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Undertaking commitment without claiming entitlement. Robert Brandom on Reliability, Certainty, and Faith

Over the last decades, the pragmatist understanding of the truth claims of religious beliefs has come under attack by many analytic philosophers of religion. They favor a realist conception of truth and an account of divine reality in terms of a robust metaphysical realism. They worry, that without such a realist epistemological and metaphysical foundation, the justification of religious beliefs as rational convictions and true ideas would be impossible in the light of the so-called “evidentialist challenge”. The evidentialist challenge or objection assumes that beliefs must be considered irrational unless and until any strong evidence can be brought forward in their favor. The evidentialist position can be presented as a conclusion drawn from three premises:

1. If it is not rational to accept certain propositions concerning God, then it is intellectually disreputable to accept them.
2. It is rational to accept propositions concerning God only if such a belief rests on other beliefs that constitute an appropriate evidential basis for this theistic belief.
3. There is no appropriate evidential basis for this theistic belief.

Conclusion: Since the existence of God is not founded on evidence, there exists an obligation not to believe in Him. Theistic religious beliefs are irrational, and therefore unacceptable and intellectually disreputable.

The epistemology of religious beliefs which has emerged over the last decades offers three possible types of response to the evidentialist objection:

1. There is in fact a sound evidential basis for religious beliefs, e.g. proofs of the existence of God.
2. A duty to provide a reasonable account of religious beliefs is to be rejected in principle. Religious belief is not founded on rational insight, but on sources that remain inaccessible to reason such as revelation, tradition or authority.
3. A reasonable account of religious beliefs is logically independent of evidence.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued that the evidentialist objection is a peculiar modern charge. Hence traditional natural theology differs in many respects from contemporary apologetics. Take Anselm and Aquinas as examples. For them, the proofs for the existence of God had the goal and the function to transform faith into knowledge (“To transmute what already one believed into something known”¹), not to provide an evidential basis for faith which would be logically independent from already given beliefs. But the second strategy of response to the evidentialist objection is also problematic since it does not do justice to the outstanding importance of rationality both for human life in general and for the self-understanding of modernity in particular. This is not to say that religious beliefs cannot be grounded on revelation, tradition or authority; in fact they are often grounded this way and in many cases justifiably so. But this grounding is not sufficient to rule out the demands of rationality. The objection that religious beliefs are irrational must be taken seriously, and rejected on its own terms.

Hence the third strategy, the rejection of the evidentialist criterion as a general principle of rationality, should be the strategy of choice. This position has been developed for instance by Wolterstorff and Alvin Plantinga under the heading of "reformed epistemology". Here, rationality is understood as a person-centered conception of reasonable account. Rationality is always understood relative to the values, preferences and attitudes of a person. The rationality of a belief cannot be judged in general or abstract terms, without considering the belief system of the person concerned. The point of departure for this conception of rationality is therefore a concept of a person, who at any given point in time already holds a certain number of beliefs. A criterion of rationality is a criterion for selection from amongst these beliefs. According to Wolterstorff, the epistemological principle of innocent-until-proven-guilty is sufficient to demonstrate the rationality of a belief: A person is rationally entitled to hold certain beliefs as long as she has no appropriate reason to abandon them. Our beliefs are rational to the extent that there is no reason *not to hold* them. They are not necessarily irrational merely because there is no appropriate reason *to hold* them. Thus the ‘innocent until proven guilty principle’ reverses the burden of proof of the rationality of beliefs which was introduced by the evidentialist objection. As long as no external objections can be shown to be compelling, beliefs are subjectively well-founded. Furthermore, the non-rationality of a belief is not a compelling reason to abandon it. This epistemological strategy argument sounds pragmatic at

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, „Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations“, in: Alvin Plantinga/ Nicholas Wolterstorff (eds.), *Faith and Rationality. Reason and Belief in God*, Notre Dame 1986.

first glance, a similar strategy to intellectually justify the religious believer's existential certainty.

The intuition that beliefs, especially religious ones, could be justified without being based on explicit reasons was elaborated by Alvin Plantinga's concept of proper basicity. In recent years Plantinga has further developed this basic idea that a person holding religious beliefs can be epistemologically justified even if she cannot provide sufficient demonstrative reasons. His conception of proper functionalism offers a reliabilist version of a religious epistemology. Plantinga wants to show that religious beliefs, especially Christian faith enjoys, „warrant“ as long as the cognitive mechanism through which those beliefs are required work reliable and properly.

Thus Plantinga seems to renew and update the insight of classical pragmatist philosophy of religion in terms of recent externalist analytic epistemology. A believer is entitled to hold a certain belief as long as there are no compelling reasons to jettison the belief in question. A religious conviction can be legitimately maintained as long as there are no sufficient reasons to believe that they are irrational. Objections of this kind be convincing only, according to Plantinga, if they can demonstrate that the cognitive mechanism of the believer does not function properly or that the content of the belief has not been produced in accordance to a properly functioning cognitive mechanism. If no such objection can be given there is no a priori reason to believe that the belief in question might be irrational. The truth of this specific belief however might still be disputable. But challenging the truth cannot be based on the assumption of the irrationality of a given religious belief as long as the cognitive mechanism producing this belief has been working properly.

Besides this apparent similarities between pragmatist and analytic epistemology of religious beliefs, there are major differences. The externalist strategy of proper functionalism does not refer systematically to the phenomenological aspect of those mental states of those experiences which ground religious beliefs, an aspect which was crucial for classical pragmatist philosophy of religion, especially for William James. According to reliabilism one could be entitled to hold a certain belief without giving explicit reasons. Thus this externalist strategy to justify religious beliefs contradicts one of the most influential attempts to reestablish a pragmatist stance in the light of the standards set by recent analytic semantics and epistemology: Robert Brandom's normative pragmatics and inferential semantics. According to Brandom

any account of the conceptual contents of beliefs and propositional attitudes has to be given in terms of the believer's capacity to give and to ask for reasons.

What is the specific content of beliefs? What are possible grounds or reasons for justifying beliefs and how are they connected with the very belief in question? Beliefs belong to the set of propositional attitudes. According to Brandom, the propositional content of a belief has to be understood as a conceptual content. But what does conceptual content consist in? What is the nature of conceptuality? First of all, Brandom stresses the difference between certain beings who are able to refer to objects by means of concepts and those who cannot – between sapient and mere sentient animals. The mere capacity to distinguish different kinds of stimuli and to respond to them in a proper way is not sufficient to determine the specific difference of a conceptual reference to objects. Otherwise we would need to assume that a parrot who utters the word "red" would be in disposition of the concept of red. According to Brandom, we dispose of a concept only if we are aware of its inferential role in respect to other concepts, as a possible premise or conclusion. So, according to Brandom, we possess a concept only when we know which inferential role it plays within a semantic network of propositions. Concepts are determined or defined by the position they occupy as possible premises or conclusions in a logical semantic network. Brandom therefore accords the semantic explanation of inference priority over the explanation of the reference of linguistic expression.

Yet what constitutes the content of concepts? Semantic theories of conceptual meaning attempt to answer this question by taking the notion of truth as foundational. Understanding the meaning of a linguistic expression means knowing the conditions under which it is true. On this view, a formal semantics that develops a theory of the truth conditions of sentences forms the starting point and the basis for a comprehensive theory of meaning. By contrast, pragmatic theories see the use of linguistic expressions as foundational. Brandom shares this basic pragmatic position. To understand how linguistic expressions acquire meaning, it is necessary to investigate those actions in which they are used. Brandom's approach thus skilfully combines inferential semantics with a normative pragmatism. Holding a concept means committing to a certain inferential framework for the semantic content in question, and allowing others to hold one to it. Conceptual content is therefore to be understood primarily in terms of its role in the process of giving and taking reasons, and not primarily in terms of the "representation" of the extra-conceptual. Brandom thus contradicts a widespread view that he terms the "representational paradigm". According to Brandom, the representational paradigm prevails to this day in epistemology, semantics and the philosophy of mind. Furthermore, in his view most natura-

list and functionalist theories of mind aim to develop a general theory of consciousness based on a notion of conceptual representation. By contrast, Brandom construes conceptual activity, which is to say the use of concepts, as *expression* rather than *representation*. The term "expression" here does not mean a process of transforming something internal into something external, but rather a process of explication, which is to say the linguistic articulation of an implicit knowledge of rules. Conceptual content explicates norms of implicit correctness, of knowing how something works or fits together. Concepts make explicit an implicit understanding of correctly executed moves in a discursive game of giving and requiring reasons.

So using a concept in such a way that it acquires meaning involves following a norm. Brandom not only borrows this pragmatic motif from Wittgenstein's theory of meaning as use, but also refers explicitly to Kant. According to Kant, concepts are rules of reason. Kant too understands conceptual content not primarily in terms of representation, but as the result of the correct application of norms of reason. Brandom thus interprets Kant's theory of the concept as a "normative pragmatism". However, according to Brandom the problem with Kant's theory of concepts lies in the fact that it operates with a two-stage model of conceptual meaning. At a first level concepts are defined, independently of experience, in relation to their possible content, which is then determined empirically in a second step. By distinguishing between analytic and synthetic judgement, Kant separates the categorical level of defining the norms governing the correct use of a concept from the empirical level of generating its concrete and definite conceptual content. It is this separation that motivates Hegel's critique of Kant. According to Hegel, Kant overlooks the fact that an investigation of the conditions of correct cognition is itself an act of concrete cognition, which must therefore already have accepted certain norms governing the correct use of a concept, if it is to lead to a verifiable result.

Brandom sees a structurally similar notion of conceptual meaning, one which separates the logical level of defining the norms for the correct use of a concept from the empirical level of the concrete definition of that concept, at work in those positions that separate formal semantics and empirical verification. Quine has criticised this kind of separation between the analytic level of defining logically the possible meaning of a concept, and the synthetic level of determining that content through the empirical verification of theories. According to Brandom, Hegel's critique of Kant is reminiscent of Quine's critique of the third dogma of empiricism, the separation of analytic and synthetic propositions. The idealist position, which Hegel develops as an alternative to Kant's transcendental philosophy, is therefore to be understood in a pragmatic sense. This position too involves a comparable understanding of meaning, in which the logical definition of the content of a concept and its empirical application are not

ascribed to separate levels.

For Brandom, however, Hegel's position not only displays structural parallels to a neo-pragmatic philosophy of meaning. Brandom goes on to assert that pragmatism and Hegelian idealism are mutually explicative. The pragmatic position, which holds that conceptual content is defined by use in conformity with rules, is complemented and supported by Hegel's idealist position. Brandom grounds this view of the mutually explicatory character of pragmatism and idealism in the following steps: Concepts make explicit an implicit normative content of correctly executed moves. This implicit normative content is established through a certain social praxis. By interpreting our actions and the actions of others as meaningful, as conceptually significant, we adopt a normative attitude of judging and accepting obligations to give reasons. This joint praxis generates a network of mutual normative obligations. This means that when a person uses concepts, she is thus ascribed the normative status of having rights and obligations. At the same time, the identity of a reasonable subject is constituted through this intersubjective recognition of that subject's discursive obligations. According to Brandom, this constitution of identity through the ascription of a normative status forms the relationship that Hegel terms "recognition". The idealist position explains the constitution of the unity of social processes of the formation of the Self, and logical processes of conceptual formation and definition.

Returning to the epistemological question of certainty the main lesson we can draw from Brandom's social and inferential account of propositional content is that "states that do not serve as reasons one for another, are not recognizable as beliefs at all" (Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, p. 108.). Brandom's basic idea that "concepts make explicit an implicit understanding of correctly executed moves in a discursive game of giving and requiring reasons" seems to contradict a reliabilist account of justified beliefs. According to reliabilism we can give an account of justified belief in terms of an external explanation of the causal relation between a given belief and the content it represents. In externalism, the correctness of the representational relation can be explained in terms of proper function of the cognitive mechanism in question. In a reliabilist perspective it seems possible to have reasons for a given belief without being able to provide reasons. A person can be completely within her epistemic rights without offering explicit reasons. One could be "warranted", that is being entitled to hold a certain belief, without knowing or giving the reasons which actually bestow warrant on one's propositional attitude. This juxtaposes Brandom's normative inferentialism which maintains that only the game of giving and asking for reasons can explain the conceptual content of a belief

and its normative status. Reliabilism as a way to justify the epistemic status of religious certainty seems to contradict inferential and normative accounts of rational justification. It seems to represent an epistemological strategy which is “cognitive irresponsible” (Brandom). If this charge is a sound and appropriate estimation the reliabilist strategy could no longer be considered a promising attempt to update a pragmatist epistemology of religious beliefs in terms of an „innocent-until-proven-guilty“- principle.

But it seems that there are cases in which we have to attribute justified beliefs, even knowledge to rational persons even if they are not able to give sufficient or appropriate reasons. There is quite a variety of instances where persons “have” reasons for believing what they do without being able to “give” reasons. Brandom addresses those cases by referring to the famous example of chicken sexers. Those persons can successfully discriminate the sexes of chicks without being able to justify their valid judgments. Apparently they don’t have proper understanding of their belief forming mechanism, they give a wrong explanation although they are successful in forming correct beliefs. Thus they are quite unable to offer appropriate reasons for why they believe the chicks are the sexes they believe them to be. But they are able to form rational and justified beliefs which in most cases happen to be true. Thus they seem to be perfect examples for the externalist doctrine that persons can be reliable sources for justified and even true beliefs without providing explicit reasons. Persons can produce reliable, justified beliefs, even knowledge without being fully “cognitive responsible” in the demanding sense of Brandom’s normative pragmatism. Brandom does not deny this possibility nor does he take beliefs of that kind as distorted or irrational. To his lights, there is nothing wrong with or incomprehensible about the idea that we can hold beliefs without being able to give corresponding reasons. In actual fact, this epistemic state is precisely what Brandom takes to be the very definition of “faith”. Faith, defined in Brandomian terms is “undertaking commitment without claiming entitlement”. This is not an incoherent epistemological concept, as Brandom emphasizes and it is certainly not confined to the realm of religious beliefs. Hence it is even more important for an epistemology based on inferential semantics and normative pragmatics to give a reasonable account of faith.

According to Brandom, the epistemic cases in question are not incoherent, but exceptional. Faith, knowledge based on reliability without the possibility of offering reasons, is a local phenomenon, not a global one. “The examples of knowledge based on reliability without the possibility of offering reasons, which motivate the Founding Insight, are *essentially* fringe phenomena. Their intelligibility is parasitic on that of the reason-giving practices that under-

write ordinary ascriptions of knowledge—and indeed of belief *tout court*” (p.110). Obviously, a community precluded from giving reasons cannot have the concept of reliability or knowledge. Sure enough, its members could function properly as measuring instruments and produce true beliefs in a reliable procedure. “But they cannot treat themselves and others as doing that. For they do not discriminate between reliable indication and unreliable indication. Absent such discrimination, they cannot be taken to understand themselves or one another as *indicators* at all. For the very notion of a *correlation* between the states of an instrument and the states that it is a candidate for measuring is unintelligible apart from the assessments of reliability” (109). Thus, according to Brandom it is the failure of reliabilism to realize that “what distinguishes propositionally contentful and therefore conceptually articulated *beliefs*, including those that qualify as knowledge” (ibid.), from those the merely reliable responses or representations of noncognitive creatures. Sure enough, reliability inferences certainly play a crucial role in the game of giving and asking for reasons. But what we do when we take someone to be a reliable noninferential believer of some *p* is to endorse “a distinctive kind of *inference*: an inference, namely, from the *attribution* to another of a propositionally contentful commitment acquired under certain circumstances to the *endorsement* or *undertaking* oneself of a commitment with the same content... Endorsing such an inference is just what being prepared to *rely* on someone else as an informant consists in” (p.120).

Reliability inferences are typical for beliefs which we might call “faith”, that is, those propositional attitudes where we undertake a commitment without claiming entitlement. Beliefs of this kind play an important role in our web of everyday beliefs and this should be reflected in epistemology. Reliability inferences explicate the condition which allows us to distinguish knowledge from mere true belief. Thus there are certainly cases in which reliability inferences justify the attribution of knowledge but they do not explain its very nature. Reliability is not sufficient to distinguish human knowledge from the proper function of technical instruments since it does not perceive conceptual content as inferentially structured, conferred by a normative social practice of giving and asking for reasons. Thus reliability inferences are exceptions which confirm the rule of semantic inferentialism and normative pragmatics in a theory of meaning and knowledge. The specific certainty which is provided by those beliefs we might call “faith” can be justified even if no explicit reasons can be given for them. But it does not follow that those beliefs are isolated from the majority of our socially constituted and inferentially structured beliefs. Faith is the epistemic exception where we undertake a com-

mitment without claiming entitlement. But we cannot treat someone as undertaking a commitment without attributing claims of entitlement.

But the very fact that Brandom's pragmatism treats these cases as mere exceptions also manifests some of the problems of his account of faith compared to classical pragmatism, especially pragmatist philosophy religion. Inferential semantics and normative pragmatics conceptualize belief and knowledge without out any internal reference to mental states and the phenomenological basis of religious experience. Thus Brandom's account of faith does not capture the constitutive relation between consciousness and action on the one hand, and religious belief on the other hand. Hence it is questionable whether the classical pragmatist insight about the specific certainty of religious beliefs can be captured completely by Brandom's updated version of pragmatism. To develop a pragmatic philosophy of religion which meets the challenge of evidentialism in the lights of recent standards of analytic epistemology still seems to be an unfinished project.

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