

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

TED POSTON

University of South Alabama

Kelly James Clark and Raymond VanArragon (eds.), *Evidence and Religious Belief*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Evidence and Religious Belief is a collection of essays organized around epistemological topics within the philosophy of religion. The volume takes up three central questions concerning evidence and religious belief: first, whether religious belief requires evidence to be rational; second, the role desires and attitudes play in affecting what evidence we have or by influencing our assessment of the evidence; and, third, what evidence there is for and against particular religious beliefs. The volume is loosely focused on the work of George Mavrodes. The editors dedicate this volume to Mavrodes and five of the eleven essays discuss aspects of Mavrodes's philosophy, with Mavrodes's book *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* (1970) getting special attention.

This volume has much to offer for those interested in the philosophy of religion. All of the essays succeed in advancing the discussion on their specific issue. For example, Chris Tucker's essay is a solid treatment of how a phenomenal conservative should understand the demand for evidentially based beliefs within the philosophy of religion. E.J. Coffman and Jeff Cervantez's contribution is a careful assessment of Paul Moser's recent reply to the hiddenness argument. William Hasker's essay, accompanied by a short response by John Hick, is a valuable addition to the literature on Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Thomas Crisp's essay attempts to undermine a central claim in the atheistic argument from evil by means of a novel application of Alvin Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism. The reader of this volume will come away with a better understanding of current issues in the philosophy of religion.

Instead of the reviewer's customary practice of summarizing and briefly commenting on each essay, I want to highlight two important

contributions both of which, in their own ways, aim to undermine the enlightenment ideal of reason that each individual person is a pure and autonomous epistemic agent. A pure epistemic agent is one whose doxastic states are not influenced by affective states. This is the subject of Wainwright's excellent contribution. An autonomous epistemic agent is one whose doxastic states are properly governed only by one's own evaluation of the evidence. This is the issue in the background of both Zagzebski's and Kelly's articles on the argument from common consent, also known as the *consensus gentium*.

I begin with Zagzebski's and Kelly's superb articles on the argument from common consent. Even though this argument has a venerable history, having been defended by Plato, Cicero, Seneca, Calvin, and others (see Kelly, p. 136 for a brief list of defenders), it has fallen out of favour. It's remarkable, therefore, that two of the essays in this volume, independently, argue that the *consensus gentium* has more merits than its recent fall from grace suggests.

Linda Zagzebski's article 'Epistemic Self-Trust and the *Consensus Gentium* Argument', explores the reasonableness of religious belief as a consequence of the reasonableness of self-trust. She argues that our natural desire for truth makes it reasonable to trust ourselves and that this trust must be extended to other people as well. Unless we have specific reasons to find people unworthy of trust, self-trust requires us to regard their beliefs favourably. This opens the door for a common consent argument. If a vast majority of people each independently believes that there is a divine being, then self-trust commits us to regarding this belief as having a presumption of truth.

Zagzebski explicitly distinguishes her 'self-trust' version of the common consent argument from the ordinary presentation of the argument as an inference to the best explanation (see p. 34). Zagzebski's argument 'links trust in the beliefs of others with self-trust' (p. 34). As she underscores, our self-trust commits 'granting *prima facie* credibility to the belief of another' (p. 34). As we'll see in a moment with Kelly's argument, on Zagzebski's interpretation of the argument *convergence* isn't so much a datum to be explained; rather the idea is that the fact that many people converge in opinion increases the plausibility of the claim because self-trust commits you to regarding the opinions of others favourably. As convergence increases, the demands arising from self-trust require that the claim's plausibility increase, assuming the absence of defeaters.

In ‘*Consensus Gentium*: Reflections on the “common consent” argument for the existence of God’, Kelly argues that, in general, the fact that a majority of people each independently believes a claim gives the claim a presumption of truth. Kelly contends that if a large number of people performing some non-trivial mathematical calculation each converge on an answer, then the fact that they converge makes it plausible that the convergence answer is the correct answer. Similarly, if a large group of people each independently attests that a large crocodile was in Times Square, then the best explanation of this remarkable convergence is that there really was a crocodile in New York City.

An interesting twist in Kelly’s presentation is to consider the evidential value of common consent arguments in cases in which the truth of the matter cannot be discerned directly, but individuals must rely on evidence to form their opinion (see pp. 139-143). What is the evidential value of convergence in a case like this? What is the evidential value of convergence in a case like this *when one has access to the original evidence itself*? Kelly quotes John Stuart Mill as being of the opinion that when one has the first-hand evidence, the fact of convergence is of little value. If Mill is right then one should give little weight to how other people have responded to the evidence. What is crucial, in Mill’s view, is how *you* respond to the first-hand evidence. But Kelly argues that other people’s reactions to the evidence ‘bears on the accuracy of one’s own assessment of the (original, first hand) evidence’ (p. 140). Consequently, even in cases in which one knows the evidence that a person has for their view, their treatment of that evidence is itself evidentially significant to your own evaluation.

The two most powerful objections to the *consensus gentium* are, first, that the convergence on theistic opinion is not independent and, second, that there is ubiquitous disagreement in theological opinion so that there’s very little sense to be made of convergence. Neither Zagzebski nor Kelly engage in sustained polemics against these objections. Rather, both focus on more general epistemological issues surrounding the objections. For instance, both Kelly and Zagzebski argue that while the failure of independence can constitute an objection to the argument, the widespread *persistence* of theistic belief requires explanation. Even if theistic belief were passed along generationally, it is still remarkable that it persists. Zagzebski’s construal of the persistence of belief is subtly different from Kelly’s discussion. For Kelly, persistence is a datum to be explained. For Zagzebski, persistence may be a reliable sign of

conscientiousness. Ultimately, from Zagzebski's self-trust perspective, the independence of convergence is not so important as is the underlying assiduousness of the individual's intellectual life.

On the subject of disagreement, Zagzebski is the most upfront about her response. She claims that 'the idea of God common among all peoples is exceedingly vague' (p. 35), but that it amounts to a 'half-glimpse'. According to Zagzebski, this glimmer may still be evidentially significant, especially as providing evidence against naturalism. Kelly's response to this objection goes through the issue of how the word 'God' functions. If it functions as a proper name, then it's possible that many people manage to refer to a divine being even in the face of significant theological controversy. If, however, it functions as a description, then widespread theological disagreement may undermine significant agreement on whether or not there is a God.

An interesting and common theme in both Zagzebski's and Kelly's essays is the evidential value of other people's opinion when it conflicts with your opinion. In recent years, the epistemology literature has focused on the evidential significance of peer disagreement. When you discover that an equally competent, conscientious, and informed friend disagrees with you about a particular matter, how should your present opinion change? The issue in the common consent argument is slightly different: when you discover that a majority of apparently assiduous people in a variety of different circumstances independently converges on an opinion, how does that affect the evidence for the claim that is converged upon? Both Zagzebski and Kelly put on the table engaging proposals about how to take into account majority opinion.

I turn now to William Wainwright's rich essay, 'Theistic Proofs, Person Relativity, and the Rationality of Religious Belief'. Wainwright focuses his attention on the agnostic objection to religious belief that 'agnosticism is more admirable than the faith of a Christian whose strength of conviction exceeds what the evidence warrants' (p. 77). His ultimate goal in this essay is to explore the conception of reason that undergirds this objection and to destabilize the strength of that conception of reason.

Wainwright begins his essay with a discussion of the various purposes of theistic proofs and a general discussion of what constitutes a good argument. After pointing out that theistic arguments have been used for a number of different aims (strengthening believers, engaging the unconvinced, an offering to God, etc.), Wainwright turns his attention to what, in general, makes for a good argument. He observes that

both Plantinga and Swinburne operate with a conception of argument according to which a good argument is one that is valid and proceeds from premises 'nearly every sane man' accepts. Plantinga and Swinburne's conception of a good argument requires that a good argument is formally valid and proceeds from some stock of universally known claims. The difficulty with this conception of a good argument is that it doesn't account for the *strength* of an argument when only a limited number of people know the premises of the argument. Gödel's incompleteness proof is a perfectly good argument, even though very few people actually understand it. While universality is a desideratum of a good argument, the most significant feature of a good argument is its strength. Good or compelling arguments extend knowledge when the premises are themselves known. Wainwright suggests, therefore, that some arguments may be strong or compelling even though not everyone who understands the premises of the argument will accept the conclusion. This may arise when a person who understands the claims in the argument does not know them to be true. In this connection, Wainwright says that a good argument can be person-relative.

In the next section, Wainwright extends the person-relativity of proofs in new, intriguing directions. He attempts to account for some of the finer aspects of the person-relativity of proofs. Some unsurprising aspects of person-relativity arise because of individual differences in education, intelligence, or, broadly, location. One individual finds a proof compelling while another does not because the first has the requisite intellectual skill to appreciate the force of the reasoning.

Other kinds of person-relativity, though, are more delicate. Wainwright argued in the first section that a good argument is valid, non-circular and succeeds in the purpose for which it was offered. Thus, one way an argument can fail to be compelling is when a person doesn't share the same purposes as the one who offers the argument. Wainwright avers that even if an argument is valid and noncircular, if a person fails to have the purposes of the arguer it can be simply dismissed as an intellectual curiosity. Consequently, a significant aspect of the person-relativity of a good argument is the interest required to take the argument seriously. The failure of an argument to achieve universal assent may reflect the fact that people do not have common interests.

Another significant aspect concerning the person-relativity of arguments lies in the connection deductive and strict inductive arguments have to cumulative case arguments or explanatory arguments.

Even if one possesses a valid, non-circular argument for an interesting conclusion, one may dismiss the argument on the grounds that its premises or its assumptions do not fit into the best explanatory system. Yet, one's judgment about the explanatory goodness of a hypothesis is invariably affected by one's personal history and one's value judgments. To take a simple example, one's assessment of the weight of evidence for a hypothesis depends on what the alternative hypotheses are as well as the intrinsic plausibility one gives to the alternatives. But there is no mechanical procedure for either determining what the alternatives are or how they should be weighted. Often this is done on the basis of the value one deems the alternative hypotheses to realize. Wainwright takes this conclusion a step further: in assessments of existentially significant or value-laden hypotheses, one's passionate nature plays a major role in determining the overall plausibility of the hypothesis.

These themes come to a head in Wainwright's final section on Schellenberg's objection. Schellenberg objects that religious faith sins against reason by having confidence that is unsupported by the evidence. A crucial assumption in Schellenberg's argument is that the evidence for and against theism should be described without any substantive metaphysical commitments. That is, the relevant evidence should be neutral. Wainwright objects to this assumption. He begins by pointing out that neutrality and fair-mindedness are distinct. A fair-minded inquirer seeks evidentially based beliefs, is open to criticism, and seeks to revise her beliefs in light of the evidence generated by open dialogue. Fair-mindedness doesn't imply neutrality, though. A fair-minded person can bring to the table any number of commitments that affect her assessment of the explanatory theories on offer. Even though she has these commitments and so doesn't realize 'neutrality', she doesn't sin against reason because neutrality isn't a requirement of reason.

Wainwright doesn't make explicit the argument that neutrality isn't a requirement of reason, but I think the argument comes from reflecting on cases. In the areas of morality and aesthetics, the enlightenment ideal of neutrality is problematic. If one were to describe the aesthetically neutral properties of an O'Keeffe desert landscape in virtue of which it is art, one may be hard pressed to resist agnosticism. In a case like this one's passionate nature may be the enabler that allows one to rightly appreciate the beauty of an O'Keeffe landscape. Similarly, as Plato has argued, proper affections may be required to reason rightly about moral matters. If reason requires neutrality then reason may foreclose possibilities to truth. In

light of the distinction between fair-mindedness and neutrality, it seems more reasonable to leave open more possibilities. But, as Wainwright observes, one's attitudes to opening or foreclosing possibilities may be influenced by how one weighs the different injunctions to believe the truth or to shun error (p. 91).

I hope to have conveyed some of richness of Wainwright's discussion. Wainwright articulates a view of reason according to which reason allows for more possibilities than the agnostic professes. One ongoing concern about the proliferation of possibilities – letting a thousand flowers bloom – is the difficulty of comparative judgments of plausibility. If Wainwright's view is correct then it seems to imply that reason is unable to significantly compare the plausibility of competing hypotheses in a non-question begging fashion. Yet, it may be that reason does not demand paying the cost of foreclosing possibilities.

AKU VISALA

University of Notre Dame, IN.

Randal Rauser, *Theology in Search of Foundation*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Randal Rauser's *Theology in Search of Foundation* (OUP 2009, henceforth TSF) is the latest addition to the philosophical literature on the epistemology of theology. In recent years, there has been more and more talk about something called *analytic theology*. It is not perfectly clear what analytic theology is, but it seems appropriate to understand it as a movement in philosophical theology and philosophy of religion, which encourages and supports the use of analytic philosophical tools to treat questions that have traditionally been understood as theological rather than philosophical (e.g., Trinity, Christology, Incarnation, etc.). Furthermore, analytic theology, it seems, attempts to be a reforming movement of theological method – an attempt to free theology from its “continental captivity”. As philosophers of religion go, most of the issues that TSF discusses are somewhat familiar, whereas for contemporary theologians, the topics might seem rather weird. If Rauser's approach to theology seems perplexing, the reader should consult Michael Rea's opening essay to a recent edited volume *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (2009).