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The Ethics of Religious Belief: A Recent History

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We begin with some truth in advertising: our title's *and* is really the logician's *inclusive or*. In other words, not all the essays in this book are strictly about God *and* the ethics of belief (where "the ethics of belief" refers to a specific research program in epistemology). Rather, some are mainly about God, whereas others are about God and belief; some focus on the ethics of belief, whereas still others are about *both* God and the ethics of belief. Most were first drafted for a 2002 conference in honor of Nicholas Wolterstorff upon his retirement from teaching; thus, the range of topics reflects his research interests as well as those of the authors.

The subtitle echoes the title of an edited volume published exactly fifty years ago: *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.[1] The goal of that volume was to offer a sampling of a newly active research program in analytic philosophy, a program that the editors referred to as "philosophical theology" rather than "philosophy of religion" because of the latter term's association in those days with Hegelian thought.[2] The first *New Essays* dealt with religious topics of philosophical interest ranging from the nature of God and the rationality of theism to the metaphysical possibility of an afterlife and the status of religious language. This volume, likewise, provides a snapshot of the field – fifty years along – and addresses many of the same topics. Because Hegel's grip on the term has loosened in the interim, we have reverted to "philosophy of religion."

In what follows, we will first characterize the "ethics of belief" debate in epistemology, and then discuss how it relates to questions about *religious* belief and practice in particular. This will set the stage for a brief sketch of the history of philosophy of religion since *New Essays*, and of how these essays fit into it. We will conclude with a description of each essay individually and make a case for including them all under the rubric of the ethics of belief *broadly* construed.

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THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

Narrowly construed, the ethics of belief debate revolves around the issue of whether there are norms governing our various practices of belief formation and, if there are, whether they are genuinely *moral* norms or norms of some other sort. Is it always *wrong* (or irrational, or impractical) to hold a belief without having sufficient evidence for it? Is it always *right* (or rational, or prudent) to hold beliefs on the basis of evidence, and to withhold them in the absence of evidence?

The *locus classicus* is an essay called "The Ethics of Belief" by William Kingdon Clifford – the nineteenth-century philosopher/mathematician whom William James dubbed "that delicious *enfant terrible*" of doxastic abstemiousness. In epistemological circles, Clifford is chiefly remembered for two things: a story and a principle. The story is that of a shipowner who is planning to sell tickets for a transatlantic voyage. It strikes him that his ship is old, and doubts creep into his mind about its seaworthiness. Knowing that repairs would be costly and cause a delay, he manages to push these doubts away and form the "sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel is thoroughly safe and seaworthy." He sells tickets, bids the passengers farewell, and then quietly collects the insurance money when the ship goes down in a mid-Atlantic squall.

According to Clifford (who himself once survived a shipwreck, and must have found this behavior particularly deplorable), the owner in this case is "verily guilty of the death of those men" because even though he sincerely believed that the ship was safe, "he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him." After making this diagnosis, Clifford changes the example: the ship doesn't meet a watery demise, but rather makes it safe and sound into the New York harbor. Does that affect the shipowner's culpability with respect to his belief? "Not one jot," says Clifford: he is equally guilty – equally blameworthy – for having believed something on insufficient evidence. Then Clifford gives us his famous principle: "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence."[3]

In his response to Clifford, James famously sniffs at the impracticable stringency of this principle, plumping instead for the more liberal policy that we often have the "right to believe" even when we lack sufficient evidence (and even when we *know* that we lack it).[4] In places, James goes further and suggests that in certain cases, it is not merely permitted but *positively commendable* or even *rationally required* that we believe on insufficient evidence.[5] He concludes

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by upbraiding Clifford for his demurral about religious belief in particular:

When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and *wait* – acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true – till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and sense working together may have raked in evidence enough, – this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave.[6]

Although the phrase "ethics of belief" may be of Clifford's coinage, there were obviously ethics of belief well before the nineteenth century. Descartes says in the *Meditations* that when forming a judgment, "it is clear by the natural light that perception of the intellect should precede the determination of the will." In the search for certain knowledge (*scientia*), at least, there is an obligation to withhold assent from any proposition the truth of which is not clearly perceived by the intellect.[7] In other contexts, it may be both appropriate and advantageous to hold a mere "opinion" (*opinio*) whose truth is not clearly and distinctly perceived. Even then, however, we need to have some sort of evidence before giving our assent: "Though we cannot have certain demonstrations of everything, still we must take sides, and in matters of custom *embrace the opinions that seem the most probable*, so that we may never be irresolute when we need to act."[8]

Locke is at least as stringent: in the search for scientific knowledge as well as in other contexts, he says, it is to "transgress against [one's] own light" to believe on insufficient evidence or to fail to proportion one's degree of belief to the amount of evidence that one has. In his discussion of the concept of "Faith," Locke writes:

He that believes without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Errour. He that does not this to the best of his Power, however he sometimes lights on Truth, is in the right but by chance and I know not whether the luckiness of the Accident will excuse the irregularity of his proceeding.[9]

To believe without good reason or evidence is not only to misuse one's faculties and risk error, says Locke; it is also to violate a God-given duty to follow the dictates of reason. Given his divine command theory of moral rightness, it looks as though, for Locke, the duty to follow evidence is a *moral* as well as an *epistemic* one.[10]

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This brings out an important point: there are different *kinds* of obligation that govern our practices generally, and there are also different *kinds* of obligation that govern our practices of belief-formation in particular. The ethicist of belief will typically try to specify which kinds, if any, he or she means to ascribe to us. Clifford and Locke claim that the question of whether one has done one's doxastic best is not only an epistemic but also a moral question. In other words, they think that to violate an epistemic norm is, by implication, to violate a moral norm.[11] Others claim that there are *only* epistemic norms in the neighborhood of belief. Consider this injunction from Kant, for instance:

> Friends of the human race and of what is holiest to it! Accept what appears to you most worthy of belief after careful and sincere examination, whether of facts or of rational grounds; only do not dispute that prerogative of reason which makes it the highest good on earth, the prerogative of being the final touchstone of truth.[12]

Although there is a whiff of a merely hypothetical imperative here (if you want to get to truth, then you should follow your evidence), in general for Kant it is the *categorical* and *epistemic* imperative to be reasonable that should lead us to be evidence followers. To "think for yourself" and "free yourself from the self-incurred tutelage of others" is the epistemic duty of every enlightened subject.[13] It is an offense against reason – a degrading capitulation to cognitive heteronomy – to do otherwise.

A third general type of norm relating to our practices of belief formation is *pragmatic* or *prudential*. In some cases, it is the better part of wisdom to believe that *p* even in the absence of sufficient evidence for *p*. In other cases, it is pragmatically *necessary* to believe that *p* in order to accomplish some worthy goal. For example: Suppose you would like to retain a good relationship with your teenage son, and you are aware that this requires believing the best of him whenever possible. You have no conclusive evidence either for or against the proposition that he turns your house into an opium den of Edwardian proportions when you are away (he claims that he has recently taken up meditation, and that the funny smell when you come home is just incense). Because you think that your relationship will be seriously damaged if you come to think of your son as a hardcore opium user, you would violate a pragmatic norm if you were to go ahead and believe that he is.

The types of norms governing belief are often taken to be related, and in at least two ways. First, they may be conceptually or theoretically connected: That there is a *pragmatic* norm to follow evidence may serve as a premise in an argument to the effect that there is also an *epistemic* norm to follow evidence. And, as we saw with Locke and Clifford, that there is such an epistemic norm may be the basis for an argument that there is an analogous *moral* norm.[14] Second,

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the norms may conflict. The pragmatic norm that advises you to believe that your son is not turning the house into an opium den may eventually conflict with the epistemic norm to follow your olfactory evidence. A full-blown ethics of belief will say something about the connections between types of norms, and will also tell us which sorts of situations the various norms govern and what to do when norms conflict.

The type of theory that ascribes to rational people the obligation to *follow their evidence* when forming beliefs often goes by the name *Evidentialism*. Given that there are different kinds of obligation, there will also be different versions of Evidentialism: at the very least, we can distinguish pragmatic, epistemic, and moral versions. In general, it is incumbent on Evidentialists to specify the sorts of norms they are putting forward, as well as to provide some account of what can count as evidence (is it only propositional attitudes, or is there also non-doxastic evidence?), what it means to "have" evidence, and what the support relations between evidence and a belief are like. These issues are exceedingly complex, but it is not obvious that any of them can be the basis of a fatal objection to all forms of Evidentialism.[15]

Another major issue in the ethics of belief debate has to do with whether or not acts of belief formation are in any way under our control. If an act is not voluntary in at least *some* sense, it is hard to see how anyone could be genuinely *blameworthy* for having performed it. In response to this objection from "doxastic involuntarism," some ethicists of belief have developed accounts of *indirect* ways in which belief-formation can count as voluntary and thus be susceptible to moral evaluation.[16] Others take the objection to motivate a shift of focus away from belief and toward other positive propositional attitudes that are by definition voluntary – "acceptances," for instance.[17] Still others seek a position that supports talk of obligations on belief while absorbing the (putative) empirical datum that much belief-formation is not under the control of the will.[18]

THE ETHICS OF BELIEF IN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

It should be clear from this brief survey of the ethics of belief debate in epistemology that the positions on offer will have implications for speculative metaphysical and religious belief formation. That's because metaphysical and religious doctrines often refer to entities that are empirically unavailable (deities, causal connections, wills, souls, possible worlds, universals), and the question naturally arises of how we can locate evidence for beliefs about such exotica. The shipowner's belief has nothing to do with the supersensible, of course, but it is clear in later parts of the essay that Clifford's principle is

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primarily targeted at *religious* belief that is not formed on the basis of sufficient evidence.[19]

Locke, too, explicitly emphasizes religion when discussing the import of his version of Evidentialism. *Pace* Clifford, Locke thinks that there *is* good evidence for belief in God, and thus that such belief is (when based on that evidence) both permitted and commendable.[20] Those unfortunate working-class folks who don't have much time, Locke says, may be excused from across-the-board duties to check their evidence. But they should at least use their Sabbaths to consider the evidence for their beliefs about "matters of maximal concernment."

> Besides his particular calling for the support of this life, everyone has a concern in a future life, which he is bound to look after. This engages his thoughts in religion; and here it mightily lies upon him to understand and reason right. Men, therefore, cannot be excused from understanding the words, and framing the general notions relating to religion, right. The one day of seven, besides other days of rest, allows in the Christian world time enough for this (had they no other idle hours) if they would but make use of these vacancies from their daily labour, and apply themselves to an improvement of knowledge with as much diligence as they often do to a great many other things that are useless.[21]

Locke builds these claims about the duty to seek evidence for religious belief into his overall Evidentialist picture. By contrast, another early ethicist of belief, Blaise Pascal, takes religious belief as a primary focus. His famous "wager" argument (which is actually a last-ditch effort to encourage theism in his readers if all else fails) says that such belief is *pragmatically* justifiable even without sufficient evidence. Thus Pascal's is an anti-Evidentialist position, at least when it comes to pragmatic norms governing religious belief formation. He also offers advice about how to overcome the apparently involuntary nature of belief (use indirect methods to generate belief in God, he says, such as going repeatedly to Mass and taking holy water). And, of course, it is this proto-pragmatist line that James takes up in developing an *apologia* for religious belief in his response to Clifford.[22]

Whereas philosophers up through the nineteenth century worried most about the moral, epistemic, and pragmatic *justification* of belief, early twentieth–century philosophers focused primarily on questions about the *meaning* of the propositions believed. The dreaded "verifiability criterion of meaning" championed by many logical positivists claimed (in some of its versions) that statements that are neither *analytic* nor *empirically verifiable* are, strictly speaking, meaningless. An implication of this doctrine is that there is not much semantic room for synthetic judgments about supersensible entities.[23]

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This strict verificationism had important ramifications for the ethics of belief. Theories of meaning are often and quite naturally accompanied by implicit epistemic, moral, or pragmatic principles according to which we should shun statements that are deemed meaningless by the theory, and verificationism was no exception. But the implicit status of such principles sometimes obscures the fact that they aren't *entailed* by the relevant theory of meaning. Clearly it *would* be pointless and irrational to try to accept statements like "All mimsy were the borogoves, and the mome raths outgrabe" or "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." But even a strict verificationist might admit that though religious statements are equally meaningless from a cognitive point of view, something of pragmatic or moral value is expressed by them that isn't expressed by the foregoing balderdash.

The arch-positivist A. J. Ayer, for example, does not dispatch religious (and ethical) language as *mere* nonsense in his twentieth century classic, *Language, Truth, and Logic*. It *is* nonsense for Ayer, of course, but it also has an important "emotive" function distinct from the "descriptive" functions of ordinary and scientific language.[24] Perhaps a cognitively meaningless statement like "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord" succeeds in expressing courageous hope for an amelioration of the human condition, or defiance in the face of our own finitude, or an affirmation of our absolute dependence on something that transcends our cognitive grasp. If so, says Ayer, then it may be pragmatically or morally valuable to utter this statement in various contexts; it may even be important for some of us to try to accept it if possible. And this may be true even though from an *epistemic* point of view, the statement is a miserable nonstarter.

THE FIRST *NEW ESSAYS*

Logical positivism and the verificationism underpinning it collapsed around mid-century.[25] This development, too, had important implications for the ethics of belief, and for the ethics of religious belief in particular. Indeed, the story of the "revival" of philosophy of religion within the Anglo-American tradition in the latter part of the century is in part the story of the reopening of lines of inquiry that had been blocked by the positivists. The publication of *New Essays* is viewed by many as a watershed in this process, decisively inaugurating a postpositivist period in the philosophical treatment of religion. As we will see below, however, *New Essays* was in fact more of a transitional document than an articulation of something entirely new.

In the preface to *New Essays*, editors Antony Flew and Alisdair MacIntyre explicitly deny that their contributors could be considered logical positivists

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"if this is taken, as it is and should be, to imply a toeing of the party line of the now defunct Vienna Circle."[26] But while the verifiability criterion is nowhere advanced with full confidence, positivism's deep influence on the collection is unmistakable.[27] One of the most prominent vestiges in *New Essays* is the shared assumption that religious language presents a particularly acute philosophical problem. None of the authors adopts Ayer's response to the problem exactly, but many pursue the project of salvaging an important but nondescriptive function for such language.

The most widely anthologized of the pieces from the collection – the "University discussion" among Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell – is typical in this regard. In his part of the discussion, Flew substitutes Karl Popper's "falsifiability criterion of meaning" for the verifiability criterion, and then argues that because there is no fact or discovery or event that religious people would take to falsify their creedal statements, those statements don't succeed in asserting anything.[28] Hare responds by suggesting that religion consists not in "systems of assertions" that can be falsified by evidence, but rather in the articulation of a *blik* – a view of the world (like the conviction that nature is regular) that determines what counts as evidence and whether certain evidence is admitted, and so is not itself defeasible by evidence.

Similarly, Thomas Macpherson, reflecting on the closing pages of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, classifies religion as simply "the inexpressible" and notes that "perhaps positivistic philosophy has done a service to religion. By showing, in their own way, the absurdity of what theologians try to utter, positivists have helped to suggest that religion belongs to the sphere of the unutterable."[29] Flew concludes the volume in the same Wittgensteinian spirit, arguing that if the semantic and logical problems inherent in talk of "surviving death" cannot be resolved, then we must simply accept the Tractarian doctrine that "death is not lived through. Outside the visual field nothing is seen, not even darkness: for whatever is seen is within the visual field. When we are dead nothing is experienced, not even emptiness: for there is no one to experience. For each of us 'the world in death does not change, but ceases.'"[30] If we cannot make empirical sense of talk of the afterlife, Flew is saying here, then we must conclude that no substantive claims – and hence no claims about personal survival – are made by such talk.

This makes it clear, again, that although the editors of *New Essays* announced their departure from positivism, the verdicts expressed by the contributors turn out to be in substantial agreement with those of their predecessors. Still, *New Essays* also contains early strains of three new and distinct themes in the analytic treatment of religion – themes that would become prominent over the half-century to follow.

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PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION SINCE *NEW ESSAYS*

Further Problems concerning Religious Language

The first theme, the one most discernable within *New Essays* itself, retains the positivists' focus on language but abandons their strict criteria of meaning. The theme is expressive of the broader mid-century movement in analytic philosophy that is sometimes called "linguistic analysis."[31] Two years after *New Essays*, Basil Mitchell described that movement as follows:

> Philosophers who adopt this approach (they are sometimes called "Linguistic Analysts") differ from the Logical Positivists in this characteristic way: in place of the dogmatic assertion that those statements alone have meaning which are empirically verifiable, they ask the question – of any class of statements – "what is the logic of statements of this kind?" that is to say, "how are they to be verified, or tested or justified? What is their use and function, what jobs do they do?"[32]

In the late 1950s, this kind of linguistic analysis was applied to theological utterances, and a "religious language obsession"[33] seized many philosophers of religion over the two subsequent decades. The obsession was most acute in Britain; this was due in part to the powerful influence of Wittgenstein there and in part to the prominence of a distinct "Oxford school" of linguistic analysis.[34] Many of the Wittgensteinians, then as now, tended to follow the positivists in denying that religious language makes substantive claims about the world (a tendency that earned this movement the sobriquet "therapeutic positivism"[35]). Members of the Oxford school, on the other hand, tended to engage in detailed analysis of religious language of the sort Mitchell describes, in an attempt to understand the various functions that such language serves. An account of the actual functions or uses of religious language, it was thought, could itself provide a guide to its meaning.[36]

A pervasive assumption in work from this period is that since questions about meaning are logically prior to questions about its truth or justification, the latter cannot profitably be pursued until the former are settled. Thus the American philosopher William Blackstone argued in 1963 that:

> [u]ntil the content of a belief is made clear, the appeal to accept the belief on faith is beside the point, for one would not know what one has accepted. The request for the meaning of a religious belief is logically prior to the question of accepting that belief on faith or to the question of whether that belief constitutes knowledge. This point the philosophical analysts have driven home with a vengeance.[37]

The prevalence of this way of thinking led to the so-called Problem of Religious Language becoming a staple in textbook and classroom surveys of philosophy

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of religion, and often being treated as *the* major problem in the field. By the early 1970s, however, this model no longer enjoyed unquestioned dominance. Wittgensteinians were slowly being marginalized in analytic philosophy as a whole, and Oxford-style linguistic analysis suffered both from the deaths of J. L. Austin and Ian Ramsey and from ongoing attacks on the idea that linguistic meanings are stable enough to support anything like an analytic-synthetic distinction.[38] Although philosophy of language has remained a core area of analytic philosophy, the last thirty years have witnessed its transformation from "first philosophy" into one area of specialization among others. Alternative types of philosophy of religion slowly emerged from under the shadow of linguistic analysis, largely as a result of this development in the field of philosophy more generally.

The conviction that it makes sense to speak of *the* Problem of Religious Language also eventually came under attack by philosophers who had themselves been working on it. Blackstone, for example, professed to be following the positivists and the later Wittgenstein in his initial investigations into the nature and status of religious language.[39] The results of his work, however, tended to highlight the multifarious character of such language: "Sentences which perform a religious function," Blackstone wrote, "are of many different kinds. They include descriptions, predictions, explanations, exclamations, exhortations, prayers, questions, ejaculations, blessings, historical statements, and autobiographical statements. There are also sentences, we have seen, which purport to refer to something outside human experience – something in principle unverifiable."[40] In the end, Blackstone largely agreed with the positivists in taking the latter sort of religious assertion to be cognitively meaningless. But like the linguistic analysts, he observed that there is a considerable variety of uses to which religious language is typically put; he also noted that there are *some* statements central to certain religions – "Pharaoh let the Israelites go," for example, or "Mohammad engaged in ministry in Mecca" – that undoubtedly *do* make claims about the world. Moreover, for many of these statements there *is* considerable (though not conclusive) evidence.[41] The worry that such observations raise should be obvious: the more that religious utterances are seen as performing a variety of very different functions – some of which are shared with nonreligious utterances – the more *the* Problem of Religious Language dissolves into a multiplicity of problems in the philosophy of language generally.[42]

Traces of the religious language obsession and its aftermath can still be detected in contemporary philosophy of religion, and in at least two ways. First, as mentioned above, there is an ongoing tradition of reflection on religion that takes its cues from Wittgenstein's "Lectures on Religious Belief," "Remarks on

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