

# **The Significance of Religious Disagreement**

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God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 11

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# Disagreement Against Faith

# Religious Disagreement

There are theistic religions but also at least some non-theistic religions ... among the enormous variety of religions going under the names 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism'; among the theistic religions, there are strands of Hinduism and Buddhism and American Indian religion as well as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity; and all these differ significantly from one another. Isn't it somehow arbitrary, or irrational, or unjustified, or unwarranted, or even oppressive and imperialistic to endorse one of these as opposed to all the others? According to Jean Bodin, 'each is refuted by all'; must we not agree? ...

To put it in an internal and personal way, I find myself with religious beliefs, and religious beliefs that I realize aren't shared by nearly everyone else. ... And my problem is this: when I become really aware of these other ways of looking at the world, what must or should I do? What is the right sort of attitude to take? What sort of impact should this awareness have on the beliefs I hold and the strength with which I hold them? (Plantinga 1995: 191-93)

# Pluralism, Exclusivism, and Abstentionism

**Pluralism** The diversity of religious traditions is merely apparent: 'the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it' (Oppy and Scott 2010: 284).

**Exclusivism** 'to continue to believe what you have all along believed; you learn about this diversity but continue to believe, that is, take to be true, [your prior religious commitments], consequently taking to be false any beliefs, religious or otherwise, that are incompatible with [them]' (Plantinga 1995: 194).

**Abstentionism** 'the right course ... is to *abstain* from believing the ... proposition and also abstain from believing its denial' (Plantinga 1995: 198–99).  
At least, I ought to withhold from any preferential judgment between any religious traditions which have adherents who are as reasonable and as informed as I am.

# Pluralism

- › The Pluralist solution to disagreement is to argue that it is a **verbal disagreement** – no religious tradition is really privileged.
  - › It permits a pluralism about **expressions** of religion, but offers only one underlying meaning for those diverse verbal formulations.
- › Suppose A and B are facing each other. A says ‘the pub is to the left’, B says ‘it is to the right’. This dispute – though it is hard to characterise it as a dispute – is **merely** verbal.
  - › Because of the relativity of ‘to the left’ to orientation, A and B **agree on the substantive question** of where the pub is; they seem to disagree only because their conversational is superficially like a genuine disagreement – e.g., suppose A is driving and B is a passenger in a car, and they say the same words, in which case the disagreement is genuine.

# Problems with Pluralism

- › The problem, of course, is that we would have to **radically reinterpret** a lot of **non-religious language** to make religious debates non-genuine.
- › For example, when the Torah and Qur'ān prohibit eating pigs (e.g., 'You are prohibited carrion, blood, the flesh of swine', [Qur'ān 5:3](#)), but the New Testament explicitly permits it:
  - Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. ... 'For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body.' (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) ([Mark 7:15-19](#))
- › To reconcile these claims we should have to say 'you are forbidden to eat pigs'/'you are allowed to eat pigs' is somehow merely verbal disagreement – and that would **undermine** the moral commands in scripture, because 'X is forbidden' doesn't necessarily mean you aren't allowed to do X.
- › There is also the interpretative question of what the unitary underlying meaning **is**. (One suspects that pluralists are secret monists who just reinterpret everyone else as agreeing with them.)

# Relativism

- › Pluralism is akin to **relativism**, the idea that some disagreements are not merely verbal and yet neither are they genuine, because there is no objective standard of truth for the apparently disputed matter (Feldman 2007: 197).
  - » A potential example: 'disagreements' about personal taste (MacFarlane 2012).
- › In this case, the relativist might suggest that A and B are saying incompatible things, but they are each correct in doing so, because each speaks of what is true **relative to their own perspective**, and there is no universal perspective to resolve the inconsistency.
- › Note that relativists face a similar difficulty to that faced by the pluralist: if I can complacently retain my belief because it is true-for-me, and you can complacently retain your belief on similar grounds, then no moral prescription I offer can have motivating force for you.
  - » **Moral relativists** embrace this conclusion (Harman 1975), but it's hard to see that as a charitable approach to religious morality.
- › And this is to say nothing of how difficult it is to make the idea of relative truth **coherent** (Boghossian 2006).



# The Moral Argument against Exclusivism

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’. (William Cantwell Smith, cited in Plantinga (1995), p. 197)

- › The idea: if Christian A expresses disagreement with Muslim B, that is an implicit censure of B – but that censure is not one A is **entitled** to make.
  1. Maybe A is not entitled because B isn't doing anything wrong at all in believing as they do (returning to **the controversy over Uniqueness**); or
  2. Maybe B is doing something wrong in believing as they do; but then A is equally doing something wrong, so A is a **hypocrite**.
- › Is Abstentionism equally censorious, since abstainer C also thinks B's attitude of believing is incorrect (Plantinga 1995: 199)?
- › They are censorious, but not hypocritical, since the abstainer themselves suspends judgment.

# Intellectual arrogance

- › Grant that intellectual arrogance is a moral and intellectual failing:

Intolerant and dismissive responses ... fail to conform to the most fundamental requirements of effective thinking. To respond to someone's argument in a dismissive way has the effect, perhaps intended, of cutting off discussion. It is as if one said, 'I refuse to think carefully about what you said. I will simply stick to my own beliefs about the topic.' (Feldman 2007: 195)

- › One initial suggestion is that to avoid arrogance, each of us ought to respond, on becoming aware of the diversity of religious opinions, by abstaining from religious belief, and abandoning any previous religious commitments.
  - ›› A view of faith like Buchak's would still allow religious practice in that case, even if it falls short of belief (Buchak 2012).

# Modest Exclusivism

- › However the foregoing argument may be too hasty. It isn't clear that merely having a belief or attitude that is at odds with another's leads to the flaw of intellectual arrogance.
- › Put another way: the diversity of religious opinion might require intellectual **humility** (accepting that you might be wrong), but doesn't require intellectual **spinelessness** (abandoning your own considered opinions).
- › One might well have carefully evaluated all the evidence, including the evidence others have presented, and yet have come to a different conclusion.
- › In other words, exclusivism need not be **proselytizing**; one think someone else is wrong and nevertheless respect their intellectual autonomy and even respect their belief (Feldman 2007: 200).
  - » Even if Uniqueness is true, and everyone ought to bring themselves to conform to the uniquely rational attitude, that doesn't mean it becomes **our obligation** to force our conversational partners into that conformity. In a democracy, it may be all-things-considered better that everyone have a voice than that everyone agrees.

# A General Epistemic Argument for Abstentionism

- › Given that, our question becomes: can humble and respectful exclusivism be epistemically rational, or must we abstain?
  - (S1) There is persistent genuine religious disagreement among serious and sensible people. (Plantinga 1995: 191–92)
  - (S2) The correct attitude for participants in persistent genuine disagreements is to suspend judgment on the disputed matters. (Feldman 2007: 212)
  - (S3) The correct attitude in light of persistent religious disagreement is to suspend judgment on religious matters. (From S1, S2)
- › So we ought not to **believe** any religion.
  - ›› What about **faith**, in Buchak's non-doxastic sense? I return to that later.
- › This may not be permanent – after all, we might get future evidence that undermines the persistent disagreement. But **right now no one rationally believes any religion.**
- › The crucial premise is the epistemological claim S2. How can we justify it?

# The Epistemology of Disagreement

# Epistemic 'Inferiors'

- › When I disagree with a novice logic student about whether  $p \rightarrow q, \neg p \therefore \neg q$  is a valid argument, I become aware of another opinion about the world, but I am not inclined to change my mind in the slightest.
- › Any good theory of disagreement should accommodate the fact that I am entitled to this attitude, or in general, that **experts aren't rationally required to defer to novices**.
- › Maybe someone is making a mistake in reasoning. I am an expert about this subject matter; it is not likely to be me.
- › To make this observation is not arrogance, though of course it can be made arrogantly. Unless we are to reject the idea of expertise entirely, one way in which it manifests is in asymmetries in who is more likely to be in error in case of a mistake.

# Evidential Asymmetries

- › Other disagreements arise when no one reasons poorly, but where one side is **better informed** (has better evidence to reason from).
  - › E.g., I look at some postgraduate admissions data, and I see that the overall probability of admission is much higher for men than for women. I reasonably conclude that discrimination is occurring.
  - › **You know something I do not:** you have the statistics broken down by department, and you can see in each department women are admitted at a higher rate than men. Since it is departments that make admissions decisions, you conclude that discrimination isn't the explanation – rather, women apply differentially to more competitive departments (Cartwright 1979: 433).
  - › You have **better evidence** than me, even though we are both good at evaluating the evidence we have. You are entitled to retain your belief in the face of our disagreement, if you know about this difference between us.

# Epistemic Peers

- › Sometimes disagreements occur between equals:

people are *epistemic peers* when they are roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers, background information, and so on. When people have had a full discussion of a topic and have not withheld relevant information, we will say they have *shared their evidence* about that topic. (Feldman 2007: 201)

- › Cases of **disagreement between peers who have pooled their evidence** is particularly interesting.
  - » For here we cannot respond by dismissing the disagreement as a product of an asymmetry in cognitive abilities, and there is no disparity in the evidence we have.
- › If I think I've done a good job in reasoning from our shared evidence, I ought to think it **no less likely** that my peer has too.
- › Our disagreement shows that one of us has made a mistake – but why should I think it is my peer **rather than me**?



# Responding to Disagreement: the Equal Weight view

After examining this evidence, I find in myself an inclination, perhaps a strong inclination, to think that this evidence supports *P*. It may even be that I can't help but believe *P*. But I see that another person, every bit as sensible and serious as I, has an opposing reaction. ... It's difficult to know everything about his mental life and thus difficult to tell exactly why he believes as he does. One of us must be making some kind of mistake or failing to see some truth. But I have no basis for thinking that the one making the mistake is him rather than me. And the same is true of him. And in that case, the right thing for both of us to do is to suspend judgment on *P*.... This is a modest view, in the sense that it argues for a kind of compromise with those with whom one disagrees. It implies that one should give up one's beliefs in the light of the sort of disagreement under discussion. This is a kind of modesty in response to disagreement from one's peers. This is also a sceptical view, in the limited sense that it denies the existence of reasonable beliefs in a significant range of cases. (Feldman 2007: 212-13)

# Religious Disagreement and Equal Weight

- › The invocation of epistemic peers means we need to refine our argument from religious disagreement.
- › It seems likely that much religious disagreement is **not** between epistemic peers.
  - › For example, it is not implausible that disagreement between the naive believer on the street and a professor of moral philosophy over whether we can be 'good without God' is not a case of peer disagreement.
- › But some disagreement is between peers, which is part of the 'lived experience' of this course: that there are sincere, well-informed, competent reasoners who are theists (of many stripes), as well as those who are atheists. We cannot fault them as victims of ignorance or epistemic vice.
- › **If we respect them, epistemically, we ought to recognise that our disagreement indicates that we are as likely as them to be making a mistake.**

# Do We Share Evidence?

- › Someone might object in principle: *can any real disagreements involve genuine epistemic peers?*
  - › Consider a radical interpretation of James' (1896) idea that some pieces of evidence for a hypothesis **cannot** be obtained 'unless we meet the hypothesis half-way': that I will not **even be able to recognise a certain piece of evidence as evidence**, unless I'm already sympathetic to *h*.
  - › If so, then if I do not believe such a hypothesis, or am not sympathetic to it, it will not be possible for me to pool my evidence with someone who does believe the hypothesis.
- › A less radical reading of James is that, unless we're already sympathetic to *h*, there is evidence for *h* we **won't** generally manage to acquire. The moderate Jamesian can allow that I can acquire such evidence via **testimony** from those who are sympathetic to *h*.
- › Yet even if this is possible in principle, one might suspect that, in practice, very few sectarian disputes actually involve the serious and reflective engagement and full pooling of evidence required for the equal weight view to obtain.

# Permission and Disagreement

# Uniqueness and Disagreement

- › We characterised the dispute between James and Clifford in part as over this principle:  
**Uniqueness** ‘a body of evidence justifies at most ... one attitude toward any particular proposition’ (Feldman 2007: 205).
- › This principle returns here, for the equal weight view entails that there is a uniquely rational response to disagreement: **abstain!**
  - ›› Many have linked the acceptance of Uniqueness to the adoption of ‘conciliatory’ views about the right response to peer disagreement, though there are complexities involved (Christensen 2009: 763–64).
- › In Clifford’s terms, a peer disagreement **undermines** any right you previously had to believe.
- › Disagreement shows you that your evidence is not after all sufficient, because a peer with the same evidence formed a different opinion. Clifford’s Principle then tells you that you ought not to believe – and you shouldn’t adopt your peer’s equally unsupported view! – and hence you need to suspend judgment.

# Steadfast Views

- › The Equal Weight view, and the Abstentionism it appears to result in, is one end of a spectrum of possible response to disagreement.

At the other end are views on which one may typically, or at least not infrequently, maintain one's confidence in the face of others who believe otherwise, even if those others seem one's equals in terms of the sorts of qualifications listed above. Let us call this the 'Steadfast' end of the spectrum. (Christensen 2009: 756)

- › Exclusivism is a steadfast view of religious disagreement.
- › Steadfast views can vary significantly over what may be required of you after learning of a disagreement.
  - › For example: an **acknowledging steadfast** view might say that you are obligated to look into the causes of disagreement, and attempt to find new evidence to support the view you continue to hold. (I have some thoughts about this: Eagle (2014).)
  - › Another **dismissive steadfast** view might permit you to keep your current opinion and to dismiss any significance of the disagreement.

# Steadfast Views and Uniqueness

- › Steadfast views, including Exclusivism, are also compatible with Uniqueness, if one dismissively takes a disagreement to indicate the **error of my peer** (Feldman 2007: 211).
- › Perhaps the unique rational attitude, even in light of disagreement, is that all parties to the dispute should come to believe **what I believe!**

the believer in question doesn't really think the beliefs in question *are* on a relevant epistemic par. She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief, and even that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar.... But she must still think that there is an important epistemic difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has *made a mistake*, or *has a blind spot*, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate. (Plantinga 1995: 204-5)

# Can we be rationally dismissively steadfast?

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 the others are not. We can of course claim this; and indeed virtually every religious tradition has done so, regarding alternative forms of religious either as false or as confused and inferior versions of itself. But the ... rational justification ... for treating one's own form of religious experience as a cognitive response ... to a divine reality must ... equally apply to the religious experience of others. In acknowledging this we are obeying the intellectual Golden Rule of granting to others a premise on which we rely ourselves. Persons living within other traditions, then, are equally justified in trusting their own distinctive religious experience and in forming their beliefs on the basis of it. For the 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, in Oppy and Scott (2010), p. 284)

- › As Hick says elsewhere, your religious beliefs are a matter of **luck**, and you ought not be dogmatic where your beliefs could have easily gone another way.



# Epistemic Symmetry and Permissivism

- › If this is right, exclusivists should adopt a **moderate** version of a steadfast view, recognising the rationality of their disagreeing peers.
- › If two moderates disagree, their exclusivism will make them each judge that they themselves are rational in retaining their diverging prior beliefs.
- › Being fully informed peers, they will recognise the **symmetry** of the situation; and hence they **may** each regard the other as justified.
- › If so, they will deny Uniqueness, and opt for some form of **epistemic permissivism**:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. ... it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators. (Rosen 2001: 71–72)

# Does Permissivism Rationalize Incoherent Beliefs?

Suppose a detective has strong evidence incriminating Lefty and also has strong evidence incriminating Righty of the same crime. Assume that the detective knows that only one suspect could be guilty. One might think that since a case could be made for either suspect, the detective could reasonably believe that Lefty is guilty and Righty is not, but could also reasonably believe that Righty is guilty and Lefty is not. She gets to choose. ...

I think, however, that this analysis of the case is seriously mistaken. It is clear that the detectives should suspend judgment in this sort of case (given only two possible candidates for guilt). The evidence for Lefty is evidence against Righty. Believing a particular suspect to be guilty on the basis of this combined evidence is simply not reasonable. Furthermore, it is hard to make clear sense of the thought that the other belief is reasonable. Suppose one of the detectives believes that Lefty is guilty. She can then infer that Righty is not guilty. But if she can draw this inference, she cannot also reasonably think that it is reasonable to conclude that Righty is guilty. This combination of beliefs simply does not make sense. (Feldman 2007: 204-5)

# Does Permissivism Make Epistemic Standards Arbitrary?

[Suppose that] how we come to adhere to certain epistemic standards... is just a matter of education. I follow standards  $S$  because I was inculcated with them at MIT. But had I attended Berkeley, I would have been inculcated with standards  $S'$  instead. Given my total evidence as input,  $S$  and  $S'$  deliver the conclusions  $P$ , and not- $P$  respectively. ... I learn that if I attend MIT I will inevitably inherit standards  $S$  from my mentors, which given the evidence will lead me to believe  $P$ . Attending Berkeley will result in my adhering to standards  $S'$  and hence arriving at the conclusion not- $P$ . Now surely the prospect of several years of graduate school will seem rather pointless no matter how passionately curious I am as to whether  $P$ . ... I might as well choose a grad school to attend and hence opinions to hold by a preference for Massachusetts weather, or by flipping a coin. Once I have filled out the enrolment form for MIT say, I will know that unless something gets in the way, in a few years I will be of the opinion that  $P$ . ... But of course it would be absurd to form an opinion on the matter by an arbitrary choice when I don't even know what to make of the evidence. (White 2005: 452)

# Summing Up

- › The upshot of all this: if we are **exclusivists**, we must either think those disagree with us are rational (permissive views) or irrational (dismissive views).
- › Hick argues that we could easily have had a different belief; it is contingency or luck that we have the religious beliefs we do. This is a problem for either sort of exclusivist.
  - › If we are dismissive, we think we are not only lucky to have the beliefs we have, but lucky to be rational. But rationality is a matter of reasons, not luck!
  - › If we are permissive exclusivists, we think we would have been rational even if we'd had a different belief (Feldman), perhaps because our evaluation of why a belief is rational may depend on historical accident (White). But this too seems irrational, because it makes rationality arbitrary.
- › If so, we ought not be exclusivists; we ought to reject permissivism, and opt for a conciliatory view.
- › Acknowledging that others are no less reasonable than me then requires acknowledging that I may well be wrong. **If disagreement tells you your opinions may be wrong, then you ought not to continue to hold them!**

# Steadfast Views: Right Reasons

- › One steadfast view tackles this directly: **right reasons** (Kelly 2005).
- › In a disagreement, the rational agents involved have already weighed up the evidence about  $P$ , and there is every chance that they did it correctly, on the basis of what are in fact the **right reasons**.
- › So my belief is **not** a matter of luck, and my reasons mean I couldn't easily have had a different belief.
  - › I've reasoned from the really decisive pieces of evidence, rather than the (what will then turn out to be) misleading pieces that the peer focuses on.
- › One needn't abandon a belief that is in fact based on good evidence without reason to think the evidence doesn't support the belief; disagreement provides no substantive reason for thinking you have made a mistake.
  - › Consider Plantinga's case (Plantinga 1995: 204): that I disagree with the racist bigot doesn't in any way make it reasonable for me to set aside my beliefs formed on a reliable and correct basis in favour of taking his poorly grounded beliefs seriously.
  - › I don't **know** they are poorly grounded, but if they in fact are, I do wrong in suspending and right in standing my ground.

# Mapping the Debate over Disagreement

- › The debate over disagreement can be characterised as involving two questions:
  1. Can there be more than one rational response to evidence? (No: Uniqueness; Yes: permissivism)
  2. Does disagreement with a peer require us to change our mind? (No: steadfast; Yes: conciliatory)
- › In that light, the space of options might look like this:

Table 1: A Rough Taxonomy of Disagreement

	Uniqueness	Permissivism
Conciliatory	Abstentionism/Equal-weight	Self-favouring/unequal weight
Steadfast	Dogmatic Exclusivism	Moderate/Jamesian Exclusivism

- › What about 'right reasons'? May be dogmatic or moderate.

# Faith and Disagreement

# Religious Faith and Disagreement

- › If that is what religious disagreement does to **belief**, still we can ask: Ought we to have **faith**, in Buchak's non-doxastic sense (Buchak 2012)?
  - (S<sub>3</sub>) The correct attitude concerning actual persistent religious disagreement is to suspend judgment on religious matters. (Equal Weight/Conciliatory)
  - (S<sub>4</sub>) Religious faith is rational only if declining to gather more evidence to ground that faith is rational. (Buchak 2012)
  - (S<sub>5</sub>) If one has rationally suspended judgment, then one is not rational in declining to gather more evidence. (Premise)
  - (SC) ∴ Religious faith is not rational. (from S<sub>3</sub>, S<sub>4</sub>, S<sub>5</sub>)



# Disagreement and Faith

- › If the equal weight view is correct, then disagreement ought to make me suspend judgment.
- › Recall Buchak:
  - faith in  $X$  is rational only if the available evidence is such that no potential piece of evidence would tell conclusively enough against  $X$ . (Buchak 2012: 539)
- › But in the case of suspended judgment as to whether  $X$ , we have a middling credence in  $X$ , around 50/50. We know that some peer did think that the present evidence did tell conclusively enough against  $X$  to disbelieve it. We should surely recognise that there is potential for my peer to be **vindicated**.
- › So in cases of peer disagreement, my suspended judgment should make me **prefer to gather more evidence** about  $X$  before committing to any course of action.
- › Hence I will not act from faith, according to Buchak.

# Querying the Argument

- › One weak point, from Buchak's perspective, is (S5): that in cases of suspended judgment, expressions of faith are irrational because one should always seek more evidence.
- › If faith is purely a kind of epistemic attitude, like belief, then (S5) is true.
- › But if Buchak is right, then whether acting on faith is rational depends also on the **utility function** in question.
  - ›› Even credence of 0.5 might be enough to justify an act of faith, if additional evidence comes only at a known sufficiently high cost, and if the pay-off for 'seizing the moment' is potentially high enough.
  - ›› Even more clearly if suspension isn't having middling credence, but having **no well-defined credence** at all (or interval-valued credence with a very wide interval).

# Postponing Choice and Suspending Judgment

- › In support of (S5), there is a *prima facie* case for this principle:
  - Postpone When one suspends judgment about *X*, one should defer making a choice about whether to perform an action when that action's rationality depends on the truth of *X*.
    - › So if I'm in suspension about Christianity, I ought to defer any choice about whether to go to church until I resolve my suspension – I certainly shouldn't think, *there's every chance I'm doing the prudentially unreasonable thing, but I should do it anyway.*
- › If Postpone is right, and we aren't to defer indefinitely, then we should gather more evidence: that is, more or less, the upshot of (S5).
- › If Postpone is right, Buchak's analysis of faith is wrong; she thinks sometimes acting from faith is reasonable even when one has suspended judgment.
  - › Postpone is also in tension with the Jamesian inspiration of Buchak's account: sometimes we cannot postpone a choice, yet we can still be rational.
- › The question of what consequences suspended judgment has for action remains unresolved.

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