

Reasonable Religious Disagreements

A few years ago I co-taught a course on “Rationality, Relativism, and Religion” to undergraduates majoring in either philosophy or religion. Many of the students, especially the religion majors, displayed a pleasantly tolerant attitude. Although a wide variety of different religious views were represented in the class and the students disagreed with one another about many religious issues, almost all the students had a great deal of respect for the views of the others. They “agreed to disagree” and concluded that “reasonable people can disagree” about the issues under discussion. In large part, the point of this essay is to explore exactly what this respectful and tolerant attitude can sensibly amount to. The issue to be discussed is a general one, applying to disagreements in many areas other than religion. However, I will focus here on religious disagreement.

Clearly, not everyone responds to apparent disagreements with the tolerance and respectful way my students did. Sometimes people respond by being intolerant and dismissive of those with whom they disagree. Some people advocate a kind of “relativism” according to which everyone is in some sense right. I will discuss these two responses in Section I. The rest of the essay will be about “reasonable disagreements” of the sort my students had.

My own religious beliefs will not figure prominently in this essay. However, it probably is best to acknowledge the point of view I had when I began thinking carefully about the issues I will address. I have long been what might plausibly be described as a “complacent atheist.” I grew up in a minimally observant Jewish family. I went to Hebrew school and Sunday school for several years, had my bar mitzvah, and soon afterward acknowledged that I did not believe in the existence of God and did not feel much attachment to the religion. In fact, I felt some disapproval of the business-like aspect of our temple, which, as I recall, refused to allow the younger brother of one of my friends to celebrate his bar mitzvah because my friend had reneged on an alleged commitment to continue attending, and paying for, classes beyond his own bar mitzvah. In college and graduate school I found the arguments about the existence of God philosophically interesting, but studying them did nothing to change my beliefs. I remain a relatively complacent atheist, though the issue discussed in this essay challenges that complacency.

I. Intolerance and Relativism

A. Intolerance

Intolerance can be found on all sides of all issues. I react strongly, perhaps intolerantly, to intolerance, perhaps because it conflicts so sharply with what I have learned in the areas in philosophy that I have studied most extensively, epistemology and critical thinking. Epistemology is the abstract study of knowledge and rationality. Critical thinking, as I understand it, is a kind of applied epistemology, the underlying idea being that thinking clearly and carefully about any issue requires understanding and applying some fundamental epistemological concepts. These include the ideas of truth and rationality, the difference between good reasons and mere persuasiveness or rhetorical effectiveness, and the fundamental concepts of logic. In my view, to think critically and effectively about hard issues requires reconstructing in clear and precise terms the important arguments on the issue with the aim of discovering whether those

arguments succeed in establishing or lending rational support to their conclusions. So conceived, arguments are tools for helping us figure out what it is most reasonable to believe. They are decidedly not tools with which we can clobber our “opponents.”¹

In fact, the idea that people with different views are opponents gets us off on the wrong foot. It is better to see others, as far as possible, as engaged in a collective search for the truth, with arguments being precise ways of spelling out reasons supporting a particular conclusion. Intolerant and dismissive responses fail to engage these arguments, and therefore fail to conform to the most fundamental requirements of effective thinking. To respond to someone’s argument in a dismissive way has the effect, perhaps intended, of cutting off discussion. It is as if one said, “I refuse to think carefully about what you said. I will simply stick to my own beliefs about the topic.” This is inconsistent with the rigorous, careful, and open-minded examination of real issues, which is the essence of critical thinking.

Although religious matters often are discussed rigorously, carefully, and open-mindedly, some discussions appealing to religious ideas constitute blatant refusals to engage in intellectually serious argument analysis. An example of the kind of thinking I have in mind can be found in a column by Cal Thomas, a widely syndicated columnist whose foolish and simplistic words regularly disgrace my local newspaper. In a column about gay marriage, Thomas writes:

Let's put it this way. If you tell me you do not believe in G-d and then say to me that I should brake for animals, or pay women equally, or help the poor, on what basis are you making such an appeal? If no standard for objective truth, law, wisdom, justice, charity, kindness, compassion and fidelity exists in the universe, then what you are asking me to accept is an idea that has taken hold in your head but that has all of the moral compulsion of a bowl of cereal. You are a sentimentalist, trying to persuade me to a point of view based on your feelings about the subject and not rooted in the fear of G-d or some other unchanging earthly standard.²

There is much that is troubling about this brief passage. For one thing, Thomas wrongly equates atheism with a denial of “objective” standards of truth, justice, and the rest. In addition, as anyone who has thought hard about arguments knows, there are difficult questions about when it is sensible to appeal to authority to resolve an issue. There are surely times when a sensible person does defer to authority. Many people who have looked under the hood of a malfunctioning car will understand why. To attempt to resolve a contemporary social issue by appeal to the authority of the difficult to interpret words in an ancient text is quite another matter. Furthermore, even if Thomas made his case more politely, it is hard to see the point of arguing about such an issue in a mass circulation public newspaper when you know that your premises are widely disputed among the readers. Good argument proceeds, whenever possible, by appeal to shared premises. Dismissing without argument the views of those with whom you disagree is of no intellectual value. Given all the time and energy I’ve put into teaching critical thinking, I react strongly to things that represent such small-minded departures from it.

It is difficult to say how, or if, we can get knowledge or justified beliefs about moral

issues. Some sophisticated thinkers believe that all moral thoughts really are just “sentiments.” Most disagree. But the idea that your moral thoughts are based entirely in sentiments if you do not believe in God, but have some more legitimizing force if you do believe in God is not at the forefront of enlightened thought. Let’s put it this way. Cal Thomas is no insightful philosopher, and his thoughts about moral epistemology are scarcely worth more than a moment’s reflection. The remarks quoted are from a column asserting that same-sex marriage should not be permitted. That is a complex issue. Judgments about what social arrangements are best for our society are difficult to establish. Well-intentioned people come to different conclusions. Religious bigotry makes no useful contribution to the discussion.

What is most irritating about Thomas’s column is its bigotry. Imagine replacing the word “atheist” with names for other groups of people in the sentence, “If you are an atheist, then your moral views are not worth a bowl of cereal.” Imagine what an editor would do with the column if it said this about Jews or Muslims. Or if it dismissed in the same way the views of people of some ethnic or racial group in the country. But attacking atheists in this way passes the mainstream acceptability test. Cal Thomas may be dismissed as a lightweight, fringe thinker. But the view he expresses is a more extreme version of the altogether too common idea that atheists are somehow less than decent people. This attitude is revealed in the undeclared axiom of contemporary American politics that any remotely serious candidate for president, and for many other offices as well, must proclaim religious faith. Acknowledged atheists need not apply. A few months before I wrote this essay (in 2004), a candidate in the Democratic presidential primaries (Howard Dean), got into considerable trouble because he was forced to profess his devoutness in order to remain a viable candidate. I have no idea what his actual religious beliefs were, but it was difficult to dismiss the thought that he was not a religious man and knew that he couldn’t acknowledge this fact without giving up all chances of winning the nomination. The reason he could not admit this truth – if it is in fact a truth – is the idea that he somehow he could not be a decent person or a good leader were he not religious. I have no idea how widespread this nonsense is, but it is at least prevalent enough to insert itself into the popular press from time to time. The asymmetry of this situation is notable. While it is acceptable for atheists to be treated with disrespect by the likes of Cal Thomas, it seems (at least to me) that it is widely accepted that atheists are supposed to treat theists with respect and to approach theistic views with attitudes of tolerance.

The Cal Thomas’s of the world illustrate one intellectually bankrupt response to disagreement: intolerance and dismissiveness. I turn next to what may seem to be a diametrically opposed response.

B. Relativism

Relativists shy away from acknowledging that there really are disagreements. Relativists wonder why there must be just one right answer to a question and they often say that while one proposition is “true for” one person or one group of people, different and incompatible propositions are “true for” others. I think of this view as “mindless relativism.” This sort of relativism is not at all unusual, and it may well be that some of my students had a response along these lines. These relativists think that somehow it can be that when you say that there is a God,

you are right and when I say that there is not, I am right as well.

Appealing as it may be to some, this kind of relativism cannot be right.³ It is true that people on different sides of a debate do have their respective beliefs. But in many cases they really do disagree. They simply cannot both be right, even if we are not in a position to know who is right. To say that the different propositions are “true for” people on the different sides of the issue is just another way to say that they believe different things. It does not make the disagreement go away.

While mindless relativists are in some ways more tolerant and respectful than those who respond in the first way described here, it is notable that they also fail to engage with the arguments of others. Since their own view is “true for them,” relativists do not see their own positions as challenged by the views of others. Therefore, they need not examine with care the arguments for those dissenting views. It is as if they responded to arguments on the other side of an issue by saying, “Well, that argument may be a good one for you, but I have my own view and I will stick to it since it is true for me.” In a way, this response is almost as dismissive as the intolerance displayed by Cal Thomas, but it is coupled with a difficult to interpret assertion that the other view is right also. Of course, relativists need not respond in this way. It is consistent with their relativism to take competing arguments seriously. However, it is difficult to make sense of their overall position and hard to see just what they think the arguments are supposed to accomplish.

Neither intolerance nor relativism is an acceptable response to disagreement. Advocates of both tend to fail to take seriously the arguments for views opposed to their own. I will set them aside and turn to the more subtle and sophisticated view that I think most of my students had in mind.

II. Disagreements

Unlike relativists, most of my students saw that there were real disagreements about religious issues. Unlike Cal Thomas, they took other views seriously. They thought that reasonable people could disagree about the issues, and that this was exactly what was going on their case. But what, exactly, can this respectful and tolerant attitude really amount to? A brief discussion of disagreements generally will help to set the stage for a more detailed investigation of this question in the remainder of this essay.

A. Genuine Disagreements

The students in my class disagreed with one another about significant religious matters. Some – the atheists like me – believed that there is no God. The majority believed that God does exist. Among the theists there were notable differences about the nature of God and about God’s relation to the world. The details of those differences will not matter for the discussion that follows and I will not attempt to spell them out here. It just matters that there were some such differences. As my central example, I’ll use the disagreement between the atheists and the theists. But most of what I will say could just as well be applied to disagreements among the theists, or to disagreements about other topics.

In saying that there were disagreements among the students, I am saying only that there were propositions that some of them affirmed and some of them denied. When there is a disagreement, it is not possible for both sides to be right. Most obviously, if there is a God, then the atheists are mistaken no matter how sincere, well-meaning, and thoughtful they were. If there is no God, then theists are mistaken. The same goes for the other propositions about which they disagreed: What some of them believed was not simply different from what the others believed. Their beliefs were incompatible. If one side had it right, then the other had it wrong.

Some disagreements are merely apparent and not genuine. That is, there are situations in which people seem to disagree about some proposition but actually do not. For example, people arguing about such things as pornography may not have any real disagreement. Those “against” it may think that it has harmful social consequences. Those “for” it may think that it should not be made illegal. There may be no disagreement about any specific proposition. Of course, there may be real disagreements about one of these more specific propositions concerning pornography. But the example illustrates one way in which an apparent disagreement can be merely apparent.

Disagreements can also be merely apparent when people use words in different ways without realizing it. If you and I are arguing about whether John went to the bank, but you are thinking of a financial institutions and I am thinking about a riverside, then we may have no genuine disagreement. Our disagreement is merely apparent, resulting from our different interpretations of the word. The unnoticed ambiguity of the word masks our agreement about the underlying facts.

There are several differences among people of different faiths that do not amount to genuine disagreements. For example, one difference between people of different religious faiths is that they commit to following differing practices. The holidays they observe and the character of their places of worship will differ. And a variety of other customs and practices will differ. These differences are not, in their own right, disagreements about the truth of any specific propositions.

Another difference that need not involve a genuine disagreement involves the presence or absence of a “spiritual” attitude. There is a sense of wonder or awe that some people experience, and this may play a role in religious belief. Of course, atheists sometimes express feelings of awe at the size, complexity, and natural beauty of the world, and may express this as a feeling of spirituality. I do not know exactly what spirituality is, but a difference that amounts to the presence or absence of this feeling is not a disagreement over the truth of religious propositions.

One could try to reinterpret professions and denials of religious faith not as statements of beliefs about how things are but as expressions of commitment to different ways of life or as mere expressions of spiritual attitudes. But any such effort is an evasion. It is obvious that theists and atheists do not merely differ in how they live their lives. They really do disagree about the truth of the proposition that God exists. Any attempt to turn religious disagreements into mere differences in lifestyles fails to do justice to the plain facts of the case and is, perhaps, part of an effort to paper over troublesome questions. In the remainder of this essay I will assume that religious differences are not merely differences involving commitments to ways of living or differences concerning the presence or absence of feelings of spirituality. They include genuine disagreements.

It is important to emphasize the existence of genuine disagreement does not rule out

significant areas of agreement. There are obviously many things about which theists and atheists can agree. And there are many things about which theists of different types can agree. It may be that the points of agreement among the theists are in some ways more important than the points of disagreement. It is no part of my goal to overstate the extent of disagreement. Rather, I begin with the fact that there is disagreement and raise questions about reasonable attitudes toward it.

B. Clarifying the Questions

My students seemed to feel uncomfortable if they were forced to acknowledge that they actually thought that those with whom they disagreed were wrong about the proposition about which they disagreed. But that, of course, is what they must think if they are to maintain their own beliefs. If you think that God exists, then, on pain of inconsistency, you must think that anyone who denies that God exists is mistaken. You must think that this person has a false belief. You must think that, with respect to the points about which you disagree with someone, that you have it right and the other person has it wrong.

Thinking someone else has a false belief is consistent with having any of a number of other favorable attitudes toward that person and that belief. You can think that the person is *reasonable*, even if mistaken. And this seems to be what my students thought: while they had their own beliefs, the others had reasonable beliefs as well. I think that the attitude that my students displayed is widespread. It is not unusual for a public discussion of a controversial issue to end with the parties to the dispute agreeing that this is a topic about which reasonable people can disagree. (Think of *The News Hour* on PBS.)

Some prominent contemporary philosophers have expressed similar views. For example, Gideon Rosen has written:

It should be obvious that reasonable people can disagree, even when confronted with a single body of evidence. When a jury or a court is divided in a difficult case, the mere fact of disagreement does not mean that someone is being unreasonable. Paleontologists disagree about what killed the dinosaurs. And while it is possible that most of the parties to this dispute are irrational, this need not be the case. To the contrary, it would appear to be a fact of epistemic life that a careful review of the evidence does not guarantee consensus, even among thoughtful and otherwise rational investigators.⁴

But how exactly can there be reasonable disagreements? And how can there be reasonable disagreements when the parties to the disagreement have been confronted with a single body of evidence? And can they sensibly acknowledge, as I have suggested they do, that the other side is reasonable as well?

To sharpen these questions, I will introduce some terminology. Let's say that two people have a *disagreement* when one believes a proposition and the other denies (i.e., disbelieves) that proposition. Let's say that two people have a *reasonable disagreement* when they have a disagreement and each is reasonable (or justified) in his or her belief. Let's say that people are *epistemic peers* when they are roughly equal with respect to intelligence, reasoning powers,

background information, etc.⁵ When people have had a full discussion of a topic and have not withheld relevant information, we will say that they have *shared their evidence* about that topic.⁶ There is some question about whether people can ever share *all* their evidence. This issue will arise later.

With all this in mind, I can now pose in a somewhat more precise way the questions the attitudes of my students provoked.

Q1) Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence have reasonable disagreements?

Q2) Can epistemic peers who have shared their evidence reasonably maintain their own belief yet also think that the other party to the disagreement is also reasonable?

The point about the people being peers and sharing their evidence is crucial. No doubt people with different bodies of evidence can reasonably disagree. Suppose Early and Late both watch the 6:00 news and hear the weather forecast for rain the next day. Early goes to sleep early, but Late watches the late news and hears a revised forecast, calling for no rain. When they get up in the morning they have different beliefs about what the weather will be that day. We may assume that each is reasonable. Their differing evidence makes this easy to understand. But if they were to share the evidence, in this case by Late telling Early about the revised forecast, it would be harder to see how a reasonable disagreement would still be possible. So the puzzling case is the one in which each person knows about the other's reasons.

People who are not peers because of vastly different experiences and life histories can justifiably believe very different things. For example, the ancients may have justifiably believed that the Earth is flat, and thus "disagreed" with our view that it is approximately round. There is nothing particularly mysterious about this. But this does not help explain how there could be a reasonable disagreement in my classroom. No matter how isolated my students had been earlier in their lives, they were not isolated any more. They knew that there were all these smart kids in the room who believed very different things. And they had a good idea of why these other students believed as they did. (Q1) asks whether they could reasonably disagree under those conditions. In effect, (Q2) asks whether a party to one these disagreements can reasonably think that their disagreement is in fact a reasonable one. This is a way of asking whether a party to a disagreement can reasonably come away from that disagreement thinking "reasonable people can disagree about this." Can they think something like, "Well, my answer is correct, but your answer is a reasonable one as well"?

Affirmative answers to (Q1) and (Q2) will support the tolerant and supportive attitudes my students wanted to maintain. In most of what follows, I will emphasize (Q2), but (Q1) will enter the discussion as well. Unfortunately, I cannot see a good way to defend affirmative answers, at least when the questions are interpreted in what I take to be their most straightforward senses. As will become apparent, open and honest discussions seems to have the puzzling effect of making reasonable disagreement impossible.

C. Avoiding Misinterpretations

It will be useful to distinguish the questions I am focusing on from some others that might be expressed in similar language. The need for this clarification of the questions arises from the fact that the word “reasonable” is used in many different ways. To be clear about our questions, it is necessary to separate out the intended usage from some others.

One might describe a person who generally thinks and behaves in a reasonable way as a “reasonable person.” Just as an honest person might tell an infrequent lie, a reasonable person might have an occasional unreasonable belief. When he has such a belief, the reasonable person would disagree with another reasonable person who has similar evidence but is not suffering from this lapse of rationality. The issue that puzzles me is not about whether generally reasonable people can disagree in a specific case, even when they have the same evidence. Surely they can. The issue is whether they are both reasonable in the contested case.

People sometimes use the word “reasonable” in a watered-down way, so that anyone who is not being flagrantly unreasonable counts as being reasonable. If a person holding a belief is trying to be sensible, and is not making self-evident blunders, then the belief counts as “reasonable” in this watered-down sense. This strikes me as far too lenient a standard. It counts as reasonable a variety of beliefs that rest on confusions, misunderstandings, incorrect evaluations of evidence, and the like. If this is all that is required to be reasonable, then it is easy to see that there can be reasonable disagreements among people who have shared their evidence. But this minimal concept of reasonableness is not what I have in mind, and it is surely not what my students had in mind. They did not want to say of their fellow students merely that they were not making obvious blunders. They wanted to say something more favorable than that. According to this stronger notion of being reasonable, a belief is reasonable only when it has adequate evidential support.

Sometimes a belief has enormous practical significance for a person. Consider, for example, a hostage and a neutral reporter on the scene. They may have the same evidence about the prospects for the hostage’s release. However, the hostage may have a better chance of surviving his ordeal if he has the optimistic belief that he will be set free, while the reporter may have no special interest in the case. The hostage, therefore, has a motive for believing he will be released that the reporter lacks. Even if he has only a very limited amount of supporting evidence, we might say that the hostage is reasonable in so believing, given the practical value the belief has for him. The reporter would not be reasonable in that same belief. This, however, is not an evaluation of the evidential merit of the belief, but rather of its prudential or practical value. One somewhat odd way to put the point is to say that it is (prudentially or practically) reasonable for the hostage to have an (epistemically) unreasonable belief in this situation. My interest is in the epistemic, or evidential, evaluations.

This point is particularly significant in the present setting. The issue I am raising about religious beliefs, and disagreements involving them, is not about whether religious belief is beneficial. It may in fact be beneficial to some people and not others. It may be that some or all of the theists in my class led better lives partly as a result of their theism, and it may be that the atheists are better off being atheists. Nothing that I will say here has any direct bearing on that question. My topic has to do with questions about what to make of disagreements about whether

religious beliefs are true.

Finally, my questions have to do with belief, not with associated behavior. There are cases in which people with similar evidence reasonably behave differently. Suppose that we are on the way to an important meeting and we come to a fork in the road. The map shows no fork and we have no way to get more information about which way to go. We have to choose. You choose the left path and I choose the right path. Each of us may be entirely reasonable in choosing as we do. Of course, we would have been reasonable in choosing otherwise. But, as you go left and I go right, neither of us would be reasonable in believing that we've chosen the correct path. Believing differs from acting in a case like this. The reasonable attitude to take toward the proposition that, say, the left path is the correct path is suspension of judgment. Neither belief nor disbelief is supported. Each of us should suspend judgment about which path is best, while picking one since, as we envision the case, not taking either path would be the worst choice of all. As this case illustrates, acting and believing are different. Sometimes it is reasonable to act a certain way while it is not reasonable to believe that that way of acting will be successful.

It is possible that the choice about being religious or not, or the choice among the various religions, is in some ways like the fork in the road example. This is an extremely important choice we must make, and our information about the matter is limited. No one is to be criticized for making a choice. If this is right, it may show that our religious choices have a kind of practical rationality. However, it does not show that our religious beliefs are epistemically rational.

All the cases described in this section are cases in which one might plausibly say that epistemic peers who have shared their evidence about a proposition can reasonably disagree. But they are not the sorts of cases I want to examine. I take it that the students in my class wanted to say that other students with other beliefs were epistemically reasonable with respect to their specific beliefs, and not just generally reasonable folks. They were not saying merely that others were not patently unreasonable. And they weren't saying that the beliefs of the others were merely of practical value. Nor were they saying that some related behavior was reasonable. They were saying that these were genuinely reasonable disagreements with shared, or at least nearly shared, evidence. These are the core cases of apparent reasonable disagreement.

III. Defenses of Reasonable Disagreements

In this section, I will consider four lines of thought supporting the view that my students could have been having a reasonable disagreement.

A. Drawing Different Conclusions from the Same Evidence

One might think that it is clear that people can reasonably draw different conclusions from the same evidence. A simple example seems to support that claim. I will argue, however, that reflection on the example shows that it supports the opposite conclusion.

There are situations in which one might say that a good case can be made for each of two incompatible propositions. For example, suppose a detective has strong evidence incriminating

Lefty and also has strong evidence incriminating Righty of the same crime. Assume that the detective knows that only one suspect could be guilty. One might think that since a case could be made for either suspect, the detective could reasonably believe that Lefty is guilty and Righty is not, but could also reasonably believe that Righty is guilty and Lefty is not. She gets to choose. If anything like this is right, then there can be reasonable disagreements in the intended sense. If there were two detectives with this same evidence, they could reasonably disagree, one believing that Lefty is guilty and the other believing that Righty is guilty. Each could also agree that the other is reasonable in drawing the contrary conclusion.

I think, however, that this analysis of the case is seriously mistaken. It is clear that the detectives should suspend judgment in this sort of case (given only 2 possible candidates for guilt). The evidence for Lefty is evidence against Righty. Believing a particular suspect to be guilty on the basis of this combined evidence is simply not reasonable. Furthermore, it is hard to make clear sense of the thought that the other belief is reasonable. Suppose one of the detectives believes that Lefty is guilty. She can then infer that Righty is not guilty. But if she can draw this inference, she cannot also reasonably think that it is reasonable to conclude that Righty is guilty. This combination of beliefs simply does not make sense.

Thinking about the case of Lefty and Righty suggests that one cannot reasonably choose belief or disbelief in a case like this. The only reasonable option is to suspend judgment. These considerations lend support to an idea that I will call “The Uniqueness Thesis”. This is the idea that a body of evidence justifies at most one proposition out of a competing set of propositions (e.g., one theory out of a bunch of exclusive alternatives) and that it justifies at most one attitude toward any particular proposition. As I think of things, our options with respect to any proposition are believing, disbelieving, and suspending judgment. The Uniqueness Thesis says that, given a body of evidence, one of these attitudes is the rationally justified one.

If The Uniqueness Thesis is correct, then there cannot be any reasonable disagreements in cases in which two people have exactly the same evidence. That evidence uniquely determines one correct attitude, whether it be belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment. And reflection on the case of Left and Righty lends strong support to The Uniqueness Thesis.

It is worth adding that the order in which one gets one’s evidence on the topic makes no difference in cases like this. Suppose the detective first learns the evidence about Lefty, and reasonably concludes that Lefty is guilty. She then acquires the comparable evidence about Righty. The fact that she already believes that Lefty is guilty makes no difference. She still should suspend judgment. The principles of rational belief do not include a law of inertia.

B. Different Starting Points

One might think that, in addition to the evidence one brings to bear on an issue, there are some fundamental principles or starting points that affect one’s conclusions. Whether these starting points amount to fundamental claims about the world or epistemological principles about how to deal with evidence, the idea is that these differences enable people with the same evidence to reasonably arrive at different conclusions.

The idea behind this thought can be developed as an objection to my analysis of the case of Lefty and Righty. It is possible that two detectives looking at the same evidence may come to

different conclusions because they weigh the evidential factors differently.⁷ Suppose part of the case against Lefty includes the fact Lefty has embezzled money from the firm while part of the case against Righty includes the fact he is suspected of having had an affair. One detective might think that one factor is more significant, or a better indicator of guilt, while the other weighs the other factor more heavily. Hence, they have the same evidence, yet they weigh the elements of that evidence differently and thus come to different conclusions. To make a case for reasonable disagreements out of this, it must be added that either way of weighing these factors counts as reasonable.

I think, however, that this response just pushes the question back a step. We can now ask which factor should be weighed more heavily. It could be that the detectives have reasons for weighing the factors as they do. If so, then they can discuss those reasons and come to a conclusion about which really is most significant. If not, then they should acknowledge that they do not really have good reasons for weighing them as they do and thus for coming to their preferred conclusions. To think otherwise requires thinking that, in effect, they get their preferred ways to weigh the factors for “free” - they do not need reasons for these preferences. But I see no reason at all to grant them this license.

A related idea is that people may have different fundamental principles or world views. Perhaps there are some basic ways of looking at things that people typically just take for granted. Maybe acceptance of a scientific world view is one such fundamental principle. Maybe a religious outlook is another. Or, maybe there are some more fundamental principles from which these differences emerge. A difficult project, which I will not undertake here, is to identify just what these starting points or fundamental principles might be and to explain how they might affect the sorts of disagreements under discussion. But whatever they are, I do not think that they will help to solve the problem. Once people have engaged in a full discussion of issues, their different starting points will be apparent. And then those claims will themselves be open for discussion and evaluation. These different starting points help to support the existence of reasonable disagreements only if each side can reasonably maintain its starting point after they have been brought out into the open. And this idea can support the tolerant attitude my students wanted to maintain only if people can think that their own starting point is reasonable, but different and incompatible starting points are reasonable as well.⁸ I cannot understand how that could be true. Once you see that there are these alternative starting points, you need a reason to prefer one over the other. There may be practical benefit to picking one. But it does not yield rational belief. The starting points are simply analogues of the two forks in the road, in the example considered earlier.

C. The Evidence Is Not Fully Shared

In any realistic case, the totality of one’s evidence concerning a proposition will be a long and complex story, much of which may be difficult to put into words. This makes it possible that each party to a disagreement has an extra bit of evidence, evidence that has not been shared. You might think that each person’s unshared evidence can justify that person’s beliefs. For example, there is something about the atheist’s total evidence that can justify his belief and there is something different about the theist’s total evidence that can justify her belief. Of course, not all

cases of disagreement need to turn out this way. But perhaps some do, and perhaps this is what the students in my class thought was going on in our class. And, more generally, perhaps this is what people generally think is going on when they conclude that reasonable people can disagree.

On this view, the apparent cases of reasonable disagreement are cases in which people have shared only a portion of their evidence. Perhaps if *all* the evidence were shared, there could not be a reasonable disagreement. This is the consequence of The Uniqueness Thesis. But, according to the present idea, there are no cases of fully shared evidence, or at least no realistic cases. If we take (Q1) and (Q2) to be about cases in which all the evidence is shared, then the answer to both questions is “No”. But if we take the questions to be about cases in which the evidence is shared as fully as is realistically possible, then the answers are “Yes”. We might say that the reasonable disagreements are possible in those cases in which each side has private evidence supporting its view.

It is possible that the private evidence includes the private religious (or non-religious) experiences one has. Another possible way to think about private evidence is to identify it with the clear sense one has that the body of shared evidence – the arguments – really do support one’s own view. The theist’s evidence is whatever is present in the arguments, plus her strong sense or intuition or “insight” that the arguments on balance support her view.⁹ Similarly for the atheist. A similar idea emerges in Gideon Rosen’s discussion of disagreement in ethics. He talks of the sense of “obviousness” of the proposition under discussion. He writes:

... if the obviousness of the contested claim survives the encounter with ... [another person] ... then one still has some reason to hold it: the reason provided by the seeming. If, after reflecting on the rational tenability of an ethos that prizes cruelty, cruelty continues to strike me as self-evidently reprehensible, then my conviction that it is reprehensible has a powerful and cogent ground, despite my recognition that others who lack this ground may be fully justified in thinking otherwise.¹⁰

The idea, then, is that the seeming obviousness, or the intuitiveness correctness, of one’s position counts as evidence. The theist and the atheist each have such private evidence for their respective beliefs. Hence, according to this line of thought, each is justified. That’s how both parties to the disagreement can reasonably draw different conclusions.

This response will not do. To see why, compare a more straightforward case of regular sight, rather than insight. Suppose you and I are standing by the window looking out on the quad. We think we have comparable vision and we know each other to be honest. I seem to see what looks to me like the Dean standing out in the middle of the quad. (Assume that this is not something odd. He’s out there a fair amount.) I believe that the Dean is standing on the quad. Meanwhile, you seem to see nothing of the kind there. You think that no one, and thus not the Dean, is standing in the middle of the quad. We disagree. Prior to our saying anything, each of us believes reasonably. Then I say something about the Dean being on the quad, and we find out about our situation. In my view, once that happens, each of us should suspend judgment. We each know that something weird is going on, but we have no idea which of us has the problem. Either I am “seeing things” or you are missing something. I would not be reasonable in thinking

that the problem is in your head, nor would you be reasonable in thinking that the problem is in mine.

Similarly, I think, even if it is true that the theists and the atheists have private evidence, this does not get us out of the problem. Each may have his or her own special insight or sense of obviousness. But each knows about the other's insight. Each knows that this insight has evidential force. And now I see no basis for either of them justifying his own belief simply because the one insight happens to occur inside of him. A point about evidence that plays a role here is this: evidence of evidence is evidence. More carefully, evidence that there is evidence for P is evidence for P. Knowing that the other has an insight provides each with them with evidence.

Consider again the example involving the two suspects in a criminal case, Lefty and Righty. Suppose now that there are two detectives investigating the case, one who has the evidence about Lefty and one who has the evidence incriminating Righty. They each justifiably believe in their man's guilt. And then they find out that the other detective has evidence incriminating the other suspect. If things are on a par, then suspension of judgment is called for. If one detective has no reason at all to think that the other's evidence is inferior to hers, yet she continues to believe that Lefty is guilty, she would be unjustified. She is giving special status to her own evidence with no reason to do so, and this is an epistemic error, a failure to treat like cases alike. She knows that there are two bodies of equally good evidence for incompatible propositions, and she is favoring the one that happens to have been hers originally.

In each case, one has one's own evidence supporting a proposition, knows that another person has comparable evidence supporting a competing proposition, and has no reason to think that one's own reason is the non-defective one. In the example about seeing the Dean, I cannot reasonably say, "Well, it's really seeming to me like the Dean is there. So, even though you are justified in your belief, your appearance is deceptive." I need some reason to think you are the one with the problem rather than me. The detective needs a reason to think it is the other's evidence, and not her own, that is flawed. The theist and the atheist need reasons to think that their own insights or seemings are accurate rather than the other's. To think otherwise, it seems to me, is to think something like this: "You have an insight according to which $\sim P$ is true. I have one according to which P is true. It's reasonable for me to believe P in light of all this because, gosh darn it, *my* insight supports P." If one's conviction survives the "confrontation with the other," to use Rosen's phrase, this seems more a sign of tenacity and stubbornness than anything else.

Thus, even though the parties to a disagreement might not be able to share all their evidence, this does not show that they can reasonably disagree in the cases in which their evidence is shared as well as possible. Their bodies of evidence are very similar, and each has evidence about what the other's private evidence supports. It is especially clear that neither person can justifiably believe both sides are reasonable. If I think that you do have good evidence for your view, then I admit that there is this good evidence for your view, and thus my own beliefs must take this into account. I need a reason to think that you are making a mistake, and not me. The unshared evidence does not help.

D. Having a Reasonable Disagreement Without Realizing It

I have considered and found unsatisfactory three ways in which one might attempt to defend the view that the participants in a purported case of reasonable disagreement can reasonably maintain their own beliefs yet grant that those on the other side are reasonable as well. These were unsuccessful attempts to support affirmative answers to (Q1) and (Q2). In this section I will consider a view according to which people can reasonably disagree but the participants to the disagreement cannot reasonably see it that way. On this view, they will think (mistakenly) that the other side is unreasonable. This view, then, gives an affirmative answer to (Q1) but a negative answer to (Q2).

The fundamental assumption behind the view under discussion in this section is that one can reasonably weigh more heavily one's own experiences or perspective than those of another person. When confronted with a case of disagreement on the basis of shared evidence, according to this view, one can reasonably conclude that the other person is not adept at assessing the evidence or that the person is simply making a mistake in this particular case as a result of some sort of cognitive failing. One way or another, then, the conclusion drawn is that the other person does not have a reasonable or justified belief. And the idea is that *both* parties to the disagreement can reasonably draw this conclusion. Thus, both parties have a reasonable belief, yet they reasonably think that the other side is not reasonable.

Applied to our specific case of disagreement about the existence of God, this situation might work out as follows. The theists reasonably think that the atheists are assessing the evidence incorrectly or that they have a kind of cognitive defect. Thus, for example, the theists can think that in spite of their general intelligence, the atheists have a kind of cognitive blindness in this case. They are unable to see the truth in religion and they are unable to appreciate the significance of the theist's reports on their own experience. The theists, then, are justified in maintaining their own beliefs and rejecting those of the atheists as false and unjustified. The atheists, on the other hand, are justified in thinking that the theists are making some kind of mistake, perhaps because psychological needs or prior conditioning blind them to the truth. Thus, the atheists are justified in maintaining their own beliefs and rejecting those of the theists as false and unjustified.¹¹ A neutral observer, aware of all the facts of their respective situations, could correctly report that both sides have justified beliefs. As a result, the answer to (Q1) is "Yes," since there can be a reasonable disagreement. Yet the answer to (Q2) is "No," since the participants cannot see it that way.

Since my main goal in this essay is an examination of the tolerant and supportive view that implies an affirmative answer to (Q2), I will not pursue this response at length. I will say, however, that I think that this defense of reasonable disagreements rests on an implausible assumption. Beliefs about whether expertise or cognitive illusions are occurring in oneself or in a person with whom one disagrees depend for their justification on evidence, just like beliefs about other topics. If the atheists or the theists in our central example have any reasons for thinking that they themselves, rather than those on the other side, are the cognitive superiors in this case, then they can identify and discuss those reasons. And the result will be that the evidence shows that all should agree about who the experts are or the evidence will show that there is no good basis for

determining who the experts are. If the evidence really does identify experts, then agreeing with those experts will be the reasonable response for all. If it does not, then there will no basis for anyone to prefer one view to the other and suspension of judgment will be the reasonable attitude for all. There is no way this setup can lead to reasonable a disagreement.

IV. The Remaining Options

In the previous section I considered and rejected some lines of thought according to which there can be reasonable disagreements. I argued that none of them succeeded. Suppose, then, that there cannot be reasonable disagreements. What can we say about people, such as my students, in the situations that are the best candidates for reasonable disagreements? What is the status of their beliefs? In this section I will examine the possibilities. There are really only two.

A. The Hard Line

You might think that the evidence must really support one side of the dispute or the other. This might lead you to think that those who take that side have reasonable beliefs and those who believe differently do not have reasonable beliefs. The answer to both (Q1) and (Q2) is “No.” We can apply this idea to the dispute between the theists and the atheists in my class. Assume that they have shared their evidence to fullest extent possible. Their disagreement is not about which belief is more beneficial or morally useful or any of the other matters set aside earlier. In that case, according to the present alternative, one of them has a reasonable belief and the other does not. Of course, one of them has a *true* belief and the other does not. But that is not the current issue. The current issue is about rationality, and the hard line says that the evidence they share really must support one view or the other, and the one whose belief fits the evidence is the rational one. Either the evidence supports the existence of God or it doesn’t. Either the theists or the atheists are rational, but not both. There can be no reasonable disagreements. This is the Hard Line response.

The hard line response seems clearly right with respect to some disagreements. Examples may be contentious, but here is one. Suppose two people look carefully at the available relevant evidence and one of them comes away from it thinking that astrological explanations of personality traits are correct and the other denies this. The defender of astrology is simply making a mistake. That belief is not reasonable. As Peter van Inwagen says, belief in astrology is “simply indefensible.”¹² Similarly, the hard line view may be correct in Rosen’s example about a person who favors an ethos prizing cruelty. That person is just missing something. It is likely that a detailed discussion of the rest of the person’s beliefs will reveal enough oddities to render the whole system suspect. Such a person’s moral view is simply indefensible.

However, the hard line is much harder to defend in other cases. These other cases are the ones in which any fair minded person would have to admit that intelligent, informed, and thoughtful people do disagree. In these moral, political, scientific, and religious disputes, it is implausible to think that one side is simply unreasonable in the way in which (I say) the defenders of astrology are.

The hard line response is particularly difficult to accept in cases in which people have

been fully reflective and openly discussed their differing responses. In our example, once people discuss the topic and their evidence, they are forced to consider two propositions:

1. God exists.
2. Our shared evidence supports (1).

The theist says that both (1) and (2) are true. The atheist denies both (1) and (2). Notice that after their discussion their evidence includes not only the original arguments themselves and their own reactions to them, but also the fact the other person - an epistemic peer - assesses the evidence differently. So consider the theist in the dispute. To stick to his guns, he has to think as follows: "The atheist and I have shared our evidence. After looking at this evidence, it seems to me that (1) and (2) are both true. It seems to her that both are false. I am right and she is wrong." The atheist will, of course, have comparable beliefs on the other side of the issue. It is difficult to see why one of them is better justified with respect to (2) than the other. But it also is clear that for each of them, (1) and (2) sink or swim together. That is, it is hard to imagine it being the case that, say, the theist is justified in believing (1) but should suspend judgment about (2). Analogous remarks apply to the atheist. It looks like both should suspend judgment. It is difficult to maintain the Hard Line position once the parties to the dispute are reflective about their situations and their evidence includes information about the contrary views of their peers.

Admittedly, it is difficult to say with complete clarity just what differentiates the cases to which the Hard Line view is appropriate (astrology, Rosen's ethos of cruelty) from the cases to which it is not (the serious disputes). One difference, perhaps, is that an honest look at what the evidence supports in the latter cases reveals that our evidence is decidedly modest to begin with. Even if our individual reflections on these hard questions provides some justification for the beliefs that may seem correct to us, that evidence is counterbalanced when we learn that our peers disagree. This leads us to our final view about disagreements.

B. A Modest Skeptical Alternative

One reaction of a party to an apparent reasonable disagreement might go something like this:

After examining this evidence, I find in myself an inclination, perhaps a strong inclination, to think that this evidence supports P. It may even be that I can't help but believe P. But I see that another person, every bit as sensible and serious as I, has an opposing reaction. Perhaps this person has some bit of evidence that cannot be shared or perhaps he takes the evidence differently than I do. It's difficult to know everything about his mental life and thus difficult to tell exactly why he believes as he does. One of us must be making some kind of mistake or failing to see some truth. But I have no basis for thinking that the one making the mistake is him rather than me. And the same is true of him. And in that case, the right thing for both of us to do is to suspend judgment on P.

This, it seems to me, is the truth of the matter. At least for some range of hard cases. There can be apparent reasonable disagreements, as was the case in my classroom. And when you are tempted to think that you are in one, then you should suspend judgment about the matter under dispute. If my students thought that the various students with varying beliefs were equally reasonable, then they should have concluded that suspending judgment was the right thing to do.¹³

This is a modest view, in the sense that it argues for a kind of compromise with those with whom one disagrees. It implies that one should give up one's beliefs in the light of the sort of disagreement under discussion. This is a kind of modesty in response to disagreement from one's peers. This is also a skeptical view, in the limited sense that it denies the existence of reasonable beliefs in a significant range of cases.

This may seem to be a distressing conclusion. It implies that many of your deeply held convictions are not justified. Worse, it implies that many of my deeply held, well-considered beliefs are not justified. Still, I think that this is the truth of the matter. And perhaps the conclusion is not so distressing. It calls for a kind of humility in response to the hard questions about which people so often find themselves in disagreement. It requires us to admit that we really do not know what the truth is in these cases. When compared to the intolerant views with which we began, this is a refreshing outcome.

V. Conclusion

My conclusion, then, is that there cannot be reasonable disagreements of the sort I was investigating. That is, it cannot be that epistemic peers who have shared their evidence can reasonably come to different conclusions. Furthermore, they cannot reasonably conclude that both they and those with whom they disagree are reasonable in their beliefs. Thus, I cannot make good sense of the supportive and tolerant attitude my students displayed. It is possible, of course, that the favorable attitude toward others that they expressed really only conceded to the others one of the lesser kinds of reasonableness that I set aside in section II, part C. If this is correct, then either the hard line response applies and this is an example in which one side is reasonable and the other simply is not, or it is a case to which the more skeptical response applies. If that's the case, then suspension of judgment is the epistemically appropriate attitude. And this is a challenge to the complacent atheism with which I began.

I have not here argued for a conclusion about which category the disagreements between theists and atheists, or the various disagreements among theists, fall into. For all I've said, some of these cases may be ones in which one side simply is making a mistake and those on other side are justified in both sticking to their guns and ascribing irrationality to the other side. Others may be cases that call for suspension of judgment. To defend my atheism, I would have to be justified in accepting some hypothesis explaining away religious belief, for example the hypothesis that it arises from some fundamental psychological need. And, while I am inclined to believe some such hypothesis, the more I reflect on it, the more I realize that I am no position to make any such judgment with any confidence at all. Such psychological conjectures are, I must admit, highly speculative, at least when made by me.

This skeptical conclusion does not imply that people should stop defending the views that

seem right to them. It may be that the search for the truth is most successful if people argue for the things that seem true to them. But one can do that without being epistemically justified in believing that one's view is correct.¹⁴

Endnotes

1. I develop this method of argument analysis in *Reason and Argument* 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999).
2. Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, March 3, 2004.
3. This assumes that we use the word “God” in the same way. See the discussion of ambiguity in Section II.
4. “Nominalism, Naturalism, Philosophical Relativism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 15, 2001, pp. 69-91. The quotation is from pp. 71-2.
5. I borrow this term from Tom Kelly.
6. People who aren’t peers can share their evidence. But the interesting case involves peers who share their evidence.
7. I thank Allen Orr for pressing me on this point.
8. It is also possible that each side is justified in maintaining its own “starting point” and rejecting the starting point of the others. This would make the present idea just like the ideas discussed in the subsection D.
9. Peter van Inwagen suggests this in “Is It Wrong Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone to Believe Anything on Insufficient Evidence?” in Jordan and Howard-Snyder, eds, *Faith Freedom and Rationality* 1996. He does not refer to the insight as evidence.
10. “Nominalism, Naturalism, Philosophical Relativism,” p. 88.
11. Both sides can still regard the others as peers because of their general capacities. The difference over this case does not disqualify them as peers.
12. “Is It Wrong Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone to Believe Anything on Insufficient

Evidence?”

13. There are technical puzzles here. There are many varieties of theism. If the view proposed implies that you should think that they are equally probable, then you can't also think that each of those versions of theism as probable as atheism and also think that theism is as probable as atheism. I will not attempt to deal with this here.

14. I am grateful to Louise Antony, John Bennett, Allen Orr, and Ed Wierenga for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. The paper is a revised version of talks given at Ohio State University, Washington University, the University of Miami, the University of Michigan, the Inland Northwest Philosophy Conference, and the Sociedad Filosofica Ibero-American. I am grateful to the audiences on all those occasions for helpful discussion.