

Toronto Philosophy of Religion Working Group

Online Conference on Religious Epistemology in Honour of the 25th Anniversary of Alvin Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief*.

Please note: All times are listed in EST.

[[Link to shared conference material folder.](#)]

Monday, December 15th

	Zoom Room 1: [Click here to enter] Hosted by Klaas Kraay	Zoom Room 2: [Click here to enter] Hosted by Daniel Rubio
12:00-1:00	<p>The Incoherence of Higher-Order Religious Disagreement Skepticism Chris Kalaitzidis (Georgetown)</p> <p>Higher-order disagreement skepticism poses a substantial challenge to the rationality of religious belief in the face of widespread religious disagreement. I contend that the strongest response to this challenge is the Incoherence Argument Against Higher-Order Religious Disagreement Skepticism. The INCOHERENCE ARGUMENT relies upon two crucial constraints, designated here as the NONCONTROVERSIALITY CONSTRAINT and the SYMMETRY CONSTRAINT, which jointly restrict the skeptical argument. The NONCONTROVERSIALITY CONSTRAINT requires the skeptical argument to avoid reliance upon first-order premises or assumptions that are themselves religiously contentious. The SYMMETRY CONSTRAINT stipulates that the skeptical argument presupposes disputants in a religious disagreement lack internally accessible justification for believing themselves epistemically superior concerning religious matters. The INCOHERENCE ARGUMENT establishes that these two constraints cannot be jointly satisfied in the context of religious disagreement involving self-favoring epistemic credentials.</p>	<p>Are <i>De Jure</i> Objections to Theism Dependent on <i>De Facto</i> Objections? Examining Plantinga’s Argument Jędrzej Gosiewski (University of Białystok)</p> <p>There is a well-known argument developed by Alvin Plantinga (2000, 189-190) according to which <i>de jure</i> objections against theism are dependent on <i>de facto</i> objections, in the sense that we must presume that theism is false in order to argue that theistic belief is unwarranted. The argument has its use in deflecting naturalistic debunking arguments, e. g., those based on the cognitive science of religion. The aim of this paper is to argue that Plantinga’s argument leads to inconsistency. Acceptance of the argument requires that we have substantial knowledge about God’s reasons for action, while defense of the argument has to rely on the fact that our knowledge of those reasons is very limited. In other words, Plantinga’s argument requires rejecting skeptical theism and accepting it at the same time. I would like to propose a different way of defending Plantinga’s conclusion, the one that will avoid the inconsistency.</p>
1:15-2:15	<p>Epistemic Discontinuity in Religious Transformative Self-Disagreement Xiaobin (Elvie) Lin (MIT)</p> <p>In Blanchard and Paul (2021), a distinctive form of peer disagreement—transformative self-disagreement—is identified. This occurs not between two distinct rational agents, but between temporally distinct versions of the same person divided by a transformative experience, such as religious conversion or deconversion. Such transformation profoundly reconfigures the individual’s lived experiences, values, epistemic framework, and modes of evidential evaluation, often rendering the “new self” unable to empathetically access or critically evaluate the epistemic position of the “former self,” and vice versa. Blanchard and Paul acknowledge that transformative self-disagreement involves a loss of epistemic and affective access to alternative selves, which differentiates it metaphysically and psychologically from typical peer disagreement. Nevertheless,</p>	<p>Warranted Christian Belief, Inference, and Testimony: A Challenge for Plantinga’s Extended A/C Model of Gospel Belief Greg Welty (Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary)</p> <p>Plantinga’s extended Aquinas/Calvin model in <i>Warranted Christian Belief</i> is a ‘testimonial’ model of gospel belief, one that insists we noninferentially acquire belief in the essential Christian doctrines of trinity, incarnation, and atonement when we read Scripture as divine testimony. The problem is that these three doctrines are only accessible by way of inference from that testimony (the text of Scripture), and believers having to rely on inference is antithetical to any ‘testimonial’ model of gospel belief.</p> <p>There are several moves that Plantinga could make to resolve this <i>prima facie</i> tension in his model:</p>

	<p>they argue that the epistemic structure of the convert’s relationship to their former self is analogous to ordinary epistemic peer disagreement, implying that rational responses to transformative self-disagreement mirror standard strategies developed for standard peer disagreement. I challenge this analogy. First, transformative self-disagreement is not structurally identical to orthodox peer disagreement. There is significant epistemic asymmetry and discontinuity between pre- and post-conversion perspectives—especially within religious traditions emphasizing epistemic foundationalism, such as Christianity, as opposed to more non-foundationalist traditions like Buddhism. When rationality is grounded in foundational religious doctrines, the post-conversion epistemic framework is qualitatively distinct, limiting the plausibility of conciliatory approaches like equal weighting or credence discounting. Moreover, transformative self-disagreement raises complications beyond mere access to rational resources: the pro-conversion perspective may lack the epistemic resources necessary to recognize or engage with the convert’s standpoint adequately.</p>	<div><div><div>1. Insist that trinity, incarnation, and atonement <i>are</i> explicit claims in Scripture.</div><div>2. Restrict the content of “the great things of the gospel” to <i>explicit</i> claims in Scripture, and nothing else.</div><div>3. Broaden the scope of “divine testimony” to something <i>beyond</i> Scripture.</div><div>4. Broaden “the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit” to include the production of <i>inferential</i> belief.</div></div><p>Unfortunately, none of these moves seem plausible, especially given other elements of Plantinga’s project. 1 seems obviously false, given the actual content of these three doctrines, and the need to use inference to derive them from Scripture. 2 significantly dilutes the content of the gospel as Plantinga summarizes it throughout <i>Warranted Christian Belief</i>. 3 would normalize dependence on church tradition in a way that is in considerable tension with Plantinga’s Reformed tradition. 4 runs afoul of Plantinga’s scruples about “the principle of dwindling probabilities,” and about the need to avoid necessary reliance on argument in religious epistemology.</p><p>So the tension remains. In virtue of its content (trinity, incarnation, atonement) and source (Scripture as divine testimony), gospel belief must be <i>inferential</i> – one must use inference to derive the former from the latter. But in virtue of its production, gospel belief must be <i>noninferential</i>. But it cannot be both.</p></div>
2:30-3:30	<p>Spiritual Encroachment on Knowledge Brandon Yip (Singapore Management University)</p> <p>If "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." (Proverbs 1:7) then knowledge appears to depend not only on evidence or reliable processes but also on one’s proper spiritual and ethical orientation towards God. In this paper, I seek to do two things. First, I explain why knowledge should depend on one’s spiritual dispositions. In brief, this follows from the nature of our epistemic agency: as relational creatures, epistemic excellence must reflect our relational nature. Second, I consider the extent to which one’s spiritual and ethical dispositions affect what one knows. One possibility is that the relationship is causal: one’s spiritual orientation may impair one’s epistemic faculties and so one’s ability to know. A more radical possibility is that their relationship is constitutive such that a deficient orientation is partly constitutive of a failure to know. I call this position spiritual encroachment.</p>	<p>(Properly) Basic Ethical Beliefs Amy Seymour (Rutgers)</p> <p>Plantinga (2000) famously argues that belief in God can be properly basic. I show that Plantinga’s framework can also be applied to ethical belief. Certain ethical beliefs seem, at minimum, to be non-inferential. In fact, requiring evidence or argument for the belief it is morally wrong to torture infants for your own pleasure seems to show one has made an ethical or epistemic wrong turn. This belief behaves in a manner similar to perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and belief in other minds. And much like belief in God can be due to a <i>sensus divinitatus</i>, ethical beliefs could be due to a properly functioning cognitive faculty—a conscience (a <i>sensus moralis</i>)—and could thus be properly basic.</p> <p>I argue that paying attention to (potentially proper) basic ethical belief provides us with a way of clearing ground in contentious debates in ethics and philosophy of religion. First, basic ethical beliefs appear to be good candidates for beliefs which might escape Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism—since humans are a social species who need each other to survive, pro-social behavior labeled as ethical correlates with survival outcomes and is thus generally selected for. Second, I will argue that several key ethical arguments advanced by atheists—such as the problem of evil and objections to skeptical theism—can be modeled as cases of seemingly conflicting basic beliefs. The theist can answer these problems in a manner similar to how they answer cases of seemingly conflicting basic perceptual or memory beliefs. In some cases, agnosticism might be warranted. But in others, it is rational to continue to hold both seemingly conflicting basic beliefs. Thus, paying attention to basic ethical beliefs provides another mode of response for skeptical theists who want to say that we should still act to prevent evils from occurring.</p>
3:45-5:15	<p>Keynote Address #1 Zoom Room 1: [Click here to enter]</p> <p>Human Cognitive Capacities and the Knowledge of Persons Eleonore Stump Robert J. Henle, SJ, Professor of Philosophy, St. Louis University</p>	

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Tuesday, December 16th

	Zoom Room 1: [Click here to enter] Hosted by Klaas Kraay	Zoom Room 2: [Click here to enter] Hosted by Daniel Rubio
12:00-1:00	<p>Unwarranted Religious Belief: Partial Defeat of Plantingian Intrinsic Defeater-Defeaters Jamie Turner (University of Birmingham)</p> <p>Alvin Plantinga’s reformed epistemology (RE) is the view that religious belief can be warranted to a degree sufficient for knowledge, even when such belief is not based upon any arguments. One problem that continues to be a thorn in the side of Plantingian RE is the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. For Plantingian RE to hold up amidst this problem, it requires a way of explaining how epistemic peers can remain steadfast despite the disagreement and without recourse to argument to break the symmetry. Plantinga’s solution here is to introduce what he coins an ‘intrinsic defeater-defeater’. In this paper, I argue that Plantinga’s solution fails for an important reason overlooked in previous critiques and suggest an alternative way forward. Specifically, I argue that unless Plantingian RE restricts itself to ‘saintly’ figures, as opposed to the many reflective believers for whom it aims to deliver epistemic goods, then its appeal to an ‘intrinsic defeater-defeater’ fails because it does not possess sufficient defeater-defeating powers to wholly mitigate the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. For even with such powers in place, reflective believers will be subject to ‘partial defeat’. Once subject to partial defeat, those believers will be epistemically required to hold their belief less firmly and in which case they will not be warranted to a degree sufficient for knowledge. However, I argue that this does not mean that such believers must uphold their religious belief in a tentative way, even if unwarranted to a degree sufficient for knowledge. For in following some earlier suggestions of Basil Mitchell, I argue that Plantingian RE may incorporate the notion of ‘practical commitment’ as the basis upon which reflective believers continue to hold onto their religious belief in non-tentative way, and even when such belief is not based upon any arguments.</p>	<p>Dark Patches Sam Lebens (University of Haifa)</p> <p>In this philosophical short story, I explore some of the conditions under which God's hiddenness would be evidence of God's existence. In so doing, the story charts the relationship between hiddenness, evidence, religious humility, and the grounds for an epistemic form of religious pluralism.</p>
1:15-2:15	<p>Plantinga’s EAAN, Diverse Goals, and Knowledge-First Naturalism Josh Brecka (University of Toronto) Runner-Up, Best Essay Prize</p> <p>Alvin Plantinga (1993: Ch. 12; 2000: 227-40; 2011a; 2011b) famously argues that naturalism, when combined with some other plausible principles, is self-defeating. This is Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN). The driving force behind the argument is the thought that naturalistic evolution is unlikely to produce reliable cognitive faculties. This paper is exclusively focused on the justification of this critical first premise of the EAAN. Some have argued that, given naturalistic evolution, we should not expect perception to be veridical. This view of perception is sometimes called the Interface Theory of Perception (ITP). I argue that Plantinga’s support for the first premise of the EAAN is relevantly analogous to the support for ITP. I exploit this analogy to raise a</p>	<p>The Political Case Against Religious Dogmatism: Why Even Epistemic Superiors Should Interrogate their Beliefs Marilie Coetsee (Hope College)</p> <p>According to public reason liberals, regard for citizens’ status as free and equal calls out for us to cooperate with them on terms that they can mutually accept. Exclusivists hold that this charge to find mutually acceptable laws requires that citizens restrain from appealing to controversial religious reasons in their public advocacy and as bases for their votes. Inclusivists resist exclusivists’ requirement for religious restraint. In the course of defending a role for religious reasons in public debates, some inclusivists suggest that believers should be willing to reconsider their religiously-motivated political positions in response to non-believers’ arguments (Chambers 2010; Eberle 2002: 104ff; Gutmann and Thompson 2004: 29). I will call this kind of inquiry—that actively seeks out and attends to other citizens’ arguments for conflicting views with an eye to updating one’s own beliefs—open-minded inquiry. The duty for open-minded inquiry</p>

	<p>novel objection to the first premise of the EAAN. ITP fails because veridical perception best accommodates the diversity of evolutionary agents’ goals. Premise 1 of the EAAN is flawed for a similar reason: knowledge—or at least reliable belief—best accommodates evolutionary agents’ vast diversity of goals. Thus, the probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable need not be low given naturalism and evolution. §1 summarizes the EAAN with a focus on Plantinga’s justification of his first premise. §2 draws an analogy between premise 1 of the EAAN and ITP. §3 uses an objection to ITP to object to premise 1 of the EAAN. §4 borrows from knowledge-first epistemology to briefly sketch a positive proposal about the place for truth in evolutionary theory.</p>	<p>stands in tension with Alvin Plantinga’s (1995; 2000) claim that religious citizens may be epistemic superiors to non-believing citizens. As I discuss in Section 1, in certain high-stakes contexts, Plantinga’s claim might imply that religious citizens need not pursue open-minded inquiry with those who challenge their controversial, religiously-motivated political beliefs. Indeed, Plantinga’s claims raise the possibility that believers should instead simply try to persuade their epistemically ‘inferior’ compatriots of their own, apparently better justified, positions. In this paper, I show why religious citizens have good, pro tanto reasons to seriously consider non-believers’ arguments against their religiously-motivated political positions even if they are also justified in believing that those non-believers speak from an epistemically inferior position. My arguments suggests that believers have strong practical reasons to avoid specific kinds of errors in their thinking that might negatively affect other citizens, and suggests that open-minded inquiry with others is necessary to help believers avoid those errors.</p>
2:30-3:30	<p>Does Everyone Know That God Exists? James Reilly and Johnny Waldrop (Notre Dame)</p> <p>Who (if anyone) knows that God exists? If there is no God, the answer is obvious: No one. If there is a God, then things get more complicated. Some figures in the major theistic religious traditions have wished to affirm that theistic knowledge is quite widespread, perhaps extending to all (or nearly-all) properly-functioning adult human beings. Call this the widespread knowledge thesis (WKT). Despite its venerable heritage, WKT faces serious difficulties, not least of which is the prevalence of those who insist that they do not know (perhaps because they do not so much as believe) that God exists. Our goal in this paper is to show how WKT is, perhaps surprisingly, far more defensible given a broadly Williamsonian epistemology. The basic argument is simple: if theism is true, then it is plausible that God has given human beings the capacity to naturally and instinctively acquire knowledge of his existence and essential attributes. Given our evidence, which includes many people denying that they so much as believe that God exists, what would it take for this natural knowledge to be nevertheless quite widespread? Two things, mainly. First, this natural and instinctive knowledge would have to be remarkably difficult to eliminate—certainly, it can’t be eliminable simply by believing contrary things, thinking you lack the appropriate evidence, etc. Second, appearances to the contrary—people’s sincere assertions that they do not know that God exists, internal assessments of their own beliefs, etc.—with some frequency will have to be misleading. But a broadly Williamsonian epistemology accommodates both phenomena for instinctive, natural knowledge in general. In other words, if there is such a thing as natural knowledge of God, Williamsonianism predicts that it may be very widespread. Hence, the conjunction of theism and Williamsonianism opens the door to a successful defense of WKT.</p>	<p>In Defense of Rational Non-Conciliationist Internalist Ties Jeffrey Tolly (Notre Dame) and Andrew Moon (Virginia Commonwealth University) Winner of the Best Essay Prize</p> <p>We argue that there can be non-conciliationist rational internalist ties in the epistemology of disagreement. Roughly, this is the claim that two individuals can rationally hold to their opposing positions even if they justifiably hold each other to be internally rational, are in a state of full disclosure about each other’s evidence, and have no dispute-independent evidence to resolve their disagreement. Here are three implications of our thesis. First, it reveals a new non-conciliationist way to remain steadfast in the face of disagreement. Second, it supports Andrew Moon’s (2021) Plantinga-inspired question-begging strategy for responding to cases of religious disagreement. Third, it undercuts John Pittard’s (2019) defense of his so-called rationalist view in the epistemology of disagreement.</p>
3:45-5:15	<p>Keynote Address #2. Zoom Room 1: [Click here to enter]</p> <p>Keith DeRose Title: TBA Allison Foundation Professor of Philosophy, Yale University</p>	

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