# METHOD AND MADNESS IN CONTEMPORARY ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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I'd like to thank the Canadian Theological Society for this invitation to speak. It is a double honour to be this year's Newman Lecturer. It is an honour to be associated with the name of Jay Newman, who made impressive and wide-ranging contributions to philosophy. Jay, as you perhaps know, was especially interested in the philosophy of culture, and I'm delighted that his legacy will ensure continued interaction between the cultures of academic philosophy and theology. It is also a great honour to follow in the footsteps of the eminent previous Newman lecturers: J.L. Schellenberg, Maurice Boutin, Robert Larmer, and William Sweet (who is here today).

My talk today will be divided into three parts. First, I will say a little bit about contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, and its practitioners' beliefs. Second, I will describe and briefly evaluate four recent meta-philosophical analyses of this subdiscipline. (That's a fancy way of saying that I'm going to air a bit of dirty laundry.) These four analyses each identify problems with this subfield, and propose solutions. Finally, I will introduce a framework for a research program in the philosophy of religion that I think these authors should all welcome.

## 1. CONTEMPORARY ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Let's begin with a little bit of history. Analytic philosophy of religion is a relatively recent area of inquiry: most folks date its origins to about 1955.[1] There is a standard (triumphalist) history of the subfield, which goes something like this.[2] In the early-to-mid-20th century, the doctrine of logical positivism was enormously influential among professional philosophers. According to this doctrine's criterion of meaning, religious statements are not just false, they are literally devoid of any meaning. And so philosophers didn't feel much need to bother with them. But when logical positivism and its criterion of meaning were abandoned by the philosophical community, one important impediment to doing philosophy of religion was thus removed. Various other important developments in logic, epistemology, and metaphysics also occurred in the mid-twentieth century – I'll spare you the details – and these enabled philosophers of religion to think about certain religious topics in a fresh, exciting, and systematic way. The pioneering work of giants such as William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and others made philosophy of religion intellectually respectable, and they went on to train a generation of graduates and undergraduates, some of whom have since joined the ranks of the professoriate, and now conduct research and train their own students in this area. Today, the subfield is thriving: there are many professional associations, academic conferences, and specialist journals devoted to philosophy of religion, and many monographs and anthologies are published each year in this area by top academic presses.

But things are not all rosy at present. It is very difficult to secure academic employment in philosophy of religion, and for this reason, graduate students are routinely counseled to downplay, or obscure, or even give up any interest they may have in it. There is covert or overt hostility towards philosophical reflection on religion – and towards those doing the reflecting – in many secular academic environments. A few years ago, a fairly high-profile "defection" from this area caused a stir.[3] More recently, there has been considerable controversy about the role of a well-endowed American funding agency, the John Templeton Foundation, in funding philosophical research projects.[4] Some philosophers and scientists take this agency to confer undeserved philosophical credibility on research in the philosophy of religion. (Full disclosure: I have received, and am currently receiving, research support from this foundation.) Finally, there is a cluster of allegations that I will consider today: that the subfield should be disbanded altogether, that it is largely misdirected, that it is riddled with cognitive bias, and that it contains much work that is not, properly speaking, philosophy.

Some of these allegations are motivated by concern about a striking asymmetry between some of the beliefs held by trained philosophers (i.e. those who hold doctorates) in all subfields, and those trained philosophers who specialize in the philosophy of religion. Here are the responses given by the former group to a recent survey question about belief in God:[5]

| Accept: atheism | 1041 / 1803 (57.7%) |
|---|---|
| Lean toward: atheism | 216 / 1803 (12.0%) |
| Accept: theism | 210 / 1803 (11.6%) |
| Agnostic/undecided | 117 / 1803 (6.5%) |
| Lean toward: theism | 85 / 1803 (4.7%) |
| The question is too unclear to answer | 30 / 1803 (1.7%) |
| Accept another alternative | 28 / 1803 (1.6%) |
| Reject both | 26 / 1803 (1.4%) |
| Skip | 14 / 1803 (0.8%) |
| Accept an intermediate view | 14 / 1803 (0.8%) |
| There is no fact of the matter | 11 / 1803 (0.6%) |
| Other | 9 / 1803 (0.5%) |
| Accept both | 1 / 1803 (0.1%) |
| Insufficiently familiar with the issue | 1 / 1803 (0.1%) |

As you can see, 1257 out of 1803 respondents (69.9%) accept or lean towards atheism, while 295/1803 (16.3%) accept or lean towards theism. When the respondents are limited to philosophers of religion, however, the following results emerge:

| Accept: theism | 63 / 101 (62.4%) |
|---|---|
| Accept: atheism | 15 / 101 (14.9%) |
| Lean toward: theism | 7 / 101 (6.9%) |
| Agnostic/undecided | 5 / 101 (5.0%) |
| Lean toward: atheism | 5 / 101 (5.0%) |
| Accept another alternative | 3 / 101 (3.0%) |
| Reject both | 3 / 101 (3.0%) |

As you can see, 70/101 respondents accept or lean towards theism, while 20/101 accept or lean towards atheism. A similar asymmetry was found in a survey conducted by Helen de Cruz in 2011-2012.[6] De Cruz had 802 respondents, most of whom were graduate students or PhD-

holders in philosophy. The table below partitions the responses into those who have, and those who lack, an area of specialization in the philosophy of religion:

|  | AOS in POR | No AOS in POR |
|---|---|---|
| Theist | 73.1% | 23.9% |
| Atheist | 17% | 52.4% |
| Agnostic | 10% | 23.7% |

I should note that neither of these surveys gave definitions for 'theism', and so it is possible – well, entirely expectable – that respondents interpreted this protean and multifarious[7] term in different ways. In any case, these results are striking, and various interpretations of them have been proposed. I will not give my own interpretation of them today; instead, I will now turn to the first of the four meta-philosophical analyses of the subfield that I plan to examine.


2. FOUR RECENT META-PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSES OF THE SUBFIELD.

In 2001, the distinguished philosopher Quentin Smith published a provocative piece entitled "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism". Although these survey results were not then available, Smith rightly suspected that far more philosophers of religion are theists than are philosophers in general. After reviewing the standard triumphalist history of the subfield, Smith concluded: "God is not 'dead' in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments" (197). (I wonder how a roomful of theologians feels about the disjunction seemingly suggested by this quotation: either God is dead in theology, or theology is not an academic area!) Smith thought that naturalist philosophers – those who believe that there are no supernatural entities – should lament this 'de-secularization' of philosophy. He argued that such philosophers have, or perhaps should have, two goals. The first is *philosophical*: they should gain knowledge that their worldview is true, by producing better arguments than those offered by theists for their position. The second is *cultural*: they should bring about the secularization of philosophy, and, thereby, academia. Smith claimed that naturalist philosophers have failed to achieve both goals: most, he said, are either *unaware* of the most compelling argument for theism, or are *unable* to defeat them (or both). The direct result was disappointing to Smith: most naturalist philosophers, he thought, do not *know* that their own worldview is true.

In the part of his paper I now wish to examine, Smith turns his attention to what he calls the 'informed naturalist': a real or hypothetical person who, unlike most actual naturalists, *knows* that her worldview is true. Smith identifies an important goal for such individuals, saying that they should strive to bring it about:

> ... that theism be justifiably reclassified as a subfield of naturalism, namely, as a skepticism about the basic principles of naturalism whose refutation serves to stimulate and further develop the naturalist program. 'Philosophy of religion' disappears, to be replaced by a new subfield of naturalism, namely, 'skepticism about naturalism' (207).

So Smith here advocates for dismantling the house of philosophy of religion altogether, and relocating its chattels into other (temporary?) lodgings.

I would like to make a few brief comments about Smith's proposal. First, given that Smith appears to believe that theism is an intellectually respectable position, bolstered by

philosophically significant arguments, it would be better for him to focus not just on 'informed naturalists', but more broadly on those who *justifiably take themselves* to be informed naturalists. (On his own account, there are already rather few of those!) Second, those who so self-identify, and who share Smith's views, should really start by trying to achieve the goals he identified for naturalist philosophers: to construct better arguments for their view, and (thereby) to bring about the secularization of philosophy. Only then, it seems to me, will such philosophers be in a position to advocate for reorganizing philosophical inquiry in the manner Smith suggests. Third, this passage oddly suggests that 'theism' and 'philosophy of religion' are equivalent. It is true that arguments for the existence of God are a standard topic in philosophy of religion, but this hardly means that the two are equivalent. 'Theism' is the view that God exists, while 'philosophy of religion' refers to a subdiscipline of philosophy that examines religion. Fourth, I should stress that Smith offers no actual arguments for the desirability of reclassifying theism as a subfield of naturalism (or for reclassifying 'philosophy of religion' as 'skepticism about naturalism'). Smith merely supports the historical claim that naturalism was once regarded as the default worldview, but, of course, this alone does not establish the desirability of his proposal. Indeed (and fifth, and relatedly), the truth of naturalism, even if it were acknowledged by all philosophers, neither entails nor makes probable the claim that inquiry should be organized along the lines Smith suggests. It can still be very useful to draw subdisciplinary boundaries around the *phenomenon studied*, as 'philosophy of religion', does – along with 'philosophy of physics', 'philosophy of art', 'philosophy of love', for that matter. Doing so helps to make the subfield perspicuous to outsiders, including undergraduate students, who are, of course, a very important audience for these terms.

I next turn to a radically different proposal, recently defended in a series of publications by the eminent philosopher Paul Moser.[8] Moser has become the leading advocate of something called "Christ-Shaped Philosophy". I will here focus on Moser's 2005 paper on the subject.[9] Moser makes three claims. The first is that Christian philosophers should not love their philosophical pursuits more than they love God and neighbour: to do this, he says, is to ignore Jesus' most important teaching (263-7). Second, Christian philosophers should embrace (and these are Moser's terms) *obedience mode* instead of *discussion mode*. Moser says: "Jesus calls us … to move beyond discussion to faithful obedience to his Father. He commands love from us toward God and others beyond the acquisition of truth, even philosophical truth. He thereby cleanses the temple of philosophy, and turns over our tables of mere discussion" (274). Third (and this point will be my focus), Moser offers an easily-expressed criterion for which philosophical topics are worth pursuing: "Philosophers should eagerly serve the church by letting the focuses of philosophy, including its questions, be guided by what is needed to build up the church as a ministry of the Good News of Jesus" (277). Other issues, Moser says, should be bracketed until they are shown to serve this goal.

I would like to make four comments about Moser's criterion. First, it is worth noting that even those Christian philosophers who accept Moser's claim that all philosophy should be done to serve the church may well disagree about what the (intellectual or other) needs of the church are, and also about how philosophical reflection can serve these needs. Indeed, they may well disagree on the meaning of the terms 'church' and 'serve'! This is not a criticism of Moser's view; I merely mean to point out that although his criterion is easy to state, it will be rather more difficult to apply. Second, let's consider the contrast cases Moser offers. Moser thinks that the philosophical study of ethics will manifestly serve the church, while the "interpretive minutia of the history of philosophy" will not (278). I'm not so sure that this is as clear-cut as Moser thinks. Not all of what might go on under the heading 'ethics' would meet Moser's standard, I suspect.[10] A Christian ethicist who takes the Divine Command Theory of morality to be true might well, by Moser's lights, serve the church by defending this view against objections. But should she also, for example, defend a new case for emotivism about ethical judgments against objections that she takes to be spurious, even though she rejects emotivism? I'm inclined to think that Moser

would regard the latter as irrelevant to the church's needs, even though it clearly counts as 'ethics'. Moreover (and more importantly), at the other extreme of Moser's spectrum, what one philosopher regards as "interpretive minutia" of the history of philosophy, another may well regard as intellectual history of paramount importance. And a Christian historian of philosophy may well reasonably believe that settling some such interpretive point can, in some small or not-so-small way, serve the church, contrary to what Moser seems to suppose. Third, when Moser urges Christian philosophers to work only on topics that are intended, and indeed are *shown*, to serve the church, he neglects the following point. Christian scholars, by doing top-flight work on any topic, in any discipline, can surely be justified in taking themselves to serve their church: simply by doing what they do, they confer intellectual respectability on Christian belief in a largely hostile secular academy.[11] Finally, while Moser requires that Christian philosophers first establish that their work will serve the church before actually engaging in it, this may be rather difficult to do. (To whose satisfaction, one wonders!) But even if it were possible, and even if all Christian philosophers were to follow Moser's advice, this would foreclose the possibility of Christian philosophers doing work that does not initially appear likely to benefit the church, but which turns out to have *unforeseen* benefits – and this strikes me as a drawback of his proposed criterion. After all, the history of intellectual inquiry is replete with examples of beneficial (in one sense or another) discoveries and insights which were unforeseen at the outset of the relevant inquiry.

Well, I've discussed "method" in the philosophy of religion for a little while now, and in case you were worried that I wouldn't get to my whole title, it's now time to turn to the "madness" portion of the talk. In a very provocative forthcoming paper, Paul Draper and Ryan Nichols claim that there is widespread cognitive bias in contemporary philosophy of religion. If they are right, it would be sheer madness to expect impartial, objective results in the subfield. They begin by complaining that work in the philosophy of religion is too partisan, too polemical, too narrow, and too often evaluated by religious or theological criteria (422-425). They next offer two rounds of what I will call "diagnostic background": summaries of social-scientific literature relevant to their charges. In each case, they then apply these results to the philosophy of religion. In their first presentation of diagnostic background (426-430), they report that social scientists have found that confirmation/disconfirmation bias is pervasive, and that its strongest effects are among sophisticated, smart individuals who have strong prior beliefs concerning the issues at hand. They also review literature which suggests that emotions are at the root of these biases. Then they give reasons to expect similar biases among philosophers of religion: its practitioners are smart and sophisticated, and they have strong prior beliefs – often infused with emotions – about issues in philosophy of religion (430). Finally, they suggest that reviewing the actual writings of philosophers of religion helps to confirm the diagnosis of cognitive bias:

> ... many philosophers of religion try to explain their high degree of confidence in their religious beliefs with the fact that they lack compelling arguments in support of those beliefs by suggesting that religious knowledge is possible without proof, indeed without any inferential evidence at all. An appeal to "sin" or even "original sin" and the variable damage it does to the cognitive faculties of human beings then functions to explain why not everyone shares their certainty. Such explanations seem quite incredible to nonbelievers. Since, however, these explanations employ pre-existing religious concepts and theological doctrines, it is not surprising that they appear plausible to some religious believers. What is surprising, however, is that a significant number of religious philosophers of religion actually assert with great confidence, not just the plausibility of these explanations, but their truth. It is difficult to explain such epistemic recklessness without postulating bias of some sort (431).

Further evidence of cognitive bias, Draper and Nichols claim, can be found in theistic philosophers' selective use of modal and axiological skepticism when it suits their dialectical purposes (e.g. in responding to arguments from evil), not realizing that this skepticism is in tension with their confidence in their claims about the goods that God would produce, or with the "... extraordinarily strong modal and axiological commitments of classical theism" (431).

Their next bit of diagnostic background concerns the psychosocial dimensions of religious affiliation that suggest cognitive bias. Draper and Nichols survey a wide range of social-scientific literature which suggests that "coalitional religiosity" is correlated with partisanship, "groupism", and "out-group aggression" (432-436). They then apply all this research to philosophy of religion in the following single speculative sentence: "Though we leave to a quantitative analyst the important job of testing this claim against texts, we hypothesize that out-group polemics delivered through war metaphors are less common in other areas of philosophy than in philosophy of religion" (436-7). They close with four recommendations for philosophers of religion. First, they should eschew apologetics, whether theistic or atheistic, since it is "antithetical to objective philosophical inquiry" (441). Second, they should more often attempt to construct arguments against their own positions (442). Third, they should allow the voice of authority to grow dim, and finally, they should accept genuine risk (443-445).

I would like to say a few words about Draper's and Nichols' allegations of cognitive bias. On the individual level, no doubt they are right to say that philosophers of religion are smart and sophisticated, and no doubt some of them have strong prior beliefs – perhaps even suffused with emotion – about religious matters. But their actual textual evidence for widespread cognitive bias in philosophy of religion is rather unpersuasive. As I read the block quotation displayed above, they mean to claim that it is "epistemically reckless" to assert confidently that either of the following propositions are true: (a) religious knowledge is possible without either proof or evidence, and (b) sin has damaged our cognitive faculties, one result of which is that not everyone believes in God. Well, for starters, it would be nice to be given at least some examples of who they have in mind here, since they think there are *many* philosophers running around recklessly asserting the truth of (a) and (b). It's worth pointing out that some of the most prominent philosophers of religion who have written on these matters most certainly do *not* claim to have shown that these propositions are true. Both (a) and (b) are part of Alvin Plantinga's "extended A/C model",[12] but let's look at what he says in the preface to his five-hundred-page book on the subject: "What I officially claim for the extended A/C model is not that it is *true* but, rather, that it is *epistemically possible* (i.e. that nothing we know commits us to its falsehood)" (1999, xii). Here is another example. In his book on the problem of evil, Peter van Inwagen offers something he calls *the expanded free-will defence*, which includes claim (b). Van Inwagen certainly does not claim that (b) is true; indeed, he spends four pages explaining that he only aims to show that his defence is *epistemically possible* (2006, 90-94).[13]

But let's set these celebrated philosophers aside, and suppose that Draper and Nichols are right that many philosophers of religion do indeed assert the truth of (a) and (b). Why would *this* be taken as evidence of epistemic recklessness? Surely it isn't reckless if, for example, they justifiably take themselves to have good reasons for believing these claims! Draper and Nichols, it is worth stressing, offer *no actual arguments* in support of the serious charge of epistemic recklessness. The only thing in the quotation above that might intend to support it is the claim that non-believers find (a) and (b) quite incredible. But that fact – let's assume it's a fact – alone, evidently enough, is neither necessary nor sufficient for, nor even suggestive of, epistemic recklessness on the part of those doing the asserting. It would be nice to see Draper and Nichols engage with the relevant arguments for (a) and (b) in a rigorous way, and to point out exactly which positions or inferences they take to be reckless, and why.[14]

Similar considerations count against Draper's and Nichols' claim that many religious philosophers wield modal and axiological skepticism arbitrarily, when it suits them, without noticing that this introduces "tension" into their views. Again, it would be nice to know who

Draper and Nichols have in mind here, what they think the relevant tensions are, why they take these to be philosophically problematic, and why they seem to think these philosophers cannot possibly ease them. Absent actual arguments along these lines, their remarks really just amount to a swipe. Here it's worth stressing that some very prominent religious philosophers are keenly aware of the appearance of certain tensions in their views, and take pains to address this explicitly. Peter van Inwagen, for example, points out that his modal and axiological skepticism are not merely motivated by a desire to raise doubts about certain arguments for atheism. Indeed, he insists, he endorsed such skepticism before becoming religious in the 1980s, and, moreover, wielded it against Alvin Plantinga's ontological argument for God's existence and against Richard Swinburne's defence of the coherence of theism (1995, 21). Michael Bergmann, to take a more recent example, explicitly considers whether the skepticism that he deploys against arguments from evil also counts against certain arguments *for* theism – and concedes that it does (1999, 389).

Next, I should say something about Draper's and Nichols' speculation concerning violent metaphors. (Recall their suspicion that such figures of speech are more common in philosophy of religion than in other areas of the discipline.) It's difficult to know what to say about this remark, but I will try anyway. For one thing, it would be extremely challenging – I'm awfully tempted to say 'impossible' – to undertake the empirical work needed to confirm their hunch. One obvious impediment is the difficulty of demarcating the various subfields of philosophy with anywhere near the required precision. Identifying some borders will be, I confidently predict, extremely contentious. But even if there are, in all cases, sharp borders, and even if their contours are settled to everyone's satisfaction, there will still be questions about where to place philosophical works that seem to belong in more than one area, or indeed works that don't seem to belong in any. And then there are questions about what counts as the relevant "writings": presumably they mean "published work", but which venues count, and which ones don't ?[15] Last but not least, there is the very real problem of scope. The leading bibliographical databases for philosophers are the *Philosophers Index* and the *PhilPapers* website. At present, the former includes 470,000 publications in 39 languages. As I write this, the latter contains 556,837 entries, of which 1663 are new *this week alone … and it's only Wednesday*![16]

But even if all these obstacles were somehow surmounted, and it were shown that war metaphors are not just a little bit more prevalent, but *significantly* more prevalent in philosophy of religion than in other areas, it would still be extremely difficult to show that this constitutes evidence of the kinds of partisanship, "groupism", and "out-group aggression", that Draper and Nichols have in mind. They seem to think of Christian philosophers of religion as an "in-group" to be distinguished from an "out-group" comprised of non-Christian-but-religious-philosophers-of-religion and non-religious-philosophers-of-religion (435-6). But the problem with this view is that a lot of important work in the philosophy of religion involves in-house disagreements *between* Christian philosophers of religion.[17] When war metaphors turn up there – and they do – this surely does not count as evidence of cognitive bias in favour of Christian positions or against non-Christian ones.

But let's set that aside too, and continue to suppose that Draper and Nichols are right that war metaphors are significantly more prevalent in philosophy of religion than in other areas. I don't mean to deny entirely that this could count as evidence of bias. It just might not be the sort of *religious* bias that they have in mind. It's surprising that Draper and Nichols fail to mention the very important feminist criticisms of philosophical argumentation in general, and violent metaphors in particular.[18] If, as has been surmised,[19] women are under-represented in philosophy of religion even relative to other areas of philosophy, and even if war metaphors are more prevalent in this area, this may be due to *gender* bias. At the very least, this would be an alternate hypothesis well worth exploring.

Before I turn to their recommendations, I would like to make one more point about cognitive biases. Even if Draper and Nichols are right that certain individual and group

characteristics lead many philosophers of religion to have pro-religious or pro-Christian biases, it's important to underscore that these are not the only cognitive pressures in play. Some religious philosophers of religion work at colleges and universities which exhibit a culture friendly (or at least not hostile to) both the academic consideration of religion and religious positions … but many do not. Many secular colleges and universities exhibit a culture that is deeply hostile not only to the *holding* of religious viewpoints, but to even to research and teaching that in any way *concerns* these viewpoints. According to the PhilPapers survey I cited earlier, the discipline of philosophy as a whole is overwhelmingly secular: almost 70% of professional philosophers accept or lean towards atheism. Many of the most prestigious generalist philosophy journals only rarely publish in the philosophy of religion. So even if some facts about religious philosophers of religion and their lives introduce cognitive biases in favour of a religious proposition or perspective, other facts about them and their lives may well introduce powerful contrary biases. So Draper's and Nichols' analysis is, at best, rather incomplete.

As I mentioned earlier, Draper and Nichols close their paper with four recommendations for philosophers of religion: philosophers of religion should eschew apologetics; they should more often attempt to construct arguments against their own positions; they should allow the voice of authority to grow dim; and, finally, they should accept genuine risk. I enthusiastically endorse their second recommendation. (I should dutifully testify that I tried to think up good arguments against it, and failed!) Their first, third, and fourth recommendations are closely related, so far as I can tell, and they are in much the same vein as certain remarks recently made by J.L. Schellenberg, the final author I plan to consider today. So I will turn to his arguments now, since what I say about them will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to these recommendations.

In a new paper, which develops a theme raised earlier in his Newman Lecture (2009, 100-103), J.L. Schellenberg claims that "Bible-based religious believing cannot inform the activity of analytic philosophers in the manner many today are advocating without their activity ceasing to count as analytic philosophy of religion" (*ms.,* 3). In support of this conclusion, Schellenberg identifies three features of so-called 'philosophical theology', each of which, he claims, are essential to *theological* activity, but which also disqualify it from counting as *philosophy* (*ms.,* 11-12). Here are the three features: (The emphasis added is mine.)

(1) Extant responses to central philosophical questions about religion that entail the denial of theism are, *due to non-philosophical causes*, regarded as *not even potentially correct*.

(2) One's basic overall understanding of how matters lie in relation to religion is *determined ahead of time.*

(3) *It is not possible* for the basic overall understanding of philosophical theologians (or any part thereof) to be revised as their inquiry is extended and deepened.

I begin with an observation and question. The observation is this: we have here a surprising reversal of a common criticism. It is frequently said of 'philosophical theology' that it is not, properly speaking, theology – but Schellenberg here claims that this isn't philosophy! As for the question, it is one that you, the audience, are surely better-suited to answer than am I: are these conditions really essential characteristics of theological reasoning? (Perhaps this is something we can take up during the discussion period.)

Next: in the numbered points above, the phrases in italics may be just a little bit uncharitable to many working philosophers of religion. Are there really individuals whose views are (entirely?) determined ahead of time, who could not (ever?) revise their basic overall understanding, and who dismiss rival views (entirely?) due to non-philosophical causes? I have a feeling that the target of Schellenberg's criticism here is rather narrower than he thinks. But of

course that's just a feeling; I suppose I should be more rigorous. Well, then, let me just say that Schellenberg's symptoms are awfully difficult to diagnose in any individual philosopher's case, and so his claim that these conditions are widely satisfied is, at best, under-supported.

But suppose we weaken Schellenberg's three claims a little bit, to make the diagnosis easier and the scope of his target wider:

(1′) Extant responses to central philosophical questions about religion that entail the denial of theism are, *largely or entirely due to non-philosophical causes*, regarded as *not philosophically promising*.

(2′) One's basic overall understanding of how matters lie in relation to religion is *largely or entirely determined ahead of time*.

(3′) *It is not likely* for the basic overall understanding of philosophical theologians to be revised as their inquiry is extended and deepened.

In my view, this revised Schellenbergian position is still somewhat problematic. Let's move to a non-religious example to make clear why. Suppose you think that there really is an external world. (Most of us do!) Suppose, further, that your view was largely determined ahead of time. It is, as they say, *pre-theoretic*, which I assume means something like 'prior to philosophical inquiry or theorizing'. But now suppose that you encounter the usual sorts of skeptical arguments: ones which invoke the possibility of evil deceivers, brains in vats, Boltzmann brains, and the like. Suppose, further, that you don't take these skeptical alternatives to be philosophically promising, and that this is largely due to non-philosophical causes. And, finally, suppose it's a fact that you are unlikely to change your view about this matter. Is there something *automatically un-philosophical* about sticking to your view in the face of the arguments for these rival skeptical hypotheses? I don't think so. G.E. Moore certainly didn't think so, when he reasoned from the 'pre-theoretic' claim that he had hands to the falsity of skeptical hypotheses (1939). Whatever the merits of this move, it would be very strange to deny that it is philosophy. My point is this: in the case of skepticism, it's far from clear that, if you meet (suitably revised versions of) Schellenberg's criteria, you must be deemed unphilosophical for sticking with your view when it seems vastly more plausible to you than its rivals. And the same holds, I think, for the religious case.

But let's go further. Even if your antecedent view *doesn't* seem vastly more plausible to you than its rivals, it's not at all clear that sticking with it must be un-philosophical, contrary to what Schellenberg suggests. For some years now, there has been a lively debate in epistemology (that branch of philosophy which studies things like belief, truth, justification, and knowledge) about a phenomenon called "peer disagreement".[20] *Epistemic peers* are taken to be individuals who are (a) roughly equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on a given question and are (b) roughly equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their assessment of it (Lackey 2010). If two epistemic peers disagree about the truth-value of a proposition, what should they do? One school of thought (variously called the "revisionist", "conformist", "conciliatory", or "equal weight" view) holds that both peers possess a *defeater* for their belief, and so both are rationally required to revise their position in some way. The rival school of thought (variously called the "anti-revisionist", "non-conformist", "steadfast" or "extra weight" view) holds that neither party is rationally bound to revise her position. If the latter view is right, both parties can be perfectly reasonable in, as the saying goes, "agreeing to disagree". Both views have very prominent defenders, and no resolution of this debate appears to be in sight. Well, consider a religious philosopher of religion who meets any or all of the revised Schellenbergian conditions (1′)-(3′) with respect to some religious proposition, P. She affirms P, but doesn't take it to be vastly more plausible than ~P, which she knows to be believed by epistemic peers. If the

latter school of thought is correct, our philosopher of religion needn't be doing anything wrong by maintaining her view in the face of disagreement from epistemic peers. And since this view is very much a live option in contemporary philosophy, Schellenberg is a bit hasty to deem it un-philosophical.


3. The Axiology of Ultimate Reality

So far I have considered four meta-philosophical criticisms of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. In the final section of this talk, I will set out a framework for a research program in the philosophy of religion that I think these authors should all welcome (or at least not oppose), despite their divergent concerns. I also hope that this research program will be of interest to theologians like yourselves. So let's shift gears, and start with an illustration. There's an amusing *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip which shows the young boy, Calvin, listening to the radio. A well-known Christmas song is playing, and Calvin hears the familiar lyrics: "He sees you when you're sleeping; he knows when you're awake; he knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake!". Calvin turns off the radio and, facing the audience with a sly look, asks, rhetorically: "Santa Claus: Kindly old elf or C.I.A. Spook?".[21] This strip perhaps depicts the moment at which a young boy stops believing in the existence of Santa Claus. But I think there's something else – something much more interesting – going on here. I think that Calvin is starting to wonder whether he would really prefer to live in a world containing Santa Claus. He's not so sure anymore that Santa Claus' existence would be such a good thing.[22] Now, let's introduce some philosophical jargon by distinguishing the *existential* question at issue here (Does Santa Claus exist?) from the *axiological question* (Would Santa Claus' existence be a good thing?). These questions are distinct, and indeed are orthogonal to each other.

With this distinction before our minds, let's turn to the case of theism. Consider this traditional definition of theism, which I will call 'restricted theism', or RT for short:

RT: There necessarily exists a being, God, who is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and who is the creator and sustainer of all that (contingently) is.

Three basic *existential* positions are possible with respect to RT: one can be a theist, an atheist, or an agnostic. These are displayed on the rows of the table below. There are, however, also various *axiological* positions that one can occupy with respect to RT, and these are displayed in the four columns of the table. Let's define *pro-theism* to be the view that God's existence makes (or would make) the world far better than it would otherwise be.[23] *Anti-theism*, then, will be the view that that God's existence makes (or would make) the world far *worse* than it would otherwise be. *Indifferentism* is the view that God's existence makes (or would make) the world neither far better nor far worse, and *agnosticism* is the view that we should suspend judgment about this axiological issue.

| | | AXIOLOGICAL POSITIONS | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *Pro*-Theism | *Anti*-Theism | Indifferentism | Agnosticism |
| **EXISTENTIAL POSITIONS** | Theism | | | | |
| | Atheism | | | | |
| | Agnosticism | | | | |

It's important to see that various combinations of existential and axiological positions seem possible. Perhaps the most typical combination is represented by the top-left cell: this is someone who believes that RT is true, and who also holds that existence of the being described in RT makes the world far better than it would otherwise be. But of course atheists and agnostics can also be pro-theists. Similar remarks apply to the other three columns: it seems that theists, atheists, and agnostics can all – at least in principle – be anti-theists, indifferentists, and agnostics about the axiological issue.

Philosophers of religion have, for millennia, devoted considerable attention to the existential question, but they have – surprisingly – paid rather less attention to the axiological one. I believe that more work needs to be done to identify and evaluate the arguments that might be offered for and against each of these axiological positions.[24] Now, some claims in this area may perhaps be reasonably familiar. Some philosophers have held, for example, that if God exists, this is the best possible world. Others have held that only God's existence can secure the possibility of human knowledge, or make human life ultimately meaningful, or ensure that everyone's life is worth living, or guarantee that no evil is ultimately pointless. Clearly, these considerations could be harnessed into an argument for pro-theism. But what form, exactly, would such an argument take, and would it be philosophically successful? Moreover, different considerations might be thought to support anti-theism. In a recent paper, Guy Kahane (2010) suggests several respects in which the world would be *worse* if God were to exist. His arguments, and others for this view, also deserve elaboration and careful scrutiny.[25] As for indifferentism, perhaps not many people really believe that God's existence would make little or no axiological difference to the world, but surely this, too, is a view worth exploring and assessing. If it is wrong, why is it wrong? Finally, some might think that the task of comparing some or all possible worlds which contain God to those which do not is too daunting for our mortal intellects – and this seems to count in favour of agnosticism about the axiological issue. But what are the best arguments for this position, and are they philosophically adequate?

I should say (in case it wasn't already obvious) that each of these four positions assumes *axiological realism*: the view which holds that there are genuine facts about such axiological matters, and that these can ground the relevant comparative judgments. Now, perhaps axiological realism in this domain is the correct view, but what are the best arguments for it, and how exactly should it be understood? What are the best arguments for the rival view, *axiological anti-realism*? These questions, I believe, also deserve attention. I should also note that while I have here discussed only one model of theism – RT – I believe that it would be very worthwhile to consider the axiological implications of other conceptions of God, and indeed of other models of ultimate reality.

I would like to close with a few words about why I think that the philosophers I've discussed today should welcome (or at least not oppose) this line of inquiry in the philosophy of religion, whether or not they accept my various criticisms of their arguments. Quentin Smith's main goal was to defend elements of an overall research program that naturalists, and especially *informed* naturalists, should undertake. While he did not discuss axiological issues, it seems that their examination should also form part of this overall program.[26] Naturalists, after all, can and do disagree about the axiological difference that God's existence would make to the world. Their dialogue with each other (as well as with theists and agnostics) about these matters will surely enrich the philosophical discussion, and help them to construct a more comprehensive world-view. Paul Moser, I think, should also welcome investigation into the axiology of theism. For example, it seems to me that he should regard defending pro-theism (either directly, or indirectly, by criticizing rival views) as one terrific way for Christian philosophers to serve the church – at least if they hold pro-theism to be true. As for Paul Draper and Ryan Nichols, I believe that they should think that a systematic and dispassionate appraisal of these axiological positions can help to alleviate the cognitive bias they think plagues the subfield. Considering, for

example, whether and how an atheist might reasonably also be a pro-theist, or how a theist might reasonably be an agnostic about the axiological issues, can encourage the questioning of stereotypical assumptions about worldviews. Certainly this inquiry would broaden the scope of a subfield which they take to be excessively preoccupied with a narrow set of questions. Finally, I think that J.L. Schellenberg should agree that, if done judiciously and undogmatically, research into the axiology of theism should at the very least clarify philosophers' commitments about the realm of value, and, ideally, make true philosophical progress in this area. (Moreover, Schellenberg would, I suspect, especially welcome the axiological investigation of models of ultimate reality *other than* RT.[27])

I have only sketched a few considerations here, and I don't claim them to be decisive. But in philosophy (as, I suspect, in theology) absolutely decisive considerations are few and far between. Let me end, then, by quoting something Karl Barth said about the relationship between philosophy and theology. Barth said that theology holds the position "toward which the true philosopher will necessarily point … when he has reached the end of his legitimate reflections" (1927, 206, as quoted in Balthasar 1951, 149). Well, I don't know if Barth is right about that, exactly, but as I look at the clock, I am quite sure that I have now reached the end of my "legitimate reflections" for today! So I will stop here, and eagerly await to hear from you theologians during our discussion period.

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<center>NOTES</center>

[1] This year saw the publication of Anthony Flew and Alisdair MacIntyre's edited volume, *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*.

[2] Smith (2001) and Schellenberg (2009) both mention this narrative. See also this account on William Lane Craig's website (www.reasonablefaith.org/the-revolution-in-anglo-american-philosophy) and Wolterstorff's (2009) 'insider's perspective'.

[3] In 2010, Keith Parsons – a well-known philosopher at the University of Houston – announced that he would no longer teach or conduct research in philosophy of religion, on the grounds that he could no longer regard theism as a respectable philosophical position, since he deemed the arguments for it to be "a fraud".
See: www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/3853/a_philosopher_of_religion_calls_it_quits/; http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2010/09/philosopher-of-religion-keith-parsons-calls-it-quits.html; and http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/archives/2010/09/atheist-burnout.html.

[4] For background, see
http://www.thenation.com/article/god-science-and-philanthropy?page=full#axzz2Wh8pNXIy; ; http://chronicle.com/article/The-Templeton-Effect/134018/; http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2013/05/28/why-philosophers-need-not-shun-the-templeton-foundation/; http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2010/12/thoughts-on-templeton-foundation-funding.html#tp; and http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2011/03/questioning-the-integrity-of-the-templeton-foundation.html.

[5] For details, see: http://philpapers.org/surveys/ and Chalmers and Bourget (forthcoming).

[6] For details, see http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/archives/2012/02/results-of-the-.html and www.academia.edu/1438058/Results_of_my_survey_on_natural_theological_arguments.

[7] Plantinga once applied these lovely adjectives to the term 'justification' (1998, 523).

[8] See Moser (2005, 2009, 2012). Moser's work is the focus of "The Christ-Shaped Philosophy Project", an initiative of the Evangelical Philosophical Society. This project aims to stimulate discussion of Moser's distinctive vision for philosophy, by publishing short discussion pieces online, together with replies by Moser. See: www.epsociety.org/library/articles.asp?pid=131.

[9] This paper also appears as Chapter 4 of his 2009 monograph, but in what follows, all citations will be to Moser (2005).

[10] Perhaps Moser would agree with this, since he says that "Philosophy as discipleship ministry will include *a range* of ethical issues" (277, emphasis added).

[11] For some suggestions in this vein, see the introduction to Moreland and Craig (2003).

[12] This is a model, based on the thought of Aquinas and Calvin, according to which certain theistic beliefs are warranted. See Plantinga (1999, Part III).

[13] I presume that both Plantinga and van Inwagen also really think that their stories are true, and perhaps they have also asserted as much. That wouldn't be surprising. But I take it that Draper and Nichols are

<center>15</center>

here concerned with what philosophers of religion have attempted to establish in print, as opposed to what they have asserted.

[14] Attempting to establish (a) and (b) is certainly not *ad hoc* for the religious believer: as Draper and Nichols seem to realize, these claims are indeed historically influential in at least some theistic traditions.

[15] *This* essay (which, I trust, qualifies as a piece of philosophy of religion), appears in a theology journal, so in addition to scouring philosophy journals, other venues would need to be examined.

[16] One might try to avoid these problems by comparing representative texts from various subfields, but how could one be sure that the texts chosen were indeed "representative"?

[17] Just one of many possible examples: consider the long-standing debate between William Hasker and Tom Flint about counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

[18] See for example, Moulton (1983), Govier (1999), and Rooney (2010). Thanks to my colleague Meredith Schwartz for pointing me towards these authors.

[19] See www.newappsblog.com/2012/01/is-the-field-of-philosophy-of-religion-more-gender-imbalanced-than-other-fields.html; http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/archives/2012/01/women-working-i.html; and http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2011/04/28/women-in-philosophy-of-religion/. See also the presentations by Victoria Harrison, Christina van Dyke, and Kristen Irwin at a symposium entitled "Addressing the Dearth of Women in Philosophy of Religion" at the 2012 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

[20] No doubt Jay Newman would have been very interested in this discussion, since it is an extension of earlier discussions concerning religious disagreement to which he contributed. See Newman (1982).

[21] Had Bill Watterson written this comic in June 2013, he doubtless would have referred to the N.S.A. instead of the C.I.A. See: http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/jun/09/edward-snowden-nsa-whistleblower-surveillance?guni.

[22] On several occasions, I have asked groups of students whether they would prefer that Santa Claus exist or not. Every time, most students are initially quite sure that they would prefer Santa Claus to exist: they suggest several considerations which seem to show that Santa Claus' existence would make things better than they would otherwise be. But after clarifying the question for a while, and after arguing about what a Santa Claus-featuring world would really look like, they find themselves far less sure of their initial view – and most wind up thinking that they would rather live in a world without Santa Claus.

[23] The terms 'pro-theism' and 'anti-theism' are due to Kahane (2011). For discussions of how best to construe these comparative judgments, see Mawson (2012) and Kraay and Dragos (forthcoming).

[24] There are also different *versions* of each axiological position well worth exploring. For details, see Kraay and Dragos (forthcoming). My current research grant ("Theism: An Axiological Investigation") aims to stimulate cutting-edge work on all these topics. For details, see: www.ryerson.ca/~kraay/theism.html.)

[25] For some criticisms of Kahane, see Kraay and Dragos (forthcoming).

[26] Let's stipulate for simplicity that all gods are supernatural entities, in which case all naturalists are also atheists.

[27] See, for example, his 2009, 103-109 and *ms.*, 25