defensive strategy. Other examples he suggests are belief that the earth is flat and naturalism.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The claim that naturalism is not warranted-if-true should not be confused with Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (EAAN). The claim here is only that naturalism is not warranted-if-true, but it does not follow from this that naturalism is not warranted, or even that it cannot be shown to be warranted, it only means that the truth of naturalism alone

DeRose agrees with Plantinga that not *all* beliefs could be defended using Plantinga's strategy, but, he claims, this will not deal with the worry. It will still be a problem for Plantinga's strategy if it is the case that there are some clearly irrational beliefs that could use that strategy. So, the next question is:

“Pointed Question 2: Now couldn't [Plantinga's defensive strategy] be argued with equal cogency with respect to any set of beliefs seriously analogous to Christian beliefs, no matter how weird?” (DeRose unpublished2)

Again, Plantinga has a response. This time he agrees that there are other systems of belief that could adopt something like his defensive strategy, such as “Judaism, Islam, some forms of Hinduism, some forms of Buddhism, some forms of American Indian religion” (Plantinga 2000, p350).<sup>29</sup> Other views could not adopt his defensive strategy, such as “Voodooism, or the belief that the earth is flat, or Humean scepticism, or philosophical naturalism” (Plantinga 2000, p350).

DeRose seems to agree that Plantinga's response to this question is acceptable, but he thinks that the question can be refined one more time. The problem is that there may still be *some* bizarre or weird beliefs that could adopt his defensive strategy. This discussion leads him to ask what he calls:

“The *Real* Pointed Question: Now couldn't [Plantinga's defensive strategy] be argued with equal cogency with respect to some weird/bizarre aberrations of irrationalism?” (DeRose unpublished2)

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gives us no reason to believe that anyone has a warranted belief about naturalism. In the EAAN Plantinga argues that naturalism cannot be rationally believed because evolutionary theory gives the naturalist a defeater for all her beliefs. For a collection of essays on that argument along with responses from Plantinga see Beilby (2002).

<sup>29</sup> DeRose, rather unfairly, questions why only some forms of Hinduism, Buddhism and American Indian religion can adopt the defensive strategy, whereas Judaism and Islam do not require such a qualification. The reason that this qualification is present in some cases and not others is because Plantinga claims that only *theistic* religions could adopt his defensive strategy, and not all forms of Hinduism, Buddhism and American Indian religion are theistic. All this means is that these forms of religion cannot be shown to be warranted-if-true using Plantinga's arguments. It is compatible with this that they could be shown to be warranted-if-true in some other way and that they are warranted and that can be shown to be warranted – it does not follow from this that they are irrational in any way.



DeRose claims that the problem is that there seem to be some clearly irrational beliefs that could be defended using Plantinga's strategy, and if that is the case, then there must be something wrong with the strategy, even if we cannot say exactly what it is. If DeRose is right about this, then it is a very big concern for Plantinga.

DeRose also attempts to turn his question into an argument:

- “1. There are some possible wildly bizarre/weird aberrations of irrationalism that are Plantinga-defensible (i.e., are such that Plantinga's defensive strategy against the charge of irrationality would be as successful in defense of them as it is in Plantinga's hands in defense of Christian belief).
2. Plantinga's strategy could not be used to successfully defend the wildly bizarre/weird aberrations against the charge of irrationality.
- So, 3. Plantinga's defensive strategy does not provide a successful defense of Christian belief against the charge of irrationality.” (DeRose unpublished2)

The key premise here is premise (1). If there are some clearly objectionable beliefs that are, as DeRose calls them, Plantinga-defensible, then this will be a very serious problem for Plantinga's attempt to show that Christian belief is intellectually acceptable. But despite the progress that DeRose has made on articulating the objection, it is still not clear whether any such beliefs do exist. Plantinga's strategy involves appealing to a number of theological claims such as, that there is a God, that he is involved in designing our cognitive faculties and that he desires that humans know him. There are other belief systems that make the same or similar claims, such as other major world religions; but these belief systems are not obviously objectionable. These theological claims cannot be used to defend other beliefs such as astrology, that the earth is flat, or the Great Pumpkin belief. Without an important connection between these theological claims and the belief to be defended then Plantinga's strategy cannot be employed.

Perhaps, however, Plantinga's strategy could be adapted and analogous claims to Plantinga's theological ones used instead. This is not clear and DeRose does nothing to describe how that might be done. In order to assess this objection one would need to outline what Plantinga's strategy is – its method and its aim.

## **2.2 Return of the Great Pumpkin**

In this section I intend to articulate what I take to be the most promising version of the Great Pumpkin objection, by building on the objections offered by Zagzebski and DeRose, and I will call this objection the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection. In order to articulate the objection there are two questions that need to be answered: firstly, what is Plantinga's method?, and secondly, what is Plantinga's strategy supposed to show?

By answering these two questions we will then be able to see how much of a concern the objection is and also what is required to advance the objection. In particular, once these questions have been answered we will be in a position to see whether there are any beliefs that could be Plantinga-defensible *and* clearly unacceptable; and so, complete the objection.

### **2.2.1 What is Plantinga's method?**

Central to the success of the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection is the claim that there are other beliefs that can be defended using Plantinga's method (DeRose calls these beliefs 'Plantinga-defensible'), so we need to be clear about what Plantinga's method is. In chapter 1 we saw how Plantinga attempted to show that Christian belief was intellectually acceptable, but this defence employed claims unique to Christianity. For the purposes of the objection we need to state this method in more neutral terms.

To do this let us remind ourselves of the brief outline of Plantinga's defensive strategy offered in *Warranted Christian Belief*:

“(a) [the extended A/C] model is possible, both logically and epistemically; (b) given the truth of Christian belief, there are no philosophical objections to this model's also being not merely possible but true; and (c) if Christian belief is indeed true, then very probably it does have warrant, and has it in some way similar to the extended A/C model.” (Plantinga 2000, p350)

Although these claims involve Plantinga's extended A/C model, which makes reference to God and his activities, there is no reason why some other model could not be inserted in its place, so long as it gave an account of how some other belief could be warranted. This means we can now restate this method for a belief p:

A belief p is Plantinga-defensible iff:

- (i) There is a model under which p is warranted, which is both logically and epistemically possible
- (ii) Given the truth of p, there are no philosophical objections to the model also being not merely possible but true
- (iii) If p is true, then very probably it does have warrant in some way similar to the model

A belief will be Plantinga-defensible if one can give a model in which the target proposition p is warranted, and this model must be logically and epistemically possible. Also, there needs to be an important connection between the truth of p and the truth of the model, such that there are no good arguments against the model that do not assume the falsity of p. And finally, it must be that the truth of p makes the truth of the model likely, or, at least something like the model. Any belief that fulfils these criteria will be

warranted-if-true. For the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection to succeed, therefore, we must find some very strange beliefs that are warranted-if-true.

### 2.2.2 What is Plantinga trying to show?

This question is important to answer because part of the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection involves finding a belief that can not only be defended using Plantinga's strategy but also clearly does not have the status that Plantinga argues Christian belief has. As we saw in chapter 1 Plantinga considers a number of different statuses such as justification and rationality, but he finds all these to be inadequate for various reasons. What Plantinga is aiming to show is that Christian belief should be considered acceptable by others even if those beliefs are not based upon evidence. The acceptability of Christian belief in this sense is compatible with the acceptability of other contradictory belief systems such as other religions and atheistic belief systems.

For a belief  $p$  to be acceptable certain things must be true. It must be the case that there is no good reason to think that the belief is epistemically defective. This means, for example, that  $p$  will be unacceptable if it has been shown to be false, or if it has been shown to have been formed by a malfunctioning belief forming faculty.

In the context of assessing the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection we do not need a definition because the objection does not seek to challenge the suggestion that Christian belief is acceptable, only that it has not been shown to be so using Plantinga's method. It achieves this by suggesting that there are beliefs that can be defended using Plantinga's method that are uncontroversially not acceptable, and for this we do not need a precise definition of acceptability. It is enough for present purposes that we have agreed examples of beliefs (such as the Great Pumpkin belief) that should not be considered acceptable, whatever the best understanding of that term happens to be.

### 2.2.3 The enhanced Great Pumpkin belief

Now that we have answered these questions we are in a position to complete the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection. All that remains is to find an example of a belief that is clearly unacceptable, yet which is Plantinga-defensible.

Here is an example, call it the enhanced Great Pumpkin belief:

For as long as Linus can remember he has believed that the Great Pumpkin exists, and he believes this in the basic way. Many people have objected to his belief, saying things such as that he is unreasonable because he has no evidence, but he weighs up their arguments and still finds his belief in the Great Pumpkin compelling. He is also able to explain why others do not believe because the Great Pumpkin has implanted in him an imperceptible faculty whereby he is able to communicate with Linus but he has not done this for anyone else. The Great Pumpkin has also explained all this to Linus using this imperceptible faculty. Each Halloween when Linus is again disappointed that the Great Pumpkin fails to turn up he communicates with Linus to apologise and explains that he will try harder next year.

This account fulfils Plantinga's tripartite method above. There is a model under which Linus's beliefs are warranted, namely the one where Linus has this faculty for communicating with the Great Pumpkin, and it is logically and epistemically possible. Given the truth of the beliefs there seem to be no philosophical objections to the model. Finally, if the beliefs are true then it is very likely that they have warrant in a way similar to that described above. It should also now be obvious that there are many ways

to construct warranted-if-true beliefs, as long as we are prepared to build in to them details about the origin of the belief.

But is Linus's belief acceptable? Intuitions may vary here, and are likely to be affected by how one imagines the scenario. Linus, in the comic strip, is a child with an overactive imagination, but what if we redescribe the scenario to make Linus a well-educated adult, who aside from his Great Pumpkin beliefs seems to have quite common beliefs. Some might think that if Linus is sincere and otherwise rational then we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt, and regard his belief as acceptable. This would be mistaken, although we might regard Linus as being rational, on some ways of understanding what it means to be rational, we should not regard his belief as acceptable. This is because we have good reason to think that something has gone wrong in the way this belief has come about (though it may not be Linus's fault); reasons such as that we know lots about pumpkins, but have never encountered one like this, or that there has never previously been a case of someone having an imperceptible faculty whereby they can communicate with another person. We also know that the belief forming faculties of human beings do malfunction leading people to form strange beliefs and to build stories around these beliefs to accommodate them. These reasons should be enough to support the belief that something is wrong with Linus' belief, and therefore it is unacceptable.<sup>30</sup>

This means that we can now restate DeRose's argument more clearly:

- (1') The enhanced Great Pumpkin belief is Plantinga-defensible.

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<sup>30</sup> Some might argue that similar accusation can be made about Christian belief. As we shall see in the next chapter, the key difference between the Great Pumpkin belief and Christian belief is that Christian belief typically occurs within a stable community of other people who share that belief, whereas Linus is an isolated individual. It is these further facts that make the difference between the ways that we should judge instances of these two beliefs.

(2') Plantinga's strategy could not be used to defend the enhanced Great Pumpkin belief against the charge of acceptability.

Therefore,

(3') Plantinga's defensive strategy does not provide a successful defence of Christian belief against the charge of unacceptability.

The Return of the Great Pumpkin objection is the concern that Plantinga's defensive strategy is not distinguishable, in any epistemically relevant way, from the defensive strategies that might be used by someone who holds clearly unacceptable beliefs.

It does not follow from this that Christian belief is irrational or defective in any way even if Plantinga's description of it is correct. It may, after all, be the case that the epistemic practices of the Christian are indistinguishable from those who hold clearly unacceptable beliefs, but yet there is some important difference that we are unable to observe. So, if this objection is successful, it means, not that the Christian (on Plantinga's account) is irrational, only that Plantinga's defensive strategy does not achieve what it sets out to do.

The argument, if successful, makes Plantinga's Christian look as though she is in the position of the innocent, but unfortunate prisoner. Suppose there is a prisoner, let us call him Al, who has been convicted of a crime based upon very compelling evidence. Even though there is plenty of evidence against Al, including fingerprints, eyewitness accounts and motive, he is in fact innocent. Al is the victim of an elaborate conspiracy, and he knows this. Al attempts to point out to people that all the evidence against him is compatible with an elaborate conspiracy, and furthermore, that if his account is correct then it is very likely that he knows what is going on, and others are being misled. In this scenario the correct response to Al would be to say: "Sure, I can see that it is possible

that you are the victim of an elaborate conspiracy, and that in the case you describe you would likely know all about this; however, can't you see that there are plenty of other prisoners who could make the same sorts of claims that you are making (as long as they are clever enough), but surely you don't think we should let you all off. I can agree that your innocence depends upon the truth or falsity of the claims you are making, but I also think that it is reasonable of me to treat you as guilty nonetheless, unless you can show me some reason why your case differs from all the others."

The conclusion can now be seen to be quite weak, though still worrying; it is not that Christian belief as described by Plantinga is unacceptable, it is rather that Zagzebski's outside rational observer has no good reason to treat it as acceptable. This outside observer cannot see any relevant epistemic difference between the behaviour of Plantinga's Christian and the Great Pumpkin believer (just as we can see no relevant difference between Al the prisoner and the guilty prisoners), so the outside observer is correct to judge the epistemic practices of the two equally; that is, as clearly unacceptable.

In the next chapter I will offer a response to this argument by considering what difference it makes that the Christian believer is in a community of believers. I will also consider whether the objection can be adapted again in order to avoid this response.



## Chapter Three – Sending the Great Pumpkin back<sup>31</sup>

In the previous chapter we saw that there is a problem for Plantinga's religious epistemology when we consider how his claims could be applied to the beliefs of others – others who we think are being clearly irrational when they believe some of the things that they do.

The argument was developed into its most worrying form by better articulating an objection from Keith DeRose. This is the argument that was made in chapter 2:

- (1) The enhanced Great Pumpkin belief is Plantinga-defensible.
- (2) Plantinga's strategy could not be used to defend the enhanced Great Pumpkin belief against the charge of unacceptability.

Therefore,

- (3) Plantinga's defensive strategy does not provide a successful defence of Christian belief against the charge of unacceptability.

In order to respond to this argument it will not be palatable to challenge (2) because that would involve arguing that Plantinga's strategy really does show that the enhanced Great Pumpkin belief is acceptable, which would weaken our understanding of acceptability to the point of being uninteresting. It would also suggest that Plantinga has achieved very little because he won't have given us much reason to think that Christian belief is any different from some very unusual beliefs, like those described in the account of the enhanced Great Pumpkin belief. In light of this we should focus our attention on (1). To challenge (1) we must find some way to adapt, improve or add to Plantinga's strategy

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<sup>31</sup> A version of this chapter (and incorporating some of the previous chapter) has been published in *Religious Studies* under the title "Return of the Great Pumpkin".

so that it cannot be used by the Great Pumpkin believer, or by anyone else with clearly unacceptable beliefs.

Clearly there are ways that we could easily achieve this, such as if we added that only theistic beliefs are Plantinga-defensible. But this would not be a satisfactory response because it is ad hoc, it fails to identify any epistemically relevant difference between the beliefs it rules in, and those it rules out, and it does not completely avoid the objection because there will also be theistic beliefs that are clearly unacceptable.

A more reasonable suggestion might be to add to Plantinga's strategy by arguing that there are good arguments in support of Christian belief, but there are no such arguments in support of the Great Pumpkin belief or any other similarly bizarre belief. This looks like a promising suggestion because there are many very well known arguments in support of theistic belief, and in support of Christian belief more specifically. But this proposal won't do either. Firstly, all of these arguments are highly controversial and face many counter-arguments; and secondly, and more importantly, Plantinga's aim has been to show how Christian belief can be acceptable even without arguments in support of those beliefs, so this approach would not really be an adaptation of Plantinga's strategy, it would be an abandonment of it.

Instead, what is required is a way of adapting Plantinga's strategy that is not ad hoc and does not require that the Christian believer be able to support her beliefs with evidence or arguments. This can be achieved by considering the historical and social environment that Christian belief occurs in. The fact that Christian belief exists – not in isolation – but, typically, in a community of believers marks an important difference between the situation that the Christian believer finds herself in compared to the situation of Linus.

In section 3.1 of this chapter I will explain how the social environment might help to improve the epistemic standing of a person's beliefs, even if they do not have access to these facts. Section 3.2 will concern how the historical and social environment can be used as evidence of the intellectual acceptability of Christian belief. Section 3.3 will consider adapting Linus's situation so that he is now a member of a community who share his beliefs, and assess whether or not we can generate a new objection that avoids the responses contained in this chapter. Finally, section 3.4 will consider whether or not these considerations deal with the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection.

### **3.1 Benefiting from the social environment**

The aim of this section is to give an example where being in a community of people who believe something can improve a person's epistemic status even if that person does not treat the beliefs of others as evidence for those beliefs.

It is uncontroversial to point that we can come to be in a better epistemic position regarding some of our beliefs because of the community that we are in. Much of what we know we know because we have learnt it from our parents or teachers or through the news. Also, we can come to learn things that we often could not know on our own because of the testimony of experts. Many of these examples, however, will not help us to draw a distinction between Linus – our hypothetical Great Pumpkin believer – and the Christian believer. Plantinga's claim is that the Christian believer's beliefs are acceptable, even if she cannot offer any evidence or arguments in support of her beliefs. But many of these examples of testimony look as though the person involved is using the beliefs of others as evidence. This is not ordinarily a problematic point, but for our purposes these examples will not do, because they do not allow us to give a response to the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection.

What is needed is an example of a person whose beliefs have a better epistemic status due to her position in a community even though she does not treat the beliefs of others in her community as evidence.<sup>32</sup>

In order to do this, let us first consider a familiar sort thought experiment in epistemology:

Suppose that Anne is in Edinburgh and she goes to the park to look for some ducks. Anne is ordinarily very good at spotting ducks; however, unbeknownst to her, the local council have released a large number of robot ducks into the area in order to cover up a recent spate of duck murders. These robot-ducks look very much like real ducks, so much so that Anne would be unable to tell the difference between them and a real duck. This means that when Anne goes to the park and spots what she thinks is a duck she will not know that she is looking at a duck, even if her belief is correct, because it could very easily have been a robot-duck.

This sort of example will be familiar to many because it is like the famous barn-façade example (Goldman 1976, pp772-773). Many philosophers have the intuition that in these sorts of examples the agent does not have knowledge. The reason for this is that, although Anne is normally able to know that there is a duck before her, she is in a bad environment. On Plantinga's account, the problem is that although her faculties are designed in such a way that she can know that there is a duck there, and although those faculties are functioning properly, she is in an environment which is not the one for which they were designed. Anne's perceptual faculties are designed to work in an environment in which there are no robot-ducks, this means that she cannot come to

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<sup>32</sup> The claim in this section is that being in a community can epistemically enhance your beliefs even if you are not aware of the actions and beliefs of others that are doing this. It may be that one can benefit from other things in the same way, that would not be a problem for what I am trying to argue here.

know that there is a duck, by seeing a duck, as long as the robot-ducks are in the environment.

In this example, the presence of the robot-ducks undermines Anne's belief even though she is not aware of the robot-ducks. I now wish to show how we can adapt the example in such a way that Anne can have knowledge that she is looking at a duck because of the beliefs of others, even though she is not aware of their beliefs, and therefore, does not take those beliefs as evidence:

Anne is going to the park – which contains some ducks, and many robot-ducks – to look for ducks with her friend Bill the ornithologist. Bill is aware of the actions of the council and can tell the difference between ducks and robot-ducks, perhaps because he read about it in one of his ornithology magazines. Bill has not told Anne about what is going on, but he stays with her as she looks for a duck. Anne spots what she thinks is a duck, and says to Bill “I found one, there's a duck”. Bill takes a look and notices that she is right; this is one of the few real ducks in the park. Realising that Anne is right, Bill says nothing, but if she had been wrong he would have corrected her and explained about the existence of the robot-ducks; in that case Anne would have ceased to believe that it was a duck because she knows that Bill is an expert ornithologist, and she always defers to him in duck-matters.<sup>33</sup>

In this example, the robot-ducks are still present, but this time, Anne is with an expert. The presence of this expert means that Anne would not be led astray by the presence of robot-ducks, were she to encounter one. The problem in the first example seemed to be that Anne, even though she was looking at a real duck, could very easily have been

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<sup>33</sup> A similar sort of case is discussed by Sanford Goldberg (2008). Goldberg argues that young children may be able to know on the basis of testimony even if they are not good at discriminating between good and bad testimony due to monitoring by adults who would stop them from forming beliefs on the basis of bad testimony.

looking at a robot-duck, and believed that she was looking at a real duck. But the presence of the expert means that this is no longer the case. Bill's presence means that Anne could not easily have been led astray.

We should observe that there are a few variations on this example. A number of factors could be altered so that we get different intuitions about the cases.

### *Why are Anne and Bill together?*

The environmental problem is not a problem with Anne's immediate environment (we are supposing that she is looking at a real duck); rather the problem is with the wider environment. This wider environment means that Anne could easily have encountered a robot-duck, and she would still have formed the same belief. If the presence of Bill is to overcome this problem, then it needs to be the case that Bill would not easily have been absent.

We can imagine a number of different scenarios in which Anne and Bill come to be together. It could be that Bill just happens to be walking past when Anne spots a duck, and announces to anyone in earshot that she has seen a duck. Or, perhaps Bill is in the park because the council has sent him there to assist people who are being led astray by the presence of robot-ducks. Or, maybe Anne never goes looking for ducks without Bill. In the first scenario, it is just by chance that Anne and Bill are together when Anne is forming her belief about the duck. In the second scenario it is not likely that they are together (unless the presence of the robot-ducks is likely) but it is likely they would be together when the robot-ducks are in the environment. In the third scenario it is likely that Anne and Bill would be together when she is forming beliefs about ducks.

In the second and third scenarios, but not the first, Bill can make up for the unfriendliness of Anne's environment because in those scenarios it could not easily happen that Anne sees a robot-duck and believes that it is a duck. What is important here is that there is a certain feature of the social environment that is important – that there is someone there who knows about the robot-ducks – and this feature can only epistemically benefit Anne so long as the feature would be present when it is needed. Let us call such features of the social environment *stable*.

### *How does Bill know about the robot-ducks?*

Another important factor is that Bill knows about the robot-ducks. If Bill does not know about the robot-ducks then he will not be able to inform Anne that she has gone wrong if she forms a belief about a duck when she is looking at a robot-duck. Here it makes a difference how Bill has come to know about the robot-ducks: perhaps he knows because he conscientiously reads *The Duck Times* every day and that newspaper never fails to report on these matters; perhaps, because of his expertise, he would immediately become aware of what was happening when he got to the park; or perhaps he only knows because he overheard a conversation between some council employees in the street; or maybe the council have informed him about the robot-ducks, but have sworn him to secrecy and he would never tell anyone.

In the first two examples above Bill is in a position where it is likely that he would inform Anne about the presence of a robot-duck if she was looking at one because it is likely that he will know about the robot-ducks. In the second two, although he knows about the robot-ducks, it is not likely that he would be able to tell Anne about them were she looking at one; in one case because it could very easily have been that he did

not know, and in the other because, although he knows about the robot-ducks, it is not likely that he would say anything about them.

In order for Bill to be able to make up for the unfriendliness of the environment it must be that he is likely to tell Anne about the presence of robot-ducks were she to encounter one. This means that as well as being stable, the relevant features of the social environment must be disposed to manifest.

### *Would Anne defer to Bill?*

A third factor that makes a difference in the thought experiment is whether or not Anne would give up her belief that there is a duck there based upon Bill's testimony. There are a few sorts of possibilities here:

- (a) Anne would not accept Bill's testimony. Perhaps because she is fiercely independent; or perhaps Bill always sounds unsure when he talks about ducks; or maybe Anne thinks that ornithology is a pseudo-science and no one really has any expertise about birds.
- (b) Anne would give up her belief when Bill tells her about the robot-ducks because she recognises Bill's expertise.
- (c) Anne would give up her belief when Bill tells her about the robot-ducks because she is gullible and believes everything she is told.

Above we saw that certain things were required of the social environment if Anne was to benefit from it. With this one we can see that something is also required of Anne. In (a) Anne would not defer to Bill's testimony were he to tell her about the robot-ducks, which means that Anne is unable to benefit from the social environment that she is in because she would believe that she was looking at a duck even if she was



looking at a robot-duck. This is in contrast to (b) where Anne recognises that Bill is an expert and defers to him because of that. In this case Anne will know that she is looking at a duck because it is not the case that she could easily have been wrong.

A tricky case is one where Anne would defer to Bill, but only because she is gullible as is the case in (c). This time Anne would not easily believe that she was looking at a duck when this was false, but only because she would defer to Bill's testimony for the wrong reasons. What this suggests is that Anne will only benefit from her social environment if she would defer to Bill for the right reasons. This is still, however, ambiguous. Suppose that Anne trusts anyone in a uniform, but – unbeknownst to her – she lives in a country where the government carefully ensures that only trustworthy people wear uniforms by carefully policing people in uniforms and imposing very heavy fines for untrustworthy conduct. Anne defers to others for the right reasons, but she does not have reflective access to the fact that they are the right reasons. Intuitions will vary here. This example is similar to the sort of situation that young children find themselves in when they trust the testimony of their carers or their teachers, so those who think that children can easily have knowledge in these sorts of cases are likely to think that Anne can know by trusting anyone in a uniform.

I do not wish to take a stand on this issue here, but I wish to note that we should not make the task of deciding who to defer to too onerous for Anne because few of us are in a position to establish for ourselves who the experts are in a given domain (if we are it is likely because we are experts ourselves). Instead, we rely on the testimony of others to help us identify experts. Even when we use qualifications to identify experts this is a sort of testimony from the awarding body about that person.

### 3.1.1 Do religious believers benefit from their social environment?

What the example above suggests is that one can benefit from the social environment – even when your beliefs are not based upon what others believe – when the following conditions are met:

S epistemically benefits from some feature F of the social environment E when:

- (i) F is stable in E
- (ii) F is disposed to manifest
- (iii) S would defer for the right reasons

Firstly, the religious believer's social environment will typically be stable. This is because religious believers typically arrange themselves in communities with other believers. They will often spend much time with other believers (a significant number of whom will often be friends or family), and it is considered important for those in the community to talk about their beliefs and to spend time listening to those in the community who are regarded as experts. This means that religious believers are very likely to remain connected to other religious believers and to come into contact with the views of those who are regarded as experts by their religious community. For this reason (i) is met.

Due to this it is likely that when religious believers form beliefs on religious matters those beliefs will be articulated in the social environment and the view of those who are regarded as experts in the community will be brought to bear on those beliefs. This may be through meeting with those experts, hearing their talks or reading their books. Alternatively it may be through others in the community passing on what has been said by experts. This means that when the religious believer forms a belief on a religious matter it is likely that, if those beliefs are in conflict with what the experts

believe they will be informed about that. For this reason, the presence of experts in the social environment is disposed to manifest, and so (ii) is met.

Whether or not (iii) is met depends on the religious believer in question. It may be the religious believer is stubborn and never accepts the correction of others; on the other hand, it may be she is gullible and believes whatever she is told. But in this respect it seems likely that religious believers defer to the experts in much the same way as the rest of the population. Imagine a believer who when she hears the views of an expert weighs up what is said against other things she knows, considers whether the expert has been consistent in the past and what that expert's credentials are. Following this she decides to defer to the beliefs of the expert. What this believer is doing seems to be just as reasonable as what most people do when they defer to the testimony of experts. This means that it seems likely that lots of religious believers would meet the requirements of (iii), even if some would not.

This suggests that religious believers who are in a community are in a position to benefit from their social environment.

### 3.1.2 A response to the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection?

Plantinga has claimed that Christian belief is warranted-if-true, and has attempted to show that this means that Christian belief is acceptable. The Return of the Great Pumpkin objection responds to this by demonstrating that there are other possible beliefs that are warranted-if-true, and yet we would not consider them acceptable. The Great Pumpkin belief is an example of this.

The aim in this section was to show that the beliefs of those who are in communities are often in a position to receive warrant from their community, which is obviously not something available to isolated figures such as Linus. This strengthens the

sorts of claims that Plantinga can make about how Christian belief might have warrant. For example, it makes the claim that Christian belief is warranted-if-true less fragile than the claim that the Great Pumpkin belief is warranted-if-true. For the Great Pumpkin belief to be warranted things have to be going exactly the way specified by Linus's belief – it must be the case that the Great Pumpkin exists, that he has done the things that Linus believes he has, and it must be that he has communicated all of this to Linus. With Christian belief, on the other hand, the individual believer need not have such a detailed understanding of what is going on; take for example her belief that God exists, this can be warranted-if-true even if she does not understand what it is that God has done that makes this the case, or had this communicated to her. Instead she can rely on her community to understand these things. This means that the Christian believer does not have to fully understand why her beliefs are warranted-if-true, but Linus must do.

Taken on its own these considerations are perhaps not sufficient to fully deal with the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection because it only shows that Christian beliefs are *more* warranted-if-true, when compared to Linus's belief. Although this shows that there is an important difference between the two beliefs it does not make clear that one should be regarded as acceptable and the other not. But it does show that the fact that Christian believers are in communities is an important and epistemically relevant difference between the Christian believer and Linus. We will also consider below (in Section 3.3) what difference it would make to the objection if we imagine that Linus is in a community as well.

### **3.2 Discriminating and favouring evidence**

The previous section concerned how the community that the Christian is in might affect the epistemic standing of her beliefs. In this section I will offer some reasons for

thinking that the existence of the community can be used as evidence for the intellectual acceptability of Christian belief.

The problem in the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection is that we do not seem to have any way to discriminate between the epistemic practices of the Christian believer and of Linus given Plantinga's constraint that we are supposing that the Christian believer can offer no evidence or arguments in support of her belief. This suggests that the rational observer ought to treat both of these beliefs (or belief systems) in the same way. In this section I will show that this is not the case because even when the two believers might appear to be the same – from the epistemic point of view – this does not mean that there is no reason to favour one over the other. In order to see how this is possible in the case we are discussing, it will be helpful to take a look at a well-known epistemological thought experiment and a solution to it.

### 3.2.1 Cleverly disguised mules

Fred Dretske (1970) has offered a thought experiment that has become known as the cleverly disguised mules example. In the thought experiment we are asked to imagine that we are at the zoo and that we see some animals that look like zebras in the enclosure marked "Zebra". Dretske observes that most of us will think that in this situation we can know that there are zebras in the enclosure, but if the animals in the enclosure are zebras then they are not mules cleverly disguised to look like zebras. Dretske claims that we have no evidence that they are not mules because we have not examined them or checked with the zoo authorities. Dretske's solution to this is to claim that we can know that the animals are zebras even when we do not know that they are not cleverly disguised mules. I wish to discuss an alternative solution proposed by

Duncan Pritchard (2010) because it will help us to respond to the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection.

Pritchard asks us to imagine that Zula, who has ordinary cognitive abilities and background knowledge, is at the zoo looking at the zebra enclosure, as in Dretske's example above. Upon seeing the animal, Zula forms the belief that it is a zebra. Intuitively it seems that this is a clear case of knowledge. A problem arises, however, when we suppose that Zula knows that if she is looking at a zebra, then she is not looking at a cleverly disguised mule.

This is a problem because there are two very plausible principles that together yield a contradiction in this scenario. The first is the closure principle, and the second the discrimination principle:<sup>34</sup>

*The Closure Principle*

If S knows that p, and S competently deduces q from p (thereby coming to believe q while retaining her knowledge that p), then S knows that q.

*The Discrimination Principle*

If S has perceptual knowledge that p, and S knows that another (known to be inconsistent) alternative q does not obtain, then S must be able to discriminate between the object at issue in p and the object at issue in q.

Given the closure principle, Zula is able to deduce that she is looking at a zebra rather than a cleverly disguised mule, but given that, according to the story, Zula is not able to discriminate between a zebra and a cleverly disguised mule, it follows from the

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<sup>34</sup> The wording for both these principles is taken from Pritchard (2010).

discrimination principle that she does not know that she is looking at a zebra rather than a cleverly disguised mule.

Dretske has used this example to argue that we should give up the highly intuitive closure principle, Pritchard claims, however, that it is possible to make sense of the example and preserve the closure principle by giving up the discrimination principle instead. Pritchard contends that this is not as implausible as it might first appear. There is reason to think that Zula does in fact have knowledge both that she is looking at a zebra and that it is not a cleverly disguised mule because her beliefs could not very easily have been false. Her belief that she is not looking at a cleverly disguised mule is both true and non-lucky given her epistemic situation. More needs to be said to understand this scenario, but this suggests that we ought to look again at our intuition that Zula does not know she is not looking at a cleverly disguised mule.

Abandoning the discrimination principle creates another puzzle – what is Zula’s supporting evidence for her belief that she is not looking at a cleverly disguised mule? It cannot be the way it appears to her, since we are assuming that Zula does not have the ability to tell the difference between a zebra and a cleverly disguised mule just by looking. This is a problem because, although we may not wish to claim that all knowledge must be supported by evidence, it seems that this sort of belief ought to be evidentially grounded.

Pritchard believes that this puzzle can be dissolved if we draw a distinction between *favouring* and *discriminating* evidence. He claims that if Zula knows that she is looking at a zebra and not a cleverly disguised mule, then she must have better evidence in support of it being a zebra than that it is a cleverly disguised mule, but this does not need to be discriminatory evidence (i.e. evidence that would be present if she were looking at a zebra, but not a cleverly disguised mule). This initially seems implausible

because, if she was looking at a cleverly disguised mule, Zula would not be able to distinguish her perceptual experience from the experience of seeing a zebra. Pritchard challenges the assumption that Zula comes to know that there is a zebra “just by looking”, instead there will be other evidence – favouring evidence – that plays an important role when error-possibilities are raised. Pritchard imagines how Zula might react when the cleverly disguised mule possibility is raised:

“One might reason, for instance, that there would be no point in such a deception, that it would be costly and time-consuming without bringing any comparable benefit, that it would be easily found out, and then the zoo-owner would be subject to penalties, and so on.” (Pritchard 2010, p256)

Here we can see that Zula possesses, as part of her background knowledge, evidence that supports her belief that what she is looking at is a zebra. For this reason it is not puzzling that Zula is able to know that she is looking at a zebra, and deduce from this that she is not looking at a cleverly disguised mule because her evidence for the former is better than her evidence for the latter – it is just that it is favouring evidence rather than discriminating evidence.

### 3.2.2 Rational recognisability and discrimination

In chapter 2 we saw that the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection concerned how it is that someone outside the Christian community could recognise that Christian belief is intellectually acceptable by considering Plantinga’s defensive strategy. The problem is that there seem to be others, such as Linus, who can adopt the same strategy, yet we do not think that their beliefs are intellectually acceptable. This is the concern that Zagzebski was attempting to raise in her discussion of the Rational Recognition Principle:



**Rational Recognition Principle (RRP):** If a belief is rational, its rationality is recognisable, in principle, by rational persons in other cultures.

The **RRP** states that if a belief is rational, then it is possible for rational people who do not share that belief to recognise that it is rational. My intention is to meet the demands of this principle by showing that we have evidence for thinking that Christian belief is acceptable, evidence that is not available in the case of the Great Pumpkin belief. This is compatible with it being the case that there are many Christians who are not aware of any arguments or evidence in support of their theistic beliefs. The **RRP** only requires that rational persons ought to be able to recognise that some belief is rational, not that the person who holds those beliefs ought to be able to persuade a rational person that their belief is rational. This means that this evidence can act as evidence to show that Christian belief is intellectually acceptable even if no Christian bases their Christian beliefs upon it, or has reflected upon it.

In light of the previous section we can now see that the problem in the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection was one of a lack of discriminating evidence for thinking that Christian belief is more acceptable than Great Pumpkin belief when both are defended using something like Plantinga's defensive strategy. Plantinga sought to show that Christian belief is warranted-if-true, and therefore, that it was intellectually acceptable. There are, however, other beliefs that are warranted-if-true and clearly not intellectually acceptable. Plantinga has not offered the outside observer any way to discriminate between the two of them. We can now see that this may not be too troubling, so long as there is favouring evidence for Christian belief.

In this case what we need is some reason to think that it is more likely that Christian belief is acceptable, than that the Great Pumpkin belief is acceptable. This is the evidence:

Christian beliefs are held by many different people; people from a wide variety of times, countries and cultures, people with varying levels of intelligence and education, a variety of ages, social classes and life experiences. The Christian tradition also contains people who have devoted much of their lives to considering arguments for and against Christian belief, and have continued in their beliefs. Some Christians have always held religious beliefs, some have come to hold them later in life, and still others have given them up and then come to believe them again.

These facts are explained by Christian beliefs being acceptable; moreover, it is difficult to give an explanation of why people have these beliefs that do not involve them being acceptable, as we saw in Chapter 1.<sup>35</sup> The same is not true in the case of the Great Pumpkin believer. Linus's belief could be explained by his having a mental illness, or having been misled by someone, or that he is only pretending to have these beliefs. All of these explanations accommodate the facts well because in our example only one person holds the belief in question. These sorts of explanations do not capture the data as well when it comes to Christian belief because it is not plausible that all Christians are suffering from a mental illness, or that they have all been misled or that they are all pretending.

This is favouring evidence rather than discriminating evidence because we have not identified anything that the outside observer can say is a relevant difference between

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<sup>35</sup> The claim here is that it is difficult to give a global explanation of these beliefs that involves them being unacceptable. It is likely that in many individual instances the beliefs are best explained in a way that suggests that those beliefs are unacceptable.

the beliefs or the way they are formed. Instead, what is appealed to is the fact that there are many good explanations of the existence of the Great Pumpkin belief in which that belief is unacceptable, whereas there are relatively few such explanations in the case of Christian belief. This does not show that Christian belief is acceptable, or that Great Pumpkin belief is unacceptable, but it favours that view.

### **3.3 The Great Pumpkin community**

In this chapter we have been considering what difference it makes to the Return of the Great Pumpkin objection that the Christian believer is typically in a community, whereas Linus is not. For this reason we should consider whether the objection can be improved by imagining that Linus is also in a community so that the responses here could be avoided.

The example could be altered in this way:

Linus lives on an, until now, undiscovered island in a community of Great Pumpkin followers. For thousands of years this community has lived there without any contact with the rest of the world. Suppose that we now find this island and meet Linus. He tells us about his belief in the Great Pumpkin. We are perplexed and begin to ask him questions and raise objections to his belief. Sometimes he can answer our questions, at other times he says that he thinks some of the Great Pumpkin writers of the past have written about these subjects, and that if we look them up he is sure we will find answers. Other questions have never occurred to him so he agrees to bring them up at the next pumpkin meeting so that the island's best minds can go to work on them.

In this scenario it is likely that none of us would be persuaded of Linus's beliefs, but we should not judge his beliefs to be unacceptable since it is clear that the community he is in has reflected upon the problems that have arisen and sought to find answers. The community has an account of how it is that they could know these things and they engage in reasoning about their beliefs. In imagining this case we might think that we could come up with clear objections to their beliefs or find contradictions; or that they would act in such a way that suggests they are not fully rational. But we should imagine that there are no obvious objections and that they generally behave rationally. If this is the case then we should regard their beliefs as acceptable unless we can come up with some clear argument against them, or find reason to believe that this community is not behaving rationally.

### **3.4 What does this mean for Plantinga's project?**

One of the things that Plantinga was attempting to do in *Warranted Christian Belief* was to show that dismissing Christian belief simply because the Christian cannot produce compelling evidence in support of her beliefs is in some way illegitimate. He has sought to do this by showing that even if the Christian does not possess this evidence her beliefs are still acceptable because they are warranted-if-true. From our current vantage point it is clear that this is not enough. We do reject beliefs that are warranted-if-true – or we would if we met people with those beliefs – even if we cannot produce good reasons for thinking those beliefs are false. The Return of the Great Pumpkin objection seeks to highlight this by showing that it is possible that there are other beliefs that are warranted-if-true, yet which we reasonably dismiss – e.g. Linus's Great Pumpkin belief.

This problem shows that there is a shortcoming in Plantinga's approach. Plantinga has sought to give an account of how Christian belief can be acceptable without the need for Christian believers to have evidence or arguments that they can produce in support of their beliefs. The Return of the Great Pumpkin objection shows that doing that does not also demonstrate that others outside the community ought to regard Christian belief as acceptable. To show to others that one's beliefs should be considered acceptable one must turn to evidence and arguments.

At first that might seem to indicate that Plantinga's project has failed, but that would be to misunderstand the role that this evidence is playing. It is not evidence that the Christian must base her beliefs upon, or even be aware of, if her beliefs are to be acceptable. Rather it is evidence for the rational observer outside the Christian community. For this reason it should be seen as a palatable adaptation of Plantinga's project.

We noted in chapter 1 that Plantinga was arguing that for every way of understanding what it means for a belief to be acceptable it is possible to show one of the following:

- (A) That the understanding of acceptability in question is flawed, that is, beliefs can be acceptable even when they fail to meet that proposed understanding of acceptability.
- (B) That Christian belief can be shown to meet that standard of acceptability.
- (C) That Christian belief cannot be shown to be unacceptable in the proposed way with first assuming that the belief is false.

What our discussion of the Great Pumpkin objection has shown us is that this is not enough. These three points above are enough to show that Christian belief has not been

shown to be unacceptable, but there is a gap between 'not been shown to be unacceptable' and 'has been shown to be acceptable'. For this reason I wish to propose that we add:

(D) There is good evidence that Christian belief is acceptable.

And this evidence is available even if we cannot demonstrate in virtue of what Christian belief is acceptable – that is, it cannot be shown that Plantinga's model of the way Christian belief is warranted is true.

## **Part III**

## Chapter Four – Plantinga and religious diversity

This chapter will focus on Alvin Plantinga's comments on the topics of religious disagreement and religious diversity. We will consider what he has to say and his responses to objections. We will also consider whether disagreement allows us to generate a viable *de jure* objection to religious belief.

There are two ways to see this chapter as fitting into the overall structure of the current work. In part II we looked at the Great Pumpkin objection and developed that into the strongest possible *de jure* argument that we could, but found that there was an adequate response to that objection. We can view part III as another attempt to develop a *de jure* objection independently of the previous one, in an attempt to shed further light on one of our overarching questions: is it possible to give an adequate response to the *de jure* objection to religious belief?

There is, however, an alternative way to think about the link between part II and part III. In part II we developed the Great Pumpkin objection into a form where we asked whether, on Alvin Plantinga's account of the rationality of religious belief, there could be any reason to think that the Great Pumpkin believer had unacceptable beliefs while thinking that the theist has acceptable beliefs? This thought experiment involved imagining an isolated figure, Linus, who believed in the Great Pumpkin – a belief that we all rightly think is unacceptable. But what if we alter the account so that Linus is in a community of believers, and what if we alter his beliefs so that they are not so clearly unacceptable. In that case couldn't this community adopt Plantinga's defensive strategy, and given that the two communities have incompatible beliefs wouldn't that give us reason to doubt the success of Plantinga's defensive strategy? But this scenario is no longer a hypothetical like the one in the Great Pumpkin objection; this is in fact the



situation that theists find themselves in. There are many different religious communities that contradict one another, and initially at least, it seems likely that they could adopt something like Plantinga's defensive strategy.<sup>36</sup> This way of thinking about the Great Pumpkin objection and the problem of religious diversity shows how the latter follows quite naturally from the former.

The aim of this chapter is to lay out and critically examine Plantinga's comments on religious diversity and to identify the key objections that it generates. Section 4.1 will describe Plantinga's views on this subject and look at his responses to problems of disagreement and religious diversity. Then, in section 4.2, I will briefly describe what I take to be two of the most important outstanding objections to Plantinga's views on religious diversity. This chapter will lay the groundwork for the next two chapters where I will develop responses to the problem of religious diversity.

#### **4.1 Plantinga on religious diversity**

Alvin Plantinga has considered whether the facts of religious diversity cause a problem for religious belief. Most people who hold religious beliefs will be aware that there are many others who hold beliefs that contradict their own, and furthermore, these people are often sincere, epistemically virtuous and familiar with the evidence and arguments that are relevant to the beliefs in question. In response to this Plantinga defends a position that he labels exclusivism.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Plantinga concedes that his defensive strategy could be adopted by any of the major monotheistic religions, but he does not view this as a problem for his project which is to show that Christian belief is acceptable. See Plantinga (2000) p350.

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that Plantinga does not use the term exclusivism in the same that John Hick does – whose work will be referred to several times in this chapter. Plantinga's definition of exclusivism is compatible with Hick's definitions of both exclusivism and inclusivism, but is opposed to what Hick calls pluralism (See Hick 1983, p487).

#### 4.1.1 Exclusivism

According to Plantinga a person, S, is an exclusivist if the following three things hold:

- (i) S believes that the tenets, or some of the tenets, of a particular religion are true, and that therefore, those who hold beliefs that contradict them hold false beliefs.
- (ii) S is fully aware of the facts of religious diversity. S is aware that many people disagree with them about religious matters and that many those people are at least as epistemically virtuous as those who agree.
- (iii) S does not believe that they possess any evidence or arguments that are unknown to people of other religions, but which they believe would persuade them should they become aware of it.

(i) means that the exclusivist thinks that different religions really do contradict one another, not that they all provide different perspectives on the same truth – the disagreement is real, not just apparent. This is in contrast to pluralism which is a position defended by, amongst others, John Hick (See Hick 1989).

According to (ii), S is an exclusivist only if she is in fact aware that others disagree, and that those people are not in some way epistemically inferior. This means that those who have had a sheltered upbringing and are not fully aware that there are many others who disagree with them, or have been told that those who disagree are not as intelligent or have been misled in some way do not count as exclusivists. This is because, for those people, there is not question of religious diversity being a problem for rational religious belief.

The third condition, (iii), states that S does not believe that she is aware of some piece of evidence that supports her beliefs that were she to share with who disagree it would most likely persuade them to give up their beliefs. This would mean that they only regard the disagreement as occurring because this evidence is not widely acknowledged.

It is Plantinga's intention to argue that in these circumstances it is epistemically permissible for S to continue to hold her beliefs. He also grants – for the sake of argument at least – that in many cases, those who hold different religious beliefs can offer equally compelling arguments for their beliefs and that their beliefs are supported by internally indistinguishable sorts of experiences:

“Let's agree for purpose of argument that these beliefs are on an epistemic par in the sense that those of a different religious tradition have the same sort of internally available markers – evidence, phenomenology and the like – for their beliefs as the Christian has for [hers].” (Plantinga 2000, p452)

Plantinga contends that even in these circumstances, the Christian believer would be justified in continuing to hold her religious beliefs.

#### 4.1.2 The objections and replies

There are a number of arguments that have been offered that seek to show that this sort of position is untenable. In this section I will outline some of these problems and Plantinga's replies to them. Plantinga has not explicitly considered each of these objections, but his comments about disagreement and religious diversity are still relevant to them. In any case, our aim is not simply to ask whether Plantinga has successfully responded to all the objections he set out to respond to, but to ask whether disagreement and religious diversity create a problem for his religious epistemology and for the rationality of religious belief in general.

## *Arbitrariness*

The first objection is that the exclusivist is not treating like things alike. Plantinga concedes, for the sake of argument at least, that all of the major religions might be equally well supported by arguments and that its adherents might all have the same sort of internally available markers for their beliefs. The scenario would be one where whatever the Christian can offer in support of her beliefs, those who disagree can offer the same considerations. For example, suppose that Anne believes  $p$  and Bill believes  $\neg p$ , and that whatever evidence or arguments Anne can offer in support of  $p$  Bill can offer equally good evidence and arguments in support of  $\neg p$ . Suppose further that their beliefs are alike in all other respects, so that if Anne finds  $p$  intuitive, Bill finds  $\neg p$  intuitive; or if Anne takes  $p$  as foundational Bill takes  $\neg p$  as foundational; and so on for any other considerations that might be epistemically relevant. John Hick claims that if this is the case then it is intellectually arbitrary for the exclusivist to hold that her own beliefs are true while those of other religions are false because she has no reason to treat the beliefs differently.<sup>38</sup>

Richard Feldman also objects to Plantinga's exclusivism by arguing for the following principle:

“If (i)  $S$  has some good reasons (‘internal markers’) to believe  $P$ , but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons (‘internal markers’) for believing things incompatible with  $P$ , and (iii)  $S$  has no reason to discount

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<sup>38</sup> When mentioning this objection Plantinga cites personal correspondence with John Hick: “He graciously replied that the central problem, for the exclusivist, is ‘how to make sense of the fact that there are other great world religions, belief in whose tenets is as epistemologically well based as belief in the Christian doctrinal system, and whose moral and spiritual fruits in human lives seem to be as valuable as those of Christian faith.’ But then given that these beliefs incompatible with Christianity are ‘as epistemologically well based’ as Christian belief, it is *arbitrary* to insist, as I do, that Christian belief is true and beliefs incompatible with it are false; it is to treat relevantly similar things differently.” (Plantinga 1997, p295).

their reasons and favor her own, then S is not justified in believing P.”  
(Feldman 2003, p88)

This principle states that even if you have good reasons for believing p, if you know that others have equally good reasons for believing something incompatible with p, and you have no reason to discount their reasons then you are not justified in accepting p. This is because, claims Feldman, learning that others have equally good reasons for their incompatible beliefs undercuts your justification for p.

### ***Reply to Arbitrariness***

Plantinga’s response to this objection is a rather negative one. He attempts to merely show that there is nothing *inconsistent* about holding onto your beliefs in the face of disagreement.

His first point is that the internal support that a belief enjoys does not exhaust everything that can be said about the epistemic status of a belief. Two beliefs can have all the same “internal markers” and yet still not be equal from the epistemic point of view. On Plantinga’s epistemology, other relevant features include whether or not the faculty that produced the belief is functioning properly, and whether or not the belief was produced in an environment for which the faculty was designed. Furthermore, one does not need to endorse Plantinga’s epistemology in order to agree with this point. Others have suggested that external factors are relevant to the epistemic standing of a belief; such as reliability of the source of the belief, whether the belief is safe or whether the belief is sensitive. One doesn’t even have to endorse an externalist theory of knowledge to see that beliefs can differ in their epistemic standing even when all the internal markers are the same since it is almost universally acknowledged that a belief only counts as knowledge if it is true. What this means is that there is no inconsistency

in thinking that two incompatible beliefs are alike in purely internal support and yet for us to treat them differently. This is a very modest claim and supplies no reason to think that judging two such beliefs differently in the sorts of cases described can be justified, only that it is not contradictory to do so. This point is supposed to lay the basis for his following two points.

The second point is that if disagreement is a defeater then it would defeat too many beliefs. Plantinga labels it a “philosophical tar baby”, claiming that it would be a problem not just for him, but for his objectors as well. This is because whatever position one adopts in this debate there will be others who disagree. The Christian will believe certain claims knowing that others in similar epistemic situations disagree, as will the Hindu or the Muslim. The pluralist will be in no better a situation since she will think that the claims of these religions are false, and know that there others who disagree. Plantinga does not think that withholding belief avoids the problem either since if one withholds belief there will still be disagreement concerning whether or not withholding belief is the correct epistemic attitude to adopt. This worry also extends to other areas as well; such as politics and philosophy where there is also widespread disagreement. What this is supposed to show is that claiming that disagreement is a defeater has potentially disastrous consequences leading to a sort of scepticism. This, of course, does not show that it is wrong that disagreement defeats belief, it is only meant to show that this problem is a problem for everyone, and it is not one that is solely a problem for the exclusivist.

Plantinga’s third point is offered by way of a thought experiment:

“Perhaps you have always believed it deeply wrong for a counselor to use his position of trust to seduce a client. Perhaps you discover that others disagree; they think it more like a minor peccadillo, like running a red light when there’s no traffic; and you realize that possibly these people have the same internal markers for their beliefs that you have for yours. You think

the matter over more fully, imaginatively recreate and rehearse such situations, become more aware of just what is involved in such a situation (the breach of trust, the breaking of implied promises, the injustice and unfairness, the nasty irony of the situation in which someone comes to a counsellor seeking help but receives only hurt) and come to believe in it more firmly the belief that such an action is wrong.” (Plantinga 1995, p215)

Plantinga claims that in moral cases, such as this one, it is clear that it is reasonable to continue believing in the face of disagreement even when you believe that those who disagree enjoy the same internal markers as yourself. If it is reasonable in this case to continue to hold on to your beliefs then it cannot be true in general that one is required to give up beliefs in the face of disagreement.

Plantinga thinks that these three considerations are sufficient to diffuse the charge of arbitrariness. His claim is that if we endorse something like Feldman’s principle above then we will be forced to give up many of our beliefs (possibly including beliefs about the principle itself) and in particular this does not fit with our intuitions about what it is rational to do in the case of moral disagreements like the one Plantinga describes above.

These responses do something to help neutralise the arbitrariness charge but it does not adequately deal with it. What Plantinga has achieved is to show that we cannot always be rationally required to give up our beliefs in the face of disagreement. But that is not sufficient to respond to the problem because there are examples where it does seem to arbitrary to hold on to your belief. An example often discussed in the literature is the restaurant case:

Restaurant Case: Suppose that Anne and Bill are in a restaurant with friends. The time comes to pay the bill and they both decide to figure out how much everyone owes. Anne believes that everyone owes £23, but Bill believes everyone owes £24.

Each considers the other to be just as good as each other at mental arithmetic and they have no reason to suspect that one of them is impaired on this occasion.<sup>39</sup>

In this example it seems clear that it would be irrational for Anne to hold on to her belief that everyone owes £23 even if it turns out that she is correct. She seems to have no good reason to prefer her own belief other than that it is her own.

What this suggests is that it cannot be either that disagreement always requires us to revise our beliefs or that it never requires us to revise our beliefs. What is needed is a more sophisticated epistemology of disagreement that lies somewhere between these two extremes. But Plantinga has given us no reason to think that religious beliefs will remain rational in the face of disagreement under this more reasonable epistemology of disagreement. What is needed here is a better understanding of the epistemic implications of disagreement and how that relates to religious disagreement. That topic will be the subject of the next chapter so I will not attempt to say anything further about that topic here.

### *Accidents of Birth*

A related set of objections stem from the observation that there is a close correlation between the time and the place that one is born and the religious beliefs that one holds. John Hick articulates the observation well:

“[I]t is evident that in some ninety-nine per cent of cases the religion which an individual professes and to which he or she adheres depends upon the accidents of birth. Someone born to Buddhist parents in Thailand is very likely to be a Buddhist, someone born to Muslim parents in Saudi Arabia to be a Muslim, someone born to Christian parents in Mexico to be a Christian, and so on.” (Hick 1989, p2)

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<sup>39</sup> This example is based upon the one discussed in Christensen (2007).



This observation can be used to bolster most of the other arguments in this chapter, in particular the arbitrariness argument in the previous section because if religious beliefs are based upon the testimony of others then it seems – or so it might be claimed – epistemically arbitrary to accept one person’s testimony over another’s, simply because you grew up with that person.

There is, however, a distinct kind of argument that this observation can be used to make. This sort of argument is suggested by a certain sort of project: the scientific study of religion, or as Hick calls it a “general interpretation of religion” (Hick 1989, p1). In *An Interpretation of Religion* Hick begins by classifying approaches to this project into two types: naturalistic and religious. A naturalistic interpretation studies religion outside of any religious tradition and as a purely human phenomenon whereas a religious interpretation is carried out from within a particular religious tradition. As Hick describes it, the naturalistic approach accounts for the variety of world religions as varied responses of the human animal to the pressures of their natural environment. The religious approach, on the other hand, sees the variety of world religions from the perspective of a single tradition, where “each [tradition] has come over the centuries to regard itself as uniquely superior to the others, seeing them as either lying outside the sphere of salvation, or as earlier stages in the evolution of which it is the culmination, or as less full and authentic versions of itself” (Hick 1989, p1). This religious approach is, of course, a sort of exclusivism since it asserts the truth of one religious tradition over all others.

This acts as a background to Hick’s new approach to the interpretation of religion, one that he sees as a third way, straddling the two previous approaches. Hick offers a religious interpretation of religion that is both outside of any particular religious tradition, but that he also claims takes religious experience seriously. Hick argues that

both the naturalistic approach and his own pluralistic approach can account for all the religious data, and that either can be rational (See Hick 1989, pp210-229). It is his criticism of the traditional religious approach that is of greater interest in the context of our present discussion.

The traditional religious interpretation of religion, which sees one religious tradition as true and others that contradict it as false, cannot, according to Hick accommodate the religious data which is that there are a large number of different religious traditions in the world:

“Nor can we reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst others are not. We can of course claim this; and indeed every religious tradition has done so, regarding alternative forms of religion either as false or as confused and inferior versions of itself. ... [T]he only reason for treating one’s tradition differently from others is the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own!” (Hick 1989, p235)

Hick’s criticism of the traditional approach – and therefore of exclusivism – is that it is not supported by the evidence. We should see this argument as an inference to the best explanation. The only way that it would be reasonable to conclude that one religion was true and the others false would be if we could find some non-question-begging difference between it and other religions – that the claims of one religion were more reasonable than all others. This way of thinking about religious diversity privileges two sorts of explanations: the first is a pluralistic hypothesis, such as Hick’s, where all religions are seen as flawed interpretations of some underlying reality; and the second is a naturalistic hypothesis that sees all religions as false and as a purely natural phenomenon.

Both of these hypotheses explain, it is claimed, the correlation between time and place of birth and religious belief. The hypothesis that there is one true religion, on the other hand, fails to explain this, and therefore, it ought to be rejected.

### *Reply to Accidents of Birth*

When responding to this objection Plantinga repeats his response that he made to the previous objection, that it is not clear that his opponents are immune to this sort of argument. Plantinga writes:

“Pluralism isn’t and hasn’t been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldn’t have been a pluralist.” (Plantinga 1995, p212)

Hick responds to this by pointing out that he and other pluralists are not usually raised as religious pluralists whereas most religious practitioners are raised to believe the claims of their religion (see Hick 1997, p281). Hick claims that this means the analogy fails to hold and it does not create a worry for religious pluralism. Plantinga doubts that this difference – between religious belief and belief in religious pluralism – is sufficient to nullify the point. There is still a correlation between where and when you are born and whether or not pluralism is a live option for you. But, in any case, Plantinga suggests that there are other examples where this sort of argument could be used. Plantinga notes that both he and Hick have been raised to believe that racism is wrong, but this is not true of everyone. Some people were and are raised to believe that other races are inferior and that therefore racism is permissible. It does not seem that this should lead us to question our moral beliefs.

This sort of response has a similar sort of failing as the response in the previous section because at best it seems to create a stalemate between Plantinga and his

objectors. There is still a puzzling issue here, and although it is not clear that it is a serious problem for Plantinga, it is also not clear that a better understanding of these issues would not yield one.

### *A probabilistic defeater*

J. L. Schellenberg has suggested that the facts of religious pluralism show that no religious beliefs are more probable than their denials, and so, for this reason, we should suspend belief about religious matters. He argues for this conclusion by noting that for any religious claim there will be many, mutually exclusive alternatives. For example, one might believe that 'there is a personal triune God', but there are many alternatives to this, such as 'there are many personal gods', 'there is one impersonal God' etc. Schellenberg points out that although one might think that one of these claims is more probable than the others, that it still may be that it is more likely to be false than true. Suppose that someone holds a religious belief  $r$  that she holds to be twice as probable as each of the alternatives, of which there are three. In that case if the probability of  $r$  is  $\text{Pr}(r)$  then the probability of each of the alternatives is  $1/2\text{Pr}(r)$ , but since there are three mutually exclusive alternatives the combined probability of the alternatives is  $3/2\text{Pr}(r)$  which is greater than  $\text{Pr}(r)$ . So, given that for most religious beliefs there will be numerous alternatives to that belief, the probability of it being true would need to be many times greater than the probability of any alternative if it is to be more probable than not.

Schellenberg also claims that it is not reasonable for religious believers to think that any of their religious beliefs are that much more probable than the alternatives because:

“the proponents of competing beliefs are often at least as honest, sincere, and intelligent as herself, and that the considerations believers in other traditions (or her own) are able to adduce in support of competing claims are very like those she takes to support the beliefs *she* cherishes – such considerations as non-discredited miracle reports, apparently (Divinely) inspired writings and well-argued interpretations thereof, the witness of learned and saintly authorities, seemingly convincing philosophical arguments, profound religious experience, and so on. What this suggests, the critic may say, is that unless she notices an apparent *incoherence* in the competing claim under consideration (and none in her own), or takes there to be inductive or deductive arguments supporting her own belief that are clearly successful (with no apparently successful arguments on the other side) and so is in a position to infer from the probability *simpliciter* or certainty of her belief that it has whatever degree of vastly superior probability is required, she will, if she considers the facts, come out in favor of the view she does *not* prefer – namely, that her own claim does not have an epistemic status *far* superior to that of the alternatives.” (Schellenberg 1997, p152)

Schellenberg, in this passage, is arguing that without any direct argument for a high probability for some religious claim the only way we have of assigning a probability to such claims is by comparing the support that they have with the support enjoyed by its alternatives. In the case of religious claims the sorts of things offered in their support are also offered in support of the alternatives, so this approach cannot justify assigning a higher probability to one religious claim over its alternatives. This, it is claimed, generates a probabilistic defeater for each of these religious claims because for any (or most at least) claim you are justified in believing that it is more likely false than true.

A similar point has also been made by John Hick:

“[I]f only *one* of the many belief-systems based upon religious experience can be true, it follows that *religious experience generally produces false beliefs*, and that it is thus a generally *unreliable* basis for belief formation.” (Hick 1997, p278)

Hick’s argument is against William Alston’s claim that Christians can be rational to form beliefs upon the basis of religious experience. But this objection could just as easily be made against Plantinga’s claim that religious beliefs may result from the *sensus divinitatis* –

a belief producing faculty that in certain circumstances produces beliefs about God. But since people hold many contradictory beliefs about God or gods, this suggests that the *sensus divinitatis* is generally unreliable.

### ***Reply to A probabilistic defeater***

Plantinga begins his reply to this objection by asking how it is we are supposed to judge the probability of Christian beliefs. With respect to what are we supposed to judge the probability of our beliefs? Plantinga claims that an assumption underlying this objection is that our beliefs ought to be probable with respect to all our other beliefs. But why think that religious beliefs ought to be probable with respect to the rest of one's other beliefs? This demand would only seem legitimate if religious beliefs have to be based upon our other beliefs to be rational. But this is explicitly denied by Plantinga. Plantinga claims that the religious believer can reasonably hold her beliefs as basic, so they need not be probable with respect to all other beliefs to be rational.

Plantinga gives an example of this:

“[A person] is playing bridge and is dealt all the sevens and eights. The odds against this are pretty formidable; there are many alternatives that are at least equally probable; does that mean that her belief that she was dealt all the sevens and eights is irrational? Of course not” (Plantinga 2000, p442)

In this case it does not seem to speak against the belief that it is not more likely than not with respect to your other beliefs, so why should this be required in the case of religious beliefs? This objection seems to assume that the religious believer forms her religious beliefs by marshalling all her available evidence and then determining what religious claims are likely on the basis of that evidence. Once the religious believer becomes aware of all the various religious beliefs that others hold, and the arguments and evidence that they offer in support of those beliefs, it will no longer be reasonable for

the religious believer to hold any of her beliefs. It is this sort of picture of the epistemology of religious belief that Plantinga's work is attempting to challenge. Plantinga does not deny that some religious beliefs are formed on the basis of propositional evidence, but he denies that all religious beliefs are formed in this way. Plantinga has claimed that many religious beliefs may be formed in the basic way.

No doubt this aspect of Plantinga's religious epistemology is controversial and subject to objections, but assessing this aspect of Plantinga's work is outside the scope of the current work. Our purpose here is to ask whether accepting Plantinga's religious epistemology generates insurmountable problems when it comes to thinking about religious diversity. This objection questions that initial framework, rather than presenting a problem for Plantinga's religious epistemology. For this reason, I will leave this objection aside.

There is, perhaps, another way to interpret this objection. What Schellenberg seems to be drawing our attention to is that whatever grounds or support the Christian takes herself to have for her beliefs then there are others who hold contradictory beliefs who have similar grounds and support for their beliefs. On this way of understanding the objection it seems to be very similar to the point raised by Feldman that the Christian is being arbitrary when she holds her beliefs in the face of such widespread disagreement, so we can discuss this interpretation of the objection with the arbitrariness objection.

The second, related objection, in this section is that the facts of religious pluralism show that even if humans have a faculty like the *sensus divinitatis*, that it must be very unreliable. This is because once we become aware of the extent of religious diversity it becomes apparent that most of beliefs that would be the result of the *sensus divinitatis* must be false, so using this faculty cannot be a reliable way to form beliefs.

There may be a reasonable objection along these lines, but much more development would be required. Two things are unclear in this objection. The first is that it is not obvious that all (or even most) religious beliefs are the result of the operations of the same faculty. You cannot in general determine the source of a belief based solely on its content. For example, several people may all believe that the sky is blue but this belief could result from the operation of sense perception, memory or testimony – to name a few. In fact, Plantinga could respond that the wide variety of beliefs that different religious communities hold is an indication that they are not using the same belief forming faculties. More theory is needed here to determine whether or not we should think that the same faculty is being used.<sup>40</sup> The second problem is that even if the *sensus divinitatis* is unreliable in general it may be that some people have a reliable *sensus divinitatis*, and it is not clear that they can not come to know in this way in such circumstances. For example, suppose that most people in the world get a disease that means that their colour perception is affected and all green things look red to them and vice versa. In this case colour perception is in general unreliable, but why should that matter to those with ordinary colour vision unless they have some reason to suspect that they have the disease. In light of these worries about the objection I will leave this one to the side because it has not been sufficiently developed into a serious objection.

### *Arrogance*

In his writings on religious diversity Plantinga frequently distinguishes between moral objections to exclusivism and epistemic objections to exclusivism (Plantinga 1995 and Plantinga 2000, pp437-457). In the current discussion I am only interested in

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<sup>40</sup> Alston argues that there are as many different religious doxastic practices as there are religions (See Alston (1991) chapter 5). If he is right then that undermines this objection.



epistemic objections to Plantinga's views. It will still be helpful, however, to look at the moral objection and Plantinga's response to it since I will argue that there is a parallel epistemic objection and Plantinga's comments are still relevant to it.

The moral objection is that it is arrogant to believe that your religion is right while all other religions are wrong. Plantinga gives the following as an example of this charge:

“except at the cost of insensitivity or delinquency, it is morally not possible actually to go out into the world and say to devout, intelligent, fellow human beings: ‘...we believe that we know God and we are right; you believe that you know God and you are totally wrong.’” (Smith, Wilfred Cantwell (1976) *Religious Diversity*. New York: Harper and Row. p14, quoted in Plantinga 2000, p443)

The claim here is that there is something morally objectionable in holding that you are right and that others are wrong when you know that those who disagree with you are just as epistemically virtuous.

Instead of considering this as a moral objection I wish to suggest that there is epistemic problem here – one that may occur in any case of entrenched and widespread disagreement such as is the case in religious matters.

If a person S can be justified in believing that she is right about a whole set of related issues while others are wrong about most of those issues then it seems that S will have reason to believe that she is epistemically superior to those who disagree with her. After all, if she is doing so well, and others are doing so badly then surely this is evidence that she is in some kind of epistemically privileged position. This creates a problem because it seems to justify ignoring future disagreements with those who disagree. Plantinga's epistemology, on this view, promotes epistemic isolation; a sort of fundamentalism where one need only take account of the views of those who are part of your community while ignoring those outside of it.

This seems absurd. It is not absurd that S could be in an epistemically superior position, but that S could be justified in believing that just because others disagree with her on such a large number of issues. It is absurd because we are supposing that S has no independent reason to believe that she is in fact in a superior position. But if believing that you are epistemically superior in this way is unjustified then that suggests that S was not justified in believing that she was right in the first place, and so, she ought to give up her religious beliefs in the face of disagreement.

### *Reply to Arrogance*

Plantinga argues that there is no reason to think that those who hold on to their beliefs in the face of disagreement as arrogant. He asks us to imagine how it might go:

“Suppose I think the matter over, consider the objections as carefully as I can, realise that I am finite and furthermore a sinner, certainly no better than those with whom I disagree, and indeed inferior both morally and intellectually to many who do not believe what I do. But suppose it *still* seems clear to me that the proposition in question is true: am I really immoral in continuing to believe it?” (Plantinga 2000, p447)

This response may be appropriate if the objection is construed as a moral objection since it is not clear why believing what seems to you to be true need indicate that there is a moral failing. But when the objection is construed as an epistemic one that arises when a series of disagreements occurs it is much more troubling.

This sort of worry has been identified by Peter van Inwagen. Van Inwagen observes that in philosophy many philosophers disagree on a whole range of topics, but this seems to have unwelcome consequences if we think it is reasonable for these philosophers to continue believing as they do:

“Am I to believe that in every case in which I believe something many other philosophers deny (and this comes down to: in every case in which I accept some substantive philosophical thesis), I am right they are wrong, and that,

in every such case, my epistemic circumstances are superior to theirs? Am I to believe that in every such case this is because some neural quirk has provided me with evidence that is inaccessible to them? If I do believe this, I must ask myself, is it the same neural quirk in each case or a different one? If it is the same one, it begins to look more a case of “my superior cognitive architecture” than a case of “accidental feature of my cognitive architecture.” If it is a different one in each case – well, that is quite a coincidence, isn’t it? All these evidence providing quirks come together in just one person, and that person happens to be me.” (van Inwagen 2010, p27).

Van Inwagen realises that when disagreement occurs regularly – as is so often the case in areas like philosophy and religion – this seems to generate a track record argument with the conclusion that you are superior to those who disagree with you. This does not necessarily indicate any kind of moral failing; the problem is that it seems absurd that you could come to know something like this in this way.

## **4.2 Two problems of religious diversity**

On the whole, the problem with Plantinga’s responses to the objections described above is not that they fail to engage or that they commit some error, but that they do not achieve enough. His responses help to highlight that the philosophical issues surrounding religious diversity are often more complex than his objectors seem to suggest; but he does not succeed in showing that a better understanding of these issues will not result in a serious problem for his religious epistemology. In this section I want to draw out two problems of disagreement that Plantinga has not adequately responded to; these two problems will be the subjects of the following two chapters.

The first problem I will call the problem of disagreement, and the second the problem of arrogance.

### 4.2.1 The problem of disagreement

The problem of disagreement can be grasped by considering the following question:

(Q) Can it be reasonable to hold one of your beliefs when you discover that someone else disagrees even if you believe they are just as intelligent and familiar with the evidence as you are?

There is, initially at least, a compelling case for answering ‘no’. There are a number of examples such as the restaurant case mentioned above where continuing to hold your belief seems to be irrational.

There are also some plausible principles that seem to suggest that you ought to withhold belief, or significantly revise your credences in the face of disagreement. I’ll repeat Feldman’s one from above:

“If (i) S has some good reasons (‘internal markers’) to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons (‘internal markers’) for believing things incompatible with P, and (iii) S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own, then S is not justified in believing P.” (Feldman 2003, p88)

Or David Christensen’s Independence principle:

**“Independence:** In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another person’s belief about P, to determine how (if at all) to modify one’s own belief about P, one should do so in a way that is independent of the reasoning behind one’s own initial belief about P.” (Christensen 2009, p758)

Feldman’s principle is motivated by the idea that we ought to treat like things alike. The idea is that when you list all the relevant considerations about the epistemic status of your belief and have done the same thing for your opponent and find that they are the same then you ought to adopt the same stance towards both. Christensen’s

**Independence** is motivated by the suggestion that when reasoning about the epistemic status of the beliefs of others we should avoid circularity. He objects to following line of reasoning: I believe  $p$  and my friend believes  $\neg p$ , but she must be wrong because  $p$  is true. This sort response to disagreement does seem objectionable, and Christensen argues that **Independence** shows us why it is objectionable.

In the case of religious belief we are assuming that the religious believer cannot offer any evidence or arguments in support of her belief since it is Plantinga's contention that even in these circumstances the religious believer can rationally hold her beliefs. Plantinga does not deny that there may be something else that grounds the belief instead; perhaps the belief is supported by an experience or an intuition. The problem is that whatever it is the religious believer suggests her beliefs have going for them (epistemically) it seems that there are others who hold contradictory beliefs and yet claim – sincerely – that their beliefs have the same things going for them. Feldman would say that in these circumstances you ought to treat the two beliefs equally, and since they are contradictory you ought not believe them both; the only option is to withhold belief. Christensen's **Independence** principle would have the religious believer judge the other person's belief independently of our own reasoning about the subject matter, but that seems to mean that we can only judge it based upon the epistemic character of the person who holds the belief such as their intelligence, thoughtfulness and any other epistemic virtues that may be relevant. But there are plenty of religious believers who hold contradictory beliefs and possess all the same epistemic virtues – it seems implausible that any one religion has a monopoly on the epistemic virtues.

This objection is a *de jure* objection rather than a *de facto* objection because it is compatible with this objection that all of the religious practitioner's beliefs are true and

that they were known prior to learning about the extent of religious disagreement in the world. Notice that none of what has been said here amounts to denying Plantinga's claim that it may be true that only one group of religious believers have a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. The claim is that, even if one group of religious believers is in a privileged position, unless they can produce some non-question begging reason for thinking that they are it is not reasonable for them to hold on to their beliefs in the face of such widespread disagreement.

In the next chapter I will discuss these problems further by engaging with the recent literature on the epistemology of disagreement. I will show that, although there is some truth to these principles, they rarely if ever apply in cases of religious disagreement.

#### 4.2.2 The problem of arrogance

The problem of arrogance follows on from the problem of disagreement; the claim is that if the problem of disagreement can be answered then a further problem arises.

Suppose that it is reasonable to hold on to your beliefs in the face of disagreement with those who you consider to be just as epistemically virtuous as yourself, then it seems that in cases where you continue to regularly disagree with those people you will over time come to believe that you keep getting things right, and they keep getting things wrong. If the disagreement is only on an isolated matter then this does not seem to have any follow on implications about the relative epistemic situations of those involved – it is just an isolated case of one person getting something right and another person getting it wrong. Where the disagreement is regular – as is so often the case in religious matters – then it looks like one will be able to construct a track record

argument with the conclusion that you are epistemically superior to those who disagree with you.

As noted above this is the worry that van Inwagen had about the implications of his own view.<sup>41</sup> It has also been advanced as an objection against any view that that permits you to maintain your beliefs in the face of peer disagreement by Adam Elga.<sup>42</sup>

Elga writes:

“[S]uppose that it was legitimate to give your own evaluations more weight than those of a friend who you initially count as a peer. Then it could be legitimate for you to “bootstrap” – to come to be confident that you are a better evaluator than the friend merely by noting cases of disagreement, and taking it that the friend made most of the errors. But that is absurd. So it is not legitimate to give your own evaluations more weight than those who you count as peers.” (Elga 2007, p486)

He gives as an example two friends who are judging which horse has won a race. Each believes the other to be just as likely to get it wrong as they are. They observe several races and each time they disagree about which horse won. If it is epistemically permissible for them to hold on to their beliefs in the face of these disagreements then each will be able to reasonably believe that their friend keeps forming false beliefs while they form true beliefs. From this they will be able to conclude that they are better at judging horse races than their friend. But this seems absurd. It seems that one couldn't possibly come to learn that you are better at something than someone else in this way.

This is a problem for Plantinga's religious epistemology because religious disagreement does not occur on isolated topics but on wide ranges of related matters. Given this, it seems that if one is not required to revise beliefs in the face of disagreement then there will be ample material for constructing track record arguments

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<sup>41</sup> Christensen has made the same observation in passing: “The mere fact of disagreement, after all, cannot show that *I* am the one who ‘must have’ the epistemic edge.” (Christensen 2004, p205)

<sup>42</sup> The term peer is a technical term used in the literature on the epistemology of disagreement. I will be discussing the various ways to define this term in the next chapter.

with the conclusion that you are epistemically superior to those who disagree with you. The objection here is different from the moral objection that Plantinga has engaged with because it is not that someone who hold this view has done something immoral but that it is absurd that anyone could come to know this in this way.

This objection, like the previous one, is a *de jure* objection not a *de facto* objection because the objection is that it is irrational to hold that you are superior to others on the basis of this kind of reasoning, even if it is true that you are the one who is getting things right and that you are in fact in an epistemically superior situation.

I will discuss this objection in more detail in chapter 6 and offer a response to it by claiming that there is a flaw in the track record argument in these examples. This means that it is permissible to believe that you are getting things right and someone else is getting them wrong, but that this will not justify the conclusion that you are in an epistemically superior position.



## **Chapter Five – The problem of disagreement**

The purpose of this chapter is to develop a view in the epistemology of disagreement that can be used to show that Christian belief is rational despite the facts of religious diversity. In section 5.1 I will argue for three claims concerning the epistemology of disagreement. Firstly, I will consider how thinking about internal and external rationality can help with the problem of disagreement; secondly, I will consider how we ought to define the term epistemic peer and the implications this has; and thirdly, I will develop a view about when disagreement generates a defeater. In Section 5.2 I will argue that these claims are complementary and give us a framework for thinking about disagreement. Finally, I will argue, in Section 5.3, that it follows from this that in many cases it is reasonable for religious practitioners to hold on to their beliefs in the face of disagreement.

### **5.1 Three approaches to the problem of disagreement**

In this section I will argue for three claims that will support my overall contention that religious belief is rational in the face of religious diversity, before going on, in Section 5.2 to show how these claims compliment each other.

Firstly, I will describe Michael Bergmann's argument for the claim that it is possible for two individuals who are equally intellectual virtuous, and recognise each other to be, to have a rational disagreement. Bergmann's views are also of interest in the context of assessing Alvin Plantinga's religious epistemology because his wider views in epistemology are similar to Plantinga's, and when discussing the possibility of rational

disagreement he makes use of Plantinga's distinction between internal and external rationality.

The second aim of this section is to ask "who is my epistemic peer?" and I will argue that we should think of epistemic peerhood as having a narrow application, limited only to those who we already agree about many things with. I also suggest that there are a broader set of disagreements that are epistemologically interesting and these are ones between what I call 'epistemic equals' rather than epistemic peers.

The third aim is to think about disagreement from the perspective of defeaters. I consider what it would take for disagreement to generate a defeater and what type of defeater it would generate.

This should put us in a better position to give a satisfying response to the problem of disagreement that was raised in the previous chapter.

### 5.1.1 Bergmann on rational disagreement

In "Rational Disagreement after Full Disclosure" Bergmann sets out to answer the following question:

"Can two people – who are and realize they are, intellectually virtuous to about the same degree – both be rational in continuing knowingly to disagree after full disclosure (by each to the other of all the relevant evidence they can think of) while at the same time thinking that the other may well be rational too?" (Bergmann 2009, p336)

In answering this question Bergmann makes use of some terms from Plantinga. He draws a distinction between *internal* and *external* rationality (this distinction has already been described in Chapter 1, but it will be helpful to go over it again here). Plantinga describes internal rationality as being when everything is going well "downstream from experience"; the idea here is that the agent is making the epistemically appropriate

responses to the experiences she is having and also that she managing her beliefs appropriately such as drawing reasonable inferences and attempting to resolve contradictions. External rationality, on the other hand, is when the agents cognitive faculties are working as they epistemically ought to be. What this means is that a brain-in-a-vat, for example, can be internally rational so long as the beliefs it forms are appropriate given the experiences it is being fed, but it would not be externally rationally because the experiences are the results of the behaviour of the mad scientist, not due to interaction with the environment. It is important to note that internal and external rationality, although they are necessary for knowledge, are not sufficient for it. Bergmann gives as an example of someone who is internally and externally rational, but who lacks knowledge: the character Truman from *The Truman Show*. In this film Truman is the victim of widespread deception – the town he lives in is part of a film set and everyone he meets is lying to him. As a result many of the things that Truman takes himself to know are in fact false, but he is still being internally and externally rational because his cognitive faculties are still functioning properly and he is forming and managing his beliefs appropriately. The problem for Truman is not one of rationality but that his environment is epistemically misleading. Armed with this distinction Bergmann attempts to answer the question quoted above, firstly by reading rationality as being internal rationality, then as external rationality.

In order to answer these questions Bergmann gives a more fleshed out example of disagreement that he takes to be the best sort of candidate for being a reasonable disagreement. He asks us to imagine two people,  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ , who disagree about  $p$ , where  $p$  is some fairly specific claim such as *God exists* or *Lying is always morally wrong*.  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are equally intellectually virtuous and believe each other to be so.  $S_1$  believes  $p$  and  $S_2$  believes  $\neg p$ . Furthermore,  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  have different broader outlooks of which  $p$  and  $\neg p$

are a part.  $S_1$  holds  $O_1$  and  $S_2$  holds  $O_2$ , where Bergmann describes these outlooks as follows:

“ $O_1$  contains as key ingredients:

- $p$
- a theory of error (applied to those roughly equal in intellectual virtue who believe the key ingredients of  $O_2$ ) according to which the apparent insight that the key ingredients of  $O_2$  are true is not a genuine insight

$O_2$  contains as key ingredients:

- $\neg p$
- a theory of error (applied to those roughly equal in intellectual virtue who believe the key ingredients of  $O_1$ ) according to which the apparent insight that the key ingredients of  $O_1$  are true is not a genuine insight”

(Bergmann 2009, p338)

Bergmann also asks us to imagine that  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  have done their best to share all of the evidence they have in support of  $p$  and  $\neg p$ , and have reported to each other any insights that they have in support of the key ingredients of  $O_1$  and  $O_2$ .<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, there will be many disagreements that do not conform to this pattern, but Bergmann suggests that many political, religious and moral disagreements are like this. He also seems to think that disagreements of this form stand the best chance of being reasonable disagreements. Bergmann claims that even after full disclosure  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  will not possess the same evidence since telling someone that you have had an apparent insight is not the same as sharing an insight with them. For this reason, Bergmann

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<sup>43</sup> Here is how Bergmann describes what he means by an insight:

“An insight that  $p$  is an instance of “seeing” that  $p$ . An *apparent* insight that  $p$  is something that feels to a person the way an instance of her seeing that  $p$  feels to her. A *genuine* insight that  $p$  – an instance of genuinely seeing that  $p$  – is a direct noninferential awareness of  $p$ ’s truth that results from considering  $p$  (either at length or only briefly, either in the context of extensive reflection on matters relevant to  $p$  or in the context of focusing only on  $p$  itself).” (Bergmann 2009, fn5)

distinguishes between the cases he is discussing and cases of peer disagreement where epistemic peers are defined such that they always have the same evidence.<sup>44</sup>

Given this set-up, is it possible for  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  to both be internally rational when they believe that  $p$  and  $\neg p$  respectively, and to reasonably think that each other is also internally rational? Here Bergmann answers ‘yes’. The reason for this can be illustrated by considering the position that  $S_1$  finds herself in. Before the disagreement she believes  $p$  and  $O_1$  both of which are internally rational for her and which are supported, at least in part, by apparent insights. When  $S_1$  discovers that  $S_2$  believes  $\neg p$  and they share their evidence it may be that as a result of this that  $S_1$  comes to have new evidence that results in her belief being no longer internally rational, but this need not be the case. We can stipulate that the only new evidence that  $S_1$  obtains is that  $S_2$  has an apparent insight in support of  $\neg p$ . According to Bergmann this would not provide a defeater for  $p$  since learning that  $S_2$  has an apparent insight that  $\neg p$  would fit very well within  $S_1$ ’s broader outlook due to the fact that she already has a theory of error for those who believe  $\neg p$ . This means that no revision is required by  $S_1$ , and by parallel reasoning, the same applies to  $S_2$ .

Each can also recognise that given the apparent insights that the other reports that believing as they do is internally rational and remains so following the disagreement. This is because, although thinking that the other person has formed a false belief will give you reason to think that something has gone wrong somewhere in the formation of the belief, it is not necessarily a reason for thinking that something is wrong with respect to internal rationality. It is stipulated in the example that each reports an apparent insight and that they are as intellectually virtuous as each other, so given that, it is reasonable for each of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  to think that the other is being internally rational.

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<sup>44</sup> I will discuss what it means to be epistemic peers in Section 5.1.2.

Bergmann's conclusion when it comes to internal rationality is that:

“In a case where two people of roughly equal intellectual virtue (who recognize this equality) continue knowingly to disagree even after full disclosure, it is possible that both parties are internally rational in continuing to disagree *and* in thinking that the other may well be internally rational in continuing to disagree.” (Bergmann 2009, p340)

But what about the same question when applied to external rationality? Here Bergmann is more cautious. Supposing that both  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are internally rational concerning their beliefs that  $p$  and  $\neg p$  respectively what can account for the disagreement? According to Bergmann there are three possibilities:

- (a) One of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  is externally irrational;
- (b) One of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  is not in an epistemically appropriate environment; or
- (c) Both of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are externally rational and in an epistemically appropriate environment but one of them happens to believe an unlikely falsehood.

The existence of possible explanations for the disagreement that do not involve external irrationality – (b) and (c) – mean that it is possible for  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  to disagree while both being externally rational. Bergmann, however, does not think that it would be reasonable for  $S_1$  or  $S_2$  to think that the other is externally rational in the circumstances described, though they can of course acknowledge that it is possible. This is because neither (b) nor (c) are likely explanations. Consider (c) first, what is being described here is a sort of gettier type case where the circumstances that the agent is in make the truth of the agent's belief likely, but where unbeknownst to them the belief is in fact false. Many examples like this have been discussed in epistemology, but the sort of example we would need is one where two agents of equal intellectual virtue and the same evidence are in circumstances that makes  $p$  likely for one and  $\neg p$  likely for the

other and where one of these turns out to be an unlikely falsehood. Here is a possible example of such a situation, adapting a well known gettier case:

Anne and Bill are both in a field standing opposite each other. Between them is a sheep and a sheep that looks like a dog (*not* a dog that looks like a sheep). They are arranged in such a way that Anne is looking at the ordinary sheep and it is obscuring from view the sheep that looks like a dog. Bill, on the other hand, is looking at the sheep that looks like a dog, which is blocking the ordinary sheep. Anne believes truly that there is a sheep in the field, whereas Bill believes falsely that there is a dog in the field.

In this example both Anne and Bill are being internally and externally rational when they believe as they do (although it seems that neither of them would have knowledge given the unusual circumstances), but one has a true belief and the other a false belief. Although circumstances like this are possible, it does not seem reasonable to think that you are actually in these circumstances.

Option (b) is not as unusual as (c), but Bergmann does not think it would be a likely explanation for either  $S_1$  or  $S_2$  since if one of them were to think that the other was not in an epistemically appropriate environment that would give them a reason to doubt their own belief. For these reasons, Bergmann thinks that although  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  may both be externally rational it is reasonable for both of them to think that it is unlikely that the other is externally rational.

Bergmann notes that in particular he finds explanations like (b) and (c) to be implausible in cases of moral, political and religious disagreements. We can challenge this, however, in light of comments that were made in chapter 3 (see Section 3.1). I argued there that one can benefit epistemically from the social environment. If I am

right about this then (b) no longer seems so unlikely. This is because although you may be in the same physical environment as those who disagree with you, you may not always be in the same social environment in virtue of belonging to different communities. This seems particularly plausible in the case of religious disagreements. This means that if  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are having a religious disagreement, then it will not be so unlikely that the reason for their disagreement is due to them being in different epistemic environments if they belong to different religious communities.

Bergmann provides an example of circumstances in which it can be reasonable to disagree with others even when you believe that they are just as intellectually virtuous as you are. This helps to make up for some of the lack of an account that we identified in Plantinga's work in the previous chapter, but it still leaves some issues unresolved, such as, when ought you to give up a belief in the face of disagreement?

The following sections will help us to answer this question and others.

### 5.1.2 Who is my epistemic peer?

An important term in the epistemology of disagreement is 'epistemic peer'. The purpose of this term is to pick out groups of people among whom disagreements pose a particular epistemological puzzle. The puzzle is whether or not disagreement alone requires us to revise our beliefs. Identifying epistemic peers helps us to isolate this issue by removing all other epistemically relevant factors. This is necessary because it is clear that there are many instances of disagreements where one may be required to revise one's beliefs or where it is clearly permissible not to. For example, suppose I believe that the population of the UK is less than 70 million and have lots of evidence to support my belief such as census data and a variety of other sources, and then I discover that you believe that it is well above 70 million; if I know that you have based this belief



upon a projection of population growth from 1970 then it is epistemically permissible for me to continue to believe that the population of the UK is below 70 million. Or, suppose I believe that some complicated mathematical theorem is true based upon my own attempt to work it out, and then I discover that you believe it is false; if I know that you are a professional mathematician and that your abilities and familiarity with the relevant area exceeds my own then I ought to give up my belief and instead agree with you.

These cases, and many others, do not help us make very much progress on the central issues in the epistemology of disagreement. The purpose of identifying epistemic peers is to locate those disagreements where the epistemic requirements upon the individuals involved cannot be explained purely in terms of things such as the differing levels of evidence possessed by the individuals involved, or their differing cognitive abilities.

Epistemic peer is a philosopher's term of art, so to some extent we are free to define it how we like. Some definitions, however, will be more useful than others, so we can ask of a definition whether it does a successful job of isolating the epistemologically interesting cases of disagreement and whether all the cases that it does isolate are interesting in the same way. I will begin by describing two important approaches to defining epistemic peers found in the literature before I go on to offer my own.

### *Equals*

The term epistemic peer originally appears in Gary Gutting's *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*. There he describes epistemic peers as equal in "intelligence,

perspicacity, honesty, thoroughness, and other relevant epistemic virtues” (Gutting 1982, p83).<sup>45</sup> Thomas Kelly has two conditions for two people being epistemic peers:

“(i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on that question, and

(ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias.”  
(Kelly 2005, p175)

Jennifer Lackey and Richard Feldman have similar definitions to this one, but they also add that full disclosure must have been achieved where full disclosure means that two people are only epistemic peers when they “have thoroughly discussed the issues. They know each other’s reasons and arguments, and that the other person has come to a competing conclusion after examining the same information.” (Feldman 2006, p220)<sup>46</sup>

Definitions along these lines seem to be very natural and offer a good starting point. There are still some ambiguities though. What is meant by equality? Are two people equal in their epistemic virtues if one is less intelligent than the other but makes up for it by being more careful in their reasoning? It may be that it depends upon the disagreement in question. Perhaps in some cases certain epistemic virtues are more important than others.

Similar questions can be raised about evidential equality. Do two people have to have exactly the same evidence to be evidential equals; or is it enough that they have equally good evidence? For example, suppose I believe the result of the football match last night was 1-0 because I read it in *The Times* whereas you believe that it was 2-0 because you read it in *The Guardian*. If these two newspapers are equally reliable, are we

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<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that Gutting’s purposes in defining epistemic peers are different from those who are engaged in the debate in epistemology of disagreement. Gutting defines epistemic peers in order to advance an objection against Plantinga’s religious epistemology. Gutting claims that it is not permissible to hold a basic belief when you discover that an epistemic peer disagrees with you about those beliefs.

<sup>46</sup> See also Lackey (2010) pp302-303.

evidential equals?<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, if we say no, then our definition of epistemic peer looks very narrow and fails to pick out lots of interesting cases of disagreement. On the other hand, if we say that equality of evidence only means equally good then the definition looks less appealing because that sense of equality is much more complicated. How good some piece of evidence is for a person will depend upon what other evidence and beliefs they have; it will not be possible to simply assign a quality value to some piece of evidence taken in isolation. In fact, it may not be possible to compare the overall quality of the evidence two people possess unless they already have a significant overlap in evidence.

Including full disclosure will not overcome these issues since telling another person about what evidence and arguments you have in support of your beliefs will not always result in them having the same evidence. For example, my telling you that *The Times* reported a certain score does not give you the same evidence as my reading the score in the newspaper.

The purpose of raising these concerns is not to give us reason to reject this sort of definition, rather, it is only to point out that there is a reading of this definition that is very narrow – as requiring equality in all respects – and this would exclude many epistemologically interesting cases of disagreement. A more permissive reading of equality does a better job of including all the interesting cases of disagreement, though it perhaps fails to highlight some interesting differences as well. For example, a disagreement between two people who are equal in abilities and evidence in this broader sense yet with very different backgrounds and sets of beliefs is an interesting case, but perhaps in a different way to a disagreement between two people who are equals in

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<sup>47</sup> Feldman notes that if we only consider cases where people have “exactly the same evidence” then there are likely to be no actual cases of disagreement like this, so he instead considers cases where people have “comparable evidence”. See Feldman (2009) pp295-296.

abilities and evidence, and have very similar backgrounds and sets of beliefs and are disagreeing for the first time. I will leave this aside for the time being and consider a different sort of definition.

### *Reliability*

Adam Elga takes a different approach to defining epistemic peers. He writes:

“My use of the term ‘epistemic peer’ is nonstandard. On my usage, you count your friend as an epistemic peer with respect to an about-to-be-judged claim if and only if you think that, conditional on the two of you disagreeing about the claim, the two of you are equally likely to be mistaken. ... In defense of my use, suppose that you think that conditional on the two of you disagreeing about a claim, your friend is more likely than you to be mistaken. Then however intelligent, perspicacious, honest, thorough, well-informed, and unbiased you may think your friend is, it would seem odd to count her as an epistemic peer with respect to that claim, at least on that occasion. You think that on the supposition that there is disagreement, she is more likely to get things wrong.” (Elga 2007, fn21)

This sort of definition is more direct and allows us to avoid some of the worries raised above about what sort of equality we are interested in. Lackey has criticised this sort of definition saying that:

“[O]n [Elga’s] account, two people could radically differ in both their evidential backgrounds and their cognitive abilities with respect to the question whether  $p$ , yet nonetheless turn out to be epistemic peers regarding this question. For instance, I may be a complete novice with respect to identifying birds of prey, and you may be an expert ornithologist. When I am sober and you are highly intoxicated, however, we may be equally likely to be mistaken about whether the bird flying overhead is an osprey. On Elga’s account, then, you and I would be epistemic peers with respect to this question, but this strikes me as quite a counter-intuitive result.” (Lackey 2010, fn17)

It is not clear to me that this is a counter-intuitive result (it’s not clear to me that it is *not* a counter-intuitive result either). For example, suppose that Andy Murray and I are equally matched at tennis when I play with a motorised racket and he plays with a table

tennis bat that is falling apart; it is not clear to me that it would be counter-intuitive to say that in these circumstances we are tennis peers even though we clearly aren't in more ordinary circumstances. Intuitions about these sorts of cases do not seem to decisively speak for or against either of these proposals so I will set these worries to one side.

Elga's proposal is that what we are really interested in when assessing whether or not someone is your epistemic peer is the end result, which is whether or not you judge them to be as equally reliable as yourself. This still means that whether or not someone is your evidential or epistemic equal is still relevant, but the question of what kind of equality we are interested in depends upon when it is reasonable to judge that another person is just as reliable as you are concerning a particular issue.

Elga endorses a view in the epistemology of disagreement that he calls the Equal Weight View, according to which one ought to revise your beliefs when you discover that an epistemic peer disagrees. What you ought to do is "split-the-difference" between your credence that  $p$  and your peer's credence. Elga suggests that this definition of epistemic peer will not apply to some of the case studies of disagreement encountered in the literature, and so, you will not be obliged to revise your opinions on as many matters as it might at first appear. For example, Elga asks us to imagine that Ann and Beth are having a disagreement about abortion; they are at opposite ends of the political spectrum and disagree, not just about abortion, but about a whole range of connected issues as well. Ann and Beth are not epistemic peers concerning abortion because neither of them thinks that the other is equally likely to be wrong about that issue given that a disagreement has arisen. But what if we consider their disagreement over the whole cluster of moral and political issues connected with abortion? Shouldn't they consider each other epistemic peers concerning that? What reason would they have

(assuming that they believe each other to be equally intelligent and familiar with the evidence) for thinking that the other was less reliable? Here Elga argues that they are not epistemic peers because there is no fact of the matter about Ann's opinion of Beth independently of all these considerations, and vice versa. The idea here is that if they do not use their knowledge about what each other believes on these matters to come to an opinion about whether the other is an epistemic peer, then they simply do not have enough material to form that opinion in the first place.

To motivate this suggestion Elga asks us to consider a different example. Suppose that you know Jennifer Lopez both face-to-face and through tabloid reports. Elga points out that in such a case we can easily ask "What is your opinion of Lopez, setting aside what the tabloids say?" because we can easily make sense of a way you could factor your belief state into your opinion based upon your face-to-face interactions and your opinion based on tabloid reports. The same cannot be said, claims Elga, of a question such as "What is your opinion of Lopez, setting aside that humans have bodies and that the Earth exists?" For this question one cannot simply separate out opinions about Jennifer Lopez based on information that humans have bodies and that the earth exists because this information is so tangled up with everything that you might believe about Jennifer Lopez.

Hilary Kornblith challenges Elga on this point (Kornblith 2010, pp47-51). He asks us to suppose that Ann and Beth have a disagreement with Zena, a homicidal sociopath. They disagree with Zena, not just about abortion, but about all moral issues. Neither Ann nor Beth would be troubled by their disagreement with Zena or feel that they ought to revise any of their opinions in light of that disagreement because they do not think that Zena is an epistemic peer on moral issues. The disagreement between Ann and Beth on abortion is not like their disagreements with Zena. Elga overstates just how

much Ann and Beth's opinions on moral matters will diverge. No doubt they disagree on a wide variety of issues, but they will still agree on things such as it is wrong to torture innocent people just for enjoyment, or we might imagine that they are in agreement over when it is morally permissible to lie even though they disagree over abortion and its connected issues. It is because they have a number of areas of agreement that they find it so troubling that they disagree over abortion – this is unlike the disagreements with Zena.

What this suggests is that Elga's definition of epistemic peer will apply to many more cases than he suggests. There will still be many moral issues about which Ann and Beth agree so as long as they believe each other to be equally reliable about those matters then it seems, according to Elga, that they ought to regard each other as epistemic peers concerning abortion and its connected issues. This suggests that we ought to revise many of our moral, political, religious and philosophical beliefs in light of the level of disagreement that occurs in these areas.

### *Why are peers useful?*

In this section I want to argue for a slightly different approach to identifying epistemic peers. In the philosophical literature epistemic peers are only discussed in the context of disagreement, but judging others to be our peers is something we do in many other situations as well. When we consider why it is useful for us to judge someone else to be our peer this will help us to arrive at a better definition.

To see that identifying epistemic peers is useful – even when we are not encountering a disagreement – consider this everyday sort of example:

I missed the epistemology reading group last week but I want to know what paper we decided to read for the next meeting. Anne, Bill and Charlotte are nearby so I

could ask one of them what paper I should read. I know that Anne is very forgetful and often turns up having read to the wrong paper, much more frequently than myself. Bill is quite reliable and usually remembers what we agreed correctly, and I judge him to be just as reliable as myself on these sorts of matters. Charlotte has an excellent memory and is very conscientious and never turns up having read the wrong paper, so I judge her to be very reliable, much more so than myself.

In this sort of case I would prefer to ask Charlotte what paper I should read for the group, and if I did I would judge myself to have very good reason to believe that I knew what had been agreed at the last meeting. If I were to ask Bill about what paper to read I would, normally, judge myself to be in just as good a position as if I had been at the meeting myself.<sup>48</sup> Depending on how reliable I judge myself and Bill to be this may be enough for me to judge myself to know what paper I should read. If I ask Anne, however, I will think that I am in a worse position regarding my belief about what paper to read than if I had been at the meeting myself; and I may or may not decide to ask anyone else about what paper to read depending on just how unreliable I judge Anne to be.

This example shows us that we very naturally judge the reliability of others even when no disagreement has arisen. It is a fact of our epistemic situation that, on our own, we have access to relatively little information. We use others in order to make up for this. I am reliant on others to find out things about Australia, about what happened

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<sup>48</sup> I say normally here, because it may be that in asking Bill you come to get a reason to doubt him on this occasion. For example, perhaps he hesitates or sounds very uncertain in which case I may be less confident than I would be otherwise. Or perhaps you are more confident because he says something like “we are reading X and I was really pleased because this was the paper I suggested” in which case I may be more confident that he got it right on this occasion. The same considerations also apply to the other cases as well.



during the Second World War and about what people talking German are discussing – to name a few topics. In order to do this it is important to be able to assess the quality of the source of information. Ordinarily we are only interested in judging whether another person is “good enough” as a source of information, which, depending on the circumstances, may involve judging them to be epistemically better than yourself, worse, or about the same.

There is also another way in which we judge the epistemic credentials of others.

Return to the reading group example above:

I missed the epistemology reading group last week and I am interested to know whether the claims being advanced in the paper were correct. Again Anne, Bill and Charlotte are nearby. When it comes to this matter, I judge Anne to be very competent at philosophy and good at understanding and evaluating arguments; furthermore, we have agreed a lot in the past and generally hold similar views in philosophy. I also think that Bill is very competent at philosophy and good at understanding and evaluating arguments; however, we often disagree about philosophical matters and usually adopt opposing views. Things are different with Charlotte who I judge to be very poor at philosophy and I am not confident that she would have understood the arguments in the paper correctly.

In this case I would ask Anne about whether or not the claims advanced by the paper were correct, and most likely accept what she says (I am ignoring any worries about her memory for the moment). Were I to ask Bill or Charlotte for their opinions I would not accept what they have to say, but for different reasons. I do not accept what Bill has to say because I think that he would evaluate the paper differently to how I would and would come to different conclusions, even though I would likely think that his views are

reasonable.<sup>49</sup> The reason that I would not accept what Charlotte has to say, however, is that I do not think that she would do a very good job of evaluating the paper.

What this suggests is that there is a difference between judging someone else to be a good source of information and judging someone else to be a competent epistemic agent. Just as we have good reason to look for good sources of information we also have good reason to look for competent epistemic agents. By identifying others who are competent epistemic agents on a certain subject (Anne and Bill in this example) this helps us to discover some reasonable views on that subject, even if we do not necessarily accept them ourselves – and where we have no view ourselves this can help to generate a list of live options. It is also helpful when it comes to group decision making. When making decisions as a group it is helpful to be able to exclude others from the decision making process at times; this can be achieved by excluding some people on the basis that they are not sufficiently competent. Were I to attempt to exclude people on the basis that they did not agree with me, then this would not truly be a group decision since only those who already agreed with my decision would get a say. For example, in a democracy some people are not given a vote such as children and the severely mentally impaired; we do this on the basis that they are judged to lack competence, not because they are judged to be bad sources of information.

How does this help us to understand who our epistemic peers are? What it means is that we should have two terms that pick out equals in these two different ways that we judge others. Here is my proposal:

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<sup>49</sup> It is important here that what I am interested in is knowing whether the claims in the paper are correct, not just whether they are well supported by arguments. It may be that I would judge that the paper contains good arguments but that I would still not accept the conclusions. It would be reasonable for me to trust Bill's assessment of the quality of the arguments in the paper, but not to trust him on whether or not the conclusion are true, given my assessment of his abilities.

*Epistemic peers:* A is B's epistemic peer concerning p just in case it would be reasonable for her to believe that A would form the same belief concerning p given the same circumstances and that should a disagreement arise it is equally likely that either one of them is wrong.

*Epistemic equals:* A is B's epistemic equal concerning p just in case B has no reason independently of p to think that she is more likely to be right about p than A.<sup>50</sup>

The idea here is that someone is only your peer (on my use of the word) if you ought to believe that that person would form the same belief as you given the same circumstances, and that you are both equally reliable. This is someone who you judge to be just as good a source of information about the world as yourself. Epistemic equals are different. They are those people who you have no non-question-begging reason for thinking that that person is not doing just as well as you are epistemically.

When we separate disagreements into disagreements between peers and disagreements between equals it has implications for the epistemology of disagreement. Consider disagreement between peers first. Suppose that Anne believes p and she believes that Bill is her epistemic peer concerning p. This means that she judges Bill to be a good source of information concerning p, just as good as herself – if she had no belief about p one way or the other she would ordinarily accept whatever Bill had to say about it (if she did not, this would call into question whether or not she really did judge

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<sup>50</sup> On these definitions, epistemic peers are also epistemic equals. When I talk about epistemic equals I will be referring to *mere* epistemic equals, unless I state otherwise. Mere epistemic equals are those who you have no reason to think are not just as equally likely to be right as you are but who you do not expect to agree with you (either because you expect them to disagree, or because you have no expectation). Note that they cannot fail to be your peer because you judge them to be less reliable than yourself because that would then give you a reason to believe they were not your epistemic equal as well.

him to be a good source of information). Bill, however, reports that he believes  $\neg p$ . This creates a conflict for Anne. She believes  $p$  and because of her beliefs about Bill she expects Bill to believe  $p$  as well. This means that the world is not the way she expected it to be, so she ought to revise her beliefs in some way. There are a number of ways to account for what has happened. Perhaps Anne and Bill are not really peers; perhaps there is something strange going on in the environment that means that one or both of them have been misled; or perhaps one of them is being impaired on this occasion in a way that is not apparent to either of them. There may be other explanations for the disagreement, but the problem with each of them is that ordinarily they do not give Anne any reason to think that she is the one who is getting things right rather than Bill.

There will be some exceptions. Suppose that Anne believes that  $2+2=4$  and she believes that Bill is her epistemic peer concerning these sorts of beliefs. In this case there will be some explanations that are preferable that do not require Anne to revise her belief that  $p$ , such as that Bill is joking, or she was wrong to judge Bill to be her peer, or Bill has taken some very powerful drugs. In this sort of case these explanations will require Anne to revise her beliefs less than if she were to revise her belief that  $2+2=4$ .

The point here is that disagreement with an epistemic peer always requires you to revise some of your beliefs. When the disagreement is concerning something like what the share of the bill is in a restaurant, what the capital of Fiji is, or how many people came to Charlotte's party last week it will usually be the case that giving up your belief in the disagreed matter will involve less revision than giving up your belief that someone is your epistemic peer because this will involve revising at least some of the beliefs that went into your judgement that they were your epistemic peer in the first place. It may

even call into question your ability to judge who is and is not your epistemic peer as well, especially if you were to do it regularly.

The situation is different in disagreements with epistemic equals. Epistemic equals are those who you have no expectation that they will agree with you, perhaps because you expect them to disagree, or because you have no expectations about what they would believe on a certain matter. They are also those who you have no reason to think are not just as epistemically well positioned as you are other than that they have disagreed with you. What about these disagreements? Do they call for belief revision?

Consider the most extreme cases first, ones where you believe  $p$  and you expect your epistemic equal to believe  $\neg p$ . You then discover that your epistemic equal believes  $\neg p$ . Why should we think that one is required to revise any beliefs in this case? After all, learning that your epistemic equal believes  $\neg p$  in this case just confirms what you already believe.

What if you have no expectations about what your epistemic equal will believe? You believe  $p$  and you come to learn that someone who you believe to be your epistemic equal believes  $\neg p$ , but previously had no belief about what they would believe. In this case coming to learn that your epistemic equal believes  $\neg p$  does not simply confirm what you already believe, but neither does it conflict with anything you believe. Will it provide new evidence in favour of  $\neg p$ ? This will depend upon what you believe about that person. It may be you have very few beliefs about the person's competence and so that opinion will carry less weight, whereas, it may be that you judge them to be very able and so their opinion carries more weight. The way you ought to respond to this new information, however, will be different than it was in the case of disagreement with an epistemic peer. You ought to weigh this new information against what you already believe which includes your belief that  $p$  and the evidence and reasoning that led

you to that belief. It may be that learning what your equal believes is sufficient to outweigh the evidence that you already have, or it may be that it does very little to affect your beliefs. The point here is that whereas with disagreement with an epistemic peer doubting the opinion of your peer calls into question your previous judgements about them, doubting the opinion of an equal does not call into question your previous judgements. Believing that your equal got something wrong does not give you reason to believe that they are not still your epistemic equal.

An objection to this account is that one ought to judge epistemic equals to be epistemic peers, or perhaps that the class of epistemic peers is much wider than I have been suggesting. It could be argued that, at least in many cases of epistemic equals, you ought to consider that person your epistemic peer because you have reason to believe that they are just as intelligent and thoughtful as you are that you ought to expect them to believe the same thing concerning *p* as you would, and that they are just as reliable concerning *p* as you are.

In response to this sort of objection I would point out that there is a difference between having no reason to think that your opinions will be different and having reason to expect them to be the same. You may have plenty of reason to think that this person is generally intelligent and well-read and conscientious and the like but that will not necessarily be sufficient for you to form the expectation that the person will form the same belief that you will. What will be required for you to reasonably form this expectation will vary from subject to subject; and in particular it will depend upon how much variation in opinion the general population shows on that subject.

The objector could press this objection further by arguing that in cases of full disclosure with an epistemic equal you ought to consider that person your epistemic peer unless you can identify some independent reason for preferring your own opinion

over theirs. If full disclosure is understood as involving a sharing of everything epistemically relevant that has gone into the forming of the belief in question, then I think that this objection is correct. It should, however, be noted that it is highly unlikely that any of us find ourselves in this kind of situation, if it is in fact even possible. Ernest Sosa has pointed out that so much of what we base our beliefs on is in the past and we are not able to bring it forward for examination or share it with others (Sosa 2010, pp290-291). This point seems even more relevant the more complex the topic in question is. In light of this we can concede the objector's point without revising the view set out above to any significant extent.

### 5.1.3 Disagreement and defeaters

In this section I wish to consider whether learning that another person disagrees with you generates a defeater. I will consider under what circumstances disagreement would generate a potential defeater, and the sort of defeater that it generates.

When I speak of a defeater what I mean is a mental state that the agent is aware of that causes a belief to be unjustified.<sup>51</sup> A defeater could be a belief or an experience that means that it is no longer reasonable for you to hold some other belief. For our purposes the candidate for being a defeater will be the belief that another person believes  $\neg p$ , and we will ask when and in what circumstances this could be a defeater for your belief that  $p$ .

There are a number of things that can be said about defeaters, but I wish to focus on one important distinction in particular: rebutting and undercutting defeater. John Pollock noted that some defeaters do their defeating by giving you a reason to think that

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<sup>51</sup> Here I am largely following Michael Bergmann's work on defeaters (see Bergmann 2006a, pp153-177)

the denial of one of your beliefs is true, whereas other defeaters act by giving you reason to doubt the grounds for one of your beliefs (Pollock & Cruz 1999, pp38-39). We call the former rebutting and the latter undercutting.

Suppose that you believe that Anne is in the room next to you. If you then go into the room and see that Anne is not there you have obtained a defeater for your belief that Anne is in the room. This defeater is a rebutting defeater because it does its defeating by giving you a reason to believe the denial of what you previously believed. Now suppose that the reason that you believe that Anne is in the room is because you saw a glance of her as you walked past the door. You have now just been told that Anne's identical twin sister is in the building and you know that you would not be able to tell them apart just at a glance. Again, you have a defeater for your belief, but this time the defeater is an undercutting defeater because it does its defeating by undermining your reason for the belief, rather than giving you reason to believe its denial.

It seems clear and uncontroversial that disagreement (with someone who is in some sense your equal) at least sometimes acts as a defeater. Examples such as the restaurant case mentioned in the previous chapter seem to demonstrate this. But what does it take for disagreement to be a defeater? What kind of defeater is it? Is it always the same kind of defeater?

### *Could disagreement generate a rebutting defeater?*

Consider the case of coming to believe that another person believes  $\neg p$  when you have no beliefs about  $p$ . Often, when you discover that another person believes  $\neg p$  this will give you sufficient reason to believe  $\neg p$ . The strength of this reason will vary depending upon what you believe about that person and other factors such as how



confident they sound. This means that disagreement is clearly a candidate for being a rebutting defeater since it often gives you a reason to believe  $\neg p$ .

Now suppose that you believe  $p$ , and you come to believe that someone else believes  $\neg p$ . If we assume that this potential defeater does its defeating through its giving you a reason to believe  $\neg p$  and therefore by being a rebutting defeater, then when does it successfully defeat your belief that  $p$ ? Here I do not think that there is any blanket statement that we can make. Learning that someone believes  $\neg p$  will in most cases give you a reason to believe  $\neg p$  but most likely it will be one reason among many. What you ought to do is weigh that against the reasons that you take yourself to have in support of  $p$ . In some cases, following this exercise, you ought to believe  $p$ , or  $\neg p$ , or perhaps withhold belief. Even if you judge the other person to be just as intelligent as you are and as familiar with the same evidence that you are that does not mean that learning that they believe  $\neg p$  will give you a reason to believe  $\neg p$  that is equal to the reason you already have for believing  $p$ .

To see this, let us consider the following case:

Anne believes  $p$  and Bill believes  $\neg p$ . Anne and Bill consider each other to be equally intelligent and familiar with the evidence concerning  $p$ . They both believe that a neutral third-party would have no reason to prefer the opinion of one of them over another.<sup>52</sup> Anne takes Bill's belief to be a reason to believe  $\neg p$  but she weighs this against her reasons for believing  $p$  and continues to believe  $p$ .

Anne acknowledges that the reason that coming to learn that Bill believes  $\neg p$  gives her is equal to the reason that a third-party would have for believing  $p$  when they learn that

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<sup>52</sup> What I have in mind here is not some ideal epistemic observer but someone who has no information about  $p$  other than what Anne and Bill believe, and knows about Anne what Bill knows about Anne, and about Bill what Anne knows about Bill.

Anne believes  $p$ . This is because the only way the third-party has of determining the strength of the reasons is by assessing the relative epistemic credentials of Anne and Bill. But the situation is not the same for Anne herself. She can weigh the reason that Bill believes  $\neg p$  gives against her evidence for  $p$ . Let's consider an example with more detail filled in:

Anne and Bill are both journalists at the same newspaper investigating what the government's announcement will be on Monday. They have equally good track records at successfully predicting these sorts of events, and recognise this about each other. They do not always agree, but neither is more likely to be wrong. On this occasion Anne believes that the government will announce more money for Philosophy graduate students whereas Bill denies this. They both go to their editor, Charlotte, who is trying to decide what to print on the front page. Charlotte says that she is unable to choose between running this story and not given that they both have equally good track-records. Anne, however, considers her evidence for what she believes such as what she has been told by her sources in the government, considering what polling data would suggest about the governments intentions and any hints she has been able to pick up from recent speeches by government ministers. Following this she concludes that, on this occasion, her evidence is very strong and supports her belief very well so she maintains her belief.

Notice that it need not have gone this way for Anne. She could have reflected on her evidence and concluded that it was quite flimsy and instead decided to withhold belief, or even given up her belief and agreed with Bill instead. The point here is that there is no reason to think that the amount of support that her evidence provides on this

occasion should be equal to general reliability of this method for forming beliefs. Anne's judgement about the reliability of her method for forming beliefs about this topic matter may remain relatively stable while her assessment of the strength of the evidence she has from one instance to another may vary significantly. For example, my vision is quite reliable but not all beliefs that result from an exercise of my vision will have the same degree of warrant, some will have a very high degree of warrant and some very low depending on the circumstances. Likewise Anne's degree of warrant will not always be simply equal to her reliability as a journalist, it will vary from case to case.<sup>53</sup>

The previous example differs from some of the examples discussed in the literature in an important way (for example, see Feldman 2004). Suppose that we change it so that Anne and Bill get together and discuss their reasons for coming to their conclusions about what the government will announce on Monday. They share their evidence and discover that they have talked to the same people, looked at the same polling data and read through the same speeches. Independently of this disagreement they both believe that the other is just as good at assessing this kind of evidence and forming beliefs on the basis of it as each other. In these circumstances – when full disclosure has been reached – is a rebutting defeater generated? Again, there may still not be a rebutting defeater because Anne can assess the strength of reason that she gets from learning what Bill believes this time, not just based upon her assessment of how reliable Bill is but based on how well she thinks that he has assessed the evidence on this occasion. But given that she believes that the evidence supports her belief and not Bill's

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<sup>53</sup> According to Plantinga degree of warrant varies with firmness of belief: "to (at most) a zeroeth approximation ... if both  $B$  and  $B^*$  have warrant for  $S$ ,  $B$  has more warrant than  $B^*$  for  $S$  iff  $S$  believes  $B$  more firmly than  $B^*$ ." (Plantinga 1993b, p9)

she will believe that he has assessed the evidence poorly, and so she will have less reason than usual to accept what he believes – so there is still no rebutting defeater.<sup>54</sup>

*Could disagreement generate an undercutting defeater?*

This is not the end of the matter, however, since I wish to argue that at least in some of these kinds of cases an undercutting defeater is generated. Remember that an undercutting defeater is a mental state that gives you reason to give up a belief by giving you a reason to doubt the grounds for that belief; not by giving you a reason to believe its denial. What would it take for Anne to come to have that kind of defeater by learning what Bill believes?

For Anne to gain an undercutting defeater it needs to be that coming to learn that Bill disagrees with her gives her reason to think that something has gone wrong in the way she has arrived at or sustained her belief. It should be noted here that we are looking for a direct reason for thinking that something has gone wrong in the way the belief is formed. This is opposed to an indirect reason; any time you get a reason to believe that one of your beliefs is false you thereby also get some reason to think that something went wrong in the way you first formed your belief, but this is indirect because it gives you a reason to doubt your belief forming process via giving you a reason to doubt one of the beliefs it produced. A direct reason gives you a reason to doubt the belief forming process independently of the truth or falsity of the resulting belief. This means that for disagreement to generate an undercutting defeater it must give Anne a reason to doubt her belief forming process independently of any reason it

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<sup>54</sup> I am assuming here that Bill does nothing that causes Anne to see the evidence in a new light or to question her assessment of it; were this to happen, things may go differently.

gives her for doubting the belief that the disagreement is over – though it may also give her some reason to doubt the belief as well.

We can divide cases of disagreement into two: cases where Anne believes that she and Bill are using the same belief forming process, and cases where Anne does not believe that she and Bill are using the same belief forming process.<sup>55</sup> Suppose that Anne does not believe that she and Bill are using the same belief forming process, and Anne comes to believe that Bill believes  $\neg p$  while she believes  $p$ . Coming to learn this will not give her any reason to believe anything about her belief forming process except via giving her a reason to believe something about the truth or falsity of  $p$ , so no undercutting defeater will be generated in these cases.

But suppose instead that Anne believes that she and Bill are using the same belief forming process. In this case a potential undercutting defeater will be generated because Anne now has reason to believe that two instances of the same belief forming process have yielded contradictory beliefs. This potential defeater may be easily neutralised if Anne has reason to prefer her own belief over Bill's; but suppose that Anne believes that Bill is just as competent as she is at forming beliefs in this way, that they are in equally good circumstances for exercising this process and that neither of them is being insincere or is drunk etc. In these circumstances she would have no reason to prefer her belief over Bill's. This disagreement, because it is between two people using the same belief forming process, generates an undercutting defeater because it gives Anne reason to think that something has gone wrong in the way she formed her belief (independently

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<sup>55</sup> It may be difficult to say exactly what is meant by the *same* belief forming process here, but a first attempt would be something like: two belief forming processes are the same iff they are expected to produce the same belief given the same circumstances. Two normal human beings identifying the colours of medium-sized objects in normal lighting should be considered to be using the same belief forming process, likewise two normal human beings with similar educational backgrounds carrying out simple arithmetical calculations should be counted as using the same belief forming processes. An example of different belief forming processes would be one person forming a belief about some recent event via testimony and another person via perception.

of the truth or falsity of that belief). She has reason to believe either that this process is unreliable, or the circumstances she is in are not appropriate for the exercise of this process, or something else is amiss in the way she has arrived at the belief. Furthermore, her options for finding a defeater-defeater for this defeater are limited. This is because since the defeater calls into question her belief and the way she formed it, it would be question-begging for her to use the belief or her evidence for it as a defeater-defeater. There are some exceptions to this. Suppose that Anne believes “ $1+1=2$ ” and Bill tells her that he has worked it out and he believes that “ $1+1=23$ ”. Prior to this Anne believed that Bill was just as reliable at arithmetic as she was and that given a disagreement arising that there would be any reason to prefer one over the other. In this case the belief is so obvious and strongly held by Anne that it is more reasonable for her to think that she has miss-assessed Bill than that she could be wrong about “ $1+1=2$ ”. These cases, however, will be rare since for most of our beliefs it is not that implausible that we could be wrong, even over beliefs that we feel very strongly about.

The result is that if Anne believes  $p$  on the basis of some belief forming process and believes that Bill is using the same belief forming process as her and she does not think there is any reason to prefer her beliefs over his, independently of  $p$ , then when she comes to believe that Bill believes  $\neg p$  on the basis of this belief forming process then she ought to stop believing  $p$ , unless she is more confident that  $p$  than she is that she has assessed Bill’s abilities correctly.

## **5.2 The epistemology of disagreement**

In section 5.1 I argued for a number of claims. Firstly, I agreed with Bergmann that there are circumstances in which it is reasonable to disagree with a person who you believed to be just as intellectually virtuous as yourself and to believe that that person is

just as internally rational as you are. Secondly, I argued that we should distinguish between epistemic peers and epistemic equals, where disagreement with epistemic peers frequently requires belief revision, but disagreement with epistemic equals does not. Thirdly, and finally, I argued that most disagreements generate rebutting defeaters but that these may not require you to revise any of your beliefs; but in some cases an undercutting defeater will be generated, and this will usually require you to give up your belief on the disagreed matter. The purpose of this section is to show how these claims relate to one another.

It should now be clear that the sort of disagreement that Bergmann has been describing is a disagreement among epistemic equals, and not among epistemic peers.  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  in Bergmann's description have substantially different belief systems that both involve theories of error that apply to each other concerning the matter that they are disagreeing over. In this case neither is likely to expect the other to form the same belief as they would on this topic, but they may still have no non-question-begging reasons for thinking that the other is more likely to be wrong on this topic. Bergmann argued that neither is required to revise their beliefs in light of this disagreement, and part of the reason for this is because since they are not epistemic peers they did not expect to agree so learning about the disagreement does not necessarily conflict with anything they previously believed.

Furthermore, the disagreement between  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  will not generate an undercutting defeater because neither  $S_1$  nor  $S_2$  will believe that they are employing the same belief forming process. They will each believe that the other is recognising different things as evidence or weighing evidence differently; or there is some other difference in the way they go about forming beliefs. This means that the disagreement is only a potential rebutting defeater because the disagreement does not give either a direct

reason to think that something has gone wrong in the way they formed their beliefs. But as we have seen already in cases where the disagreement generates a potential rebutting defeater the agent in question can weigh this against the reasons she already has in favour of her belief, so depending on the outcome of this, revision may not be required.

There is also a close connection between the distinction between epistemic peers and epistemic equals, and the circumstances when rebutting and undercutting defeaters are generated. Disagreement will only generate a potential undercutting defeater when the disagreement is with an epistemic peer, whereas it will generate a potential rebutting defeater when the disagreement is with an epistemic equal.

I argued above that an undercutting defeater will only be generated when you believe the person you are disagreeing with is employing the same belief forming process as you and is just as likely to go wrong in employing it. In these circumstances that person is also your epistemic peer. Remember that an epistemic peer is someone who you believe would form the same belief as you would given the same circumstances and who you think would be equally likely to be wrong given a disagreement. If you believe that their belief is the result of the same belief forming process and that that person is equally likely to be wrong then you should expect them to form the same belief, so that person will be your epistemic peer.

Will disagreements with epistemic peers always generate undercutting defeaters? This is not quite as clear. If someone is your epistemic peer you believe that they would form the same belief as you given the same circumstances and that you are equally reliable. Depending on how we understand what it means for two people to be employing the same belief forming process this may be the same as believing that they are employing the same belief forming process, but it is possible that it does not. I will



not take a stand on this issue because it is not clear and it makes little difference to the current debate.

In the previous chapter we asked the following question:

(Q) Can it be reasonable to hold one of your beliefs when you discover that someone else disagrees even if you believe they are just as intelligent and familiar with the evidence as you are?

Bergmann has shown us there are certain circumstances when the answer to this question is yes. More generally we can also say that when the disagreement is with an epistemic equal and not an epistemic peer it is reasonable to continue holding your belief when you have weighed the reason your equal's belief gives you against your other reasons and concluded that overall they support your original belief.

This runs counter to what has been argued by others such as Feldman or Christensen. Feldman sought to support a 'no' answer to Q using the following principle:

“If (i) S has some good reasons ('internal markers') to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons ('internal markers') for believing things incompatible with P, and (iii) S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own, then S is not justified in believing P.”  
(Feldman 2003, p88)

The problem with this principle is that once we understand it correctly we will be able to see that it has very limited application. Firstly, we need to remember that the situation that Feldman has in mind here is one of full disclosure where both sides to the disagreement have shared all of their evidence and reasons in support of their beliefs. In response to this we can repeat Sosa's observation that in many cases not all of our evidence or reasons can be fully shared:

“Our basis for believing as we do [in cases of public controversy] generally fails to be fully formed and operative in one fell swoop. Light dawns gradually over such questions. A belief forms in us over time through the subtle influence of diverse sources. Some are testimonial, others perceptual, others inferential, and so on. The belief might owe importantly to the believer’s upbringing, or to later influence by his community. We are social beings and do well, socially *and* intellectually, to rely on such influence by our social and intellectual communities. Such proper reliance over time on divergent communities might thus help explain how disagreement can be reasonable.” (Sosa 2010, p290)

These reasons or evidence (or whatever else one might wish to call it) that cannot be adequately shared still plays an important role in supporting the beliefs that we have. In cases where we have shared all that we are able and cannot find any reason to prefer one’s own beliefs over those of others you disagree with, it may still be reasonable to continue believing as you do since it may be reasonable for you to believe that your belief is supported by those reasons that you cannot adequately share with others.

Another problem is that there are a number of ways to read “S knows that other people have equally good reasons”. For example this could be read as simply saying that other people have reasons that appear just as good from their point of view. If this is the case envisaged then this should not require S to revise her beliefs since this is like the example Bergmann offered above where two people in a disagreement can each recognise that the other is internally rational, but yet be rational in sticking to their beliefs since they believe that although their reasons appear equally good each from their own point of view, in fact, S’s reasons are superior. So we must read this as saying S believes that other people have reasons that she considers to be just as good as her own.

Now we can see that the sort of situation that the principle is describing is one where S believes that all the reasons they have that are relevant to the question of whether or not P have been shared, all these reasons are balanced, and there is no

reason to discount the other person's reasons and prefer her own. In this case, if a disagreement still occurs then what we have is a disagreement between epistemic peers (as I defined the term) since we have two people who now have the same evidence and reasons (since they have shared them) and they are equally well able to evaluate it (since there is no reason to prefer one of their beliefs over the other) so they should expect to come to the same conclusion on the matter, and to be equally likely to be wrong if they do not.

This principle will not apply in cases of disagreement between epistemic equals, because the conditions that it lays down, once properly understood, will not be met in these cases. In cases of disagreements between *mere* epistemic equals you do not expect the other person to agree with you; this must be because you believe there is some important difference in the reasons that you possess or because you are not fully aware or able to assess all the reasons that you both possess.

Christensen has also tried to motivate a 'no' answer to Q using the following principle:

**“Independence:** In evaluating the epistemic credentials of another person's belief about P, to determine how (if at all) to modify one's own belief about P, one should do so in a way that is independent of the reasoning behind one's own initial belief about P.” (Christensen 2009, p758)

This principle, at first, seems to demand quite a significant level of belief revision in the face of disagreement, but there is a way to understand how this principle fits into the debate on disagreement that means that it can be endorsed by the view that is currently being articulated in this chapter; and it is the reading that Christensen himself endorses. The two different ways of understanding Christensen's view arise when we think about how the evaluation of the epistemic credentials of the other person's belief about P feeds into our resulting belief revision. Christensen suggests the following two options:

“(A) Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation *fails to give me* good reason for confidence that I’m better informed, or more likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly, I must revise my belief in the direction of the other person’s.

...

(B) Insofar as the dispute-independent evaluation *gives me* good reason to be confident that the other person is equally well-informed, and equally likely to have reasoned from the evidence correctly, I must revise my belief in the direction of the other person’s.” (Christensen 2011, p15)

There are two ways that we can understand the independence principle as fitting into an epistemology of disagreement. One is to say that when evaluate the epistemic credentials of another persons beliefs you must do this independently of the reasoning behind the disputed beliefs and unless you can find some reason in this evaluation to prefer your own beliefs then you ought to give up your belief in the disputed issue – this is (A). Alternatively, there is a weaker reading – (B) – which is that you are only required to withhold belief if the evaluation of the epistemic credentials of the other person’s beliefs gives you reason to believe that they are just as likely as you are to get things right.<sup>56</sup> Christensen favours (B), and on this reading we should not view the independence principle as being incompatible with the view described in this chapter.

### 5.3 Religious disagreement

We now need to apply what has been argued for here back to our original problem: does religious disagreement give the religious believer reason to doubt her religious beliefs. Firstly, we need to make a couple of observations about the nature of the disagreement:

- (a) The disagreement is broad. Religious disagreement does not typically involve disagreement over one or two beliefs but over a wide range of beliefs.

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<sup>56</sup> Christensen notes that the contrast between (A) and (B) is similar to the one between Gilbert Harman’s principles of negative undermining and positive undermining (See Harman (1986), ch4).

- (b) The grounds of belief are not shared. The participants in religious disagreement frequently do not take themselves to have similar grounds for their beliefs – they may base their beliefs upon different scriptures, or accept the testimony of different people, or appeal to different kinds of religious experiences to name a few examples.

These two features are important because they show that we are not dealing with a disagreement between epistemic peers or a disagreement that would generate a potential undercutting defeater.

The reason that religious practitioners from different religions should not consider each other epistemic peers is because they should not expect each other to agree on religious matters. They should not expect each other to agree because they have a history of disagreeing and because it is clear that the belief forming processes that they are engaged in are significantly different. This means that they can only be epistemic equals, not epistemic peers. But as we have already seen, what is required in cases of disagreement between epistemic equals is that we weigh up the reason that learning about the disagreement gives us against our other reasons and this may not require that we revise any of our beliefs.

Furthermore, the disagreement will not generate a potential undercutting defeater because religious practitioners from different religions should not believe that each other is using the same belief forming process. The disagreement will, however, generate a potential rebutting defeater if one believes that the other person is intelligent, conscientious, familiar with relevant evidence etc. but the strength of this potential defeater needs to be weighed against the strength of the belief that the disagreement is over.

If the religious beliefs in question were rational before the disagreement occurs then discovering the disagreement counts as some new evidence against them, but it need not be particularly strong evidence since the disagreement is with someone who has very different beliefs and very different epistemic practices.

This chapter offers a more satisfying response to the problem of disagreement than the one previously offered by Plantinga. Rather than simply pointing out problems in the objection we are now able to explain when and why disagreement calls for belief revision and when it is reasonable to hold on to your beliefs.

This has not, however, dealt fully with all the problems raised by religious diversity as we shall see in the next chapter.

## Chapter Six – The problem of arrogance

In the previous chapter I sought to deal with what I have been calling the problem of disagreement, but there is another problem lurking in the area that particularly comes to light in cases of broad disagreements where the disagreement is not isolated but is over a range of related issues, which so often occurs in cases of religious disagreement. The problem is that when you frequently disagree with another person it seems that if it is epistemically permissible to hold on to your beliefs then you will be able to construct a track-record argument with the conclusion that you are epistemically superior in some way. This result is absurd because it seems that this conclusion is achieved much too easily. I will refer to this seemingly absurd argument as the ‘track-record argument’, and to the argument that views that license these track-record arguments are flawed as the ‘bootstrapping argument’. This bootstrapping argument in the debate on disagreement has been made explicit by Adam Elga, as we shall see below.

Part of the intention in the previous chapter was to show that in cases of religious disagreement it is epistemically permissible to continue holding your religious beliefs even though you may be aware of others, that you consider to be very epistemically virtuous, who disagree with you. While defending this sort of position I also wanted to show that becoming aware of disagreement should carry some epistemic weight – this disagreement cannot reasonably be ignored, one ought to weigh it against one’s other reasons for belief. The present objection threatens to undermine this because it would mean that the disagreement would give you reason to believe that those who disagree with you are epistemically inferior to you in some way. This may make it reasonable to

ignore the disagreement and it could lead to a worrying sort of dogmatism and epistemic isolation.

In this chapter I will articulate the objection further in section 6.1 paying particular attention to Adam Elga's version of the objection. Section 6.2 will focus on Thomas Kelly's response to it, where I will show why that response fails. Section 6.3 will consider some other possible ways to respond to the objection by considering some proposals from the literature on these kinds of track-record arguments, and will find that one of these proposals can be adapted to offer a response to the current objection.

### **6.1 Elga's bootstrapping argument**

Before articulating the argument I need to spell out how I am going to use certain terms. I will drop the term epistemic equal and only talk about epistemic peers and take this to refer to either epistemic peers or equals in the sense I described them in the previous chapter. The reason for doing this is twofold. Firstly, the distinction is not important to what will be discussed in this chapter because the track-record argument is just as troubling in cases of disagreement between epistemic equals as it is in cases of disagreement between epistemic peers. Secondly, this will bring my language more into line with the language being used by others who are discussing this objection (e.g. Elga and Kelly). Furthermore, I will not assume any one particular way of defining 'epistemic peer' in this chapter since the objection can be formulated for any of the common definitions of 'epistemic peer'.

It is common in the literature on epistemology of disagreement to divide views into two broad camps: I'll refer to these two camps as the Equal Weight View (EQ) and the Steadfast View (ST). By EQ I will mean the following view: If S believes p and has a disagreement about p with a recognised epistemic peer then it is not epistemically



permissible for S to continue to believe p.<sup>57</sup> ST, on the other hand, is the view that it is at least sometimes epistemically permissible for S to believe p in the face of disagreement with a recognised epistemic peer.

Adam Elga (2007) has defended a version of EQ and he claims that because ST allows you to favour your own opinion over an epistemic peer's that you will be able to bootstrap your way to knowledge that you are epistemically superior to your epistemic peer based solely on the fact that they have disagreed with you. This, claims Elga, is absurd, and it counts as a reason to reject any theory that permits giving greater weight to your own opinion over that of an epistemic peer.

The absurdity can be illustrated with an example:

Anne and Bill consider each other to be epistemic peers concerning simple mathematical problems. They are out for dinner and at the end of the evening they decide to split the bill. They both take a look at the prices and Anne comes to the conclusion that they each owe £24.30, whereas Bill believes they each owe £24.20.

Prior to discovering what Bill believes Anne believes that “each person owes £24.30” and “Bill is my epistemic peer concerning simple mathematical problems”. Upon finding out what Bill believes she also learns that “Bill believes it is not the case that ‘each person owes £24.30’”.

Elga claims that if Anne is rationally permitted to believe that “each person owes £24.30” following the disagreement, then she will be permitted to believe that she has a

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<sup>57</sup> This description of EQ does not specify what the two peers ought to believe instead. Some have suggested that they should both suspend belief (e.g. Feldman (2006)), whereas others suggest that peers ought to “split the difference” (e.g. Christensen (2007)). It will make no difference in this chapter which version of EQ the reader has in mind.

true belief, whereas Bill has a false belief. This will give her some evidence that Bill is not her epistemic peer, but this seems far too easy.

Elga can, and does, press his point further. He claims that we can imagine that Anne and Bill have a series of disagreements. If in most cases Anne believes that she is right and Bill is wrong, then it looks like she has a very good track-record argument for thinking that she is in fact superior to Bill. Her argument might be something like this:

- (a1)  $p_1$
- (b1) I believe  $p_1$  and Bill believes  $\neg p_1$
- (c1) I am right about  $p_1$  and Bill is wrong (from (a1) and (b1))
- ...
- (an)  $p_n$
- (bn) I believe  $p_n$  and Bill believes  $\neg p_n$
- (cn) I am right about  $p_n$  and Bill is wrong (from (an) and (bn))
- (1) I am more likely than Bill to be right about  $p_1$ - $p_n$  (from (c1)-(cn))
- (2) Therefore, I am Bill's epistemic superior concerning  $p_1$ - $p_n$  (from (1))

Elga claims that it is absurd that Anne could come to have a track-record argument that supports the conclusion that she is superior to Bill just by having disagreements with him.<sup>58</sup> Elga concludes, that because ST allows statements like (c1) to be rationally permissible even when you discover that an epistemic peer disagrees, it must be wrong because then a track-record argument can be generated; and since EQ is the only view that rules them out, it must be correct.

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<sup>58</sup> We saw in chapter four that Peter van Inwagen has a similar concern. (See van Inwagen 2010, p27).

### 6.1.1 Bite the bullet?

Before going on to look at responses to this objection we should stop to consider whether the defender of ST could just accept the conclusion of this argument. Perhaps one can say that repeated disagreements do give you reason to think that someone is not your epistemic peer. After all, presumably the reason why you first come to view someone else as your epistemic peer is because you regularly agree, and there seems to be something inconsistent in thinking that you and someone else are doing equally well at assessing the evidence before you, and yet you both keep coming to different conclusions.

There seems to something right about this sort of response, but one should notice that the conclusion of the track-record argument is much stronger than that. The argument has the conclusion, not just that you are not epistemic peers but that you are epistemically superior. In the case described above it might be perfectly reasonable for Anne to suspend judgement about whether her and Bill are epistemic peers, what seems absurd is that Anne could come to rationally believe that she is epistemically superior to Bill in this way.

Perhaps this objection is a problem generally for defenders of ST, but not a problem for Plantinga, or anyone who endorses something like his religious epistemology. After all, Plantinga seems to endorse something like the conclusion of this argument. Plantinga suggests that the faculty by which we are supposed to be able to have knowledge of God – the *sensus divinitatis* – has been corrupted by sin so that it no longer functions properly (Plantinga 2000, ch7). The Holy Spirit, however, can work to reverse this:

“Regeneration heals the ravages of sin ... there is repair of the *sensus divinitatis*, so that once again we can see God and be put in mind of him in

the sorts of situations in which that belief-producing process is designed to work.” (Plantinga 2000, pp280-281)

What this amounts to is the claim that the *sensus divinitatis* is malfunctioning in most humans, but that it has been restored to proper function for some. If this is the case, then it would seem to be correct that some people (those with a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*) are in an epistemically superior position to others. So, this seems to mean that the bootstrapping argument poses no problem for Plantinga since he already endorses something very much like the conclusion of the track-record argument.

This way of responding to the bootstrapping argument misunderstands the nature of the absurdity involved in it. The absurdity is not that you might be an epistemically superior situation to compared to someone else – there is nothing especially absurd about that – it is that it is absurd that you could come to know that you are in this way; that is, just by having a series of disagreements with someone. The absurdity remains even if the conclusion of the track-record argument is true.

This means the defender of ST ought to look for a way to respond to the bootstrapping argument.

## **6.2 Kelly’s response**

Thomas Kelly has argued for a view in the epistemology of disagreement called the Total Evidence View which is a version of ST. On this view one’s total evidence in the face of a disagreement with an epistemic peer consists of your own opinion, the opinion of your peer, and the evidence upon which you based your opinion before the disagreement. For this reason, Kelly argues, it may be rational to give greater weight to one’s own opinion if the original evidence supports your position better than it supports

your peer's. This means Kelly's view seems to make possible the track-record type arguments like the one that Elga describes.

Initially, Kelly observes that favouring your own opinion does not mean that you must believe you are epistemically superior. He writes:

“a revision in my assessment of our relative levels of competence is in no way mandated by the judgement that one of us has proven superior with respect to the exercise of that competence on a given occasion. Two chess players of equal skill do not always play to a draw; sometimes, one or the other wins, perhaps even decisively.” (Kelly 2005, p179)

This seems correct; there are too many ways that you could have ended up with the right opinion and your peer with the wrong one. Perhaps Anne and Bill are epistemic peers, but on this occasion Bill had a momentary lapse in concentration or Bill gave in to some bias that Anne managed to resist. These explanations do not conflict with the suggestion that Anne and Bill are epistemic peers, so they can disagree, and Anne can consistently believe that she is right and Bill is wrong while also believing that Bill is her epistemic peer, just as it is possible to consistently believe that Anne and Bill are equally good at playing chess even if Anne has just beaten Bill at a game of chess.

This diffuses Elga's suggestion that views other than the EQ imply that a single disagreement should increase your confidence that you are in fact superior to someone you considered a peer, but the chess analogy is not so persuasive when we consider the bootstrapping argument. If Anne continues to beat Bill at Chess, then it does look like the reasonable thing to conclude is that Anne is in fact a better Chess player. Likewise, if Anne believes that she is right and Bill is wrong over a sufficient number of cases, it no longer looks plausible to suggest that they might all be due to lapses of concentration on Bill's part; rather it starts to look like Bill is less able than Anne.

Kelly's second response is to argue that the bootstrapping problem is a problem, not for his view, as Elga suggests, but for views like EQ which say that one must always give equal weight to the opinion of your epistemic peer. He claims that they reveal a problem in views like Elga's because there are examples where it seems plausible to suppose that one can come to know that someone is your epistemic inferior on the basis of a series of disagreements, which Elga rules out.

If Kelly is right about this, then his response to Elga's bootstrapping argument not only nullifies the problem for ST, but it allows him to use the bootstrapping argument as an argument against EQ.

Kelly seeks to make this point by way of an example:

“At the first meeting of our seminar, I strike you as a perfectly reasonable and sensible person. For the most part, we find the same arguments and considerations persuasive. Even on those few occasions when we express different views, my view seems to you to be well within the bounds of reasonable opinion, no less than your own ...On the basis of this first meeting then, you form the opinion that I am your peer. In subsequent meetings of the seminar, however, you and I disagree often. Moreover, when we disagree, my views often seem to you to be based on relatively flimsy arguments; when I attempt to parry objections, what I say strikes you as weak and unresponsive, and so on. (Needless to say, I would dispute such assessments.) By the end of the semester, you no longer regard me as your peer.” (Kelly 2010, p164)

This, according to Kelly, is analogous to the bootstrapping case described by Elga, but this time coming to believe that you are in fact superior to someone who you took to be a peer seems reasonable. Kelly claims that there are reasonable and unreasonable track-record arguments so any view that disallows them all (like EQ) must be flawed.

This would be a good response, except that Kelly's example, and any other non-controversial example, will not be analogous to the bootstrapping examples. What makes the bootstrapping examples so problematic is that they are based upon Anne's

belief about the disputed matter combined with her beliefs about what Bill and she believe whereas Kelly's example is not.

Return to Anne and Bill, Anne has a series of instances where she disagrees with Bill. On each of these occasions she believed that she is right and Bill is wrong even though she regards him as an epistemic peer. Anne's reasoning that leads her to believe that Bill is no longer her epistemic peer begins solely with the fact that there has been a series of disagreements between the two of them and her belief about the matter being disagreed upon. From this she can conclude that she is right and Bill is wrong, and that allows her to generate the track-record argument.

What about Kelly's example above? Let us suppose that Anne and Bill are philosophers. When they first meet they talk about many matters in philosophy and find that they agree on many things, but when they do disagree they believe that each others views are reasonable and well supported by arguments. As a result, they come to regard each other as epistemic peers. As time goes on, however, they begin to disagree more, and Anne begins to believe that Bill's philosophical positions are naïve and based on flawed reasoning. Based on this track-record she concludes that Bill is in fact not her epistemic peer, but her epistemic inferior.

Is Anne's reasoning, in this case, based solely on the fact that there is a series of disagreements, and her beliefs about these disputed matters? It need not be. Notice that Anne becomes suspicious of Bill's abilities not simply because he disagrees, but because his opinions seem so ill-supported by arguments. This means that Anne has a reason – that does not depend upon her belief about the subject – to downgrade her assessment of Bill's philosophical abilities. This can be illustrated using an extreme example: suppose that Anne believes that an action is free if and only if the agent could have done otherwise. She tells Bill this and he responds that he disagrees; his account of

freewill is that an action is free if and only if it is performed on a Friday. Anne asks Bill why he thinks this, to which he responds “because ‘freedom’ and ‘Friday’ both start with ‘F’”. Clearly in this example Anne should conclude that Bill is not her epistemic peer when it come to thinking about freewill, but notice that in order to come to this conclusion she need not employ her belief about what the correct account of freewill is – she would have just as much reason to conclude that Bill is her epistemic inferior even if she later came to believe that her account of freewill was wrong, or if she had no beliefs about freewill.

But, one might object, surely Anne must assume that she is a better philosopher than Bill if she is to assess his philosophical arguments? If that were true then very few philosophers would be able to comment on the work of the best philosophers, but that is (hopefully) not true. Or imagine that instead of finding that Bill’s arguments and views are weak, Anne comes to believe that Bill’s arguments and views are superior to her own, and over time she comes to believe that Bill is actually her epistemic superior. This seems reasonable, but it can’t possibly require that Anne be (or believe that she is) a better philosopher than Bill. All that is required in these cases is that Anne is capable of assessing how able another person is at philosophy based upon hearing their views and listening to the arguments they give in support of them. For this reason Anne can come to believe that she is epistemically superior to Bill without relying solely on the existence of disagreement and her beliefs about the subject matter.

This means that Kelly’s example is not genuinely a case of bootstrapping. Kelly had two aims in his response to Elga’s argument, the first was to show that the argument was not a problem for ST, and the second, was to show that it was a problem for EQ instead. He has failed to achieve both these aims. Since his example has a different to structure to Elga’s it means that Elga is not committed to giving the same



assessment of both. This means that Kelly has failed to give an adequate response to the bootstrapping argument.

### 6.3 What's wrong with bootstrapping?

The aim of this section is to consider ways that ST may be defended against Elga's argument. In order to achieve this, let us first take a look at the broader structure of the track-record argument in the hope of getting a better idea of how to respond to it. I will divide the argument into three stages. Stage 1 is when Anne first forms her beliefs,  $p_1$ - $p_n$ , about whatever the relevant subject matter is on the basis of her evidence,  $E$ . Stage 2 is when she comes to learn what Bill believes and then concludes from that, and what she believes to be the truth, that she is right and Bill is wrong. The third and final stage is an inductive inference from several instances of Anne being right about some subject matter, and Bill being wrong, to the conclusion that Anne is more likely to be right about  $p_1$ - $p_n$ ; it follows from this that Anne is Bill's epistemic superior concerning  $p_1$ - $p_n$  because if she is more likely to be right about  $p_1$ - $p_n$ , then it is not the case that they are equally good at assessing the evidence.

Stage 1:

(1)  $E$

(2)  $p_1$ - $p_n$  (from (1))

Stage 2:

(3) I believe that  $p_1$ - $p_n$  and Bill believes  $\neg p_1$ - $\neg p_n$

(4) I am right about  $p_1$ - $p_n$  and Bill is wrong (from (2) and (3))

Stage 3:

(5) I am more likely than Bill to be right about  $p_1$ - $p_n$  (from (4))

(6) Therefore, I am Bill's epistemic superior concerning  $p_1$ - $p_n$  (from (5) and definition of epistemic superior)

As has already been noted there seems to be something suspect about this argument. It seems that Anne can come to learn that she is better at getting things right than Bill, even though she previously believed that they were just as good as each other, without independently checking that she is getting things right. Elga has an account of what has gone wrong in this way of arguing, which is that Anne cannot use premises like (2) and (3) to assess whether or not Bill is her epistemic peer, once she discovers that he disagrees with her because then it will no longer be epistemically permissible to believe (2). What the defender of ST needs is some alternative reason for why it is that Anne is able to hold on to (2) without it leading to (6). (3) cannot be the problem because that is just a statement of who believed what, and (4) seems to very easily follow from (2) and (3). The most promising step of the argument for the defender of ST to challenge is the inductive inference to (5).

The similarity between this track-record argument and the arguments used to object that reliabilism licenses bootstrapping has been noted by Elga (2007). In light of this I will begin by looking at some proposals from that debate that draw distinctions between good and bad inductive inferences to see if they can be used by the defender of ST. We will consider four proposals in this section and find that the first three of these will not offer us a response in this case. The fourth proposal, however, can be used by the defender of ST to respond to the bootstrapping argument.

### 6.3.1 No epistemic circularity

Jonathan Vogel (2008) has offered a bootstrapping argument as an objection to reliabilism. Here is an example of a case he uses:

“Gas Gauge Case. Roxanne drives a car with a well-functioning, reliable gas gauge. She has never looked into the status of the gauge or others like it; she has no information whatsoever on the subject. Rather, Roxanne automatically forms beliefs about the level of gas in the car’s tank simply by consulting the gauge. For example, if the gauge reads ‘F’ she immediately and directly forms the belief that the car’s tank is full. Given that the gauge is reliable, it seems clear that Roxanne’s belief that the car’s tank is full is formed by a reliable process. Now, Roxanne can also observe what the state of the gauge itself is, if she chooses to. Roxanne notes that the needle reads ‘F’ at the time when she believes, by reading the gauge, that the tank is full. Roxanne conjoins her belief that the gauge reads ‘F’ with her belief that the tank is full, and deduces that the gauge reads accurately on this occasion. We can suppose that Roxanne repeats this strange procedure a good number of times, accumulating beliefs that the gauge reads accurately at various times  $t_i$ . Roxanne goes on to conclude by induction that the gauge is accurate in general, that is, that the gauge is reliable.” (Vogel 2008, pp518-519)

In this case Roxanne seems to come to know that the gas gauge is reliable much too easily. It seems that this sort of argument cannot possibly be acceptable. It has been noted that this argument has an interesting feature, in that it is epistemically circular.

Epistemically circular arguments need to be distinguished from logically circular arguments. A logically circular argument is one in which the conclusion can be found among the premises, whereas an epistemically circular argument is one in which the conclusion must be true if one or more of the premises are to be warranted.<sup>59</sup>

Vogel suggests that we can reject this argument and other similar arguments if we introduce a principle of No Rule Circularity for arguments. This is his principle:

“(NRC) A belief that an epistemic rule R is reliable cannot be justified by the application of R. That is, neither the conclusion itself nor any belief

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<sup>59</sup> This definition of logically circular and epistemically circular is taken from Bergmann (2004). It should be noted that while it is generally agreed that logical circularity is a flaw, it is not agreed that epistemically circular arguments are in general problematic. Michael Bergmann’s paper is a good example of a defence of epistemically circular arguments.

which supports the conclusion may be justified in virtue of the application of R.” (Vogel 2008, p531)

According to NRC an argument will not provide justification for believing its conclusion if, in attempting to justify the use of some rule, one relies on that rule. This means that Roxanne’s justification of her reliance on the gas gauge fails because in coming to the conclusion that the gas gauge is reliable she uses premises that are justified only if the gas gauge is in fact reliable. This means that Roxanne will not be justified in believing that the gas gauge is reliable (at least, not on the basis of this argument) even if the premises of the argument are justified.

We may, if we are prepared to endorse NRC, be able to apply this to Elga’s bootstrapping argument, and if this is successful it will then be epistemically permissible for Anne to believe that she is right and Bill is wrong without her argument providing any support for the conclusion that she is Bill’s epistemic superior. But is Anne’s argument epistemically circular?

Remember that we have said that an epistemically circular argument is one in which the conclusion must be true if the premises are to be warranted. The conclusion is that Anne is epistemically superior to Bill; and the premises are that Anne is right on this occasion and Bill was wrong. Must Anne rely on the truth of the conclusion in order to be warranted in believing the premises? Well, that is exactly the issue that proponents of EQ and ST disagree over.

According to EQ it is only permissible to give greater weight to your own opinion if you are epistemically superior; otherwise you ought to give the two views equal weight. If EQ is correct then Anne’s argument is epistemically circular. ST, on the other hand, claims that it is permissible to believe that you are right and another person is wrong even if that person is your epistemic peer. So, if ST is correct then Anne’s

argument will not be epistemically circular since the premises could be warranted even if the conclusion was false.

This means that NRC will not help us to diffuse Elga's bootstrapping argument since Elga is assuming, for reductio, that ST is correct. In order for Anne to be able to generate the premises for her argument it must be assumed that ST is correct, in which case her argument is not epistemically circular.

Despite the apparent similarity between the track-record argument in the disagreement case and the arguments that appear in the literature on epistemic circularity, it turns out that structure of the arguments are different in very important ways. This suggests that responses to the two types of arguments need not be the same. For our purposes it means that ruling out epistemically circular arguments will not help us to respond to Elga's bootstrapping argument.

### 6.3.2 No Feedback

In "Bootstrapping in General" Jonathan Weisberg offers a principle that seeks to articulate a certain sort of flaw that some inductive inferences suffer from. This problem arises when one attempts to "feed" the conclusion of an inductive inference back into one's pool of evidence in an unrestricted way. Here is how he sets out the principle:

**"No Feedback**

If (i)  $L_1 - L_n$  are inferred from  $P_1 - P_m$ , and (ii)  $C$  is inferred from  $L_1 - L_n$  (and possibly some of  $P_1 - P_m$ ) by an argument whose justificatory power depends on making  $C$  at least  $x$  probable, and (iii)  $P_1 - P_m$  do not make  $C$  at least  $x$  probable without the help of  $L_1 - L_n$ , then the argument for  $C$  is defeated." (Weisberg 2010, pp533-534)

The problem being highlighted here is that because induction allows you (unlike deduction) to go beyond your premises one must be careful not to string an indefinite number of inductive inferences together because the conclusion of an inductive

inference does not expand your body of evidence, unless it has been independently verified. For example, suppose that you have a bag that you know contains 100 coloured balls. You pull out 20 and find that they are all blue. Given this you have good evidence that the next one you pull out will be blue. Your original evidence was that there are 20 blue balls and then you inductively inferred that the next one would be blue as well. What the No Feedback principle states is that in this case you cannot add your belief that the 21<sup>st</sup> ball will be blue to your pool of evidence in order to start making inferences based upon 21 balls being blue, otherwise, by repeating this, one would become increasingly confident that each subsequent ball was going to be blue, and finally following 80 inferences one would be certain that all the balls are blue, but that is absurd.

The track-record argument does not obviously violate the No Feedback principle. Let us take a look at the argument again. In stage 1 above Anne infers her beliefs about the current subject matter from her evidence. In stage 2 she learns that Bill believes something different from her, and by combining this with her beliefs about the disagreed matter she concludes that she is right and Bill is wrong. Stage 3 is an inductive inference to the conclusion that she is more likely to be right about the relevant subject matter based upon several instances of her being right about that subject matter, and Bill being wrong.

What the No Feedback rule states is that the inductive inference in stage 3 is defeated unless that conclusion is also supported by Anne's original premises. In this case the original premises are her evidence E and the facts about what she and Bill believe; all the other claims in the argument are inferred from those premises. But if the evidence supports Anne's beliefs then it also supports that Anne is more likely to be right than Bill, because for each instance where Anne believes x and Bill believes  $\neg x$  if E

supports  $x$  then it also supports that Anne is right and Bill is wrong, and over a large enough number of instances of Anne being right and Bill being wrong it will support that Anne is more likely to be right than Bill. This means that the No Feedback principle does not apply in this case, and so cannot be used as a way for the defender of ST to respond to Elga's argument.

### 6.3.3 Representative samples

Another possible response to the bootstrapping argument is to claim that the premises in the track-record argument do not support the conclusion because an additional premise is required in order to justify the inductive inference. This additional premise is that the instances of disagreement are a representative sample. This response is offered by Duncan Pritchard:

“[G]ood inductive arguments ... are arguments which proceed from premises which involve a representative sample. This imposes a constraint on good inductive inferences (so defined), since it means that it is not enough to merely have a sample and draw the relevant inductive conclusion from it. Rather, one needs in addition an independent basis for regarding the sample as representative.” (Pritchard 2013, p157)

This kind of restriction on inductive inferences is common and very reasonable. Pritchard goes on to claim that this blocks the inferences involved in Elga's bootstrapping argument because a person in the situation described in the bootstrapping argument would have no reason to believe that their sample was representative.

This might be an adequate response to some individual cases, but it will not provide a general response to Elga's argument because there are cases where no such addition is required. This can be illustrated with an example:

Suppose that Anne and Bill both have a good track record of predicting the results of football matches. They are both familiar with each other's ability and consider each other to be epistemic peers in this matter. One Saturday morning they get together and set about to predict the scores for all the matches that afternoon. They take into account a number of factors including each team's recent performances, their record against the team they are playing today, the injury list etc. After settling on their predictions they compare lists. Much to their surprise they discover that they haven't agreed on a single score-line. In this scenario Anne is in a position to construct an argument like the one described above with the conclusion that she is Bill's epistemic superior even though prior to comparing predictions she considered him to be her epistemic peer.

In this example Anne is employing a bootstrapping argument with the conclusion that she is Bill's epistemic superior. One could object that what is wrong with Anne's argument is that she does not know that these examples are representative, and therefore she cannot justifiably make the inductive inference. Suppose, however, that Anne and Bill wait until after the matches are played, and it turned out that Anne had made the right prediction each time, and Bill had made the wrong one. Once it has been confirmed that Anne is right the inductive inference does look reasonable, but she has not been given any extra reason to think that the sample is representative, so this cannot, in general, be the problem with the bootstrapping argument.

#### **6.3.4 Good v bad investigations**

The fourth, and final, option that I will consider is to draw a distinction between good and bad investigations, where good investigations result in justified conclusions



and bad investigations result in unjustified conclusions. One such attempt to apply this to bootstrapping arguments is by Igor Douven and Christoph Kelp (2013).<sup>60</sup>

Douven & Kelp suggest that bootstrapping problem can be solved by borrowing some insights from confirmation theory. To achieve this they use a principle from Clark Glymour. Here is the principle:

“No Risk, No Gain (NRNG) To test a hypothesis we must do something that could result in presumptive evidence against the hypothesis” (Glymour, Clark (1980) *Theory and Evidence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. p115, Quoted in Douven & Kelp 2013, p181)

The motivation behind NRNG is that there is something wrong with an investigation if you can know in advance that you will not disconfirm the target of your investigation. A legitimate investigation into whether or not  $p$  ought to put  $p$  at risk.

This can be used to show what has gone wrong in Vogel’s gas gauge example above. In that example Roxanne will never get any evidence that her gas gauge is unreliable, even if it is unreliable. This is due to the way she has gone about her investigation. What she does is to form a belief about the level of fuel in her by reading the gas gauge while at the same time forming a belief about the reading on the gas gauge. From this she infers that the gas gauge is reading correctly on this occasion. By repeating this process she is able to form a track-record argument with the conclusion that her gas gauge is reliable. But the problem with this investigation is that even if her gas gauge is not reliable she will still come to believe that it is using this type of investigation. The problem is that there is no way for this investigation to produce evidence against the claim that the gas gauge is reliable. According to NRNG, this

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<sup>60</sup> Similar proposal’s have been offered by Michael Titelbaum (2010) and Juan Comesana & Carolina Sartorio (forthcoming). There are some subtle differences in the proposals that are offered in these other two papers, but the differences are not important for the present work, because, as we shall see, the proposals cannot be used to help us respond to Elga’s bootstrapping argument, but reflecting on the motivation behind them will help us to develop a response.

means that Roxanne's investigation is defective and cannot provide support for the claim that the gas gauge is reliable.

Perhaps this can be applied to our bootstrapping argument above to show what goes wrong. At first glance this looks like a promising prospect because it seems that the reason one is inclined to recoil at the sight of such an argument is because it looks like the reasoning process involved was rigged from the very beginning – it looks like Anne was only ever going to end up with the conclusion that she is epistemically superior to Bill. It's not, however, quite that straightforward.

Anne's investigation involves comparing her beliefs to Bill's in order to determine how her epistemic situation compares to Bill's. She discovers that he frequently disagrees with her, and on each occasion she forms the belief that she is right and Bill is wrong. From this she infers that she is Bill's epistemic superior. NRNG states that this investigation will provide no support for her conclusion – that she is Bill's epistemic superior – unless the investigation could provide evidence against that conclusion. But her investigation passes this test. It could have turned out that Anne and Bill agreed on each occasion and this would have given her reason to believe that they were epistemic peers, not that she was his epistemic superior.

Despite this we can still use the insight behind NRNG to develop a response to the bootstrapping argument. The insight behind the NRNG is that there is something defective about an investigation that shields a hypothesis from disconfirmation. But we need not articulate this insight in the way that NRNG does. Here is a different way to put the insight, but with broader application:

Treat all Hypotheses Equally (THE): An investigation only provides support for its conclusion if it could have provided support to any competing hypothesis.

The THE principle states that an investigation can only provide support to its conclusion if any competing hypothesis could have been supported by the same investigation. What counts as a competing hypothesis is debatable; but determining which hypotheses are genuine competitors should involve things like assessing simplicity, explanatory power and prior probability.

We can use this to respond to the bootstrapping argument. Notice that although Anne's investigation could provide evidence against the conclusion that she is Bill's epistemic superior – by providing support for the claim that they are epistemic peers – there is a competing hypothesis that it could not provide support to. That is the hypothesis that Bill is Anne's epistemic superior. The claim that Bill is Anne's epistemic superior is a genuine competitor to the claim that Anne is Bill's epistemic superior because prior to the disagreement Anne believed that Bill and herself were peers, so she has no reason to prefer one of these alternatives to the other. If she did have some good reason to prefer the hypothesis that she is Bill's superior to the hypothesis that Bill is her's then her reasoning would not look so objectionable.

There are two important objections to this proposal that need to be addressed. The first is that there is an inconsistency between what I have argued for here and what is contained in the previous chapter. I have argued here that an investigation is flawed if it leads to a conclusion but that it could not have supported one of that conclusions competitors – the flaw in our example being that Anne's investigation leads her to the conclusion that she is Bill's superior, but that it could not have led to the conclusion that Bill was her superior. The reason that her investigation has this feature is that because either she will compare her beliefs to Bill's and discover that they agree, in which case she will continue to believe that they are peers, or she will discover that they disagree, in which case she will believe that she is Bill's superior. This does not seem to

accurately match the sort of approach to disagreement that I described in the previous chapter. There I did not say that there were only two possibilities when you compare your beliefs to the beliefs of an epistemic peer (or epistemic equal), rather there are three: you could discover that they are the same; you could discover they are different and maintain your belief; or you discover they are different and revise your belief. This means that it is possible given what was said in the previous chapter that you have a series of disagreements with an epistemic peer and come to believe that the other person is getting things right and that you are getting things wrong. This would seem to support the conclusion that the other person is your epistemic superior. What that means is that if Anne is behaving in a way consistent with what was described in the previous chapter then it is possible that her investigation could support the conclusion that Bill is her epistemic superior, and so, her investigation is not flawed in the way described above.

We can accommodate this by adapting THE slightly:

Treat all Hypotheses Equally 2 (THE2): An investigation only provides support for its conclusion if it treats all competing hypotheses equally.

THE2 is a stronger requirement because it requires that an investigation show no bias towards or away from any competing hypotheses, not just that all competing hypotheses could get support from the investigation.

The reason that Anne's investigation fails to meet the requirements of THE2 is because her investigation shows a bias towards concluding that she is epistemically superior to Bill. The reason for this is because when she disagrees with Bill I have argued that it may be reasonable for her to hold on to her belief because she does not know enough about Bill and the way he formed his belief relative to her own situation –

such as what the grounds for their beliefs are, the processes involved in forming the beliefs etc. This, I argued, can make it reasonable for Anne to continue to hold her belief. It does not, however, give her a reason to think that she is epistemically superior to Bill. But given the way she is going about her investigation it is clear that it will favour that conclusion. This means her investigation is flawed because it fails to meet the requirements of THE2.

A second objection is that THE (or THE2) undermines ST. Suppose we take an extreme version of ST, such as, if you believe  $p$  and discover that an epistemic peer believes  $\neg p$  it is rationally obligatory to believe  $p$ .<sup>61</sup> This version of ST seems to violate THE because the disagreement could not have provided support to  $\neg p$ . This means that THE solves the problem of arrogance, but at the expense of forcing us to give up the view that we were defending in the first place.

This objection can be dealt with without revising any of the principles above. The mistake that such an objection makes is to think of disagreements as a kind of investigation. When Anne compares her belief to Bill's concerning  $p$  this is not an investigation into whether or not  $p$ . I have argued that Anne's belief that  $p$  can be rational and justified even when she discovers that Bill disagrees, but the support for this belief still comes from whatever her prior reasons were, not from the act of comparing her belief to Bill's. This means that it is no problem for my account that it fails to meet the THE since comparing your beliefs to those of others is not an investigation.

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<sup>61</sup> This objection can be advanced using a more reasonable version of ST such as the one I outlined in the previous chapter, but it would need to be reworded. This example makes the objection clearer, even if its target seems implausible.

## 6.4 The problem of arrogance solved

The problem of arrogance is that views in the epistemology of disagreement that claim that it is epistemically permissible to hold on to your beliefs in the face of peer disagreement seem to allow one to construct a track-record argument to show that you are epistemically superior to the person you previously considered your peer. This seemed much too easy; all that has changed is that this person has started disagreeing with you. This problem threatens to call into question any such view in the epistemology of disagreement, including the one outlined in the previous chapter.

We have seen that an existing response from Thomas Kelly is unsuccessful. Instead we looked to the literature on bootstrapping arguments, given the apparent similarity between bootstrapping arguments and the track-record argument being considered here. Many of the proposals that we found there did not offer a way to respond to this objection. One proposal, however, we found could be adapted to provide a response. The problem with the objection is that the kind of reasoning that it endorses is one where hypotheses are not being treated equally – it is a kind of reasoning that shows a bias towards certain conclusions. In light of this we concluded that such reasoning is flawed and cannot support the conclusion that it leads to.

This gives us a principled reason for claiming that you can hold that you believe the truth while others believe falsehoods, and at the same time also reasonably believe that they are your peers.

## Afterword

“Rationality is a property that all humans have *qua* human.”

(Zagzebski 2002, p120)

It has been my intention in this thesis to attempt to describe a way to think about the rationality of beliefs in a world where a plurality of belief systems exist. This is quite obviously the case when it comes to religious beliefs.

Throughout, one of the guiding principles for me has been the ancient platitude, articulated by Zagzebski above, that humans are rational. Clearly humans do fail to be rational – often spectacularly so – but no one time, place or people has a monopoly on rationality.

This principle should help us when we come to think about those who disagree with us. How do we determine which of these beliefs are reasonable? We cannot reasonably conclude that all those who disagree with us are all irrational because that would violate our principle. It can be reasonable in some cases to believe that others are irrational because we know that humans do at times fall victim to malfunction, or give in to bias or are deceived. But in cases where the belief is widespread it is usually implausible that the belief is the result of malfunction, bias or deception. It is preferable in these cases to think that this is the sort of thing a rational person could believe.

But to regard the beliefs of others as rational is not to believe them to be true. We can regard others as being rational while believing that they are not reaching the truth. This makes a difference to how their opinions should be incorporated into our own search for the truth. That other humans believe something gives us reason – all else being equal – to believe that such a view is rational, but it does not always give a reason

to believe that it is true. This is where a distinction between equals and peers becomes useful.

When we are searching for the truth it is, and should be, more important to us to think about what our peers believe. But at the same time, we ought to acknowledge the possibility that we may have got things wrong – very wrong. In those cases it is comforting to know that there are rational people trying a very different path. If they find the truth, and I am lost, I hope they can persuade me – I need to continually remind myself that all humans are rational.



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