

Pragmatism and Religion

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ABSTRACT

Theism is partly based on testimonial evidence, and partly on philosophical arguments for the existence of a supreme being. Testimony is an invaluable source of evidence. Had it not been for the testimony of others and our tendency to accept it as a source of knowledge, learning would have been hampered in ways that would have impacted the speed of human progress. When we read a book, we normally learn new things through accepting the testimony of the author, and we tend to accept testimony as evidence only if we find it intuitively plausible, and if the testifier is reliable. Theistic discourse implies that religious messengers, by virtue of their excellent moral character, had a privileged access to truth. This article argues that even if we accept that they were morally excellent and perfectly honest in their testimonies, it still does not follow from this that they knew the truth or that they reported the truth to us. It could be the case that they were completely honest in their testimonies, and reported to us what they *thought* the truth was, not what the truth *really* was. The aim of this article is to examine the epistemic force of religious testimony and theistic belief in light of pragmatism.

KEY WORDS: Pragmatism, Religion, Belief, Testimony, Truth.

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatism is essentially a theory of truth, which argues that an assertion is true insofar as it is expedient or useful for us to believe. Religious propositions also claim to be describing the truth about the universe and human condition. The aim of this article is to examine why pragmatism salvages religion most effectively when it is subjected to a thoroughly epistemic inquiry. The study examines the nature of theistic beliefs to establish their justification status in light of pragmatism, which bases the meaning of the truth of a belief on the utility of the belief. It also analyzes the notions of belief and testimony, including the things that give rise to religious beliefs, notably practical considerations.

PRAGMATISM

The concept of pragmatism is credited to the American philosopher Charles Peirce, who first introduced the notion into the western philosophical thought in 1878. The notion was later developed and promoted by the American philosopher and psychologist William James in 1907. The concept comes from the Greek word "pragma", which means action or practice. The central thesis of

pragmatism is the maxim that the validity of an idea lies in the kind of consequences it brings about. James (1907a, p. 45) argues that the "pragmatic method is primarily a method of settling metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be interminable. Is the world one or many? -fated or free? - material or spiritual?"

James (1907b, pp. 45-46) contends that the pragmatic method in resolving disputes over these many alternatives is to "try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right".

In other words, when settling opinion on a given object, we "need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve - what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all," argues James (1907c, pp. 46-47).

Pragmatism and Truth

Pragmatism is essentially an account of truth, which we are naturally hardwired to pursue in our intellectual

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endeavors. James (1907d, p. 50) argues that the "whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one". That is, pragmatists tether the truth of an idea to the convenience and difference the idea might make to our life. James (1907e, p. 222) says, "'The true', to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as 'the right' is only the expedient in the way of our behaving".

Thus, in explaining ideas, pragmatists appeal to the instrumental or utilitarian view of truth, which argues that "truth in our ideas means their power to work" (James, 1907f, p. 58). That is, according to James (1907g, p. 58), ideas "become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience". This way, James (1907h, p. 63) holds that a "new opinion counts as 'true' just in proportion as it gratifies the individual's desire to assimilate the novel in his experience to his beliefs in stock. It must both lean on old truth and grasp new fact".

Echoing James's conception of truth, John Dewey (1903a, p. 108) too argues that we can "find the ultimate criterion of truth and reality in the practical outcome of thought". Elaborating on his account of truth, Dewey (1903b, p. 75) says, "The test of validity of [an] idea is its functional or instrumental use in effecting the transition from a relatively conflicting experience to a relatively integrated one". Emphasizing the connection between the validity of an idea and its power to bring about value to our mental or concrete life, Dewey (1903c, p. 75) argues that the "validity of meaning is measured by reference to something which is not mere meaning; by reference to something which lies beyond the idea as such - [namely], the reconstitution of an experience into which thought enters as mediator".

Dewey (1903d, p. 107) says that the "test of reality does not consist in ascertaining the relationship between an idea and an x which is not an idea, but in ascertaining what experience can be taken for granted as a safe basis for securing other experiences", adding that the "criterion of reality which we use is a practical one" in actual life. To illustrate this, Dewey (1903e, p. 106) gives the example of the world previously believed to be flat, which he says "ceased to be a fact" because "it ceased to be a safe guide for action" after "further thought-constructions of the real world convinced us that there is no reality which the idea flat-world represents". That is, Dewey (1903f, p. 10) argues that reality "must evidently be a broad enough term to cover both fact and idea", which he regards as "two aspects of a total reality". Charles Peirce, however,

disagrees. He thinks that a belief's being true, is independent of our feelings or the belief's being valuable to us. Peirce (1878, p. 298) rightly defines reality as "that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be".

Pragmatism: Truth and Goodness

The achievement of practical purposes is the essence of pragmatism as a theory of truth and reality. In deciding whether a belief is true or false, a pragmatist looks to see whether the belief furthers any desirable purposes. If it does, then it is true. If does not, it is false, according to pragmatism as understood by Bertrand Russell. Russell (2009, p. 82) says, from a pragmatist perspective, when "pursuing any purpose, a belief is entertained which is relevant to the purpose, the belief is 'true' if it furthers the achievement of the purpose, and 'false' if it does not do so".

Similarly, James (1907a, p. 73) argues that religious beliefs are true in so far as they afford comfort to the believer, and prove to be good for their lives: "If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much". James (1907b, p. 75) bases his pragmatist argument for truth on the premise that "an idea is 'true' so long as to believe it is profitable to our lives. That it is *good*, for as much as it profits".

James (1907c, pp. 75-76) joins John Dewey and Friedrich Schiller in advocating for a pragmatist doctrine of truth, arguing that "truth is *one species of good*, and not, as is usually supposed, a category distinct from good, and coordinates with it. *The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons*". In a possible world where "there were no good for life in true ideas", our duty "would be to *shun truth*" argues James (1907d, p. 76). Detailing his defense of the utility conception of truth, James (1907e, p. 76) notes, "If there be any life that it is really better we should lead, and if there be any idea which, if believed in, would help us to lead that life, then it would be really *better for us* to believe in that idea, *unless, indeed, belief in it incidentally clashed with other greater vital benefits*".

Associating truth with the good, by which pragmatists mean desire satisfaction, James (1907f, p. 77) holds that we cannot "keep the notion of what is better for us, and what is true for us, permanently apart", although he acknowledges that this way of thinking might precipitate a situation where we could be indulging all kinds of fantasies and superstitions.

Thus, James (1907g, p. 80) argues that pragmatism's "only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of

leading us, what fits every part of life best". Further emphasizing practical considerations in relation to what he thinks truth is, James (1907h, p. 80) says, "If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, in particular, should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was pragmatically so successful. What other kind of truth could there be, for her, than all this agreement with concrete reality?"

James (1907i, p. 64) concludes his account of truth, arguing that an idea "is truest which performs most felicitously its function of satisfying our double urgency", referring to our need to fulfill practical desires and meet the objective requirements of reality. It is because of these practical considerations underlying the theory, that pragmatism is widely seen as the doctrine that most efficiently explains why religious belief is desired, although the theory fails to address epistemic inadequacies of the belief due to its reliance on utility as the meaning or at least a key criterion of truth.

THE CONCEPT OF BELIEF

Belief is one of the central theses in the epistemology of religion. Belief is a propositional attitude, whose constitutional nature has polarized opinion among philosophers. Epistemic voluntarists argue in favor of the concept being a voluntary attitude, while epistemic involuntarists contend that belief is essentially an involuntary psychological state. Essentially, a person believes something when they take it to be true, as argued by Richard Swinburne (2001, p. 32), who holds that belief is a person's "view of the world, what they hold to be true about it, what they accept as true". Hence, it is truth-value considerations that prompt belief. And the proper way to arrive at belief, is through adequate evidence. However, if the given evidence is unsatisfactory, the person suspends judgment, rejects or merely accepts the proposition in question.

Moreover, belief is a mental state that is normally "inwardly stable, and fills the mind solidly to the exclusion of contrary ideas", argues James (2007, p. 283). In other words, when a person is said to hold a particular belief, they are normally said to be in the clear as far as the irritation of doubt is concerned. However, not all beliefs exclude a certain degree of doubt. Sometimes, we can hold a belief, while also having a certain degree of doubt about it.

Thus, when we examine a particular belief, we investigate the reasons that cause or give rise to the belief, or ask why someone would believe something. As Gilbert Ryle (2000, p. 129) argues, belief is "of the same family as motive words, where 'know' is of the same family as skill words; so we ask how a person knows this, but only why a

person believes that". Due to the absence of verifiable or incontrovertible evidence, religious belief is mostly driven by testimony, which accounts for many of our beliefs. There is consensus among philosophers that testimony affords reasonable grounds for belief only when its source is, among other things, reliable and knowledgeable about the subject matter in question.

Testimony as a Source of Knowledge

There is consensus in the philosophical realm that testimony is an invaluable source of many of our beliefs, without which our life will be hampered. David Hume (1977a, p. 74) argues that there is "no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and more necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators". Hume (1977b, p. 74) adds that our "assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses". That is, we learn the bulk of our knowledge on mathematics, geography, history, medicine, engineering, and many other important disciplines through the testimony of others. And it is rational to accept the testimony of a person only if we are justified in believing the testifier to be telling the truth. This kind of justified belief in the testifier's reliability and moral character normally takes the form of us having previously observed the testifier telling the truth, as argued by Hume.

In other words, Hume argues we can infer the reliability of a testifier from the reliability of his previous testimonies, and through this we can establish whether the testifier is of good moral character and whether to accept their testimony. For example, if a testifier *t* says that *p*, and if *t* has been reliable on such matters in the past, then I am justified in accepting *t*'s testimony that *p*. Thus, it is rational for me to conclude that *p*, from a Humean perspective. But, in addition to *t* having been consistently reliable and therefore of good moral character, I should also find *p* conclusive or reasonable in order for me to believe that *p*.

Thus, we need reasonable grounds to accept the testimony of a testifier, as argued by Jennifer Lackey (2006a, p. 179), who holds that people "need positive reasons in order to acquire testimonial justification". This way, we can avert the charge of "gullibility and intellectual irresponsibility" Lackey adds (2006b, p. 179). She gives an example of an extraterrestrial alien dropping a letter to us describing events on their planet. She argues that we as hearers or receivers of the letter have no good reason to believe their testimony, and are therefore unjustified to accept it. According to Lackey, we don't have any justified beliefs about the reliability of the alien testifier, or about life on their planet. Hence, it

would not be rational for us to accept their testimony, although we do not have any evidence to doubt the testifier's reliability or credibility of the account of events on their home planet.

Testimony and Will

Unlike sensory perceptions, which are normally irresistible sources of belief formation, we can withhold our assent to testimony if we find fault in the testifier's moral character or deem their testimony inconclusive. Robert Audi (2008a, p. 40) argues that there is a "sense in which testimony-based belief passes through the will - or at least through agency."

Furthermore, Audi (2008b, p. 40) contends that the recipient of a testimony "commonly can withhold belief, if not at will then indirectly, by taking on a highly cautionary frame of mind" in situations where the testimony is questionable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory. DePaul (in Sosa and Villanueva, 2004, pp. 97-98) joins Audi in thinking that it is "very often epistemically best for us to withhold belief" whenever the "circumstances call for it", adding that the "cautionary policy is epistemically better."

Given our cognitive constitution aiming at the truth, we cannot help believing things supported by adequate evidence. Similarly, we cannot help disbelieving ideas not supported by reasonable grounds. After all, beliefs are "normally shaped by evidence" and are "states which we can't help having" (Engel, 2000, p. 3). Highlighting the truth-conduciveness of belief, Jonathan Cohen (1992, p. 22) argues that beliefs are "states of mind that are normally responsive to the truth, not to our own decisions" differentiating belief from acceptance, which he says "occurs at will". Hence, under insufficient evidentiary conditions, we normally withhold judgment, or merely accept the given proposition for practical reasons.

Testimony, Honesty, and Truth

Whereas it is reasonable to take someone's good moral character as evidence for their honesty in the testimony they give, being honest in your testimony about something does not entail knowing the truth about the thing in question. I can be perfectly honest in my testimony about something, and therefore report to you what I honestly believe to be the case about the thing. But my being honest about my mental state on something neither entails my knowing the truth about the thing, nor does it necessitate or render my mental state to be actually true.

Keith is a respected local fisherman known for his honesty and excellent moral character. He has very interesting stories to tell about his fishing adventures, and is known to always tell the truth *so far as he takes things to*

be true. On one of his fishing adventures, he happens to hallucinate, appearing to see and talk to a mermaid. Keith later reports to locals his seeming encounter with a mermaid and the locals come, on the basis of his excellent moral and honest character, to believe his story. That is, the locals, on the basis of his testimony, come to take the existence of mermaids to be real.

They, from then on, come to think and act appropriately to such a belief. They go to the coast, expecting to see mermaids. Here, although Keith honestly reports to us his spurious mental state, his being honest about his mental state does not entail that he in fact had seen or spoken to a mermaid. That is, his being honest about his mental state does not mean that he knows the truth so far as the existence of mermaids is concerned. Even though he did experience seeing or speaking to a mermaid, his experience was nevertheless false. It was a mere seeming, a sheer hallucination.

There are two legitimate questions that we might want to raise here – whether Keith is justified in believing what he does, and whether the people who accept or acquire such a belief on his testimony are justified in so doing. Beliefs are justified so long as they are based on objectively adequate or good evidence. Because I do not take belief as an appropriate object for deontic appraisal, as I do not take belief to be a matter of choice, I therefore do not characterise unjustified beliefs or believers as epistemically blameworthy or irresponsible.

Rather, I characterize them as epistemically irrational or unjustified. However adequate, satisfactory or good Keith's evidence might be from his own perspective, hallucinatory evidence is by no means good evidence from an objective standpoint. He is therefore not justified in believing what he does, no matter how honest, convinced or fervent a believer he might be. That is, his belief is irrational from an objective perspective. Mermaids are, so far as we know, a mere figment of human imagination, beings that are not deemed impossible to exist. It is logically possible for there to be not only humans in this universe, but mermaids, extraterrestrials or other unknown beings too.

It is likely that such beings do exist, but we have not yet come to observe their existence in order to know that they do. Thus far, there is no good evidence that they do. But this does not stop people from believing that they do. The lack of good evidence does not always inhibit belief in us. Some of us come to believe certain things on scanty evidence, bad testimony, or through self-deception. It is human credulity along with their hunger for belief in something, that facilitates the advent of belief where there is no good evidence for belief. This is especially the case as regards belief in things that please us.

Before we determine whether or not people who come to believe on Keith's testimony that mermaids exist, are

justified in believing so, we need to determine when believing on testimony is or is not justified. The following is what William Clifford (1999a, pp. 79-80) says about when it is right to accept testimony:

In what cases, then, let us ask in the first place, is the testimony of a man unworthy of belief? He may say that which is untrue either knowingly or unknowingly. In the first case he is lying, and his moral character is to blame; in the second case he is ignorant or mistaken, and it is only his knowledge or his judgment which is in fault. In order that we may have the right to accept his testimony as ground for believing what he says, we must have reasonable grounds for trusting his *veracity*, that he is really trying to speak the truth so far as he knows it; his *knowledge*, that he has had opportunities of knowing the truth about this matter; and his *judgment*, that he has made proper use of those opportunities in coming to the conclusion which he affirms. ... [Thus], Of the two questions, equally important to the trustworthiness of a witness, "Is he dishonest?" and "May he be mistaken?" the majority of mankind are perfectly satisfied if *one* can, with some show of probability, be answered in the negative.

That is, there are two things that we would have to look out for in a witness when considering whether to accept their testimony: the moral character of the witness, whether he is dishonest, and the possibility that he may be mistaken. In a world where not only others, but even our own senses can deceive us, it is a worthwhile duty of all humankind to question testimony in this manner before accepting it as a basis for belief.

Clifford (1999b, p. 75) goes even further than questioning testimony as a universal duty, arguing in favor of questioning everything that we believe, no matter its basis, whether it be testimony-based, sensory-based or based on our own a priori reasoning: "No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe." This, however skeptical it may sound, is the way to ensure that we are rational in all our believings and sincere to our cognitive aim: the pursuit of truth.

But in practice, we do not tend to question all that we believe or come to believe, i.e. we do not normally question the perceptual beliefs we acquire unconsciously, the beliefs we acquire through our own senses, unless we have good reason not to trust our senses. Further to the conditions under which it is inappropriate to accept the testimony of a witness, Clifford (1999c, p. 87) argues that "Even if ... the matter affirmed is within the reach of human knowledge, we have no right to accept it upon authority unless it is within the reach of our informant's knowledge." Clifford (1999d, p. 82) further argues that even if the testimony of our witness were to be "subsequently verified by me, as proved him to have means of knowledge about verifiable matters far

exceeding my own; this would not justify me in believing what he said about matters that are not at present capable of verification by man."

Now, what shall we say about the people who buy into Keith's story solely on the basis of his testimony? There is no stain in his moral character. He is an honest man, and people trust him. The problem here is with the substance of his testimony, his so-called knowledge that *p*. Even though we can somehow dispense with our inability to verifiably eliminate the possibility that he was mistaken or deceived by his own senses, or the possibility that *p* is the result of his hallucinating or dreaming that *p*, as we have a negative answer for the question whether he is dishonest, it would be alethically inappropriate to disregard or ignore the fact that his testimony is about something which is not currently capable of verification by us.

It is impossible to know that something exists, when it does not in reality. It is, however, not impossible to know that something exists, when it does, but is not yet within the reach of our knowledge. In this universe of extreme vastness, with billions of unspotted areas, unexplored corners, unobserved spots, it is logically possible to think that mermaids or extraterrestrials do exist in one of these spots which we have not yet come into contact with, explored or observed. In light of this, it is inappropriate to argue that we know that such beings do not exist, because we do not yet, nor do we know the opposite.

It is possible that the existence of a deity is a mere product of human imagination, just like the existence of mermaids or extraterrestrials might be. These are matters which are beyond the reach of our knowledge at the moment, and are incapable of verification at present. The evidence theistic religions adduce for the existence of God is scripture, divine inspiration, or other philosophical arguments. The unverifiable existence of other beings or planets can give us good reason to accept them as working assumptions or hypotheses, but believing in them solely on the basis of the testimony of one single witness is far from being epistemically rational, no matter how honest or moral the witness in question might be.

It is an epistemic heresy to believe a witness when he makes statements about unverifiable matters out of the blue, because there is no reasonable ground for supposing that he knows the truth of the matter, for he himself is a human being like us, and such matters are at present beyond the reach of our knowledge and are currently incapable of verification by us. But theists take the moral character of a witness to guarantee the truth of the matters philosophers take issue with, i.e. *why believe in supernatural beings or things? Because he said so!* This is normally the reply that theists give whenever they are challenged on unverifiable matters. But, as argued by Clifford (1999e, p. 85), the moral character of a witness is no good reason for believing him when he makes

statements about matters currently incapable of verification by us: "The goodness and greatness of a man do not justify us in accepting a belief upon the warrant of his authority, unless there are reasonable grounds for supposing that he knew the truth of what he was saying. And there can be no grounds for supposing that a man knows that which we, without ceasing to be men, could not be supposed to verify."

Moreover, some religious people consider it impious and sacrilegious to question the veracity of religious texts or of matters puzzling enough which they themselves might have living doubts about, matters neither currently within the reach of our knowledge, nor capable of verification by us at the moment. The theistic argument partly appeals to scripture as evidence for the existence of a deity as if the moral character of a person entails infallibility or immunity from delusion or hallucination. They talk about religious matters as if they are a given.

For theists, when it comes to the statements of scripture about matters of divine existence, there is no room for coincidence, hallucination, dreaming, or the possibility of being mistaken or deluded. This is probably because the joy theistic belief generates in its holders outweighs these logical possibilities. But, as rightly argued by Clifford (1999f, p. 83), the "fact that believers have found joy and peace in believing gives us the right to say that the doctrine is a comfortable doctrine, and pleasant to the soul; but it does not give us the right to say that it is true. And the question which our conscience is always asking about that which we are tempted to believe is not "Is it comfortable and pleasant?" but, "Is it true?"

Humanity has been living with religion for so long that its truth has somehow become subservient to the joy and peace it generates in its followers. It has now become an insurance policy for happiness and peace of mind, and it is because of this that most religious people tend to ignore any doubts that might disturb the comfort of holding supernatural beliefs. It is through religion that they make sense of life, and it is religion that gives them a sense of purpose or belonging in life.

It is because of these pragmatic values that most religious people tend to shy away from the doubts that, once properly and dispassionately considered, might shake the foundation of their religious beliefs. It is the promising rewards of theistic belief, such as eternal life after death, paradise and its privileges, which account for the joy this belief instills in religious people. Furthermore, it is these comforting rewards along with our inability to know otherwise, that there is no deity, which account for the temptation to have supernatural beliefs. However, it is worth questioning whether theists would still keep their beliefs if these beliefs were devoid of such rewards.

There is no *general* innate proclivity for developing or entertaining supernatural beliefs, i.e. people with severe

physiological or mental disorders may not possess such a tendency. Even if they do, it is not a necessary fact that they will activate it. Moreover, from the idea that there is a general natural tendency in us for developing or entertaining supernatural beliefs, it does not follow that we necessarily develop or entertain such beliefs. It is logically possible to think that some people, due to some severe physiological abnormality or some severe mental disorder, never develop supernatural beliefs or entertain the possibility of there being supernatural or extraterrestrial beings, in spite of having the tendency to do so. This is, of course, despite the fact that so many intelligent people do not possess, and might never develop supernatural beliefs, although they might possess a natural tendency to do so.

Possessing a tendency does not entail activating it. Furthermore, possessing the tendency for supernatural beliefs does not entail activating it in the way of developing such beliefs or entertaining supernatural existence. Consider a new-born kept in quarantine somewhere soon after birth, leading a secluded life away from the influence of people holding supernatural beliefs. It is likely that he, at some point in maturity, will consider the question of the origin of human race or that of the universe, wondering whether or not there is a supernatural creator.

This might cross his mind: creating a universe of this magnitude is well beyond the ability of ordinary humans, and it is unlikely that this universe has always been here without a prime mover, there should therefore be a transcendent being who created this complex universe. But he subsequently realises that this is, given the evidence at his disposal, merely an intriguing logical possibility with some temptation to buy into it. There is, for him, nothing verifiable about that possibility. Here, even though the given subject experiences a natural tendency to entertain the possibility of there being a supernatural being, he does not end up acquiring any such beliefs. In addition, he may, for some reason whether it be poor cognitive sophistication or some severe mental disorder, not even entertain such a possibility, in spite of having a natural tendency to do so, that is if such a tendency is natural in us.

Believing in invisible things is normally classified as blind belief. It is belief in a supposed perceptual object in the absence of any perceptual evidence for it. People who buy into the existence of such things either blindly follow a crowd holding such a belief or follow a blind crowd holding this belief. The question to ask here is whether the people following the crowd believe what they might think they believe, or merely accept what the crowd supposedly believes, or whether the crowd really believes what we take them to believe or what they think they believe. It is likely that the people who first promulgated

religion believed their own account of events. It is likely that they were so certain of the existence of a supernatural being that they never thought of other alternative explanations for the origin of the universe, so certain that they just could not think otherwise, so certain that they never doubted the veracity of what they supposedly believed to be the case, probably much more certain than their own existence.

But it is also possible that they never believed in the existence of a supernatural being; that they just devised religion¹, accepted and spread it as a social system to regulate human behavior and edify our mind. Perhaps they thought that we are born inherently selfish, inherently prone to err, and are liable to be derailed from doing or thinking good, and therefore needed something like religion to edify our character, instill the principles of right and wrong in our mind and provide us with a sense of purpose in life.

But the key question still remains as to why we should be tempted to believe in perceptual things for which we have no perceptual evidence. Is it inherent in human nature to believe in something no matter the probity and adequacy of the evidence, if any, that we just cannot not believe in something, at least when it comes to the question of why we are here, who is responsible for our being here, the origin of this universe, and whether there is a supernatural creator.

If so, why believe in the idea that there is a deity, why not believe in the idea that there is no such deity, while the veracity of none of these propositions is currently verifiable by us? Perhaps the latter is not comforting enough to swallow. So why believe and not disbelieve in something which is neither currently within the reach of our knowledge, nor is it presently verifiable by us? Maybe it is something to do with our nature. We are hungry for belief, not disbelief in elusive matters of supernatural existence, especially when the belief provides us with values like a sense of purpose in life, peace of mind or psychological comfort. That is, it is human nature to believe in something no matter the evidence, as argued by Russell (1921, p. 130): "Man is a credulous animal, and must believe something; in the absence of good grounds for belief, he will be satisfied with bad ones."

Religious discourse is such that humanity needs religion to be good and righteous, as if we are born lacking the will to normally do good and be good, and that religion is there for us to instill this will in us. Religion in this sense is more a matter of practical necessity for people, than reality. This is so primarily because the metaphysics of God has, due to its unknowability or unverifiability, proven to be a great challenge to overcome. Thus, the current status of evidence makes it epistemically irrational to believe in supernatural existence, whereas

the practical benefits this belief provides make it pragmatically rational to hold such belief. It is because of religion's psychic benefits and its role in inculcating moral attitudes that French philosopher M. de Voltaire (1768, p. 2) argues, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him."

It is due to the pleasing rewards theistic belief promises that some people would rather live as if there is a God, than live as if there is not. Had it not been for these rewards or the psychological difference the belief is said to make in their lives, they would probably not mind living not holding the belief. Few people, if any, believe in extraterrestrial beings or mermaids despite the idea being around for a long time. And this is perhaps because holding belief in the idea does not promise any subsequent rewards, such as being treated favourably to those who do not hold the belief, nor does it make the kind of difference which religious belief makes in the psychology of people.

If we are told by an honest shepherd about a flying sheep that he says he had seen flying over, we would be inclined to immediately rule this out or at least suspend judgment on the matter, pending our own inquiry into the veracity of the incidence and the likelihood or possibility of such occurrences in nature. The shepherd does not report a natural occurrence. He reports a supernatural incident which is not explainable by the laws of nature. There is therefore nothing within our cognitive horizon that supports the validity of such a proposition in a way that makes belief possible for us. However, the doxastic response of many of us would be different if this incident was mentioned in religious scripture. It is likely that many of us would not even impugn the veracity of the proposition. Scripture asks people to believe and accept everything it states. Furthermore, religious clerics warn that challenging the content of scripture is a blasphemy, discouraging people from entertaining the doubts that they might otherwise consider. That is, scripture demands full surrender of peoples' mind. People are expected to think and act in accordance with what it prescribes or proscribes.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that religious testimony has enough pragmatic force to compel belief in the existence of a supreme being, and such belief would be pragmatically justified due to the practical benefits the belief affords. But this kind of testimony does not possess the epistemic probity necessary to warrant such belief, irrespective of how reliable the source of the testimony is, for knowledge of the given matter is not within the reach of human beings.

¹ I am focusing on theistic religions in this article.

Theistic belief implies different things, including holding a belief in life after death, in prophets being God's messengers, in the obligation to pray and adhere to the instructions outlined in the scripture, in the scripture being divine, in the idea that the universe was created by a supernatural being, and in other relevant propositions. At the heart of any theistic belief system lies a core belief in the existence of a supreme being.

While religious belief can be the result of pure introspection, many people arrive at some kind of religious belief through the testimony of others telling them about what they think is true about the origin of the universe, about the existence of a creator, about heaven, and other relevant religious matters. Some people form a variety of religious attitudes through introspection, or a process of persuading themselves that things are a certain way. Others form these religious attitudes by way of the testimony of others. Whether through introspection or testimony, these propositional attitudes are formed through mostly pragmatic values that are typical of faith and mere acceptance rather than proper belief, which is normally formed upon exposure to epistemically good reasons.

However, this does not mean that people cannot bring themselves to believe something on unprobative grounds, hypnosis, or self-deception. This paper concerns testimonially-based theistic beliefs, and has argued that religious beliefs owe their existence mainly to testimony that lacks robust epistemic values, given that we are dealing with rational agency. Pragmatic considerations play an instrumental role in the formation of theistic beliefs to the extent that hearers of religious testimony even tend to either suppress or ignore living doubts they encounter in favor of the pragmatic rewards and pleasing benefits the belief affords them. Truth-conducive testimony from a reliable source transmits epistemic warrant to our beliefs, whereas testimony not satisfying these conditions merely gives practical reasons to accept a given proposition, or accept it on faith.

In the case of religious testimony on the existence of a supreme being, heaven, or other related religious matters, for our belief in these ideas to be epistemically rational, we need to satisfy two conditions. First, we should justifiably believe in the reliability of the testifiers, who are of excellent moral character in this case. Second, we should justifiably believe that knowledge of such matters is within their reach.

While it is tempting to think that the existence of the universe is excellent evidence to believe in the existence of a supreme creator, it is possible to think that the universe has always been here uncreated. It is also logically possible to think that the universe is the work and product of a team of supreme beings, if it was ever created. In the absence of justified belief about these unverifiable matters, testimony on them merely affords pragmatic reasons to accept them on faith. Moreover, in light of pragmatism that relies on a belief's practical values as a test of its truth, theistic belief is certainly warranted and true. But a belief's utility, expediency, or its ability to withstand constant inquiry is no proof of its truth.

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