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# KNOWLEDGE AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Maria Rosa Antognazza

*Introductions to epistemology routinely define knowledge as a kind of belief which meets certain criteria. In the first two sections of this article, I discuss this account and its application to religious epistemology by the influential movement known as Reformed Epistemology. In the last section, I argue that the controversial consequences drawn from this account by Reformed Epistemology offer one of the best illustrations of the untenability of a conception of knowledge as a kind of belief. I conclude by sketching an alternative account of cognition which also provides a different framework for religious epistemology.*



Textbooks and introductions to epistemology routinely define knowledge as a kind of belief which meets certain criteria. One of these criteria is truth: in order to be knowledge, a belief must be true. Being true, however, is not sufficient. Say, I believe that Speedy Gonzales is the winner of his class race. If it turns out that this is actually the case, my belief is true, but we would not regard this belief as knowledge just because it is true. To be knowledge, the story continues, my true belief cannot be merely the result of a guess or of wishful thinking (say, I have no idea of how good a runner Speedy is, but his name gives me a hunch that he is the winner). For my true belief to qualify as knowledge, I need to have reasons to believe what I believe. In other words, my belief must be justified. And this is where this account of knowledge begins to unravel.

To start with, I do have a reason to believe that Speedy is the winner: his name. This reason, however, is clearly not good enough: it could have easily turned out that poor

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Speedy was so named as a joke. He is, in fact, the slowest of his class and never wins anything (let alone a race) – it just so happens that today is his birthday and everyone has decided to let him win as a birthday present. So it turns out that it is mere chance that my belief is true. Let's say, however, that I have better reasons to believe that Speedy is the winner of the race: Speedy is the fastest of his class and, therefore, has won every race. Is this enough for a claim that I *know* that Speedy is the winner? If my life (or at least my entire yearly income, my second-hand car, and my complete collection of Beatles LPs) depend on it, I would not say that I *know* it although I have very good reasons to believe it. Does the fact that Speedy actually wins turn my well-justified belief into knowledge? What if today Speedy is drunk and, as a result, the slowest of all – but it is his birthday (which is why he is drunk) and, as a birthday present, his caring classmates stop running until he eventually crosses the line? So it turns out that the good reasons which, I thought, justified my true belief are not the reasons why my belief is true. In short, justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge even when I have very good reasons to believe what I believe.

This simple, and yet devastating, point was made by Edmund Gettier in a short article of 1963 published in the journal *Analysis*. This article, so the story goes, blew a huge hole in the supposedly 'traditional' account of knowledge as justified true belief (JTB for short). Since then, hundreds of books and articles have attempted to fill the hole by finding a satisfactory additional condition which could turn justified true belief into knowledge. Turning the JTB account into the JTB+ account, however, has not proven the same as turning belief into knowledge. Despite many attempts to identify the elusive 'plus' which would fix the problem, charges of circularity and counterexamples continue to tear apart the JTB+ fabric. Therefore, rather than trying to pin down an additional fourth condition, many have tried to reconceive or eliminate the 'justification' condition altogether. A variety of influential proposals have

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emerged, including the 'causal theory of knowledge' (knowledge must be appropriately causally connected to a fact); the 'tracking theory of knowledge' (true belief counts as knowledge if it is formed in a way that tracks truth, that is, the believer has a tendency to believe something when it is true, and not to believe it when it is false); 'reliabilism' (knowledge is true belief produced by a reliable – that is, likely to produce true beliefs – belief-producing mechanism). Notably, some proposals substitute the notion of 'justification' with that of 'warrant': thus, knowledge is warranted true belief, that is, true belief which is produced by a properly functioning belief-forming mechanism working in appropriate circumstances.

What many of these proposals have in common is the stress on the mechanisms or methods of belief-formation: belief counts as knowledge if it hits its target – truth – not by chance (accidentally) but as the result of a belief-forming process which delivers mostly true beliefs (that is, the belief is non accidentally true). Another thing they have in common is their so-called 'externalism': a believer does not need to be aware of supporting grounds or reasons which justify her belief; if her belief is true and is produced by a reliable belief-producing mechanism (of which, once again, she may be totally unaware), her belief counts as knowledge. This way, it is claimed, we can stop worrying about Gettierized cases of justified true beliefs which still do not count as knowledge. No awareness of justification or reasons for true beliefs is needed for knowledge. In post-Gettier epistemology, the combination of externalism and (broadly speaking) reliabilism (in its many, subtle incarnations) has risen to a position of dominance. Despite (as we will see below) mounting criticism, it continues to provide the framework of much present-day epistemology. Most importantly, notwithstanding its significant changes to the JTB theory criticized by Gettier, it maintains the basic structure of the analysis of knowledge underpinning Gettier's article: knowledge is a kind of belief which meets certain criteria.



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## Religious Belief and Reformed Epistemology

It is in this framework that a very influential strand of religious epistemology has been built: so-called Reformed Epistemology.[1] Religious epistemology deals, in general, with the epistemic justification of religious belief. This justification is traditionally understood as the justification of belief in terms of the evidence or reasons which can be provided for the belief in question. The classic arguments for the existence of God, usually collected under the label of 'natural theology', provide the prime example of this approach. Although many past philosophers regarded these arguments as proper demonstrations, one would be hard pressed to find present-day philosophers claiming such a strong epistemic status. Typically, these arguments are now seen as making, at best, a convincing case for the probability of God's existence, or as convincingly rejecting charges of irrationality against belief in God. In brief, most theists who endorse versions of these arguments would regard them as ways to support reasonable belief in God rather than as proofs which provide knowledge of the existence of God.

Reformed Epistemology, however, tackles the task of providing justification for religious belief in a completely different way. Established in the early 1980s by Protestant, 'Reformed' philosophers belonging to the Calvinist tradition, Reformed Epistemology counters the failure of arguments for the existence of God to provide *knowledge* of God's existence with a rejection of any need for arguments, reasons, or propositional evidence in support of religious belief. As argued by the founding fathers of the movement, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'many Reformed thinkers and theologians have rejected *natural theology* (thought of as the attempt to provide proofs or arguments for the existence of God). They have held not merely that the proffered arguments are unsuccessful, but that the whole enterprise is in some way radically misguided.'[2] 'Faith', Wolterstoff writes, 'is not the property of the intelligentsia; it inhabits all those to whom God is revealed in

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Christ. As such, it's OK as it is. It can use the ministrations of Christian theology. But it doesn't need to be rationally grounded to make it acceptable.'[3] In brief, according to Reformed Epistemologists, religious belief is rational, 'warranted', or 'entitled' independently of any justification by reasons, arguments, or propositional evidence.

Plantinga's mature work offers the most detailed explanation of this position in a massive trilogy on 'warrant' and Christian belief.[4] His proposal is built on the twentieth-century epistemological orthodoxy briefly outlined above, namely the view that knowledge is a kind of belief which meets certain criteria. Plantinga's distinctive version of this doctrine conceives knowledge as warranted true belief. Warrant, Plantinga writes, is 'that property – or better, *quantity* – enough of which is what makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief' (WCB xi). Warrant turns true belief into knowledge and is 'intimately connected with *proper function* . . . a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning properly, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for that exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief' (p. xi). Externalism is fully at work here: a believer does not need to be aware of how her belief is warranted; she does not need to have reasons which support her belief. As long as the belief in question is produced by a reliable belief-forming mechanism working in the appropriate circumstances, her belief is warranted. To cut a long story short, Plantinga's epistemological proposal is at bottom a variant of one of the most widely held externalist models of knowledge: reliabilism.

On the basis of this model, Plantinga claims that:

> what is required for *knowledge* is [i] that belief be produced by cognitive faculties or processes that are working properly, [ii] in an appropriate epistemic environment . . . [iii] according to a design plan that is aimed at truth, and [iv] is furthermore *successfully*



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> aimed at truth. But according to this model, what one believes by faith (the beliefs that constitute faith) meets these four conditions. (WCB 256; i–iv added for clarity)

As such, 'Faith is *Knowledge*' (WCB 256–8).

More precisely, 'faith' is, for Plantinga, a belief-forming process (analogous to sense-perception, memory, or rational intuition) designed by God to produce warranted true beliefs about God (cf. WCB 257). In this epistemological framework, Plantinga argues, 'the full panoply of Christian belief in all its particularity' (that is, religious beliefs specific to Christianity, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, and so on) can enjoy the three main varieties of 'positive epistemic status', that is, justification, rationality, and warrant (cf. WCB 241–89; see, for instance, pp. 241, 252). Christian belief, he concludes, can therefore rightfully be regarded as *knowledge*.

His claims, however, become even more sweeping. On this model, 'it is really the *unbeliever* who displays epistemic malfunction; failing to believe in God is a result of some kind of dysfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*' (that is, of the belief-forming mechanism which produces basic beliefs about God) due to the negative effects of sin on cognition (WCB 184; cf. WCB 213–40). Most importantly, all this leads to a key general claim, namely, that only in a theistic framework are all the conditions of warrant fulfilled. This claim reveals, in my view, the neo-Cartesian and neo-Sceptical bent of Plantinga's proposal. According to Descartes, it is the existence of a non-deceiving God that warrants the truth of our beliefs, saving us from a thoroughgoing scepticism spreading from sense-perception to mathematical truths. (In this regard, it is worth noting that, according to Wolterstorff and Plantinga, from a classical Cartesian point of view, a priori beliefs are just as exposed to scepticism as perceptual beliefs and beliefs in other minds.) Analogously, for Plantinga, it is the existence of (a Christian) God that ultimately rescues us from an engulfing scepticism about the truth of our beliefs since only a

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theistic metaphysics ensures that our belief-forming mechanisms have been designed to reach truth (as opposed to, say, survival, as maintained by Darwinian natural selection; cf. WCB 227–40: 'Naturalism and Lack of Knowledge').

Reading Plantinga, one may have the impression that, in his plea for epistemic parity between basic beliefs about God (that is, beliefs which are not inferentially based on other beliefs, but are themselves immediate, fundamental) and other basic beliefs, he is appealing to a form of direct realism (the view that we have direct awareness of objects which exist independently of perceivers). I do not think this is really the case. The distinctive claim of direct realism is that, in sense-perception, there is a direct cognitive contact between mind and world. By contrast, what bears the main weight of Plantinga's argument is not the claim that sense-perception puts us in contact with the world but the claim that basic beliefs produced by sense-perception (or rational intuition, or memory, or other standardly accepted belief-forming mechanisms) have no greater claim to a non-circular epistemic justification than basic beliefs about God. What he aims to establish is not that there is an originary openness of mind to world but that no cognitive faculty (including sense-perception) has independent justification for its reliability. That is, basic beliefs about trees, what we had for breakfast, simple mathematical calculations, the existence of other minds, and so on, are not per se less exposed to scepticism than basic beliefs about God. In his earlier work, Plantinga seems content to claim that if we accept the former kinds of basic beliefs as rational despite the lack of cogent reasons for their reliability, then we should accept also basic beliefs about God as rational. In his later work, however, he goes much further: the only principled way to avoid the sceptical consequences of not knowing whether any of our basic beliefs hit the mark is to embrace theism. In short, beliefs have warrant sufficient to turn them into knowledge only if God exists.

There is, however, a key difference between Descartes's way of escaping scepticism and Plantinga's way. Descartes



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is convinced he has *demonstrated* the existence of God. On the contrary, one of the key drivers of Reformed Epistemology is the acknowledgment that none of the arguments for the existence of God enjoys the epistemic status of a stringent demonstration. Trying to prove the existence of God by rational argument, however, is precisely what Reformed Epistemology does not want to do, and does not think needs to be done. According to Reformed Epistemologists, the existence of God is a basic belief – a belief that religious believers simply find themselves having. In other words, God's existence is simply assumed. Plantinga's aim is not to provide reasons for the truth of this assumption, but to defend the rationality of holding this belief without any argument or propositional evidence for its truth.

All objections to the rationality of holding the belief that God exists, Plantinga argues, *presuppose* in fact the falsity of this belief. Needless to say, if one starts from the assumption that, as a matter fact, God does not exist, then it is irrational to believe that there is in every human being a *sensus divinitatis* which, when working properly, produces true beliefs about God, and so on. But the issue of God's non-existence, Plantinga points out, has not been demonstratively settled any more than the issue of his existence has been demonstratively settled. One is, therefore, rationally entitled to hold on to belief in God's existence. If one presupposes his existence (instead of his non-existence), then it makes perfect sense to believe that God has designed human beings with reliable belief-forming mechanisms which produce mostly true beliefs, including a belief-forming mechanism which, given appropriate stimuli, produces true beliefs in God. In short, Plantinga concludes, religious believers have an internally coherent explanation of why belief in God is rationally held despite the lack of propositional evidence or arguments in support of this belief. If one assumes, as they do, the truth of God's existence, they have a good story to tell of why their belief is warranted. Furthermore, in an externalist reliabilist

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framework according to which knowledge is warranted true belief, their basic belief in God's existence, as well as their other, specifically Christian, religious beliefs, qualify as *knowledge*.

This bold conclusion becomes clearer in the light of another prominent movement in analytical philosophy of religion: so-called 'Wittgensteinian Fideism'. Drawing from writings of the late Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wittgensteinian Fideism argues that every belief presupposes a system of beliefs which, together, form a 'world-view' or a 'form of life'. Any belief can be evaluated only within the world-view or form of life to which it belongs, and according to the criteria of meaning and rationality of that world-view. Notwithstanding crucial differences in their metaphysical outlook, Wolterstorff himself notes the similarities in the approach of Reformed Epistemology and Wittgensteinian Fideism: both Wittgensteinianism and Reformed Epistemology regard religion as an all-embracing 'world-view' that offers its own, internally coherent explanation of ordinary experience. As per Wittgensteinianism's proposal, the claim is that the coherence of this explanation cannot be established through 'external' standards but only evaluated 'within' its own world-view (cf. RE 245–71).

## Knowledge and Belief as Different in Kind

Despite the huge success of Reformed Epistemology in contemporary analytical philosophy of religion, Plantinga's claim that 'faith is knowledge' continues to be controversial, not only (as one would expect) among atheists and agnostics, but also among theists. In what follows, I will give my reasons for rejecting this claim. Moreover, I will gesture at an alternative account of knowledge and belief that can provide a different framework for religious epistemology.[5]

First of all, it seems to me that Plantinga's radical project of countering the failure of the classical arguments for the existence of God to achieve knowledge with an account



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according to which Christian faith (with all its distinctive beliefs) is *knowledge* results in a general weakening of rationality rather than in a plausible defence of Christian belief from the charge of irrationality. Rather than securing the status of knowledge for religious belief, all knowledge is reduced to the particular beliefs of incommensurable world-views which can all claim entitlement to their own set of basic beliefs produced by ad hoc, properly functioning, belief-forming mechanisms. It may be comforting for believers within each incommensurable world-view to feel entitled to their basic beliefs, but the most likely outcome is that those belonging to different 'forms of life' will continue to regard as irrational basic beliefs of rival world-views for which no reasons are offered.

Even more importantly, it seems to me that the very project of turning religious belief into knowledge is misguided. In my view, the fact that natural theology does not provide *knowledge* of the existence of God but, at best, rational arguments for the reasonableness of *believing* in God's existence is not a failure of natural theology but the consequence of the limitation of human cognition with regard to many matters, including putative super-natural entities. Trying to address this limitation by providing an account which is supposed to turn religious belief into knowledge does not ultimately help the cause of religious belief. On the contrary, it undermines the epistemic uncertainty, and consequently the element of trust, which is normally and traditionally regarded as essential to faith. In brief, it deeply compromises the very notion of 'faith'. Somewhat paradoxically, Reformed Epistemology compromises faith, and its element of epistemic uncertainty, by proposing an updated form of fideism according to which faith does not need reasons.

There is a staggering amount of literature which objects to various aspects of Reformed Epistemology and to Plantinga's proposal in particular. My own view is that what should be rejected are not so much individual elements but the very framework in which Plantinga's astute proposal is

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built, namely the still widely accepted view that knowledge is a kind of belief which meets certain criteria. If one endorses both this view and its declination as externalist reliabilism, then Plantinga should be credited with having mounted a powerful case for why Christian belief counts, on this model, as knowledge.

The twentieth-century orthodoxy that knowledge can be analysed in terms of belief plus additional conditions is coming, however, under increasing fire for reasons independent of its use in Reformed Epistemology – and, I argue, rightly so. The highly problematic consequences drawn by Reformed Epistemology from this diehard twentieth-century account of knowledge offer, on the other hand, one of the best illustrations of the untenability of this model.

To start with, one should note that, contrary to the rumours spread by countless textbooks and by Gettier himself, an account of knowledge as a belief which meets certain criteria is neither standard nor traditional in pre-Gettier epistemology. Before the twentieth century (and even in some important twentieth-century philosophical movements such as Oxford Realism and Neo-Scholasticism), many (and, arguably, most) thinkers would have agreed that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge – not because something else should be added to truth and justification but because knowledge and belief are mental states different in kind.

A key thinker in this earlier and much longer tradition is a philosopher and theologian who could not be suspected of wishing to undermine Christian belief: Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, although fundamentally different, knowledge and belief are both cases of 'thinking with assent [*cum assensione cogitare*]' (*Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, q. 2, a. 1). For him, we 'think with assent':

(1) when we *know* something – that is, when the mind's assent is moved 'by the object itself' (we 'see' or 'grasp' it, either literally in sense



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perception or metaphorically in the case of intellectual perception);

(2) when we *believe* something – that is, when the mind's assent is not moved 'by its proper object' but by other reasons, external to the object (the object of cognition is not directly seen or grasped but we assent to it due, for instance, to testimony, or to other reasons which move us to believe that what we cannot see is nevertheless the case).

This account implies a primitive openness of mind to reality. Knowledge is a primitive mental state in which the presence of the object of cognition to the mind immediately moves assent. This is the most fundamental cognitive mode – a mode characterized by a cognitive contact between mind and world with no 'gap' between knower and known. By contrast, belief is a mental state in which the object of cognition is *not* immediately present to the mind, and assent to the object of cognition is moved by reasons rather than by a direct presence of the object itself. This difference in kind between knowledge and belief is captured by Aquinas throughout the *Summa Theologiae* through the contrast between 'seen' and 'not seen': what is known is seen; what is believed is not seen. 'Those things are said to be seen', he writes, 'which, by themselves, move our intellect or the senses to knowledge of them. Wherefore it is evident that neither faith [*fides*] nor opinion [*opinio*] can be of things seen either by the senses or by the intellect' (IIa-IIae, q. 1, a. 4). Believing cannot be turned into knowing for the simple reason that the state of 'not-seeing' cannot be turned into the state of 'seeing' without ceasing to be 'not-seeing'. Put another way, 'seeing' cannot be a species of 'not-seeing'.

One may be tempted to object that the difference between this model and the account according to which knowing is a species of believing is purely verbal. If one substitutes 'belief' for what I am calling 'assent', and

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'opinion' or 'credence' for what I am calling 'belief', one is back to the view that knowledge is a kind of belief. This objection, however, misses the point. What is at stake is not which *words* we use to indicate a more general cognitive mode and its species, but the identification of the most fundamental cognitive modes and how they are distinct from one another. A key aspect of the problem is the inflated and equivocal use of the term 'belief' to cover very different things, including the general mental act of acknowledging/affirming, and the specific mental act of affirming something with which there is no direct cognitive contact. The really crucial point, however, is whether there are, or there are not, mental states which are different in kind: that is, whether there is a mental state in which there is a direct cognitive contact with what 'is', and a mental state in which there is not such a direct contact. If all our cognition is reduced to the latter (that is, what a long tradition going back to Plato calls 'belief' as opposed to 'knowledge'), the gap between mind and world makes it impossible to be sure whether our cognition ever hits the mark.

A clear implication of my proposal is that the great majority of what we pursue in our successful cognition is belief (with different degrees of justification) rather than knowledge, since assent which is directly moved by the presence or manifestation of the object of cognition to the mind is possible only in limited cases. Much of our cognition relies on reasons which justify assenting to what is not seen, literally or metaphorically. On the other hand, belief supported by good, robust reasons is mostly very reliable in tracking truth. Most importantly, belief is not a botched case of knowledge, but an ineliminable mode of our cognition with the enormous power of extending our cognitive grip on the world beyond the little which (strictly speaking) can be known. In fact, its specific contribution is that of aiming at truth where and when knowledge is out of our cognitive reach. Therefore, in my proposal, belief aims at truth, not at knowledge. Moreover, since it is clear from the outset that justified true belief is not knowledge, the need to de-



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Gettierize justified true belief due to its being insufficient for knowledge does not arise.

To conclude, once we move away from the general epistemological project (pursued in much post-Gettier epistemology) of turning belief into knowledge through the addition of appropriate conditions, religious epistemology will also need to be approached in a way fundamentally different from that adopted by Plantinga. This different approach accepts the distinction in kind between knowledge and belief, and grants that knowledge is a cognitive mode sparingly available only in areas plausibly within the reach of limited cognitive abilities (at least insofar as natural knowledge is concerned, as opposed to some super-natural kind of mystical vision). One of the distinctive features of religious faith is that of being primarily about an unseen order of things beyond the boundaries of our finite, natural experience. If most of our successful cognition is justified true belief rather than knowledge, it is hardly surprising that when the object of cognition is some putative super-natural entity, the appropriate cognitive mode is not knowledge but belief. And this belief is at risk of being irrational if there are no reasons which can be given, either by the individual or by the community, to justify it.

*Maria Rosa Antognazza is Professor of Philosophy, King's College London. She is also the Chair of the British Society for the History of Philosophy and the President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion.* maria.rosa.antognazza@kcl.ac.uk

## Notes

[1] For a fuller discussion of these issues see Maria Rosa Antognazza, 'Belief, Religious Belief, and Faith', in a special issue on 'Kinds of Belief' of the *Rivista di Filosofia* 110(2) (2019): 283–306, on which the following remarks are based.

[2] Alvin Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?', *Noûs* 15(1) (1981): 41–51, at p. 43.

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[3] Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Religious Epistemology', in William J. Wainwright (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; hereafter RE), 245–71, at p. 269.

[4] Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; hereafter WCB).

[5] This proposal will be developed in Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Thinking with Assent: Renewing a Traditional Account of Knowledge and Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).



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