Evidentialism and a Pedagogy of Belief and Doubt

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In

In 2007, I was pleased to be accepted into a seminar, sponsored by the Teagle Foundation, to discuss the idea of a pedagogy of belief and doubt. The plan was that each participant would develop a course, in response to the seminar, which would enable our students to engage with questions of belief and doubt, especially as they relate to “big questions” such as ethical or, in the case of my own proposed course, religious issues. Coming into the seminar, I found it almost natural to think of a pedagogy of belief and doubt in Socratic terms as a way of enabling our students to become more reflective with their beliefs, to recognize the importance of critically examining the reasons for their beliefs in the light of objections from others who may not see things quite the same way as they do. And this Socratic ideal of an examined or reflective life would seem to presuppose the evidentialist idea that we ought to have good reasons for thinking our beliefs true since securing good reasons for our beliefs, and weeding out beliefs for which we lack good reason, is what we are trying to achieve through adopting that reflective attitude. This was, in fact, the way I understood the course I had proposed which was centered in a close reading of Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. I wanted to give my students, both religious and skeptic, the opportunity for a sustained reflective examination of their beliefs, pro and con, concerning the existence of God. The evidentialist presupposition behind my course proposal was simply that we ought to have good reasons for our beliefs, in particular where those beliefs concern the existence or non-existence of something like a Judeo-Christian conception of God, and we should, therefore, be vigilant about those reasons, inspecting their soundness in the light of arguments and viewpoints which call them into question.

In good Socratic fashion, I found my evidentialist presuppositions challenged by the 2007 Teagle seminar. Our very first formal presentation by Nicholas Wolterstorff dismissed the
evidentialist challenge to religious belief as a product of a now widely recognized failed foundationalist epistemology. We do not need convincing reasons to accept our religious beliefs as true. All rationality demands in the sphere of religious belief is a willingness to respond to arguments which purport to give good reasons to doubt the truth of one’s belief in God, not to have good reasons for one’s belief. In much the same key, participants of the seminar were also asked to read for our first day’s meeting William James’ classic essay, “The Will to Believe,” which famously argues that when the personal, pragmatic stakes are high enough, it can be rational to will to believe in God without evidence which would be intellectually convincing to think it true that God exists. There appeared to be a clear message here for what a pedagogy of belief and doubt should look like or, more properly, what it should not look like. It should not be based in evidentialist premises which would challenge religious students to critically examine the reasons for their religious beliefs. Such an evidentialist challenge is based in an outmoded epistemology which ignores the pragmatic nature of the grounds of religious belief. After many spirited discussions in both the 2007 and follow up 2008 seminars, and my own experiences with teaching my course on Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, however, I remain unconvinced. A sound pedagogy of belief and doubt should be based, I still think, in a commitment to the idea that we ought to have good reasons for our beliefs. Anything short of this leaves us with an impoverished picture of intellectual dialogue and inquiry which, in crucial respects, falls short of opening up a genuinely Socratic space in which our students can find their beliefs challenged and come to appreciate why Socrates famously declared the unreflective life not worth living. (Plato, 1994)
When Dawkins’ book, *The God Delusion*, was published in 2006, I had several students I knew approach me wanting to talk about the book. Since the dialogues I was having with my students out of class were precisely the sort of dialogue I seek to foster in class, I thought this book - which appeared to have touched a nerve with some of my students in a positive way - would be an ideal basis for my college’s month long, ‘special topics’ courses we teach each January. But beyond that, these conversations convinced me that many of my students actively wanted to have this sort of critical discussion of religious faith and, perhaps, were not finding enough of an opportunity in their time at college to do so. Both religious and skeptical students alike wanted to examine the reasons for their faith or skepticism and see how those reasons might fare when confronted with objections from ‘the other side.’ Dawkins’ book merely served as a catalyst for these desires, I believe, providing students who wanted to think more reflectively about their religious beliefs (or lack of religious beliefs) an opportunity to give voice to those desires.

Seeking a counter to Dawkins’ critique of religious faith, I chose Alistair McGrath’s *The Dawkins Delusion?* as a second book for the class to read. My basic objectives for the class were quite simple: to create a context where my students could engage with Dawkins’ critique of religious belief and McGrath’s defense of religious belief in response to Dawkins’ critique, develop a better understanding of the issues involved in this debate and, above all, be able to have a respectful but frank discussion about these claims where those who were more sympathetic with Dawkins’ critique of faith and those who were more sympathetic with McGrath’s defense of faith could genuinely learn from each other. And, in the end, I could not have been more pleased with how the course went. It was, as I had hoped, a discussion driven
course in which most of my students, both religious and skeptic, made contributions on a regular, if not daily basis. And the discussions were of what I regard as the highest caliber where you could see individuals changing how they thought about issues, if only in subtle ways, as a result of exposing their beliefs to the objections of others and taking those objections seriously in their responses.

My positive impression of the course was borne out by the overwhelmingly positive responses I received from my students in their written evaluations of the course. Some mentioned that this critical examination of their beliefs led them to either strengthen their beliefs or to change somewhat in their beliefs. Others simply discussed how they valued the opportunity to engage in a critical reflection on their beliefs. One person described the course as “one of the most thought provoking classes I’ve ever taken.” Another mentioned that her/his “faith had been strengthened” by the class but that s/he was “thankful” for the questions Dawkins had raised of her/his faith. Yet another described the course as “by far one of the greatest opportunities to sit down and critically analyze my beliefs.” Many commented on how helpful they thought the class discussions were, in particular. One noted how “everyone” involved in the discussions was “thoughtful and non-judgmental.” Another wrote that “the class discussions helped me think about my beliefs in a critical way and I feel that my principles are stronger having been challenged.” Yet another described the discussions as “a liberating experience.”

I find my one student’s choice of the term “liberating” in describing what s/he found valuable about the course particularly interesting. Why would s/he find it liberating to have beliefs which are so close to the core of her/his sense of self called into question rather than, as it undoubtedly is for many of us, simply annoying or even offensive? There are many ways in
which we could think about the Socratic enterprise as liberating, but one sense which I believe is relevant here is the way in which it opens up a kind of autonomy for those who are actively engaged in it; not, of course, autonomy in the sense of being able to do or, let alone, believe whatever one wants to do or believe, but rather a Kantian sense of autonomy where we come to tailor our beliefs according to what we ourselves can see we have good reason to think true. The Socratic enterprise enables one to have a form of ownership over one’s intellectual life. In reflecting on the grounds of a belief, it ceases to be merely a product of whatever psychological and sociological processes may have led one to adopt it, but a product of one’s own efforts to discern what one has good reason to believe. In enabling that critical distance from whatever has, as a matter of fact, led one to adopt a particular belief, one gains a sense of being, as a rational agent, in command of one’s intellectual life. Insofar as one sees the prospect of no longer merely believing something because of how one has been influenced to believe it - perhaps influenced to such an extent that one could previously not even see the sense of calling it into question - one gains the autonomy to determine one’s beliefs for oneself through a process of rational inquiry.

This autonomy is not, however, individualistic in character. It is premised on what Emmanuel Levinas has called the heteronomy of a relation to the other person that is, at bottom, an ethical relation in which one finds oneself called into question by others, obliged to respond in ways which take their concerns seriously. (Levinas, 1969, pp. 40 & 203) The Socratic enterprise is an inherently social enterprise which demands a sense of responsibility not only to the enterprise at hand, but to those who undertake it with you. It requires frank conversation in which one is willing to speak one’s mind even if others might disagree and find one’s point of view offensive.3 But it also requires a sense of respect for the points of view of others, a sense that
they deserve my consideration and should not be dismissed out of hand. The class discussions my students had with one another and myself instantiated this frank, but respectful character of Socratic reflection to a remarkable degree. I believe they learned not only the value of a kind of autonomy which is made possible by Socratic exchange, but also the value of an ethical sense of responsibility to others which lies at the heart of it. Adopting a reflective attitude toward one’s beliefs is a complex endeavor, enabling the individual to take her/his critical distance from whatever events and processes may have led her/him to the beliefs s/he holds, while also enabling her/him to establish a connection with others, no longer at the level of blind mutual influence, but rather in terms of rational exchange and mutual respect.

But this entire Socratic enterprise is premised on the evidentialist idea that we ought to have good reasons for what we believe and that it is, consequently, worth the effort to submit our beliefs to critical examination in order to better assess the soundness of whatever reasons we may think we have for them. Those of us who accept the value of the Socratic enterprise accept this evidentialism in practice with respect to most of our beliefs. But does it hold with respect to religious beliefs? As I mentioned earlier, the thought that it does not was advanced at the beginning of the Teagle Seminar of 2007. To begin with the most widely known argument, James’ defense of our right to ‘will to believe,’ his most basic point is that when the pragmatic stakes are high enough and we have no compelling evidence against a belief, we may reasonably allow our “passional nature” to move us to adopt that belief without having good reason for thinking it true. (James, 2008) Though people of religious faith may lack good reason for thinking it true that the God of their faith actually exists, if their lives are better by virtue of that faith, then their belief in God is reasonable for them.
It is unclear, however, how this pragmatic consideration is supposed to work in the first person, for the believer her/himself. I might think that it is reasonable for you to hold a belief without good reason for thinking it true because of all the good it does you. Indeed, this attitude can be motivated by a concern for the welfare of others and, as such, instantiate an apparently praiseworthy form of respect for them. But can I believe anything and, in full awareness, recognize that I have no good reason for thinking it true, but only believe it because of its pragmatic benefits? It is not clear, to say the very least, how I, in the first person, could pull that off. To believe anything is to believe it true and for that we need some reason for thinking it true, a reason that is relevant to its truth. And, at least with respect to beliefs concerning matters of fact in the world, such as beliefs concerning God’s existence, the pragmatic benefits of a belief are simply irrelevant to its truth. Viewed from a first person point of view, believing that God exists because of the pragmatic benefits of that belief must, therefore, involve some degree of distraction or self-deception which allows us to overlook this as the ‘reason’ for our belief, perhaps thinking falsely that we do, in fact, have good reasons for the belief. This is, undoubtedly, the case with all of us with respect to some of our beliefs - holding them because we deeply want to believe them true, but without recognizing that we hold them for that ‘reason.’ But this kind of distraction or self-deception, whether deliberate or not, is surely not something an intellectually responsible pedagogy of belief and doubt ought to affirm as reasonable for students. Though it may appear as a form of respect we show our religious students, in fact it is an attitude which, when taken seriously from a first person point of view, can only foster intellectually irresponsible attitudes and habits of thought.

It could be argued, however, that no real harm is done in fostering such attitudes with
respect to a very limited range of our students’ beliefs, their religious beliefs, especially when we take into account the benefits of those beliefs. This response presupposes, of course, James’ contention that religious beliefs are, on balance, beneficial. And this is a point that we should surely regard today as something that cannot just be taken for granted.\(^5\) But even accepting this contentious premise, the response overlooks the way in which intellectual attitudes such as a willingness and desire to scrutinize the reasons for one’s beliefs can only be acquired as a generalized habit of mind - a proclivity toward living reflectively with respect to one’s beliefs generally. As Louis Pojman suggests of our disposition to seek the truth through securing well-justified beliefs, “It is dispositional, a habit. If it is to be effective at all, it must be deeply engrained within us, so that it is not at all easy to dispense with.” (1986, p. 190). It is not too much of an overstatement, I believe, to say that we are a species which is pervasively disposed to living unreflectively, to uncritically accepting the beliefs we have been brought up to hold and resisting efforts to challenge especially those beliefs which are very important to us. Given the pervasiveness of our generalized disposition to living unreflectively, it does not seem likely that a commitment to the value of a reflective life can be successfully cultivated in any other way than as a competing disposition which, as Pojman notes, is “not at all easy to dispense with.” Teaching our students that they do not need reasons for their religious beliefs does not, formally speaking, preclude adopting a reflective attitude toward other beliefs. But it does undermine the cultivation of a generalized disposition to living reflectively which is arguably necessary to successfully counter our unreflective dispositions. A reflective life does not, as such, appear to be something we can cultivate in a piecemeal way, with some beliefs but not others.\(^6\)

Perhaps, though, religious beliefs are an exception to the evidentialist rule that we cannot
believe something, in full awareness, to be true without having what we take as good reasons for thinking it true. This was the basic point pressed by Wolterstorff in his presentation to the 2007 Teagle seminar in which he argued that the evidentialist challenge to religious faith - the demand for reasons for thinking one’s belief in God true - was a product of a bankrupt foundationalist epistemology. Following Alvin Plantinga in this regard, the problem for the evidentialist is that demanding reasons for every belief gives rise to an infinite regress of beliefs which serve as reasons for other beliefs and so on. Typically evidentialists have avoided this regress by supposing that some beliefs are self-evident. Beliefs such as “1+1=2” or beliefs about one’s own states of consciousness wear their truth on their sleeves, so to speak, needing no further justification. (Wolterstorff, 1983b, p. 3) They are “basic” beliefs in the sense that they are not inferentially derived from other beliefs which serve as our reasons for holding them. And these basic beliefs can serve as the foundations of other beliefs in the sense that these other beliefs can be inferentially derived from them. But Plantinga and Wolterstorff both correctly note that the idea of self-evident foundations of knowledge is deeply problematic, rendering any evidentialism which presupposes it suspect. Plantinga, in particular, argues that foundationalism draws the range of properly basic beliefs too narrowly, excluding such beliefs as “there are enduring physical objects” or “the world has existed for more than five minutes” which, despite their lack of self-evidence, still appear to be beliefs we hold, and reasonably so, without inferentially deriving them from other beliefs which serve as reasons for them. (Plantinga, 1983, pp. 59-61) Lacking any clear criteria for what can count as a basic belief, Plantinga reasons that different communities will count different sorts of beliefs as properly basic and, as such, there is no reason why belief in God cannot be properly basic for the Christian community. (1983, pp. 59-61)
Generalizing on this anti-foundationalist theme, Wolterstorff argues that rationality does not demand, as the evidentialist supposes, that we have good reasons for all of our beliefs, but merely that we abandon any of our beliefs when we have good reason to suppose them false.\(^8\) (Wolterstorff, 1983, pp. 162-164) People of faith are rationally obligated to answer objections which purport to provide good reason for thinking their belief in God false, but Wolterstorff can find no reason for supposing them rationally obligated to provide reasons for thinking their belief true; a way of characterizing the demands of rationality for religious believers which Plantinga endorses as well. (Plantinga, 1983, pp. 82-87) In this way, people of faith do not leave the argumentative sphere, what I have been characterizing as the Socratic endeavor to live reflectively. But those outside the religious community need to respect the religious beliefs of communities of faith as properly basic, beliefs which no more stand in need of justification for them than beliefs such as “the world has existed for more than five minutes” do for the rest of us. Different communities think about the world and their place within it from different epistemic or cognitive vantage points, characterized by different sorts of basic beliefs which guide them in their inquiry. Using the phrase Wolterstorff stressed at his presentation to the Teagle seminar, we need to foster a “dialogical pluralism” between these different communities which aspires to facilitate dialogue across their different epistemic vantage points, but also respects that religious people must speak with their own distinctly religious voice.

There are two points I believe we ought to bear in mind when evaluating the cogency of Wolterstorff’s and Plantinga’s position. First, its cogency depends almost entirely on the link they draw between evidentialism and foundationalism. And yet, it is far from apparent that evidentialism must presuppose foundationalism. One could, for instance, grant Plantinga’s point
about basic beliefs and still argue that the range of what can properly count as a basic belief is more restricted than he would allow and certainly not relative to the epistemic vantage points of particular communities. One could follow certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s work and argue that properly basic beliefs are beliefs where it is difficult to make sense of anyone seriously doubting them; where, as with our belief that the world is more than a hundred years old, we would have to say, “‘If I am wrong about this, I have no guarantee that anything I say is true.’” (Wittgenstein, 1969, #s 69, 231, 252, and 261)9 This would be a qualified evidentialism, to be sure, but one that would resist the potential for a proliferation of basic beliefs, depending on the varying epistemic vantage points of the communities in question. There would be, on this account, no question as to whether belief in the Great Pumpkin could count for some community of true believers as a properly basic belief, as it does arise as a question for Plantinga.10 And there are still other options available for the evidentialist we need not go into here11 as the only point I want to stress here is the availability of non-foundationalist options for the evidentialist. If these options exist, then Plantinga’s and Wolterstorff’s warranted critique of foundationalism need carry no necessary implications whatsoever for the cogency of evidentialism.

But the more pressing point I want to raise concerns the practical implications of their ideas for the Socratic endeavor itself and, for that reason, for a pedagogy of belief and doubt. For Wolterstorff and Plantinga, the person of faith does not entirely leave the Socratic sphere of critical self-reflection as s/he is obligated to answer objections which purport to offer reasons for thinking belief in God false. But they remain in that sphere in a way which makes them almost certainly immune to any serious critical challenge. As Plantinga points out, any argument which led, from premises the Christian accepts, to the denial of God’s existence only shows “that there
is trouble somewhere” in the entire range of beliefs the Christian endorses. “A change must be made somewhere, but the argument does not show where.” S/he may give up one of the premises upon which the argument is based or, more radically, could reply that s/he finds her/his basic belief in God “more worthy of belief” than any argument which would lead to its denial. (1983, p. 83) To better see Plantinga’s point here all we need do is take an example of what is arguably a basic belief for all (rather than some) of us: our belief in a physical world independent of our minds. Surely we would, and arguably should, find any arguments which seem to show that there is no physical world more suspicious than the belief those arguments aim to call into question. If belief in God is properly basic for the person of faith, in the way that belief in a physical world may be for the rest of us, then in like manner they would and arguably should find any arguments against God’s existence more suspicious than their properly basic belief in God. Though freeing the believer of the need to find good reasons for their religious beliefs does not completely close down the possibility of critical self-reflection, it does limit it considerably, giving the believer what amounts to a “Get Out of Jail Free!” card with respect to most serious critical challenges to her/his beliefs.

With these limitations, it is hard to see how dialogue in this context could amount to anything more than a mutually respectful exchange of opinions, an expression of one’s own point of view and why one finds it, from one’s own distinctive point of view, convincing followed by similar forms of self-expression from others. With this in mind it is interesting to note that Wolterstorff stresses that the Reformed Calvinist religious tradition which his and Plantinga’s critique of evidentialism “has a close affinity to” holds that the Christian community may reasonably reject science in favor of its own Christian convictions, when they appear to conflict,
pursuing its own distinctive form of ‘science,’ grounded in a uniquely Christian vision of the world which ultimately could lead to quite different conclusions regarding the nature of the world than a secular version of science, such as we know it today, would lead. He characterizes this as a kind of “pluralism in the academy” which is advanced as an alternative to the dominant view which regards “consensus as the appropriate goal and expectation of scientific inquiry.” (1983b, pp. 8-9)¹³

More recently, Plantinga has amplified this natural implication of their position in arguing that people of faith should practice a Christian or, more broadly, theistic ‘science’ which would draw from “all that (they) know” of the world, from both empirical observation and their faith. In particular, Plantinga argues that an acceptance of this epistemic pluralism with regard to science, should lead to an acceptance of Intelligent Design as a reasonable alternative, for the Christian at least, to contemporary evolutionary biology. What is reasonable to believe is relative to the other beliefs already accepted by the individual or community under consideration: what Plantinga calls that person’s or community’s epistemic base. Evolution is a reasonable belief to adopt relative to the epistemic base of modern science since it includes a commitment to methodological naturalism: the idea that we can only give scientific consideration to naturalistic hypotheses. Once we have restricted the range of hypotheses concerning the origins of living species to naturalistic ones, Plantinga accepts that the evolutionary hypothesis emerges as the most reasonable naturalistic option.

The epistemic base of Christians, however, includes not only beliefs acquired through empirical observations but beliefs about God and her/his relation to her/his creation acquired from their understanding of Scripture and, in this way, is not limited by the restrictions of
methodological naturalism. The challenge for the Christian, then, is to balance what they ‘know,’ *prima facie*, on the basis of their faith and what they ‘know,’ *prima facie*, on the basis of their empirical studies of the world around them, inspecting the degree of warrant associated with any apparently conflicting claims. This balancing act will not always result in decisive conclusions. Plantinga notes, in particular, how people of faith may come to different conclusions regarding the conflict between the apparent teaching of scripture regarding a *very* young universe and the “variety of types of scientific evidence” for a *very* old earth. Though Plantinga himself appears to come down on the side of contemporary science on this one, he is careful to note that “a sensible person might be convinced, after careful and prayerful study of the Scriptures, that what the Lord teaches there implies that the evidence (for a very old earth) is misleading and that as a matter of fact the earth *is* very young. So far as I can see, there is nothing to rule this out as automatically pathological or irrational or irresponsible or stupid.” (Plantinga, 2001b, pp. 121-122) But his own conclusion regarding evolution is that, when viewed from the perspective of all that the Christian ‘knows,’ Intelligent Design emerges as the more reasonable hypothesis. Drawing implications for the academic curriculum of public schools, Plantinga concludes from this that Intelligent Design and evolution should both be taught, but only as conditionally true, depending on the epistemic base one adopts in evaluating it.15

There is much that could be said about Plantinga’s proposal for a Christian or theistic ‘science.’ First, it teaches us something about the theoretical possibilities inherent to a rejection of evidentialism. Though it may be insisted that believers are not rationally entitled to their religious beliefs as long as they have good reasons to believe them false, this does not necessarily entail that we will not ultimately wind up counting beliefs as reasonable which fly in the face of
overwhelming empirical evidence. As Plantinga’s arguments remind us, the evaluation of evidence or reason against a proposition is always a holistic matter which requires change somewhere in the entire range of beliefs we endorse, but does not tell us where. If we count what Scripture teaches us about God as a properly basic belief and, “after careful and prayerful study of the Scriptures,” we believe that God teaches us that the age of the Universe is somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 years old, then we may find it reasonable to reject overwhelming evidence to the contrary as “misleading.” As such, we need more than reassurances that beliefs reasonably held without good reason to believe them true cannot be reasonably held with good reasons to believe them false in order to assure ourselves that rejecting the evidentialist challenge to religious faith will not lead to all manner of beliefs which fly directly against empirical evidence. As long as we are rationally entitled to those beliefs without good reason to think them true, evaluating the strength of any reasons against them will always be a process, aptly illustrated by Plantinga, in which we must balance the relative warrant of the competing claims and make a change somewhere in our beliefs, but not necessarily in favor of the empirical evidence.

It is of interest, though, to note that many people of faith implicitly reject this sort of balancing act, taking what they learn on the basis of empirical evidence as sufficient reason to reject any interpretations of their faith which tells against them, such as belief in a young earth, special creation, and the like. This would appear to involve a subordination of the lesser warrant of beliefs acquired by faith to the greater warrant of beliefs acquired on the basis of empirical evidence. Something like this epistemic subordination of faith to evidence would appear to be what anti-evidentialists need in order to erect a dependable firewall between their rejection of
evidentialism and a ‘worst case scenario’ in which it is conceivable that just about any belief
could be rationally endorsed, no matter how much it flies in the face of evidence against it.
Plantinga is clearly uninterested in erecting any such firewall and Wolterstorff does not appear to be either, assuming he endorses the vision of ‘academic pluralism’ mentioned earlier. And, though accepting the epistemic subordination of faith to evidence would not lead to the view that beliefs without evidence are irrational, it would appear to lead to the view that beliefs without evidence are less rational than beliefs formed on the basis of evidence. Why else, otherwise, must they give way to contrary evidentially supported beliefs? This consequence does not appear to be in synch with the ‘spirit’ of anti-evidentialist defenses of religious faith, but I can see no reason why it could not be acceptable, in principle, to some anti-evidentialists. Plantinga’s position would illustrate, in that case, not the necessary implications of an anti-evidentialist position, but only something like an instructive reminder as to how easily anti-evidentialist views can lend support to religious views which not only lack evidence, but go against the evidence.

Regarding the implications for the academic curriculum of public schools, Plantinga’s proposal is interesting in the way it does not suffer from what I would argue is the most damning problem of the way this so called “balanced” approach to scientific education is usually proposed. What is typically sought by ID advocates is time in the science classroom to present Intelligent Design as a scientific alternative to evolution. But this would mis-educate students into thinking that a properly scientific hypothesis need only be an idea or set of ideas which ‘makes sense’ of something, but does not necessarily lead to a program of empirical research that would lead over time to its confirmation or disconfirmation, inasmuch as no such program of empirical research is possible with the Intelligent Design ‘hypothesis.’ As Robert Pennock
succinctly explains,

nothing definite can be said about the processes that would connect a given effect with the will of the supernatural agent - God may simply say the word and zap anything into or out of existence. Furthermore, in any situation, any pattern (or lack of pattern) of data is compatible with the general hypothesis of a supernatural agent unconstrained by natural law. Because of this feature, supernatural hypotheses remain immune from disconfirmation. (2001, pp. 89)

Plantinga’s “modest proposal” does not suffer from this problem as Intelligent Design would not be taught in the same ‘science’ classroom, conceptually speaking, as evolution. There would be the classroom for science as we currently understand it, reasonably presupposing the restrictions of methodological naturalism so as to ensure that any hypotheses we consider are capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed empirically. And then, down the hall perhaps, there would be the Christian or theistic ‘science’ classroom where these restrictions would not be honored and The Bible would be consulted alongside any empirical work still being done.

But Plantinga’s specific proposal brings with it the equally, if not more, troubling problem that it would mis-educate students into believing that what we can reasonably claim to know of the world around us is relative to what is, in principle, an anarchic proliferation of alternative epistemic vantage points. If we need to include a Christian ‘science’ perspective in the curriculum that would teach Intelligent Design as an equally legitimate alternative to the evolutionary biology taught down the hall in the methodologically naturalistic science classroom, then should we not also include a geocentric ‘astronomy’ classroom as well since there are still Christians who believe “after careful and prayerful study of the Scriptures” that the Bible not
only tells against evolution, but a Copernican view of the solar system as well? (Association for Biblical Astronomy, 2008) And what of a classroom devoted to Raelian perspectives onto the origins of our species in extra-terrestrial genetic engineering? (The Raelian Movement presents Message from the Designers, 2005) Once we accept Plantinga’s relativistic appraisal of our possibilities for acquiring empirical knowledge of the world around us and incorporate this insight into the academic curriculum, the curriculum becomes an intellectual market so open to a vast array of beliefs justifiable from some epistemic perspective or other that it reminds one of the old saw: “it’s important to have an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out!”

The critical point I want to stress in the context of this paper, though, is the way Plantinga’s proposal shows us what practically becomes of intellectual dialogue once we accept the relativistic perspective which informs it. If Christians may reasonably form their own ‘scientific’ view of the world based on their basic beliefs in God and The Bible as her/his revealed word as a legitimate alternative to science as we know it today, practiced under the restrictions of methodological naturalism, there could still be dialogue, but the lion’s share of it would almost certainly be within each particular community in terms of its own conception of what counts as proper science. For all practical purposes the Christian community, practicing its Christian or theistic ‘science,’ might as well have a “no non-believers allowed” sign on the door which opens to their own self-complacent, insular conversations. For as soon as a reference to the Biblical reasons for thinking this or that emerged, anyone who did not share that religious view, because they were not religious or believed in a different religion, would be practically excluded from the conversations. If they were to ask for the justification for this invocation of Biblical references in a discussion of empirical questions, they would be told that these beliefs are
properly basic and so do not require justification.

But could not much the same be said of science as practiced under the limitations of methodological naturalism? Is not a creationist, such as Plantinga, who does not accept the restrictions of methodological naturalism as appropriate for science, placed in the same position in a scientific discussion of evolution as someone who does not accept that the Bible is the revealed truth of God is placed in a Christian ‘science’ discussion which periodically references the Bible in support of its claims about the world? Though it might appear so, this appearance is misleading. For even though no scientist would, in their role as a scientist at any rate, answer Plantinga’s questions about our reasons for thinking methodological naturalism appropriate for science, there are still non-scientific reasons to which we could appeal: the historical success of the sciences as practiced with this restriction, to cite just one not terribly deep reason. In other words, our response to Plantinga’s query need not be that methodological naturalism is basic for us and we simply do not recognize a need to offer reasons for thinking it legitimate. The conversation can continue with Plantinga as we recognize, in a way he and his fellow theistic ‘scientists’ do not, the evidentialist demand to offer reasons for our beliefs.

At bottom, Plantinga’s anti-evidentialist defense of religious faith leaves us with a vision of dialogue which fractures us into different communicative worlds where everyone is all but assured of never having to expose their most fundamental beliefs to critical reflection: a vision of dialogue at odds, for this reason, with the Socratic ideal of a reflective life. The evidentialist demand to seek good reasons for one’s beliefs has the capacity to overcome such a fractured communicative scenario. Recognizing that demand allows the skeptic as well as the person of faith to call each others’ beliefs into question in a way that can bring both to ‘think again’ about
fundamental matters they might otherwise merely take for granted and to reason together about
the grounds (or lack of grounds) for their beliefs. It is integral to this properly Socratic form of
dialogue that each person’s beliefs must be put at genuine risk. Though we may fancy that we are
showing a kind of concern and respect for our religious students by not placing their beliefs in
such a vulnerable position, by excusing them, as far as their religious beliefs go, from the rigors
of a ‘no holds barred’ Socratic exchange, we are actually doing them a disservice. For, despite
the risks, the rewards of the Socratic endeavor can be great, as the experiences of both my
religious and non-religious students in my Dawkins class showed.

The reflective life is not, alas, for everyone. But it is too important not to make it
available for those among our students who can appreciate its value. And, on the basis of my own
experiences, the students who can appreciate it are also not likely to wilt at the first exposure of
their beliefs to criticism. They recognize, or can be led to recognize, that becoming aware of the
possible shortcomings of the reasons for this or that belief, as made evident by this or that
argument, does not and should not entail the immediate disavowal of any belief. The Socratic
endeavor is a long term endeavor in which we engage in an ongoing reflection concerning the
grounds (or lack of grounds) of our beliefs that may eventually culminate in abandoning them,
but may, just as likely, result in the eventual development of better reasons for our beliefs in the
light of criticisms of our earlier reasons. Hence, the response of some of my religious students
that considering Dawkins’ criticisms of their faith, in the end, strengthened their faith. Of course,
that is only one outcome of placing one’s religious beliefs into the Socratic sphere of critical
self-reflection. Sometimes it can lead to increasing skepticism that may eventually culminate in a
very difficult repudiation of deeply held beliefs. But those are the risks a responsible pedagogy of
belief and doubt must not only accept, but actively embrace as we seek to enable our students to autonomously fashion and re-fashion their intellectual lives for themselves through their own capacity to see what they do and do not have good reason to believe.

Notes

1. Two of the sixteen students in the class evaluated the class negatively.

2. I am thinking here in rather general terms of the kind of rational autonomy Kant argues is at the heart of taking a moral point of view onto life where an agent acts only according to principles for which s/he has good reasons, reasons s/he can endorse in an impartial spirit as good for both her/himself and others, and so principles which can be universalized. For Kant’s ethical conception of rational autonomy, Kant (2008, “Second Section”).

3. As Socrates certainly did! For a wonderful example of Socrates’s willingness to follow an argument where ever it leads, even to a point he knew his interlocutors would find scandalous, see Plato (2003, pp. 494-495).

4. See Williams (1973) and Adler (2002), in particular, the “Introduction” and Ch. 1.

5. I am thinking here, of course, of the works of the “new atheists” who have at least made a case which deserves our consideration that religious beliefs are, on balance, not beneficial. See, in particular, Dawkins (2006, Chs. 7-9) and Dennett (2006, Chs. 10-11).

6. Thanks to my Birmingham-Southern colleague and fellow Teagle seminar participant, Shane Pitts, for helping me to formulate these, still admittedly rudimentary, thoughts.

7. See Wolterstorff’s and Plantinga’s contributions to the volume they co-edited, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*; Wolterstorff (1983b) and (1983a) and Plantinga (1983). On the basis of his “Introduction” to the volume (1983b) and the opening paragraph of part III of “Can Belief in God Be Rational?” (1983a, pp. 141-142), I take it that Wolterstorff endorses Plantinga’s positions and sees his own essay as a contribution to a shared epistemological cause: what Wolterstorff calls “Calvinist” or “Reformed” epistemology (Wolterstorff, 1983b, p. 7). Though I will be careful in dealing with specific positions taken by Wolterstorff or Plantinga, in particular, to speak only of Wolterstorff’s or Plantinga’s position, I believe I am on safe hermeneutic grounds - at least in relation to their contributions to *Faith and Rationality* - in speaking more generally of a shared epistemological view that can be attributed to both Wolterstorff and Plantinga.

8. Wolterstorff goes on to qualify this simplest version of his position in important ways. In
particular, he notes that it does not imply that all beliefs are, as he puts it, “innocent-until-proved-guilty.” There may be beliefs which require reasons for thinking them true in order to be rationally held. (1983, p. 171). But he only endorses this as a formal possibility and does not explore why it might actually be true with respect to any specific range of beliefs, focusing his efforts on showing why it is not the case with religious beliefs. Since it is the case of religious or religiously based beliefs that I am concerned with here, I believe we need not consider this qualification other than to, as Wolterstorff himself does, note it in passing.

9. Also see Smith (2000, pp. 32-40).

10. The basic question here is, as Plantinga phrases it: “If belief in God is properly basic, why cannot just any belief be properly basic? Could we not say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? . . . What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween?” For Plantinga’s statement of and response to this question, see his (1983, pp. 74-78). For a good summary assessment of the shortcomings of Plantinga’s response, see Pojman, (1986, pp. 136-137).

11. See, for instance, Jonathan Adler’s intriguing proposal for tacit confirmation of beliefs which attempts to avoid the problem of an infinite regress while preserving the evidentialist idea that we need good reasons to believe, in full awareness, that any of our beliefs are true. (2002, Ch. 6)

12. This analogy would seem to require that belief in God, for the believer, must either be held with a degree of firmness which is analogous to the firmness with which I hold my belief in a physical world or have an analogous depth of ingression (the extent to which other beliefs would require change if this one is given up) or both. See Plantinga (1983, pp. 49-50). Plantinga does not comment on this in this article, but his endorsement of the line of argument just considered as an option for the believer in meeting a challenge to her/his religious beliefs would appear to presuppose it. And this is not implausible as many believers would stress that their belief in God is quite firm and is at the center of an overall world view which would stand in need of serious reevaluation were belief in God to go missing.

13. I am trying to be careful in my wording here. Wolterstorff discusses this ‘pluralistic’ dimension of reformed Calvinism as one of the four broad themes around which all of the essays in the volume, Faith and Rationality, are organized. And even though it appears to be a view Wolterstorff is endorsing, it is not completely clear that he is doing so. Still it does appear as a natural development of the epistemological positions taken by both he and Plantinga in that volume and anticipates, in its structure, Plantinga’s later proposals for a Christian ‘science’ to be discussed in the next paragraph.

14. As an aside, I italicize the word “very” here to stress the extent of the disagreement between advocates of young earth creationism and our best scientific estimates of the age of the earth. Dawkins illustrates the extent of the disagreement with these two analogies. “We of the ‘establishment’ think the Earth is 460,000 times older than McIntosh’s estimate (about 4.6 billion
years old to less than 10,000 years old). It is as though McIntosh estimated the height of a man as 6 feet and then accused the rest of us of believing that the same man was 460,000 times as tall, or 521 miles. Or, looking the other way, it as though McIntosh looked at the establishment geographers’ measurement of the distance from New York to San Francisco and claimed that the true distance from sea to shining sea was 460,000 times smaller, namely ten yards.” (2006) http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/dec/27/post845.


16. But, on this point, see note # 13.

17. However, my critical comments in regard to James would still be germane along with my earlier claim that anti-evidentialism seriously limits the space for critical reflection on one’s religious beliefs by making it all too easy to reasonably dismiss arguments which tell against those beliefs once one is rationally entitled to them independent of evidence for them. Also germane is what is, perhaps, my most basic point that evidentialism opens up the space for ‘no holds barred’ form of Socratic reflection that is worth affirming because of the sense of autonomy it makes possible and the sense of ethical responsibility which it presupposes. Insulating the religious beliefs of people of faith from the responsibility of seeking good reasons for thinking them true does people of faith no real favors in the end.

18. It is important to note that this conclusion does not hold for older proposals regarding Creation Science which went beyond the proposal that life shows evidence of intelligent design to more specific and, therefore, potentially confirmable hypotheses such as claims regarding the very young age of the earth (6,000 to 10,000 years old). As such, this could count as a properly scientific hypothesis in the sense that it is capable of generating a program of empirical research which could confirm or disconfirm it. The only problem is, of course, that it and other similar sorts of confirmable Creationist claims have been overwhelmingly disconfirmed.

19. Also see Pennock (2001b, pp. 794-795).

20. I stress this to my students in all of my classes which deal with “controversial” issues.

References


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