RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY: 
NATURALIZING A POINT OF VIEW

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The concerns of epistemology, within the Anglo-American tradition, and the concerns of the religious, or of philosophy of religion, might seem to have an obvious intersection. It might seem that one’s natural desire to establish an epistemic basis for the sort of belief as important to one’s sense of mental well-being as religious beliefs typically are would lead to a merging of these two concerns in some sort of direct line. A quick perusal of the literature reveals that this is not the case. Although contemporary analytic style has been employed in philosophy of religion, particularly with regard to arguments which might be deemed to be more metaphysical than not, seldom have epistemological questions within the framework of the religious been addressed in anything like standard epistemological mode.

There can and should be, I argue, an epistemology of religious belief which is not divorced from or radically different from the epistemology of belief simpliciter. Providing such an epistemology, is of course, no easy task. And yet I think current theory offers us more than one way in which to construct such an epistemology, and the epistemology so concocted will have the virtue of being au courant and far from unsophisticated.

The failure to establish such an epistemology thus far might be related, as I shall argue, to the stranglehold of normative theory on analytic epistemology as a whole until approximately the past decade or so. If it is difficult to establish an epistemic justification theory which supports my claim that Smith owns a Ford, it must be more than difficult to establish an epistemic justification theory which backs up a religious claim, assuming, of course, that a religious claim is not normally based on mere sensory evidence of the kind employed in mundane affairs. But religious claims, like other claims, are established within a framework and context, and failure to see this, I argue, is part and parcel of the reason that we do not have an adequate epistemology for religious belief.

In the first part of this article I will briefly recapitulate the normative nature of analytic epistemology, and develop an explanation of why it is that such normative theories cannot really be helpful to us in religious
contexts. In the second and third parts of the paper I will go on to develop a more positive view of what sort of an epistemology – a naturalized epistemology, I will assert – can aid us with religious beliefs.

I

The normative nature of analytic epistemology owes its status to a number of concerns which are largely historical, but of which we cannot remind ourselves too often if we are to try to come to grips with much of contemporary epistemic theory. It is not merely that epistemology owes much to the Cartesian tradition, although this is also true; it is that twentieth century epistemology also owes much to the Russellian logical atomism and sense-data theories of the earlier parts of this century.

Russell’s 1914 views, however antiquated they now seem, set out phenomena in discrete packets which had the virtue of lending themselves readily to attempts at epistemic precision. Russell had noted in his lectures that such a sensum could be maintained for approximately ‘two to three minutes’ at the most; the virtue of this conceptualization is that any sensum which I maintain steadily without interruption for two or three minutes is a sensum which, on an internalist view, may be thought of as a possible candidate for epistemic incorrigibility. Access to such a sensum is privileged access, and if I hedge my statements and qualify them, I may (according to some thinkers of the time) come up with a statement about which I could not possibly be wrong, or a statement which would not be refutable. Although – to shorten the story tremendously – the sense-data theories and privileged access views to which a doctrine like Russell’s gave rise were assailed with vitriolic fervour by Austin and others, this search for the epistemic inductive analogue of deductive certainty has been a hallmark of twentieth-century analytic epistemology.

After Austin’s period, a new, more American, turn gave rise to the Gettier examples and the sets of theories drawn up to respond to them. But the force of the Gettier examples, it will be remembered, was essentially this: it is possible to construct pieces of alleged knowledge which meet what used to be called the Tripartite Conditions (\(p\) is true; \(p\) is believed; I have adequate justification for the belief of \(p\)), but which we would not want to call knowledge. One of the original Gettier examples was constructed by disjoining alongside of a proposition for which we have what we would ordinarily take to be adequate epistemic justification. I may be justified in my belief that Jones owns a Ford because he has owned one ever since I have known him, I have never seen him in another car, and so forth. If I then make the logical move of trying to establish the truth value of a proposition such as ‘Jones owns a Ford or \(q\)’, I know from the law of the disjunction that, just in case I am
wrong about Jones, the proposition as a whole will be true if it turns out that \( q \) is true. If it turns out that \( q \) is true for accidental reasons, then I have a counterexample to the Tripartite thesis.\(^2\)

I delineate all of the foregoing because a quick overview of analytic epistemology of recent vintage reminds us of its completely normative nature. The replies to the Gettier examples drew on ever more complicated strands of theory, most of which were structured in terms of logically necessary and sufficient conditions to prevent a knowledge claim’s being susceptible to disconfirmation.\(^3\)

But if it is staggeringly difficult to provide a theory of epistemic justification for ordinary empirical beliefs, what then of religious beliefs? Religious beliefs occur in contexts that, in general, are divorced from the realm of the empirical. Because religious beliefs are context-bound, they require an epistemology which is context-dependent and not stringently and globally normative. But we have the beginnings of such an epistemology in contemporary naturalized epistemology.

II

When we attempt to become more precise about the nature of religious beliefs, we run up against the difficulty that a plethora of views is open to us, not all of which fall within the framework of the Western tradition. Consequently, I will try to narrow my focus by employing just two or three examples, taken from Western work which is best categorized under ‘philosophy of religion’. The point here is not so much to try to be as precise as possible about what the constitutive elements of religious belief actually are; rather, the point is to provide some examples which will help us in elucidating the contention that religious belief requires a contextualized epistemic view, rather than the normative view outlined in the previous section. In any case, I find John Wisdom’s classic piece ‘Gods’ quite helpful, since Wisdom is making the point that a certain context of interpretation is what is crucial for the development of some religious views.\(^4\)

It will be recalled that Wisdom employs the analogy of a garden left untended for a long period of time. I will quote extensively here, as this example is quite illustrative of my point, in so far as its emotive/cognitive force is concerned:

Two people return to their long neglected garden and find among the weeds a few of the old plants surprisingly vigorous. One says to the other ‘It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these plants’. Upon inquiry they find that no neighbour has ever seen anyone at work in their garden. The first man says to the other ‘He must have worked while people slept’. The other says ‘No, someone would have heard him and besides, anybody who cared about the plants would have kept down these weeds’. The first man says ‘Look at the way these are arranged. There is purpose and a feeling for beauty here. I believe that someone comes, someone invisible to mortal eyes. I believe that the more carefully we look the more we shall find confirmation of this’.\(^5\)
And so on. Wisdom’s point, of course, is that the gardener hypothesis is not intended (or interpreted) as a scientific hypothesis. As he says at a later point, ‘The difference as to whether a God exists involves our feelings more than most scientific disputes and in this respect is more like a difference as to whether there is beauty in a thing’. Now my point here is not that it is one’s external context which induces religious moments, or moments of felt religious experience or awe, although I believe that that is probably also true. Rather, what I take to be of import in this example is that one has an established mental context, so to speak, antecedent to the interpretation of any experience. This ‘mental context’, if you will, consists of the set of beliefs held antecedently, dominant dispositions, associations from experiences of the past, and so forth. This mental set provides the backdrop for the acquisition/disconfirmation of religious beliefs, and, in this sense, any epistemology which takes psychological functioning into account will be an epistemology which is much better prepared to help us cope with the problematic nature of religious beliefs than a strictly normative epistemology is. We must, of course, acknowledge that some of what goes into the make-up of the set of dispositions and associations may itself consist of preceding rational argument, and the efforts by those who have attempted to deal with, for example, the argument from design tend to show how powerful such arguments can be. Thus a complex network of arguments, conclusions, dispositions and associations may well be at an individual’s disposal.

In other words, what I aim at here, in broad strokes, is an epistemology which is more descriptive than normative, and which attempts to help us account for, say, a disposition to interpret facts of the world in terms of a Divine Maker, rather than an epistemology which, tied to some sort of metaphysical view, would attempt to help us adjudicate the view, as some older epistemologies certainly would. In many cases, these epistemologies are not sufficiently au courant to attempt to make use of current work in cognitive science. It is not for no reason that Hume’s epistemology is deemed ‘sceptical’, even if we are inclined to tell undergraduates to be careful in the employment of that term. An epistemology which tells us that we are inclined to posit real entities behind sensory phenomena because this makes us better able to cope with externals does not give us a happy prognosis with regard to the existence of entities for which there is no sensory evidence.

I take it that this antecedent, underlying mental set, as it were, is in fact part of the point of Wisdom’s article. A certain sort of person interprets the universe in one way, a person with different experiences and exposure to different arguments (and possibly even different neuronal firings, if we want to be reductionist) in still another. Now we must ask ourselves what moves in recent Anglo-American analytic epistemology help us with regard to the construction of the sort of epistemological
view I have been talking about. I will claim that what we need here is a naturalized epistemology, and I now want to fill in the blanks a bit on that particular view.

III

In the first section I sketched the development of twentieth century analytic epistemology, reminding us that the overriding concern was to develop the inductive analogue, as it were, of deductive certainty, and that moves in the early part of this century paved the way. In the previous section I tried to elucidate the more contextual elements which adhere to religious belief, being specific about the fact that we may think of these contextual elements to some extent as antecedent mental sets, or predispositions, rather than as externalized contextual elements (although this sort of element, too, may be important in some cases.)

Now what has occurred in analytic epistemology in the last two decades or so has been nothing less than a radical breakthrough of certain sorts of contextualized and naturalized lines of thought. The Gettier examples, and the theories which they spawned were, as I have already remarked, globally normative and not in general concerned with any actual cognitive moves made by an epistemic agent. But Kornblith, Goldman and others have done recent work which reminds us of what many researchers in other disciplines have been aware of for quite some time: We now have a functioning cognitive science – a science of the mind, as it were – and we are now in a position to say a great deal more about brain functioning than was possible even as recently as a decade ago.

The upshot for epistemology is simply this: any epistemics which purports or alleges to provide a theoretical overview of knowledge without taking into account mental functioning is liable to be, as Kornblith has remarked, ‘non-instantiable’, and irrelevant. So if we want theories which at least have the possibility of being instantiated, we must theorize in a way which is more consonant with cognitive functioning.

In ‘Some Social Features of Cognition’, Kornblith reminds us of the fact that the average three-year-old picks up almost all of her ‘knowledge’ from adults around her, and that it would appear from recent work in social psychology that we are hardwired to respond to the cues of other human beings from an early age. When we think of the functioning of the three-year-old, we can employ a crude input-output analysis which utilizes some features of the computational model of mind, but which could be rephrased according to, say, connectionist models, while still preserving its contextualized and naturalized (from the standpoint of traditional epistemology) flavour.

The three-year-old has input, picked up from other human beings in her social context, which may be auditory, visual, tactile, or even olfactory
or taste-related. Much of the more important stimuli will be auditory; she hears certain strings of input, and processing them syntactically so as to produce related semantic components (assuming that there are such components, that the strings of input are not just ‘noise’), she eventually – if she is a three-year-old at a developmentally average stage – produces her own brief strings of output. Much of the input–output at this level is still related to tasks of everyday functioning, and may have a great deal to do with physical safety. She decides, for example, that she would like to drive the family car, so she reaches for some object on the dashboard or for the steering wheel itself. She is told, or shown, that she may not do that. She processes the auditory signals; the well-behaved three-year-old acquiesces, while a more recalcitrant three-year-old must be told several times or even removed from the context, so to speak. When she is a bit older, she may even be able to process strings of argument about why driving cars – or riding bicycles – can be dangerous.

More importantly, this input-output analysis, however crude, allows us to try to come to grips with the social aspect of cognition in such a way that it has some congruence with traditional strands of epistemological theory, particularly classic justification theory. For if justification theory used to divide into two rival camps, referred to in the literature as foundationalist and coherentist, one aspect of their dispute is immediately apparent to the naturalizing epistemologist: One camp is more intuitively ‘naturalizable’ than the other. The coherentists, because they theorize in terms of justificatory sets, have a model for justification which is probably somewhat closer to being a descriptively accurate model than the foundationalist view is. We may think of foundationalism as related in a direct link to its Cartesian ancestors – since the coherentists give no one belief or knowledge statement special epistemic status, the direct linkage to epistemic tradition is not as obvious. Now the result of the foregoing, in so far as a naturalized epistemology is concerned, is that the justificatory set for an epistemic agent, on the basis of a naturalized epistemology, looks much more like an analysis of strings of output resulting from the processing of certain sorts of sensory input. These strings of output may not form a normatively accurate justificatory set (indeed, in certain sets of circumstances, they will seldom form a normatively accurate justificatory set), but the set so constructed will be descriptively accurate, and will harmonize with what we know about cognitive functioning.

IV

Now we are in a better position to explicate how a naturalized epistemology might help in the attempt to develop an epistemics for the religious. My previous example, taken from Wisdom’s well-known
piece, reminded us of the extent to which our psychological predispositions, or exposure to underlying lines of argument, are related to our interpretations of notions of the religious. Thus a naturalized epistemology, one more congruent with the way in which agents actually do function, might help us delineate the components of an agent’s belief set which might lead him or her to interpret the world as one which has been tended by an Unseen Gardener.

For my second example I will utilize the work of a thinker whose work stands in a rather different aspect to the religious tradition: Kierkegaard. One might at first wonder what the relevance of Kierkegaard’s work could be here, since this paradigmatically subjectivist and individualist thinker does not address epistemic questions in anything like the standard manner (regardless of what epistemic tradition one chooses to take as exemplary). I choose, obviously, to interpret these aspects of Kierkegaard’s work in a different way: precisely because his work does not fall under the usual rubrics, I claim that it lends itself to the interpretation of a naturalized epistemology.

In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard employs two notions which are crucial in his description of the encounter of the would-be believer with the divine (here Christ). One is the concept of reflectivity and the other is the notion of offended consciousness. In a previous analysis of this material I have written:

What Kierkegaard terms in *Philosophical Fragments* ‘offended consciousness’ – that is, consciousness which is offended by the seeming paradox of the Teacher’s divinity and mortality – finds itself involved in an ‘acoustic illusion’ with regard to this Primal Paradox. The offended consciousness cries out to the Paradox (according to Kierkegaard): ‘You are Paradox! You are irrational!’ and receives in reply ‘I am Paradox! I am irrational!’ from the source of the problem. Such a dialectic, involving an echoing back and forth of the statement of paradox, may ultimately lead to submission – a bestowal of the Paradox – if one makes the leap of faith into Christianity. The witness finds the God within him by leaping wholeheartedly into the Paradox. As Kierkegaard writes: ‘All that the offended consciousness has to say about the Paradox it has learned from the Paradox, though it would like to pose as the discoverer, making use of an acoustic illusion’.9

Now what I want to argue is that, stripped of the peculiarities of Kierkegaard’s style, the passage quoted above is indicative of some interesting epistemological material, material which I will claim is best analysed from the standpoint of naturalized epistemology. The point of the passage, I take it, is not unlike the point of Wisdom’s passage. One is faced with the inexplicable/irrational: In the case of Wisdom’s example, a garden which may appear to have been visited by a gardener, even though no gardener is around, and in the case of Kierkegaard’s construction, the presence of a Teacher who claims to be, simultaneously, Divine and Mortal.

With Wisdom’s analogy, we can readily see how analysis in terms of underlying predispositions, naturalized justificatory sets, and the
presence of strings of output which may be thought of as constitutive of such sets yields an account where evidence is interpreted as meaning that there is a Divine Gardener. But what I want to claim is that the Kierkegaard piece is itself analogous to the Wisdom piece in terms of its epistemic structure: a tendency to accept psychologically the fundamentally irrational nature of the Paradox as characteristic of the greatness and incomprehensibility of the divine could be analyzed along the same lines, especially if antecedent definitions of the divine in such terms are part of a person’s background. A certain sort of person exhibits such a tendency, and accepts the notion of a mortal divine teacher; another person does not, and steadfastly maintains that that which is divine cannot be mortal, and so forth. In either case, I argue, the antecedent predispositions can be analysed along the lines of naturalized epistemology. No normative epistemology completely divorced from what we now know of cognitive functioning, of whatever type, can do a good job of settling the metaphysical dispute of the existence and/or nature of the divine. Rigid foundationalism of the positivistic stripe does nothing to adjudicate the existence of a being with the requisite divine properties not knowable through the senses. But perhaps, somewhat incongruously, the more contemporary moves in epistemology – moves which are themselves derivative of work in the sciences and empirical work in general – might have the intriguing side effect that they allow us to account, in a certain sort of way, for our intrinsic desire to grapple with weighty ontological questions.

In this article I have argued that, however odd the juxtaposition, the merger of naturalized epistemology – that is, epistemology that makes use of contemporary work in psychology, linguistics, artificial intelligence and cognitive science in general – and notions of the religious may be a fruitful one. Preliminarily, I claimed that the failure of epistemology to develop an adequate epistemic overview for the religious might be related to the completely non-descriptive nature of analytic epistemology of the earlier part of this century, and I cited the work of Russell and others as exemplary of that trend. I then took as paradigmatic material from philosophy of religion the work of John Wisdom, and tried to explicate how his example could be elucidated in terms of a naturalized justificatory set. In order to make this material more transparent, I then cited the work of Kornblith and other naturalizers, noting that the way in which agents normally function, such as Kornblith’s hypothetical three-year-old, is best described in terms of dispositions, arguments, and strings of output, and that this descriptive approach might help us to understand one who is grappling with the notion of
religious belief. Finally, in order to make my point still more forcefully, I utilized material from a completely different segment of the religious tradition, and pointed out that the Kierkegaardian material, too, might be analysed along similar sorts of lines.

Part of my conclusion is, of course, as I asserted above, that an epistemology of the religious cannot – indeed, must not – be a non-descriptive and entirely normative epistemology. Our standard analytic epistemology is directly linked to moves in metaphysics and ontology-construction (one might indeed say, away from metaphysics and ontology-building) which took place in the early part of this century, which are rigidly normative, and which have little place for the religious, the aesthetic, or even the emotive, especially insofar as they tie in to the positivist tradition. But the richness of our lives demands that we begin to build an epistemology congruent with a multiplicity of facets. One such facet of living is our experience of the religious, in whatever context. I conclude that our experience of the religious demands and deserves a naturalized epistemology.

Notes
2 This is an approximation of one of the original Gettier examples. See Edmond Gettier, ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’, Analysis (June 1963), pp. 121–2.
5 Ibid., p. 392.
6 Ibid., p. 395.
7 Kornblith employs this terminology in several places. One of the most recent is ‘The Unattainability of Coherence’ in John Bender, The Current State of the Coherence Theory (Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic Press, 1989).