

MORE ON DEFENDING RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVISM: A REPLY TO RICHARD FELDMAN

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This is the penultimate version of a paper printed in *Faith and Philosophy* 32 (2015): 188 – 204. Please do not cite this draft.

Abstract: In his “Plantinga on Exclusivism,” Richard Feldman argues that Alvin Plantinga, in an earlier paper, has not sufficiently addressed a particular problem for the religious exclusivist. The particular problem that Feldman thinks Plantinga has failed sufficiently to address is the problem of epistemic peer disagreement—that is, disagreement between two (or more) equally competent thinkers who share equally good reasons for, and are in equally good epistemic situations regarding, their contradictory beliefs—in matters of religious belief. To demonstrate that Plantinga has so failed, Feldman introduces a principle, “B”, that purports to show that exclusivism (religious or not) tends to lead to unjustified beliefs. But I think that Feldman has failed successfully to show that B demonstrates exclusivism’s tendency to lead to unjustified beliefs; so, in the paper, I defend Plantinga, and the exclusivist more generally, from Feldman’s criticisms.

I. Introduction

In his “Plantinga on Exclusivism,”¹ Richard Feldman argues that Alvin Plantinga, in an earlier paper,² has not sufficiently addressed a particular problem for the religious exclusivist, that is, the sort of person who holds the following belief:

Religious exclusivism: The belief that the tenets or some of the tenets of *one* religion are in fact true and, moreover, any propositions, including other religious beliefs that are incompatible with those tenets are false.³

The particular problem that Feldman thinks Plantinga has failed sufficiently to address is the problem of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement—that is, acknowledged disagreement between two (or more) equally competent thinkers who share equally good reasons for, and are in equally good epistemic situations regarding, their contradictory beliefs—in matters of religious belief. Feldman concedes that Plantinga’s counterexamples to a particular principle

(we'll call it "A") regarding alleged cases of epistemic peer disagreement (the sort of disagreement that purports to demonstrate how a person's being an exclusivist⁴ with respect to one or more of her beliefs, leads her to hold said beliefs in an epistemically unjustified way) are successful. But that's because A isn't a principle about cases of epistemic peer disagreement at all. It's really just about *mere* disagreement. So, he thinks that A is not the principle that undermines the exclusivist position.

Instead, Feldman thinks it's *another* principle (we'll call it "B") that properly demonstrates how a person's being an exclusivist with respect to one or more of her beliefs, leads, in cases of epistemic peer disagreement, to the holding of said beliefs in an epistemically unjustified way. And it is *this* principle that Plantinga's counterexamples fail successfully to undermine. What's more, Feldman thinks there are no counterexamples to B, and so there are no successful defenses of exclusivist attitudes in cases of epistemic peer disagreement. So, according to Feldman, Plantinga has failed to show that an exclusivist could be justified in continuing to hold her belief in a case of epistemic peer disagreement.

In what follows, I intend to defend Plantinga and, more broadly, the religious exclusivist from Feldman's arguments. I will do this by offering three main objections: the first two by way of counterexample, and the last by way of posing a dilemma for the anti-exclusivist. On the basis of these objections, I will conclude that Feldman has failed to show that B demonstrates how a person's being an exclusivist with respect to one or more of her beliefs, leads, in cases of epistemic peer disagreement, to the holding of said beliefs in an epistemically unjustified way. And, if so, then Plantinga and (more broadly) the exclusivist are safe from Feldman's attacks.

II. How Plantinga's Counterexamples Successfully Defeat A, But Fail to Defeat B

To begin, recall that Feldman grants that Plantinga's counterexamples are sufficient to undermine the following principle about alleged cases of peer disagreement:

A: If (i) S has some good reasons ("internal markers") to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons ("internal markers") for believing things incompatible with P, then S is not justified in believing P.⁵

Feldman thinks that the sorts of cases that Plantinga cooks up are counterexamples to A. One such counterexample consists of a scenario in which Plantinga believes that racial bigotry is despicable, all while knowing full-well that there are others who have the same sort of "internal markers" (i.e. evidence, both sensuous and non-sensuous phenomenology, and the like) that he has, but believe the opposite. He concludes that his belief that racial bigotry is despicable is justified nonetheless. Feldman thinks that all should agree that this is a counterexample to A. But he thinks we should all agree because A is a principle regarding *mere* acknowledged disagreement as opposed to acknowledged *epistemic peer* disagreement. (That is, A is a principle regarding mere disagreement as to whether p between two (or more) parties in which each party is aware of the other, dissenting, party, as opposed to disagreement as to whether p between two (or more) parties who believe each other to be equally competent thinkers who share equally good reasons for, and are in equally good epistemic situations regarding, whether p.) And nobody thinks mere acknowledged disagreements necessarily result in unjustified epistemic attitudes.⁶

But to see why Plantinga's counterexamples fail to address cases of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement, consider the following case, another counterexample to A; call it Researcher Case.

Researcher Case (RC): Suppose a medical researcher does a careful study to examine the effectiveness of drugs E, F, G, and H for treating some disease. The study indicates that E works best. Suppose that at first this is all the information she has relevant to the issue. At this point, we can assume, she is reasonably well justified in thinking that E works best. Suppose further that three other researchers have done similar studies, and one study indicates that F works best, another that G works best, and the last that H works best. No researcher knows about any study other than his or her own. At this point, each of them has reasons good enough to justify believing that the drug that did best in his or her own study is in fact most effective....But now suppose that [the original medical researcher] learns about all the other results....She has her reasons and she knows that they have their comparable reasons.⁷

Note that conditions (i) and (ii) of A are satisfied. Is the researcher unjustified in her belief that E works better than its competitors? Not necessarily. For, as Feldman points out, we can add further details to RC such that both (i) and (ii) are satisfied, but the researcher is fairly obviously justified in continuing to hold her belief that E works better than its competitors.

Consider one such addition we might make to RC. Suppose that the researcher knows about some flaws in the studies of the other researchers and that these flaws are such that the other researchers could not have been reasonably expected to know about them; in other words, these flaws are not the result of errors of reasoning or anything relevantly similar. Here we'd have a case where (i) and (ii) are satisfied (because the competing researchers, we can assume, are still fully justified in their believing as they do about their results), but our researcher is justified in believing that E works better than its competitors. And this is precisely because this is

not a case of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement; it's a case of mere acknowledged disagreement.

To be clear, RC is a case of mere acknowledged disagreement (and not acknowledged *epistemic peer* disagreement) because, while our researcher is aware that her colleagues have come to different conclusions than the one she has come to, she has *further evidence* as to why her colleagues are mistaken or, at any rate, have come to different conclusions than the one she has come to. It's this having of further evidence that sets our researcher apart, epistemically speaking, from her colleagues. Or, put another way, she's in a better epistemic position than her colleagues. But if she's in a better epistemic position than her colleagues, then she's not their peer, epistemically speaking: in this regard, she's their *superior*. Thus, our researcher and her colleagues are not epistemic peers; and, if not, then RC is not a case of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement.

So, in examples that *aren't* cases of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement, A's antecedent can be met without A's consequent also being satisfied. And RC helps us to see why: the researcher has evidence about the other researchers' evidence that the other researchers lack. So, she's in an epistemically better position than her colleagues. And we can add similar details to the bigotry case, details that suggest the bigot is like our researcher's colleagues in that the bigot, too, has some flaws in her evidence that Plantinga knows about (perhaps the bigot, through no fault of her own, was, and is, kept away from all equality-supporting evidence of any kind, and Plantinga knows this). Thus, we can see that A is false; it's subject to counterexample. Both the bigotry case and RC (at least when filled out in certain ways) successfully undermine A because, as in RC, in particular, it's clear that the subject of the counterexample is in an epistemically better position than her dissenters.

But in a case of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement, this is not the case. The parties involved are stipulated to be in an overall epistemic position that is *equally* good. Consider, then, the following anti-exclusivist principle that Feldman thinks sufficiently captures common intuitive reactions to cases of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement.

B: If (i) S has some good reasons (“internal markers”) to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons (“internal markers”) for believing things incompatible with P, and (iii) S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own, then S is not justified in believing P.⁸

Here, it’s alleged that B’s antecedent *does* suffice for the truth of its consequent. So it is B that Feldman thinks is the principle that Plantinga’s counterexamples need to, but fail to, address.

To be clear, Feldman thinks that Plantinga’s counterexamples need to address B (as opposed to A) because he believes that “Plantinga does not deal satisfactorily with an issue concerning the justification of belief when one knows that others have equally well supported competing beliefs.”⁹ In other words, when Plantinga says that he’s willing to grant, for the sake of argument, that those of differing religious traditions than his have beliefs that “are on an epistemic par” as his own,¹⁰ he’s granting that he knows (or is otherwise justified in believing) that those in other religious traditions have “internal markers” that are comparable to his regarding his own religious beliefs. But, if Plantinga is willing to concede this, then it seems as if he’s willing to concede that those holding different religious beliefs are his epistemic peers; that is, they have *equally good* reasons to hold beliefs that contradict his own, reasons that he can’t properly or sensibly discount in favor of his own. And if B properly demonstrates how a person’s being an exclusivist with respect to one or more of her beliefs leads, in cases of epistemic peer disagreement, to the holding of said beliefs in an epistemically unjustified way,

then Plantinga will have to come up with counterexamples that show B is false. If he can't do that, then he won't have successfully defended the exclusivist.

III. Reconsidering Plantinga's Proposed Counterexamples

Consider principle B. Do Plantinga's counterexamples fail to engage B? It's not clear to me that they do so fail. To see an initial reason why not, consider how Plantinga puts the case regarding racial bigotry:

Am I wrong in thinking racial bigotry is despicable, even though I know there are others who disagree, and even if I think they have the same internal markers for their beliefs as I have for mine? I don't think so.¹¹

Now, it's important to note that there are at least two ways we can take the question with respect to whether or not Plantinga is *wrong* in thinking racial bigotry is despicable even though he knows there are others who disagree and have the same sort of internal markers, and the like.

We can take this question in a moral way: is Plantinga *morally* wrong in thinking that racial bigotry is despicable even though such and so? Or we can take the question in an *epistemic* way: is Plantinga *epistemically* wrong—that is, is he epistemically unjustified—in thinking that racial bigotry is wrong even though such and so? But, if the bigotry case is going to count as a potential counterexample to B, we'd better take the sort of “wrongness” to which Plantinga refers as being of the epistemic variety, since B is a principle about epistemic justification. So, taking the above question in the epistemic way, *is* Plantinga wrong?

I don't see any obvious reason to think so, for I think there are further details we can add to the bigotry case that make it clearly a counterexample to B. Before I say what I think these

additional details are (or might be), let's first consider what Feldman has to say about Plantinga's racial bigotry case:

But I doubt that there are specifications of the story about the bigot in which both conditions (ii) and (iii) of B [that is, the conditions that say S knows that other people have equally good reasons ("internal markers") for believing things incompatible with P, and that S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own] are satisfied. In some version of the story, those who favor bigotry do not have internal states on a par with Plantinga's. They may feel as strongly as he does, but I suspect that there is some sort of incoherence in their view or it requires an unjustified ad hoc acceptance of exceptions to general principles they endorse. (That's what makes it bigotry.)¹²

I don't know just what to say about whether or not Plantinga's bigotry case, as he has it originally stated, meets conditions (ii) and (iii) of B. But I don't know that I need to know what to say. It doesn't seem to me that Feldman has offered any real reason to think that the bigotry case *doesn't* meet (ii) and (iii). All he's offered, as far as I can see, is what he suspects about the bigot; and that's not really much of an argument against Plantinga's bigotry case as a counterexample to B.

Now, Feldman might respond that what he's up to, in the passage just cited, is trying to point out that Plantinga's bigotry case does not qualify as what Ernest Sosa calls a "refuting counterexample" to B;¹³ that is, he might claim that Plantinga's bigotry case does not offer the sort of counterexample that shows it's *clearly* the case that (ii) and (iii) of B are met. Instead, Feldman might say, Plantinga's bigotry case offers, at most, what Sosa calls an "opposing counterexample,"¹⁴ a counterexample that shows it's not *clearly* the case that the bigotry case *doesn't* meet (ii) and (iii) of B. And what's more, if this is all Plantinga's bigotry case has done,

then all should agree that Plantinga's bigotry case doesn't *refute* B; if anything, it merely *opposes* B. So, Feldman may conclude, the bigotry case is not a very serious threat to B at all (given the support B enjoys from our intuitive reactions to specific cases of acknowledged peer disagreement, etc.), even if it does offer some *weak* reason to doubt B.¹⁵

If this is how Feldman were to respond, then I take the point. Even so, I don't think it's *clearly* the case that Plantinga's bigotry case is *merely* an opposing counterexample to B. Or, put another way, I don't think it's clearly the case that Plantinga's bigotry case *isn't* a refuting counterexample to B. For, I think there are additional things we can say about (or add into) the bigotry case that make it more clearly a refuting counterexample to B than not. I'll say more about this just below.

For now, let's suppose that Feldman's comment "that's what makes it bigotry" suffices as a reason to think the bigotry case fails to meet conditions (ii) and (iii) (i.e. it suffices as a reason to think the bigotry case, as stated, fails to meet the conditions of B that say S knows that other people have equally good reasons ("internal markers") for believing things incompatible with P, and that S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own). Bigotry, as I understand it, implies *stubbornness* with respect to some issue on the part of the bigot. So a racial bigot would be, I suppose, stubborn with respect to ideas of racial equality. And stubbornness implies unreasonableness or unwillingness to consider another's beliefs, opinions, or whatever. If that's right, then the bigot case might not meet (ii), and almost certainly doesn't meet (iii) of B as it's currently stated.

The "bigotry case" may initially appear to fail to meet (ii) because stubbornness seems to rule out reasonableness, or the having of "equally good reasons". There is reason, however, to

doubt this claim about the epistemological implications of stubbornness. To see why, consider the following from Thomas Kelly:

...I think that we should admit that someone's belief might be reasonable even if his or her commitment to that belief is dogmatic [in the way a bigot is dogmatic in retaining his beliefs in spite of evidence to the contrary]...The reason why even perfect dogmatism is consistent with reasonable believing is that whether one's belief is reasonable typically depends on the evidence that one actually possesses, and on the psychological relationship between that evidence and one's belief that actually obtains.¹⁶

Kelly's idea, I take it, is that condition (ii) can be met in cases of "perfect dogmatism" (e.g. cases like the bigotry case) because what determines whether or not a person holds some belief P reasonably is whether or not that person believes P on the basis of adequate evidence she actually has and the sort of psychological relationship that holds between her belief and her evidence (most pertinently, whether or not she bases the belief on that evidence). This suggests that, even if a particularly dogmatic person holds her belief P at least in part because she refuses to consider evidence that runs contrary to her belief, she might still believe P reasonably since the evidence *she actually has* supports P and she has the proper sort of psychological relationship between her evidence for P and her belief *that* P.

Even so, though we can concede that (ii) (the condition that says that S knows that other people have equally good reasons ("internal markers") for believing things incompatible with P) may be met in the bigotry case, it's less clear that (iii) (the condition that says that S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own) is. For it seems as if stubbornness might be a good reason for Plantinga to discount the bigot's beliefs; the bigot, after all, is being hardheaded if nothing else. So, the bigotry case might not meet (ii) of B; but, even if it does, it's less than

clear that it meets (iii). It's less than clear that the bigotry case meets (iii), Feldman thinks, because, for the bigot, "there is some sort of incoherence in [her] view or it requires an unjustified ad hoc acceptance of exceptions to general principles [she] endorse[s]." And if so, then Plantinga may well have reason to discount the bigot's reasons in favor of her "anti-bigot" reasons, in which case (iii) isn't met. Thus, thinks Feldman, we have reason to believe that Plantinga's bigotry case fails to undermine B and, thereby, fails to defend the exclusivist.

But I think reading the case this way (i.e. in a way that suggests the bigot is stubborn in his racially-related beliefs simply because this fits the definition of "bigotry") is less than generous. If bigotry is, necessarily, the sort of thing that involves "some sort of incoherence" or "an unjustified ad hoc acceptance of exceptions to general principles" that the bigot already endorses, then there's good reason to think that the bigot in question believes unreasonably because she stubbornly refuses to consider evidence that goes contrary to what she believes. Or, even if not (as we saw with the quote from Kelly, above), reading the case this way certainly makes it clearer why Feldman thinks the bigotry case fails to meet (iii).

So, let's think of Plantinga's bigotry case in terms of *racism (simpliciter)*, and not racial bigotry. The idea I have in mind, here, is that a person might believe that her own race is superior to another's, but this belief *isn't* based in any way on incoherence or an ad hoc acceptance of exceptions to general principles she already endorses. Now suppose that Plantinga (as I assume he does) finds racism to be despicable. Further, suppose that there are those who disagree with Plantinga about racism all while having the same sort of internal markers that Plantinga has with respect to his contrary belief and, moreover, Plantinga knows that they have said internal markers and that he can't discount their internal markers in favor of his own (he can't discount their internal markers, we may assume, because, e.g., they haven't based their

racist beliefs on anything incoherent or on an ad hoc acceptance of exceptions to general principles they already endorse, etc.). Is Plantinga epistemically unjustified in continuing to believe, as he (I assume) does, that racism is despicable?

I don't see any obvious reason to think so. B, of course, says that it just follows from the racist case's meeting conditions (i) – (iii) that Plantinga is unjustified in continuing to believe that racism is despicable. But, is it really the case, even if we stipulate that the racist case meets conditions (i) – (iii), that Plantinga's belief is unjustified, that he's made some epistemic misstep? I don't see any obvious reason why. For, suppose there's nothing in Plantinga's opponent's internal markers to which he can point and say "Aha! That's why she believes falsely that \sim P (e.g., that racism *isn't* despicable)." Why should that indicate that Plantinga believes that P unjustifiedly? Perhaps it just *seems* to him that P is true, and all while knowing full-well it plausibly just *seems* to his opponent that \sim P. There's some reason to think that *seemings* can justify beliefs.¹⁷ If so, then Plantinga can appeal to his seemings (and his opponent can do likewise). Or, perhaps, Plantinga can appeal to his *intuitions* (if intuitions come apart from seemings) about whether P. I don't see why we should think Plantinga's believing on the basis of his seemings or intuitions in a case like this entails his believing in an epistemically unjustified way. And, I don't think that Feldman has given good enough reason to think that we *should* so think.

Now, I can imagine an objection like the following.

You've *granted* that seemings can justify beliefs. But Feldman claims that B enjoys support from our common intuitive reactions to cases of peer disagreement. Thus, by your own lights, these seemings, or intuitions, justify our beliefs about cases of peer disagreement, and these justified beliefs are what

support Feldman's (and many others') belief that B is the principle to which Plantinga (and now you) ought to respond. Thus, by your own lights, these seemings justify the belief that B is true. Moreover, B, in effect, *disallows* mere seemings from being justifying in peer disagreement. So, the issue then becomes whether the intuitive wallop of the counterexample even begins to approach the wide intuitive strength of B. In short, in virtue of your own recognition of justification by intuition, instead of writing that Feldman gives no reason to think the counterexample fails, should take up the Feldman claim that B enjoys wide intuitive support, and that for many people B has far more intuitive such support than intuition gives to the counterexample you're offering.¹⁸

There are two ways in which I would like to reply to this objection. First, it is *not* Feldman's claim that *B*, itself, enjoys wide intuitive support. Rather, Feldman's claim is that B captures common intuitive reactions to cases of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement. So, let us assume that we have particular intuitive reactions—i.e. “seemings”—with respect to cases of acknowledged peer disagreement that, thereby, justify our beliefs about those cases. Even if we do, this is *not* the same as saying that B, itself, enjoys such intuitive support. What B allegedly does is render verdicts about acknowledged cases of epistemic peer disagreement that align with our intuitions about *those cases*. Moreover, this objection seems to me to imply that I have argued for the claim that Feldman is unjustified in believing that Plantinga is unjustified in his beliefs in the racist case. But, I have not argued that Feldman is unjustified in thinking (if he, in fact, thinks) that Plantinga believes unjustifiably in the racist case, or that B is true; for, this is not the issue in question. Rather, what is at issue is whether or not Plantinga, in fact, *is*

unjustified in his beliefs in the racist case. B was supposed to tell us that he is. I have argued that B fails to render such a verdict if seemings can justify beliefs.

Second, it's not clear to me that B *does* rule out mere seemings from justifying in cases of peer disagreement. But, let us suppose that it does. If it does, by virtue of what argument does it do so? So far as I can tell, Feldman does not offer any argument as to why we should think B properly rules out mere seemings from justifying in cases of peer disagreement. And since I have cited several philosophers who have argued that seemings can justify beliefs, we have no reason, yet, to think that such justification cannot happen in cases of epistemic peer disagreement—not, at any rate, without some antecedent acceptance of B. So, if the objection is right, then we have, here, a reason to think that B is dialectically improper. (I mention another reason to think that B is dialectically improper, below.)

Returning, now, to the bit about what sort of counterexample to B Plantinga's bigotry case might be offering, let me attempt to justify my claim that Feldman's attempt to show that, at most, what Plantinga has offered is an "opposing counterexample", fails. For Feldman's critique of the bigotry case successfully to show that it, if anything, is *merely* an 'opposing counterexample', Feldman has to show, among other things, that the bigotry case is not *clearly* a counterexample to B. But, more than that (and, more importantly, it seems to me), Feldman must show that it's more clearly the case that the bigotry case *isn't* clearly a counterexample to B than that it *is*. Recall, again, principle B:

B: If (i) S has some good reasons ("internal markers") to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons ("internal markers") for believing things incompatible with P, and (iii) S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own, then S is not justified in believing P.

Perhaps Feldman is successful in showing that the bigotry case, as Plantinga has it stated, *isn't* clearly a counterexample to B; that is, that the bigotry case, as Plantinga has it stated, isn't a counterexample that *refutes* B. Even so, just as Feldman adds additional details to his researcher case to make it clearly the case that it's a counterexample to A (i.e. B *sans* condition (iii))—that it *refutes* A—I've added additional details to the bigotry case (e.g. Plantinga's having the relevant "seemings"; thinking in terms of racism *simpliciter*, etc.). These additional details, it seems to me, successfully show that even if Feldman is successful in showing that Plantinga's original bigotry case isn't a counterexample that refutes B, he is not similarly successful when we consider the more detailed version of Plantinga's case that I describe.

One further point before moving on. It seems to me that accepting a principle like B has an untoward consequence. Consider that Plantinga believes, for example, that Serious Actualism (i.e., the metaphysical thesis that says no objects have properties in worlds in which they don't exist, not even the property of non-existence) is true.¹⁹ Now, to be clear, it doesn't really matter, for our purposes, what particular metaphysical doctrines Plantinga holds to. What's important, is that Feldman is committed to the view that B implies one is, or would be, epistemically unjustified in accepting *any* such difficult metaphysical doctrines (like Serious Actualism, or anything else) as true.²⁰ That is, Feldman thinks that it is unreasonable to accept such a metaphysical doctrine if Plantinga's (or anyone's) belief in Serious Actualism (or some other difficult metaphysical doctrine) meets (ii) and (iii). And what's important to note about this is that the problem generalizes to *any* difficult academic theory (should one's belief in this or that academic theory meet (i) – (iii) of B).

But I think that if Feldman is right, then B is too strict. For, if B is right, then a junior-level philosopher can't reasonably disagree with those in her relevant field of study who are

senior to her unless she has good reason to think they've done something wrong in their philosophizing. But for a junior-level philosopher to have the relevant sorts of reasons to discount her senior colleague's beliefs, she'd have to have some evidence that her senior colleague has made some kind of mistake or was otherwise less careful than she. But how *could* a junior-level philosopher ever come upon such evidence? And, even if she *could*, how likely is it that this sort of thing happens *in fact* (or, perhaps better: happens *frequently enough* to preserve the justification of all the "junior-level" beliefs we're inclined to judge as reasonable)? I don't see how this could be very likely at all; but this is fairly astonishing given that junior-level philosophers mature by figuring out what they take to be wrong with some or another of the things their senior colleagues believe. It seems to me that, in very many cases where a junior-level philosopher disagrees with a senior colleague, their differences in belief arise out of a difference in the way they evaluate the evidence concerning the belief; and "difference" doesn't necessarily imply "level of quality". It's true that the junior-level philosopher will be committed to the belief that her senior colleague is mistaken, but it's plausibly not because she thinks he's not looked at the evidence as responsibly or as fully as she has. Such cases seem to be the basis of *reasonable philosophical impasse*. If I'm right about this, then we have another counterexample to B. Both the junior-level philosopher and her senior colleague meet conditions (i) – (iii) of B; yet, they're both justified in believing as they do.²¹

So, B seems subject to counterexample and, what's more, the consequences of accepting a principle like B seem to me to be untoward. Even if not, though, I think there's another problem for the B proponent: B forms the second horn of a dilemma that the anti-exclusivist will have to face. In the next section, I'll construct the dilemma and show how the anti-exclusivist is skewered on either horn.

IV. The Anti-exclusivist's Dilemma and Other Reasons to Doubt B

The first anti-exclusivist principle we looked at, A, is, as we saw, subject to counterexample. And B, too, might be subject to counterexample. But, even if B isn't subject to counterexample—or at any rate, even if the alleged counterexamples I've offered are unsuccessful—I do not think the anti-exclusivist will have gotten away unscathed. For, I think that there is trouble lurking for the anti-exclusivist in the form of a dilemma. Either she will have to endorse A, or she will have to endorse B, a principle that, as I'll argue, is dialectically improper.

To see why I say that B is dialectically improper, recall just what B says. B says that *if* (i) a person S has some good reasons (“internal markers”) to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons (“internal markers”) for believing things incompatible with P, *and also has no reason to discount the reasons of a disagreeing epistemic peer and favor her own*, then S is not justified in believing P. Doesn't the clause “and also has no reason to discount the reasons of a disagreeing epistemic peer and favor her own” *just mean* that S has no reason to disagree with her epistemic peer? But this clause is just (iii) of B; so, isn't (iii) just the definition of “unreasonable disagreement”? To put the point another way, mightn't I be able to restate B this way?

B': If a person S meets (i) and (ii) and (iii') also lacks reasons (on balance) to disagree with her epistemic peer, then she disagrees unreasonably (that is, without reason) with her epistemic peer.

If I can restate B as B', then this principle does little by way of helping us see why an exclusivist is unjustified in her exclusivist beliefs. All B adds to A, as far as I can see, is the notion that if a person disagrees without reason, then that person disagrees unreasonably. But all should agree

with a condition like that. The question left unanswered by Feldman, is why anyone should think that the exclusivist *meets* the relevant condition.

In particular, I see no obvious reason why the *religious* exclusivist should think that there really are any such cases that meet B's antecedent (in particular, (iii) of B). That is, I don't see why the religious exclusivist should agree that there really are any such cases of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement. And, even if there are cases of this sort, it's not obvious to me why the exclusivist should think they apply to her *sitz im leben*—her situation in life—at least with respect to her religious beliefs. Plantinga hints at this idea when he says:

[The exclusivist] doesn't really think the beliefs in question *are* on a relevant epistemic par. She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief, and even that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar. But she must still think that there is an important epistemic difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has *made a mistake*, or *has a blind spot*, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate.²²

But Feldman thinks that, from the perspective of the exclusivist's opponent, it doesn't matter what the exclusivist *will* think in a situation like this. What matters is whether or not the exclusivist *has a reason* to so think.

Can't an exclusivist have a reason to so think? I don't see why not. For, as we saw in the last section, it's perfectly possible that, while an exclusivist may lack insight with respect to some problem with her opponent's internal markers, she can appeal to her own seemings or, perhaps, her intuitions (if seemings and intuitions come apart, that is) as justifying reasons for thinking she's right and her opponent is wrong.

Thus, the dilemma for the anti-exclusivist: either the anti-exclusivist will have to accept A, or she will have to accept B. If the anti-exclusivist accepts A, her principle is subject to counterexample (e.g. Researcher Case). If she accepts B, her principle might be subject to counterexample, but even if not, she has to accept B'. And once the anti-exclusivist endorses B understood as B', then the *other* premise of her anti-exclusivist argument—viz., the assertion of B's antecedent—is dialectically improper (since some of its explicit content is extremely close to the target anti-exclusivist conclusion) and not obviously met by the exclusivist. So, I conclude that B does little to help the anti-exclusivist's case against exclusivism.

One final point about B. I think B is dialectically unhelpful in an additional way. To see what I mean, let's consider B in a somewhat anachronistic light. Consider what Roger White calls

Extreme Permissivism [EP]: There are possible cases in which you rationally believe P, yet it is consistent with your being fully rational and possessing your current evidence that you believe not-P instead.²³

We might be able to imagine Plantinga endorsing something along the lines of EP. I don't know that Plantinga *really does* endorse EP, for EP commits one to the view that two believers with *identical* evidence can rationally hold contradictory beliefs on the basis of that evidence. All Plantinga is committed to, so far as I can see, is that two believers can have *equally good* evidence for their contradictory beliefs, and that's not what EP says.

Even so, suppose Plantinga, or some other exclusivist, *does* endorse EP.²⁴ If he (or she, or whomever) does, it seems as if Feldman has, simply by *fiat*, given a principle—namely, B—that rules out EP. To see that B “rules out” EP, note, for example, that on EP I and my “evidential twin” (we might call it)—that is, another person who has the exact same evidence I

have with respect to whether p —can hold, in an epistemically justified way, contradictory beliefs on the *exact same* evidence. But if my evidential twin and I know about each other and what evidence we have for our competing beliefs, we meet all three conditions of B; for, we both have what we take to be good evidence in favor of our belief, but we also know that the other of us has equally good evidence (since it's the *same* evidence), and we have no reason to discount the other's evidence in favor of our own belief (since such a reason would be *further* evidence, and *ex hypothesi*, we have the same evidence). So, if B is true, then EP is false. But Feldman hasn't argued *against* EP at all on his way to (purportedly) establishing B, and EP can't be so easily dismissed.²⁵ So, I conclude that Feldman's use of B begs the question against at least some types of exclusivists (in particular, EP-endorsing exclusivists). But, B was supposed to undermine exclusivism generally; so, I conclude that Feldman's use of B fails altogether.²⁶

V. Conclusion

This concludes my defense of Plantinga and, more broadly, the religious exclusivist from Feldman's argument. It seems to me that revised versions of Plantinga's bigot case (e.g. the racist case) or, better, cases of philosophical impasse, are successful counterexamples to B. And, if not, then such cases provide ample reason to think that the consequences of accepting a principle like B are untoward. But, even if accepting B doesn't lead to untoward consequences, I have shown that B doesn't do much to help the anti-exclusivist because B forms the second horn of a troublesome dilemma. Either the anti-exclusivist will have to accept A (i.e. B *sans* condition (iii) in the antecedent), which is subject to counterexample, or she'll have to accept B understood as B', and B' is a principle that is dialectically uncharitable because (as I've argued) some of its explicit content is extremely close to the target anti-exclusivist conclusion.

Moreover, it's not at all obvious that B's antecedent is met by the exclusivist since it's not at all clear that there actually are (or even could be) cases of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement concerning religious beliefs. But, even if there are (or could be), I've tried to show that there are other epistemically relevant considerations apart from reasons *qua* "internal markers" to which an exclusivist can appeal to justify her exclusivist beliefs; namely, her seemings or, possibly, even her intuitions.

Moreover, Feldman's use of B begs the question against at least some types of exclusivists (in particular, EP-endorsing exclusivists); it presupposes the falsity of Extreme Permissivism, an epistemological thesis that cannot be so easily dismissed. So, I conclude not only that Feldman has failed successfully to show that Plantinga's counterexamples to principle B fail, but he's failed to accomplish his broader goal of undermining the exclusivist position in cases of acknowledged epistemic peer disagreement.²⁷

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NOTES

¹ Richard Feldman, “Plantinga on Exclusivism,” *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003), 85 – 90.

² Alvin Plantinga, “Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ *Ibid.*, 174. Some might quibble about the definition of “religious exclusivism” on offer, here. They might think, for example, that if the emphasis on “one” means to say “only one”, then it’s fairly implausible that there even *are* any exclusivists by this definition. For, many religions *share* some tenets they hold to be true (e.g. all Abrahamic religions believe that there is just one God, that Abraham was a prophet, and so on). Two things I’d like to say to this line of thinking go as follows. First, I’m, of course, using Plantinga’s definition of religious exclusivism since it’s the one that both he and Feldman use. Second, I think the spirit of the term is obvious enough. For sure there are religions that share tenets. But the point is that an exclusivist—as we’re thinking about her, here—is such that she thinks only *her* religion has all true tenets. So, though she can agree that there are other religions that have true tenets, she’s committed to the idea that somewhere along the way, these other religions got some of their tenets wrong (otherwise they’d just be part of *her* religion). This, I take it, is the idea behind the term “religious exclusivism” at play, here. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helping me clarify this point.

⁴ For the sake of expediency, I’ll drop the “religious” part from “religious exclusivism”, and, as I have here, “religious” from “religious exclusivist”. So, I’ll just call the position I’m defending

“exclusivism”, and the person who holds to “exclusivism” an “exclusivist”. This serves for more than expediency, however. As we’ll see, the problem of exclusivism generalizes to *any* exclusivist belief whatever, religious or not.

⁵ Feldman, “Plantinga on Exclusivism,” 86.

⁶ Now, some might wonder whether or not Plantinga and Feldman would concede that the bigot’s reasons for thinking that bigotry is permissible are as *equally good* as Plantinga’s reasons for thinking that bigotry is despicable. For, they would *have* to concede this in order for it to be the case that Plantinga’s bigotry example suffices for a counterexample to A since (ii) of A says that Plantinga would have to know that the bigot has equally good reasons for her bigotry-related belief. Given that Feldman *does* concede that the bigotry case is a counterexample to A, I think I can say that, at any rate, *Feldman* concedes that the bigot’s reasons for thinking that bigotry is permissible are equally good as Plantinga’s. Of course, this raises all sorts of questions about what makes competing reasons for belief as to whether p *equally good*. It also raises questions about moral epistemological issues. For example, *should* (in the moral sense of that word) the bigot believe differently than she does even if she has no reason to hold the competing belief? These questions go unexplored by either Plantinga or Feldman, but are worth further exploration. They are, however, beyond the scope of this paper; so, I, too, will leave them unexplored.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁰ Plantinga, “Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” 181.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹² Feldman, “Plantinga on Exclusivism,” 89. My insertion.

¹³ See his “Review: Proper Functionalism and Virtue Epistemology,” *Nous* 27 (1993), 51 – 65.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Thanks to E. J. Coffman for alerting me to this possible objection.

¹⁶ Thomas Kelly, “Following the Argument Where it Leads,” *Philosophical Studies* 154 (2011), 105-124. See, especially, p. 110.

¹⁷ For example, see David Barnett, “Does Vagueness Exclude Knowledge?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 82 (2010), 22-45; James Pryor’s “The Skeptic and the Dogmatist,” *Nous* 34 (2000), 517-549; Michael Huemer’s *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, Maryland: Roman and Littlefield, 2001); George Bealer’s “A Theory of the A Priori,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 81 (2000): 1-30; Laurence Bonjour’s *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Gideon Rosen’s “Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 15 (2001), 69-91, and Ernest Sosa’s *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁸ I owe this objection to an anonymous referee.

¹⁹ Plantinga, “Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” 182.

²⁰ Feldman, “Plantinga on Exclusivism,” 89.

²¹ An anonymous referee objects as follows.

You claim that B would bar an academic from believing any controversial academic thesis and drive home the point with the example of the junior level philosopher. And this, you say, shows that B is obviously false. But it is not clear that this argument works because it might be argued that B deals with belief only. There are weaker propositional attitudes such as ‘acceptance’ and ‘using as a working hypothesis’. B does not apply to them. So, it might be argued that indeed when B applies to such academic disputes then a

person really is not justified in having a *belief* that p. However, a person might well be justified in accepting p or keeping it as a working hypothesis. Doing so is how advances are made in academic matters. The junior philosopher should not give up. The reason you might think it clearly false that one cannot believe in such circumstances is because you are thinking that one would then have to just give up and close down. But this is not true, because of the weaker attitudes that can be taken up and continued. And it can be argued that what we generally see among academics is in fact acceptance and not belief, because people act in deference to the acumen of other scholars.

But I reply that this objection misses the point. I do not say that B is obviously false. And I do not say that B rules out advances in academia. For, it is surely possible—and, perhaps, often *actual*—that academic progress is made simply by academics asking “what if” questions, questions to which they don’t have a belief about the answer. What I say is that junior-level philosophers *mature* by figuring out what they take to be *wrong* with some or another of the things their senior colleagues believe. This implies that these junior-level philosophers take themselves to be *right*; that is, they disagree with their senior colleagues. The fact that many junior-level philosophers take their senior colleagues to be wrong about some issue or other is what gives rise to many junior-level philosophical projects like, e.g., a dissertation. Perhaps there *are* junior-level philosophers who approach a project like a dissertation from an agnostic point of view, or merely as a “what-if” project, but it seems quite implausible to me that even most do. But if I’m right about that, and Feldman is right about B, then most junior-level philosophers who write their dissertation because they have a particular belief that conflicts with a senior colleague do so from an epistemically unjustified position. This is implausible and a reason to reject B.

(I say this is a reason to reject B; but, I do not mean to say that this is a reason for *Feldman* to reject B, though I think he should. As an anonymous referee points out, Feldman has, in recent work (see, e.g., his “Epistemological Puzzles About Disagreement,” in *Epistemology Futures* ed., Stephen Heatherington (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216 – 236, and his “Reasonable Religious Disagreements,” in *Philosophers Without Gods* ed., Louise Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 194 – 214), argued in such a way that it appears he might be comfortable with the notion that, for example, junior-level philosophers are epistemically unjustified in their positions if they disagree with a senior colleague who is their intellectual peer (or better). Maybe Feldman *would* be comfortable with this sort of skeptical conclusion. But, my point isn’t just to show Feldman that he’s wrong about B (because of its skeptical consequences, and etc.); rather, my point is to offer compelling reasons for thinking that Feldman’s arguments do not go through, whether or not Feldman agrees with such reasoning. Or, in the words of the referee, my point about B’s leading to untowardly skeptical conclusions “goes through whether Feldman recognizes the consequence or not.”)

²² Plantinga, “Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” 182.

²³ Roger White, “Epistemic Permissivism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (2005), 445-459. See, especially, p. 447. Thanks to E. J. Coffman for bringing this to my attention.

²⁴ And, indeed, it’s plausible that some philosophers *do* (or could) hold a view like EP. As Nathan Ballantyne and E. J. Coffman point out (see their “Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality,” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 11 (2011), 1 – 13), there are several well-defended epistemological theories that are consistent with a view like EP. For example, there is Michael Bergmann’s notion of an evidence-rationality bundle that features a proper-function account of rationality (see his *Justification Without Awareness* (New York: Oxford University Press,

2006)). On a view like this, a person, S, “thinks that facts about one’s proper functioning help determine what a given body of evidence rationalizes for one,” so, “when [S] reflects on her evidence E for her belief *p*, she thinks it is possible that E rationalize a different attitude for her” (Ballantyne and Coffman, “Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality,” 11). Or, for another (tastefully ironic) example, there is Earl Conee and Richard Feldman’s endorsement of what they call an “explanatory coherentist” account of rationality (see their “Evidence,” in *Epistemology: New Essays* ed., Quentin Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83 – 104). Following Coffman and Ballantyne, again, on such a view, it’s possible for a person, S, to reflect “on the evidence E upon which she has based her belief in *p*, then [judge it] possible that E rationalizes some other attitude to *p*. For instance, she might realize that if she didn’t so much as understand or grasp *p*, then *p* wouldn’t be an *available* explanation of E for her. And given that possibility, E would not rationalize believing *p* for her; rather, it would rationalize withholding belief in *p*” (Ballantyne and Coffman, “Uniqueness, Evidence, and Rationality,” 11).

²⁵ See footnote 24 for reasons to think EP has (or could have) something going for it and, so, can’t be very easily dismissed.

²⁶ An anonymous referee objects as follows.

You argue that Feldman has begged the question against certain types of exclusivists, viz., EP-endorsing exclusivists. You do this by supposing that Plantinga endorses EP, and then showing that Feldman has introduced a principle, B, that contradicts EP without so much as an argument as to why EP might be false (other than introducing B). But this argument is reversible. Feldman can just as quickly complain that he endorses B, and then along comes Plantinga who *by fiat* endorses EP that rules out B. You need to give a

reason for thinking that the presumption is in favor of EP and not in favor of B, if the *fiat* argument is going to work.

But I reply that this objection misses the context of the dialectic. The dialectic, as I see it, goes something like this. Plantinga argues that exclusivism doesn't necessarily lead to unjustified religious beliefs. His argument, we could say, provides reasons for thinking that EP is true. Thus, we might take Plantinga's original argument as an argument for EP (though, again, it's not clear that Plantinga endorses EP—the point is that an EP-endorser could use Plantinga's argument to support EP). But, then Feldman responds by saying that exclusivism *does* necessarily lead to unjustified religious beliefs because principle B is true. The context is *not* such that Feldman introduces B, then Plantinga comes along and says “but, EP!” Rather, the burden of proof, at this point, is on Feldman. So, I conclude that my *fiat* argument *does* work.

²⁷ Thanks go to at least two anonymous referees, and the participants of the 2012 meeting of the North Carolina Philosophical Society for comments on earlier versions of this paper. And special thanks go to E. J. Coffman who read and provided comments for several full drafts of this paper.