

Virtue Epistemology and Religious Belief

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to provide an overview of recent discussions in religious epistemology, to compare it with some traditional accounts, and to sketch a direction of further development. The article presents the evidentialist's challenge to religious belief and Alvin Plantinga's reply to it as he developed it in his earlier writings but also in his recent book *Warranted Christian Belief*. The question arises whether Plantinga does justice to the voluntary element in the formation of religious belief. As a complementary account, John Henry Newman's view of Faith is sketched. Finally a version of virtue epistemology is presented as a general epistemology which tries to account for several intuitions concerning epistemic value.

Keywords: Religious Epistemology, Evidentialist Challenge, Reformed Epistemology, Defeater, Epistemological Internalism, Epistemological Externalism, Warrant, Cognitive Voluntarism, John Henry Newman, Virtue Epistemology, *Phronesis*, Emotion.

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of recent discussions in religious epistemology, to compare it with some traditional accounts, and to sketch a direction of further development. Since I know of the discussion primarily in the Christian context the focus will be on Christian Belief. But I guess the problems discussed are similar with problems of some other religions as well. I start with a semantical consideration. Sometimes religious people make religious utterances. Some of these utterances have the structure of statements, for example: *An almighty, omniscient and all-good being exists*, or *God creates the universe*, or *God reconciles the world with himself through Christ*, or *Christ is risen*, or *There is forgiveness of sins*, etc. Reflecting on the meaning of these sentences, some philosophers took them to be what they seem to be at first glance: claims. According to them some religious sentences are expressions of beliefs. Beliefs are attitudes toward propositions. Propositions can be true or false. And people can be justified or unjustified in believing them. Let us call this account the propositional attitude account of religious belief.

Some philosophers, however, have thought that these religious utterances only look like claims. Their surface-grammar is misleading. What they really mean is something different. When people utter such sentences they do not express beliefs, but rather feelings. Let us call this account the emotivist account of religious belief.

Some philosophers, finally, have thought that the religious utterances are disguised rules which regulate the believer's personal life. Let us call this account the regulative account of religious belief.

Philosophers who hold the emotivist or the regulative account or a combination of them seem to have an advantage. Since according to them religious beliefs do not express propositions, they do not need to find epistemic evidence for them. However, they also have a problem: To take all religious utterances to be emotive or regulative not only requires an enormous amount of reinterpretation but also seems to distort how religious believers themselves understand some of their utterances. After all, when they say "There is a God who created the universe" they do not just mean to express a feeling of security or a rule which prescribes ecological behaviour. They actually articulate what they believe: that there exists such a being. They would say that if somebody could convincingly show that such a being does not exist they would give up their belief.

Looking back on the discussion of the last twenty years one notices that the propositional attitude account has gained many proponents. They hold that religious believers, besides doing many different things with their religious utterances, also express what they believe to be the case. They hold that religious believers take a set of propositions to be true. Thus the epistemological question reappeared: Can persons be justified when they believe religious propositions? Evidentialists say: Yes, but only if they have propositional evidence for believing these propositions. Reformed epistemologists say: Yes, even if they have no propositional evidence for believing these propositions. Let us look at the assumptions which lay behind these answers.

1. The evidentialist challenge

Evidentialists are interested in attempts to give propositional evidence for religious belief. They are interested to provide proves for the existence of God: deductive *a priori* arguments, like Anselm's ontological argument; deductive *a posteriori* arguments, like Aquinas' five ways, and inductive *a posteriori* arguments, e.g. Richard Swinburne's hypotheses to the best

explanation.¹ Furthermore, they are interested in probability arguments which support the claim that God has revealed himself and that God's revelation is contained in a particular scripture and a particular creed.

What is worrying about the evidentialist approach is the fact that many of those who have access to the available evidence for religious belief do not embrace it. The evidence alone does not seem to do the job. It does not seem to be sufficient for forming the belief in question. Moreover, many religious believers do not have this kind of evidence. Should one therefore conclude that most of the religious believers are not justified in holding their beliefs?

In the face of this observation the question arises whether there is something wrong with the program of evidentialism. Thus I am asking: What are the assumptions behind the interest of the evidentialist? Are they tenable?

The stance behind evidentialism could, but need not necessarily, be epistemic foundationalism. If it is foundationalism, one could spell it out in the following way:

(1) A person S justifiably believes that p, if and only if the belief that p is either properly basic for S or can inductively, deductively or abductively be derived from beliefs of S which are properly basic.

(2) The belief that p is properly basic for S if and only if the belief that p is either self-evident for S or incorrigible for S or evident to the senses for S.

(3) Religious beliefs do not fulfil the conditions set out in (2).

(4) Therefore, religious beliefs need to be based on other beliefs.

A first problem poses sentence (2). As Alvin Plantinga² convincingly pointed out: (2) is too restrictive. For there are many everyday beliefs which we do not hold on the basis of other beliefs but which we take in the basic way and which we properly take so, e.g. my belief *I had lunch this noon*, or *Emma is angry*. Such memory beliefs or beliefs about other people's mental states are often not believed on the basis of other beliefs, but nevertheless are regarded

¹ See: Muck, Otto 1999 *Rationalität und Weltanschauung. Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Innsbruck, 338-340.

² See: Plantinga, Alvin 1983 "Reason and Belief in God", in A. Plantinga & N. Wolterstorff (eds.) 1983 *Faith and Rationality*. Notre Dame, 16-93.

to be justified and, if they are true, to constitute knowledge. Moreover, the evidentialist, by his own criteria, is not justified in holding the belief (2). Because (2) is neither self-evident to the evidentialist, nor incorrigible nor evident to the senses. Thus (2) is not properly basic for him. And the evidentialist has not shown how he arrived at (2) by inductive, deductive or abductive argument.

A second problem pose sentences (1) and (2): They seem to involve epistemological internalism. Internalist theories of justification claim that what makes for the justification of a belief must be internal, that is it must be cognitively accessible to the believer. However, this requirement seems to be too strong as well. Many of my beliefs seem to be justified without me being in a position to be cognitively aware of what it is that justifies them. E.g. when I see my mother I produce the belief *The person in front of me is my mother*. I am justified in holding this belief. But I could not tell what it is that justifies this belief. Thus, the internalist requirement does not seem to be necessary in order to justifiably believe a proposition.

2. Reformed Epistemology

Plantinga made a twofold move: First, he abandoned the stance behind evidentialism that he calls classical foundationalism and moved to a position one could label weak foundationalism. Second, he moved from epistemological internalism to a version of epistemological externalism. Let us take a short look at these moves.

Weak foundationalism affirms that a person's noetic structure consists of basic beliefs and of beliefs which are based upon other beliefs. However, weak foundationalism gives up the strong condition (2). Beliefs, in order to be properly basic, need not be incorrigible or self-evident or evident to the senses. Many beliefs are accepted in the basic way, e.g. *I was walking this morning through the forest*, or *Emma is angry*, or *The world existed longer than five minutes*, *There exists an external world*. And a person is *prima facie* justified in acquiring or holding these beliefs. That is: These beliefs are to be regarded as properly basic as long as they are not defeated by other beliefs. My belief *I was walking through the forest this morning* is *prima facie* justified, and it is justified in the basic way. Now, suppose my friend tells me that we were together in the pub the whole morning. Now I have a problem. Either my friend is mocking me or he is right. If I should find out he is mocking me I would still be justified in my belief. If he is right then I ought to give up my belief and look for a doctor.

Now, why do we not say that some religious beliefs are accepted by the believer in the basic way? Why do we not assume that religious beliefs are similar to such beliefs as *I was walking through the forest this morning*, *Emma is angry*, etc.? There are situations in the life of believers in which they acquire their beliefs in the basic way:

“[...] there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe. [...] Upon reading the Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God’s sight and form the belief *God disapproves what I have done*. Upon confession and repentance I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgives me for what I have done*. [...] There are therefore many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God: guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God’s presence, a sense that he speaks, perception of various parts of the universe.”³

This move has got its advantages. It seems to correspond to the experience of many religious believers. For many of them say that they did not come to believe by a process of syllogistic reasoning. They regard their religious believing as a gift. Their believing, they say, was triggered by particular circumstances.

However, this approach has got a few problems as well. First, there is the relativity-problem.⁴ If religious belief is not excluded from being properly basic, then why not say that many other beliefs are also properly basic for some people, e.g. Emma’s belief *Alpha Centaurs visit me every Sunday afternoon*. Now, there are a few strategies to respond to this objection. The first would be to insist, that every belief needs justification. What justifies basic beliefs are not other beliefs one holds but particular circumstances. Thus, the belief is not without grounds. The second strategy would be to insist that the justification conferred by the circumstances is only *prima facie* justification. That is: One is justified to hold the target belief only as long as there is no evidence to the contrary. If the evidence to the contrary has got much by way of justification, a person is no longer justified to hold the target belief. In order to remain justified, the person has to find a defeater for the defeater. However, if the evidence to the contrary has got less justification for the person as the target belief, there is no need to find a defeater for the defeater. One would still be justified in holding the target belief. Thus, a

³ Plantinga 1983, 80-81.

⁴ Compare Kenny, Anthony 1992 *What is Faith? Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*. Oxford, 13-14. Niederbacher, Bruno 1999 “Zur Epistemologie des theistischen Glaubens. Gotteserkenntnis nach Alvin Plantinga“, in *Theologie und Philosophie* 74, 1-16, here 8-12.

person's religious belief can be properly basic, but she has to be attentive at the evidence to the contrary and she has to be able to defeat it, if necessary. This requirement – so it seems to me – demands no less intellectual abilities as the requirement of evidentialism. The difference, however, lies in the epistemic status of the religious belief. For the evidentialist religious belief is never justified in the basic way. For the weak foundationalist the belief remains justified in the basic way when the defeater is defeated.

Second, there is the experience-problem. Plantinga does not tell us how the circumstances, e.g. the circumstances of being appeared to by the starry heavens, justify the religious belief. It seems that a person needs to have many background beliefs in order to form this belief in these circumstances. And thus the question arises: If the circumstances contain many background beliefs, how is it possible that the experiential content alone is supposed to do the justificatory job? This leads us to the more general question of how experience is supposed to justify beliefs. One of the dogmas of foundationalism is that one can distinguish between a pure experiential base on the one hand and beliefs on the other hand. However, the question is whether there are any experiences which entail no conceptualisation and background-beliefs. If any experience is theory-laden, then there is a flaw within the program of foundationalism. The second move Plantinga made was a move away from epistemological internalism towards a version of epistemological externalism. Epistemological externalism holds, roughly speaking, that a person can be justified in believing a proposition *p*, without being in a position to have cognitive access to all the justifiers. What makes for the justification of a belief is rather that the belief is the outcome of a reliable and proper working faculty of belief-formation. Thus, my belief *I had lunch this afternoon* is justified by being the product of my properly functioning cognitive faculty. If the cognitive faculty to remember things works properly, then the belief is justified by the fact of being an outcome of that faculty. In his recent book *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga develops a detailed account of an epistemological position of this kind.⁵ The book aims in two directions.⁶ First, it entails an argument against the opinion: “Whether Christian belief is true or not I do not know; but I do know that it is irrational, or unjustified, or unwarranted”. Plantinga tries to establish that such an opinion is not tenable. If the Christian content is true, then a person is warranted in believing it. The second aim is to give a plausible account of the way in which Christian belief can be justified, rational and warranted. Here, I am interested in this second aim.

⁵ Plantinga, Alvin 2000 *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York, Oxford.

⁶ Plantinga, Alvin 2001 “Rationality and Public Evidence: A Reply To Richard Swinburne”, in *Religious Studies* 37, 215-222, here 215.

Plantinga claims that a person can be justified, rational and warranted in believing that there is a God; and that a person can be justified, rational and warranted in believing the Christian core-content, e.g. the proposition *God reconciled the word with himself in Jesus Christ*. A person can even have knowledge of these contents.

Plantinga argues on the basis of a general epistemology which tries to find out what knowledge is. Most of the epistemologists agree that knowledge is true belief plus something else. What this something else is supposed to be, is in dispute. Plantinga calls this extra quantity or quality “warrant”, enough of which converts true belief into knowledge. He defines warrant in the following way:

“Put in a nutshell, then, a belief has warrant for a person S only if that belief is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.”⁷

A Christian believer can fulfil these conditions by believing the Christian content. The idea is that the belief is induced in the believer by the activity of the Holy Spirit, when the believer encounters central scriptural teaching. First, when the content is accepted by faith and the belief in it is the result from the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, the belief is produced by cognitive processes working properly. It is not produced by way of some cognitive malfunction. The whole process of hearing the content, being instigated by the Holy Spirit and accepting the content by faith is designed by God to produce this very effect. Second, the environment in which we find ourselves is precisely the environment for which this process is designed. Third, the process is designed to produce reliably true beliefs. Thus, Plantinga sees faith on a par with other faculties of belief-formation, such as perception and memory. And as such Christian belief can be warranted even if it is not probable with respect to public evidence. Plantinga gives an example:

“I am a suspect in a crime committed yesterday afternoon; I have means, motive, opportunity. I am known to have committed this kind of crime before, and a credible eyewitness claims to have seen me at the crime scene. Nevertheless, I clearly remember spending yesterday afternoon on a solitary hike miles from the scene of the crime. Then I know that I did not commit the crime, despite the fact that my committing is more probable than not with respect

⁷ Plantinga 2000, 156.

to public evidence. So probability with respect to public evidence is by no means necessary for rationality, justification or warrant - even of beliefs that are among the deliverances of reason.”⁸

3. Control over belief-formation

Plantinga’s account can be assessed under many respects.⁹ The question I would like to ask is: How does his account correspond to the self-understanding of Christians? Does Plantinga’s account of Christian belief conform to the way in which many Christians think of their religious believing? Does it correspond to the way Christian belief was traditionally understood? Traditionally, faith was understood as a theological virtue: as a habit of belief formation, designed and infused by God, in order that the person, graced with this habit, is enabled to assent to the central claims of the Christian content. What is believed is a bearer of truth value. And the claim is: the truth value is that of truth. The Christian propositions are not proposed for belief in order to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but rather in order to give orientation for one’s entire life such as to gain the last goal: beatitude. Plantinga’s account matches the traditional understanding so far. However, there is one point of dissimilarity. The tradition stressed one point in the process of assenting to the content of faith: the assent is thought to be brought about by an act of will. There is a decision involved on the part of the believer. Thus, there is Augustine’s famous *dictum*: “No one can believe unless he wants to”.¹⁰ And Thomas Aquinas defines the act of faith as follows: “Now the act of believing is an act of the intellect assenting to the Divine truth at the command of the will moved by the grace of God, so that it is subject to the free-will in relation to God”.¹¹ The object of faith is not such as to determine the intellect necessarily. The propositions of faith are not such as to produce necessarily assent in the person who grasps them as it is the case with self-evident

⁸ Plantinga 2001, 220.

⁹ For a detailed discussion of Plantinga’s theory of knowledge in general see Kvanvig, Jonathan L. (ed.) 1996 *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology. Essays in Honor of Plantinga’s Theory of Knowledge*. Lanham. For a discussion of Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* see Swinburne, Richard 2001 “Plantinga on Warrant” in *Religious Studies* 37, 203-214. Löffler, Alexander 2002 “Wie können christliche Glaubensüberzeugungen Wissen bilden? Einige Anmerkungen zu Alvin Plantingas Aquin/Calvin-Modell” in *Theologie und Philosophie* 77, 233-245. Zagzebski, Linda 2002 “Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* and the Aquinas/Calvin Model” in *Philosophical Books* 43, 117-123. Löffler, Winfried 2003 “Externalistische Erkenntnistheorie oder theologische Anthropologie? Anmerkungen zur Reformed Epistemology“ in L. Nagl (ed.) 2003 *Religion nach der Religionskritik*. Wien, 123-147.

¹⁰ Augustinus, *In Ioan*, tract. 26, n. 2. *Patrologia Latina* 35, 1607: *Intrare quisdam potest nolens, accedere ad altare potest nolens, accipere Sacramentum potest nolens: credere non potest nisi volens.*

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II II 2,9: *Ipsum autem credere est actus intellectus assentientis veritati divinae ex imperio voluntatis a Deo motae per gratiam; et sic subiacet libero arbitrio in ordine ad Deum.* For a detailed account of Aquinas’ conception of Faith see Jenkins, John 1997 *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*. Cambridge. Niederbacher, Bruno 2004 *Glaube als Tugend bei Thomas von Aquin. Erkenntnistheoretische und religionsphilosophische Interpretationen*. Stuttgart.

propositions or with propositions which follow syllogistically from self-evident propositions. By getting presented the content of faith a person is not forced to believe it. The person has to make a decision. I guess that many religious believers would say that their religious believing does entail a voluntary element.

In my opinion this is the main point where Plantinga parts from the traditional understanding. It is not that will and affection play no role in his account of faith. In fact he devotes a whole chapter on that topic.¹² The difference lies in the understanding of the role which will and affections play. In Plantinga's view one finds oneself believing.¹³ And the role of will concerns rather the question of whether one loves or hates what one believes. In Augustin's and Aquinas' view however, the assent does not come about, if one does not want it. Thus, they seem to hold a version of cognitive voluntarism. And the question arises: Is cognitive voluntarism tenable?¹⁴

Two things seem to be rather uncontroversial in the debate: First, a person cannot decide to believe the contradictory or the contrary of what seems to be obviously true to her. For example, I cannot decide to believe that $2 + 2 = 5$, or that it is night in Rome when I see that the sun is shining. I do not have voluntary control over every kind of belief formation.

Second, a person does have some sort of indirect control over her belief-formation. It depends on my will whether I take efforts to find arguments for or against a claim, it depends on my will whether I take the effort to go to the library or to look for information.

Now, what about propositions which do not naturally trigger a person's assent by grasping them? What about propositions where some of the evidence speaks for but some against the truth of the propositions? I suggest the view that in such cases moral habits, which we do acquire and for which we are responsible, play a role in the belief-formation. It depends on us whether we are thorough or not. It depends on us how we choose the evidence, how we weigh and evaluate the evidence and when we stop looking for evidence. Affective dispositions can influence us positively or negatively. Envy, too much fear, arrogance, distrust, etc. can influence our view of the evidence and of other persons. And these affective dispositions are partly acquired. We do have some voluntary control over them.

¹² Plantinga 2000: 290-323.

¹³ Compare Pritchard, Duncan 2003 "Reforming Reformed Epistemology", in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 43-66, here 55: Pritchard stresses the "voluntary" element in religious belief which seems to be absent in most forms of perceptual beliefs. Normal religious belief, he says quoting Keith DeRose, is rarely understood in terms of being "zapped" by a divinity but more in terms of being "nudged" or "invited" towards a certain doxastic commitment.

¹⁴ There is a big discussion on the question of cognitive voluntarism. Compare: Williams, Bernard 1970 "Deciding to Believe", in H. Kiefer & M. Munitz (eds.) *Language, Belief, and Metaphysics*. Albany, New York. Winters, Barbara 1979 "Believing at Will", in: *The Journal of Philosophy* 76, 243-256. Bennett, Jonathan 1990 "Why Is Belief Involuntary?", in: *Analysis* 50, 87-107. Eisen Murphy, Claudia 2000 "Aquinas on Voluntary Beliefs", in: *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 74,4, 569-597. Swinburne, Richard 2001 *Epistemic Justification*. Oxford, 38-40 and 165-166.

Thomas Aquinas holds a view like this. When he considers the relation between will and intellect, he utilizes the distinction between the exercise of an act and the specification of an act. He writes:

“[...] we must take note that the act of the reason may be considered in two ways. First, as to the exercise of the act. And considered thus, the act of the reason can always be commanded: as when one is told to be attentive, and to use one's reason. Second, as to the object; in respect of which two acts of the reason have to be noticed. One is the act whereby it apprehends the truth about something. This act is not in our power: because it happens in virtue of a natural or supernatural light. Consequently in this respect, the act of the reason is not in our power, and cannot be commanded. The other act of the reason is that whereby it assents to what it apprehends. If, therefore, that which the reason apprehends is such that it naturally assents thereto, e.g. the first principles, it is not in our power to assent or dissent to the like: assent follows naturally, and consequently, properly speaking, is not subject to our command. But some things which are apprehended do not convince the intellect to such an extent as not to leave it free to assent or dissent, or at least suspend its assent or dissent, on account of some cause or other; and in such things assent or dissent is in our power, and is subject to our command.”¹⁵

The exercise of cognitive powers and virtues is within our power. But the determination of the act is only in some restricted cases within our power. It is within my power to open or shut the eyes. But it is not within my power to determine that I see green instead of red. It is within my power to make a research and to use scientific syllogisms. However, it is not within my power that I get p as conclusion instead of q. Aquinas thinks that there is a class of objects of cognition which are also under a certain voluntary control as regards the determination of the act (*quantum ad determinationem actus*). He thinks that the objects of religious belief are of that kind. Probably he thinks also that some contingent objects of cognition are of that kind, e.g. the beliefs *Emma is arrogant*, or *It is right to visit Emma in the hospital*. I suppose that this kind of cognitive voluntarism is a tenable position. In what follows I will present an analysis of Faith that on the one hand displays similarities with Plantinga's concerns and that on the other hand takes the voluntary element of Faith into account. It is the view which John Henry Newman developed in his *University Sermons*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I II 17,6.

¹⁶ Newman, John Henry 1871 *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford between A.D. 1826 and 1843*. Edited by D.M. MacKinnon and J.D. Holmes, London 1970.

4. John Henry Newman's account of Faith

Newman pleads for a plurality of non-reducible cognitive habits which work in their own way in moving from grounds to beliefs with a certain content. He warns against the “usurpations of reason”, that is the vice of taking features of one cognitive habit to be normative for others.¹⁷ Newman contrasts faith and syllogistic reasoning as two different *habits* of the mind:

„Faith is an instrument of knowledge and action, unknown to the world before, a principle *sui generis*, distinct from those which nature supplies, and in particular [...] independent of what is commonly understood as Reason.”¹⁸

„[...] Faith, viewed as an internal habit or act, does not depend upon inquiry and examination, but has its own special basis, whatever that is [...].”¹⁹

Newman understands faith as a habit of the mind. It is a quality which enables a person to reliably attain a result in the right way. What is gained by the habit of faith is knowledge. Thus faith is a *cognitive* habit. If a belief results from acts of faith, this belief is thereby not only claimed to be proper, apt, adequate, but to constitute knowledge. And faith is independent, not-reducible, to the habit of belief-formation which Newman calls syllogistic reason. Faith is a principle *sui generis*, with its own special basis. Faith is similar to other belief-forming faculties where substantial questions of great complexity are concerned: moral perception, conscience, judgment about other people's character, etc.²⁰ Plantinga would agree with this account so far.

A second point of similarity between Newman and Plantinga concerns epistemological externalism. Not all the grounds which make for the justification of one's beliefs need to be immediately cognitively accessible to the cognizer. “Its justification lies in their success.”²¹ In the sermon “Implicit and Explicit Reason” Newman wants to show “[...] that the reasonings and opinions which are involved in the act of Faith are latent and implicit; that the mind reflecting on itself is able to bring them out into some definite and methodical form; that Faith, however, is complete without its reflective faculty, which, in matter of fact, often does interfere with it, and must be used cautiously”.²² Thus he makes a distinction between:

¹⁷ Newman 1970, 54-74.

¹⁸ Newman 1970, 179.

¹⁹ Newman 1970, 184.

²⁰ Mitchell, Basil 1990 „Newman as a Philosopher“, in: I. Ker & A. Kill (eds.) 1990 *Newman after a Hundred Years*. Oxford, 223-246, here 239.

²¹ Newman 1970, 257.

²² Newman 1970, 277.

(1) having grounds for believing that p.

(2) knowing, or being able to tell, the grounds for believing that p.

In many areas of belief formation there are adequate grounds for believing something. This is the case in moral perception, in conscience, in judging what is right and wrong. “And so in the case of questions in which party spirit, or political opinion, or ethical principle, or personal feeling, is concerned, men have a surprising sagacity, often unknown to themselves, in finding their own place.”²³ However, these grounds may not be immediately accessible to the cognizer. People “may argue badly, but they reason well; that is, their professed grounds are no sufficient measures of their real ones. And in like manner, though the evidence with which Faith is content is apparently inadequate to its purpose, yet this is no proof of real weakness or imperfection in its reasoning.”²⁴ “The sheep could not tell *how* they knew the Good Shepherd; they had not analysed their own impressions or cleared the grounds of their knowledge, yet doubtless grounds there were: they, however, acted spontaneously on a loving Faith.”²⁵ Thus, faith is a habit like other habits by which people are capable to get it reliably right in some area. Newman mentions the skilful mountain climber, who cognises the situation of the stiff cliff, who, “by quick eye, prompt hand, and firm foot, ascends how he knows not himself, by personal endowments and by practice, rather than by rule, leaving no track behind him, and unable to teach another”²⁶; he mentions “the sagacity with which a great general knows what his friends and enemies are about and what will be the final result”²⁷. Whether one gets it right in concrete matters depends on whether one has the non-rule-governed “inward faculty” which Newman sometimes calls “instinct” and later in his work *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* the “illative sense”. The illative sense is an extension of Aristotle’s *phronesis* to all concrete reasoning which is not strictly rule-governed. It is a virtue by which a person is enabled to discern which belief is most strongly supported by a number of considerations with respect to which there are no general rules for weighting them and getting a result.²⁸ One acquires the illative sense by long experience in dealing with the subject matter in question. The illative sense is at work in many areas: in historical inquiry, interpretation of texts, in creative scientific work, and in religious belief. Note that Newman is not committed to the view of a pure experiential base which justifies the

²³ Newman 1970, 211.

²⁴ Newman 1970, 212.

²⁵ Newman 1970, 281.

²⁶ Newman 1970, 257.

²⁷ Newman 1970, 217.

²⁸ Compare Alston, William 1999 „The Distinctiveness of the Epistemology of Religious Belief“, in: G. Brüntrup & R. Tacelli (eds.) 1999 *The Rationality of Theism*. Dordrecht, 237-254, here 246.

corresponding belief. The justifying base can be considered as a mixed bag of sense impressions and background beliefs.

Where does the voluntary element come into the picture? Moral habits play a role when Newman comes to explain disagreements in different areas of cognition. In matters of politics, ethics, economy, art, taste, history, and religion disagreements abound.²⁹ Newman explains the disagreements by appealing to a person's preferences (beliefs, desires) and emotions. He speaks of "antecedent considerations", "previous notices", "prepossessions", "(in a good sense of the word) prejudices", "hopes, fears, and existing opinions", "principles", "presumptions".³⁰ How people evaluate the evidence, what they believe and disbelieve also depends among other things on their wants, emotions and background-beliefs.

"Most men must and do decide by the principles of thought and conduct which are habitual to them; that is, the antecedent judgment, with which a man approaches the subject of religion, not only acts as a bearing this way or that, - as causing him to go out to meet the evidence in a greater or less degree, and nothing more, - but, further, it practically colours the evidence, even in a case in which he has recourse to evidence, and interprets it for him."³¹

From the fact of disagreements Newman does not want to draw relativist consequences. He thinks that we are responsible for our wants and the management of our emotions. His thesis is: A morally good disposed person is also in a better position to get it right in cognitive matters.

"In the judgement of a rightly disposed mind, objects are desirable and attainable which irreligious men will consider to be but fancies. Such a correct moral judgment and view of things is the very medium in which the argument for Christianity has its constraining influence [...]"³²

"But a man is responsible for his faith, because he is responsible for his likings and dislikings, his hopes and his opinions, on all of which his faith depends."³³

"[...] and what he thinks likely, depends surely on nothing else than the general state of his mind, the state of his convictions, feelings, tastes, and wishes."³⁴

²⁹ Newman 1970, 209-210.

³⁰ Newman 1970, 187-190.

³¹ Newman 1970, 227.

³² Newman 1970, 191.

³³ Newman 1970, 192.

³⁴ Newman 1970, 226.

Thus, for Newman the sharp dichotomy between the theoretical and the practical is not tenable, at least in some areas. The question arises whether there is a general epistemology which is able to take Newman's insight into account. I would suggest that there is one: Virtue epistemology.

5. The rise of virtue epistemology

Virtue epistemology was proposed first in 1980 as a way out of the debate between foundationalist and coherentist theories of justification by Ernest Sosa. He formulated the program for virtue epistemology in parallel to *virtue ethics* the following way:

„The important move for our purposes is the stratification of justification. Primary justification attaches to virtues and other dispositions, to stable dispositions to act, through their greater contribution of value when compared with alternatives. Secondary justification attaches to particular acts in virtue of their source in virtues or other such justified dispositions. The same strategy may also prove fruitful in epistemology. Here primary justification would apply to intellectual virtues, to stable dispositions for belief acquisition, through their greater contribution toward getting us to the truth. Secondary justification would then attach to particular beliefs in virtue of their source in intellectual virtues or other such justified dispositions.“³⁵

Modern *virtue ethics* was developed as an alternative to two dominant ethical theories: consequentialism and deontology. Both regard the evaluation of acts as primary, the evaluation of persons and their traits as derivative. The idea of virtue ethics is best understood as a thesis about the direction of analysis.³⁶ Normative properties of actions are to be analysed in terms of normative properties of moral agents. Such ethics has been described as person-based rather than act-based. Just as traditional ethical theories like consequentialism and deontology were act-centred, traditional epistemologies like externalism and internalism were belief-centred.³⁷ Virtue epistemology suggests a similar turn of analysis as virtue ethics. The epistemic values of beliefs such as justification, or warrant, are derivative; central or primary is the concept of intellectual virtue.

³⁵ Reprinted in: Sosa, Ernest 1991 *Knowledge in Perspective*. Cambridge, 165-191, here 189.

³⁶ Compare Greco, John "Virtue Epistemology", from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, online at <http://plato.stanford.edu>.

³⁷ Compare Zagzebski, Linda 1996 *Virtues of the Mind*. Cambridge, 7-8.

Plantinga makes the concept of a properly working faculty central to his explication of warrant. Under this respect his account can be seen as a type of virtue epistemology. As cognitive faculties or virtues count perception, memory, approved reasoning skills, testimony. Beliefs acquired or sustained through such virtues, qualify as warranted. They enable a person to form reliably true beliefs. Amongst epistemic vices one could count guesswork, wishful thinking, ignoring contrary evidence, etc.

This, however, is only one type of virtue epistemology. There are virtue epistemologists who count rather such habits as intellectual open-mindedness, thoroughness, carefulness, observance, perseverance, autonomy, courage, and humility as cognitive virtues.³⁸ These habits are more like virtues of character. Generally, virtue is seen as an excellence which enables a person reliably to achieve a good result in a good way. A cognitive virtue, then, is an excellence which enables a person to acquire and sustain true beliefs in a good way. Thus, the concept of intellectual virtue combines a success component and a motivational component.³⁹

In my view, the two kinds of accounts of intellectual virtue do not exclude each other. Any reduction to one of them would lead to problems. If one claims that any belief-formation depends on virtues of the second kind one seems to be forced to a much too strong version of cognitive voluntarism which is implausible, for example in the case of simple perceptual beliefs. If one claims that any belief formation depends only on intellectual virtues of the first kind, one is unable to do justice to beliefs which are objects of praise or blame. Thus, I plead for a virtue epistemology that leaves space for an irreducible plurality of accepted ways, practices, or virtues of belief-formation. Such epistemology does not look for one single concept of justification or warrant of beliefs, but for accepted ways of belief-formation which vary from each other. A belief is justified or constitutes knowledge by being the result of virtuous performance. If one accepts a plurality of cognitive virtues one can account for several intuitions about epistemic value.

First, there is a place for externalist and internalist intuitions. Some beliefs are justified by being the outcome of epistemic virtues, without the fulfilment of internal requirements, such as the cognizer's ability to be aware of the grounds, or their adequacy, or the basing relation. Emma's belief *This is Peter*, when she looks at him, is justified, if produced by proper working faculties of person-identification. She is justified in believing *This is Peter*, although she would be unable to tell us, what exactly it is that justifies that belief. Some other beliefs

³⁸ See Zagzebski 1996, 220; 269.

³⁹ See Zagzebski 1996, 165-211.

are justified by being the outcome of virtues, where the fulfilment of some internal accessibility to grounds, adequacy and basing relation is required.

Second, there is a place for the intuition that there must be starting points in our reasonings, and for the intuition that our belief-system must be coherent. The virtuous person has a sense for what can count as a starting point for beliefs in a given situation. She has the right estimation of the cognitive situation and the required safeness of beliefs. Thus, virtue epistemology allows situation-bound foundationalism. At the same time coherence in one's belief-structure can be seen as a virtue. The virtuous person tries to be consistent in her beliefs.

Third, there is a place for the intuition that we are responsible for our beliefs and our belief-formation, and for the intuition that we cannot decide to believe something just like that.

Virtue epistemology can account for these intuitions in a threefold way:

- by distinguishing between cognitive habits and their use. The use of a particular cognitive habit might be under our voluntary control, while the belief one ends up with by using the virtue in question might not be within our power. It is within Emma's power to look at the table, but it is not within her power to acquire the belief *The table is green*.

- by distinguishing cognitive habits the products of which are not under effective voluntary control, and cognitive habits the products of which are. Emma's belief *Peter is arrogant* might be a product of the second kind of cognitive habits.

- by the view that many habits are acquired through exercising in one direction. One is responsible for acquiring a habit. Once a habit, being second nature, is acquired, the corresponding belief-formation occurs *quasi* naturally.

Fourth, there is a place for emotions. The role of emotions in moral philosophy is widely acknowledged. How we morally perceive a situation, and what we think is the right action to take, also depends on our affective states and emotions. Emotions have a role in explaining our moral failings and successes. The virtuous person has the habitual disposition to respond emotionally *adequately* to types of situations and therefore to be enabled to spontaneously make the right choice and perform the right action with a certain pleasure. Similarly, emotions and affective states can play a role in explaining epistemic failings and successes. Appropriate pattern of emotional response may be required for inquiring or believing well.⁴⁰

If one allows a plurality of non-reducible cognitive virtues, the question arises whether they are somehow united. The person must use them properly in order to get to the desired end of having a true belief, justified belief or knowledge. Traditionally the unifying role for moral

⁴⁰ Compare Hookway, Christopher 2002 "Affective States and Epistemic Immediacy", online at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/~phil/staff/hookway/>

virtues was ascribed to the virtue of *phronesis*. On the one hand, *phronesis*, the ability to think well in practical matters, presupposes the moral virtues which enable one to respond emotionally well to types of situations. On the other hand, in order to decide and to act well it is not sufficient to know what one has to do in general, but one needs *phronesis* which enables one to have a proper grasp of the situation and of the particular goal and of the way one achieves that goal.

Virtue epistemology enlarges this account and argues for the importance of *phronesis* in epistemic matters as well. Linda Zagzebski thinks that *phronesis* is a higher order virtue that governs the entire range of moral and intellectual virtues. She identifies three theoretical needs served by *phronesis*: First, by virtue of *phronesis* one is enabled to determine the mean between extremes in those cases in which the virtue is a mean, for example: courage, carefulness, autonomy, perseverance, and humility. Second, by virtue of *phronesis* one is able to mediate between and among the individual moral and intellectual virtues. Third, by virtue of *phronesis* one is enabled to coordinate the various virtues into a single line of thought leading up to a belief.⁴¹

6. Concluding remarks

I have tried to provide an overview of recent developments in religious epistemology in the Christian context. Several controversial topics appeared. The first concerned the proper understanding of religious belief. Philosophers of religion should try to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon. In my view, religion has a regulative and expressive function in the religious person's life. Nevertheless, this does not exclude that religious beliefs are propositional attitudes. We have desires and wants; and we have beliefs about wherein the fulfilment of these desires consists and beliefs about the means that lead to this fulfilment. These beliefs can be true or false.

A second controversial topic concerned the function of arguments for religious belief. Nobody would probably claim that they cannot be useful. The controversy concerns rather the exact determination of the relationship between religious belief and arguments. The following questions can help sorting out positions:

- (1) Are the arguments understood as arguments for believers themselves or for other people?
- (2) Do the arguments have a defeating or a sustaining function?

⁴¹ Zagzebski, Linda 1996, 219-231.

(3) Does every believer need to have defeating and sustaining arguments?

Ad (1): For some persons it might be the case that their religious belief has got such an epistemic status that their belief is warranted even if their belief is not probable with respect to the public evidence. In such cases the function of arguments is not to convince oneself, but to convince other people who do not share the same belief.

Ad (2): For some persons it might be the case that they spontaneously held their religious belief in a basic way; they believed by relying on the testimony of their parents, the religious community, the founder of the religion, God. But some time in their life they encountered irritations and they started doubting. They started asking whether their certainty was appropriate, which grounds they have for their beliefs or whether their religious cognitive faculties are working properly. Such irritations abound. There is the problem of evil, which for many constitutes a source for doubt about the goodness or even about the existence of God. There is the encounter with a plurality of religions which sometimes make claims that contradict each other. In such cases arguments can have two functions: First, the function to defeat the defeater of one's belief. This function of arguing is stressed by Plantinga, and he takes it very seriously. Second, the function to find evidence in favour of one's belief: What sustains the beliefs that there is a God, and that God revealed himself, and that what he revealed is contained in a particular scripture? I guess that in the sight of a plurality of religions a religious person is forced to ask these questions and to find some answers to them.

Ad (3): Here the objection arises that many believers will intellectually not be in a position to produce defeaters against defeaters or to find a theodicy or to gain sustaining arguments. In order to answer this objection I would say that many do have simple versions of arguments. Moreover I would like to bring up the old idea of the division of epistemic labour. In other areas, e.g. in physics, biology, astronomy, lay people are justified in holding particular beliefs without being in a position to understand the details and to know what speaks in favour of them. They are justified by relying on the experts who are in a position to know the details and the evidence. Similarly, simple religious believers are justified in holding their religious belief without being in a position to understand the details and to have arguments and defeaters against defeaters. They are justified by relying on the experts who do have some arguments.

A third controversial topic concerned the estimation of the cognitive role of the will and the emotions. I have tried to argue that in some areas of cognition desires, emotional dispositions and background-beliefs influence the belief formation. Religious belief might be acknowledged as such an area. A virtue epistemology which assumes two types of cognitive

virtues could account for the role of emotion and will regarding the formation of beliefs. Our wants, emotions and background-beliefs come into the picture at several stages: (1) by determining the fields of inquiry; (2) by judging about the appropriateness of cognitive habits, methods, or procedures for a particular inquiry in a certain field; (3) by the way we evaluate the evidence for and against a certain belief; (4) by determining whether the evidence is sufficient for safe belief. The *phronimos* person in the extended sense of *phronesis* would be the person with the relevant moral and cognitive virtues. She would thereby more likely find reliably correct answers for substantial questions of great complexity, also in religious matters, than somebody lacking these virtues.