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# Does Epistemic Humility Threaten Religious Beliefs?

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## Abstract

In a fallen world fraught with evidence against religious beliefs, it is tempting to think that, on the assumption that those beliefs are true, the best way to protect them is to hold them dogmatically. Dogmatic belief, which is highly confident and resistant to counterevidence, may fail to exhibit epistemic virtues such as humility and may instead manifest epistemic vices such as arrogance or servility, but if this is the price of secure belief in religious truths, so be it. I argue, however, that even in a world full of misleading evidence against true religious beliefs, cultivating epistemic humility is the better way to achieve believers' epistemic aims. The reason is that dogmatic belief courts certain epistemic dangers, including to the true religious beliefs themselves, whereas epistemic humility empowers believers to counter them.

## 1. Introduction

Dogmatic beliefs are highly confident and resilient in “unfavorable epistemic circumstances” (Kelly, 2011, 108), including situations in which the believer receives counterevidence. It is fair to say that religious beliefs are prime candidates for being held dogmatically, for there is much at stake emotionally for their truth – and religious communities have indeed been known to shield members from counterevidence and to encourage epistemic obedience.

Dogmatic beliefs, religious or otherwise, are commonly subject to harsh epistemological criticism, being associated with epistemic vices such as intellectual arrogance, and more generally with a lack of epistemic humility (e.g., Kidd, 2016; 398; Kelly, 2011, 112-113; Tanesini, 2018, 409; Hazlett, 2012, 220). But dogmatic religious

believers might object to such criticism. What if your religious beliefs happen to be *true*, and what if the sources on which you base them are genuine divine revelation? Surely here, especially given their importance to the meaning of life, the goodness of their truth far outweighs the badness of any epistemic vice with which one might hold them. After all, our increasingly secular world generates manifold evidence that points toward the falsehood of religious beliefs, including the relative preponderance of nonbelievers in university-level teaching positions. In the epistemic obstacle course that is contemporary society, dogmatic religious belief is a crucial way to preserve sacred true beliefs that might otherwise fall victim to misleading counterevidence.

And anyway, the believer may add, there is an account of epistemic humility on which dogmatic believers can count as epistemically humble: the doxastic account (Hazlett, 2012; Church, 2016). If this account is correct, then, since epistemic humility excludes vices like epistemic arrogance, the idea that dogmatic religious belief is epistemically vicious is a non-starter.

In responding to these objections, I will assume that the dogmatic believer is right that at least the most important of her religious beliefs *are* true and divinely grounded, and will accordingly call her epistemic state *dogmatic-but-true* belief. I will begin by arguing that, unfortunately, the charge of epistemic vice holds, because the doxastic account of epistemic humility is mistaken – and that the reason is precisely the feature by which it enables the dogmatic-but-true believer to count as epistemically humble.

But the dogmatic-but-true believer will not be overly bothered by the conclusion that she lacks epistemic humility. After all, she will take it to be the inevitable consequence of doing the best she can with what seems an epistemically irremediable hand. A perfect world would not contain so much evidence against her religious beliefs, so in a perfect world she could hold them with epistemic humility. But this is not possible in our world. As it is she has been forced to choose between two epistemic goods: this-world epistemic humility, on the one hand, and true religious beliefs of eternal importance, on the other. Given this choice, true religious belief must take priority.

But I will argue that epistemic humility is not the danger to true religious belief that it might at first appear to be. We cannot deny that it comes with epistemic risks, but the epistemic gains that it promises, including religious truth, understanding, and epistemic agency, are better than any gains there may be in eschewing it. Moreover, eschewing epistemic humility poses a far greater epistemic risk to her religious beliefs than the dogmatic-but-true believer seems to realize. I will argue this by using another account of epistemic humility, the limitations-owning account (Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder, 2017; Tanesini, 2018; Kidd, 2016), to illuminate the ways in which the dogmatic-but-true believer lacks epistemic humility, and by arguing that these characteristics in fact obstruct religious epistemic aims.

The second section characterizes dogmatic-but-true religious belief more closely. The third section addresses the objection from the doxastic account of epistemic humility. The fourth and fifth sections appeal to the limitations-owning account to show how the dogmatic-but-true believer lacks epistemic humility and why this is problematic by her own lights. Finally, the sixth section argues that cultivating epistemic humility (in the sense of the limitations-owning account) would, in spite of superficial appearances to the contrary, better serve the dogmatic believer's own epistemic aims.

## 2. Dogmatic-But-True Religious Belief

Dogmatic religious belief may manifest itself differently in different religious traditions. The form that I describe here, I take it, appears in Christian traditions, though it likely arises in other religions too. My illustrations draw on Christianity in general, as well as on its various confessions and denominations – which can certainly in theory be true, and can be believed dogmatically above and beyond Christianity more generally.

Dogmatic-but-true religious belief is *committed* religious belief, though one can be committed without being dogmatic about it. A committed believer cares deeply about relationship with God and structures her life around fostering it. She strives to meet religious moral standards and cultivates such emotions as gratitude and awe; she worships God and usually participates in a religious community. She also strives to know God as well as a being like herself can. Because knowing someone involves knowing certain propositions about him, she cares about having true beliefs about God and his revelation.

What makes committed religious belief *dogmatic-but-true*? I'll start with "true". By this I mean that the believer subscribes to a picture of religious reality that is accurate in the most important respects. In other words, a certain core contingent of her religious beliefs is true, namely those which are definitive of her religious belief system. Core beliefs typically include standard religious creeds and select doctrines. Without giving criteria for what makes a belief definitive, some examples will give a sense of what I have in mind. A core belief of Christianity is that faith in Jesus saves; a core belief of Baptism is that this sacrament applies only to adults. Some religious communities may have a narrow core of beliefs; others may have a broad one that includes (for example) doctrines on the eschaton, on charismatic gifts, on what roles women may undertake, and so forth. In stipulating that her core beliefs are true, I aim to pinpoint the beliefs that the dogmatic-but-true believer is apt to care the most about and hence hold dogmatically. But she also has religious beliefs that do not belong to this core, and I am assuming that these *peripheral* religious beliefs, though they may be true, may also be false. Some examples of peripheral religious beliefs might concern whether a given healing constitutes a miracle, what if anything God was saying through last night's sermon, or whether one's core beliefs are incompatible with some scientific theory. In addition to core and peripheral religious beliefs, dogmatic-but-true believers have beliefs about non-religious matters; these may or may not be true. My argument is addressed, then, to committed believers whose core beliefs are true and who hold them dogmatically, and whose peripheral and non-religious beliefs may or may not be true and who do not hold them dogmatically.

The truth of the dogmatic-but-true believer's core beliefs, we are supposing, is not serendipitous, but results from divine cognitive guidance. Much of her evidence comes from divinely instituted traditions or revealed texts, and possibly also from philosophical arguments; and God guides her community's teaching and her cognition to apprehend these truths. He may also guide their peripheral religious beliefs, though not infallibly.

What makes a belief *dogmatic*? One thing is the *strong confidence* with which the believer holds it: she is disposed to assign it a high probability, to feel strongly that it is true, and to use it as a premise in practical reasoning.<sup>1</sup> But strong confidence does not suffice for dogmatism. For you can hold a belief with strong confidence, yet be disposed to change it should you receive evidence against it. Dogmatic belief is thus also largely *unwavering*: the believer is disposed to retain it even in "unfavorable epistemic circumstances" (Kelly, 2011, 108), including situations in which she has significant

evidence against it. To see what unwaveringness amounts to, compare two beliefs. One, your belief that the earth is round, is *not* unwavering in this sense; for although you hold it confidently and are strongly disposed to retain it, if you were somehow to obtain evidence against it, you would be ready to revise it. Compare the second belief, that your football team is the most skilled in the league. This belief *is* unwavering in the sense at issue here, because you are disposed to hold it with undiminished confidence no matter how often they lose.

To further clarify what makes epistemic circumstances unfavorable (on my understanding, which we'll see is broader than Kelly's), we need a brief word on the notion of evidence. I am using *evidence* synonymously with "epistemic reason": a reason that points toward the truth or falsehood of a belief (Conee and Feldman, 2004). Although we tend to refer to physical things (such as fingerprints) as evidence, in the philosophical sense at issue here, evidence comprises the mental representations to which (for example) looking at the fingerprints gives rise. The mental representations in question include a person's beliefs and representational experiences, including her perceptual experiences and intellectual seemings. Although evidence tends to be a good guide to what is true, it can sometimes mislead. That is, it might fail to tell the whole story: there might be additional evidence that you lack and that would cast a different light on the evidence that you have. For example, the visual appearance of your watch might mislead you to think that your watch says 11:00 when it is really 12:00, if you lack the additional evidence that it is broken. Finally, I am supposing that there are genuine, i.e. non-subjective, evidence-weighting policies that determine how different pieces of evidence weigh up against each other (cf. Dormandy, 2018a).

We are now in a position to clarify the way in which dogmatic belief is unwavering in unfavorable epistemic circumstances. Kelly (*ibid.*) understands unfavorable circumstances narrowly, as those in which the believer receives counterevidence – that is, evidence that points to the falsehood of her belief. Kelly presumably means *undefeated* counterevidence, i.e., counterevidence that has not been shown by additional evidence to be false or misleading. And he is right that holding your belief in open defiance of undefeated counterevidence, without changing it or even lowering your confidence, is dogmatic. But dogmatic belief has other manifestations than the disposition to defy counterevidence.

A second disposition of dogmatism is to *explain away* counterevidence. A dogmatic-but-true believer characteristically does this by appeal to resources in his religious belief system that are geared toward defeating counterevidence. For example, his religious belief system might include evidence-weighting policies that give much greater epistemic weight to his own religious beliefs than to any counterevidence that may arise against them.<sup>ii</sup> For another example, it might teach that the world, because fallen, is bound to contain abundant evidence against its core beliefs, evidence that will – assuming the truth of those beliefs – be misleading. The believer may be unable to explain *why* much of that counterevidence is misleading; but he does not need to, because its very existence confirms his doctrine of the fallen world and even his religious belief system as a whole. Holding beliefs in the face of counterevidence, then, is a last-ditch response for the dogmatic believer whose religious belief system has not managed to explain it away.

Third, should the believer's environment contain features that would generate counterevidence, she is disposed to not perceive them – or more specifically, she is disposed not to perceive their counterevidence-generating aspects. She is instead disposed to perceive things that would yield evidence favoring her beliefs. These

negative and positive dispositions are generated by her prior beliefs, her affective states, her intentions, and those of her epistemic community. These factors influence what features of reality catch her attention and which she overlooks (Chabris and Simons, 2011, chapter 1; Mack and Rock, 1998), and they influence *how* things appear to a person if she does notice them (Zeimbekis and Raftopoulos, 2015). For example, a dogmatic believer might overlook *non sequiturs* in a Sunday sermon that a non-believer would be pick up on; and she might experience a starry sky *as* God's presence, which a non-believer would not. Everyone's beliefs are influenced by their psychology in these ways, but the dogmatic-but-true believer's are influenced especially strongly.

Even if her environment does not contain many things that would generate counterevidence, the world at large may. To this broader sort of epistemically unfavorable circumstance, the dogmatic believer answers with a fourth disposition: the disposition to avoid environments that might generate counterevidence to begin with. She might for instance inhabit a relatively closed community, spend her free time with like-minded people, and so forth.

We may think of these four dispositions as four lines of defense against unfavorable epistemic circumstances: the disposition to hold beliefs in defiance of counterevidence that one cannot explain away, the disposition to explain counterevidence away, the disposition to overlook counterevidence-generating features in one's environment, and the disposition to inhabit environments with minimal features of this sort. Each disposition is epistemically problematic, because each, in one way or another, involves restricting or manipulating the information that gets through to the believer. And these dispositions seem paradigmatically epistemically un-humble, because they are premised upon the idea that the person's belief system as it stands does not need improvement.

However, when we recall our assumption that the believer's core religious beliefs are *true*, we cannot ignore that these dispositions also perform the valuable epistemic service of *helping her retain true beliefs*. So we seem to be at an epistemological impasse: on the one hand, dogmatic belief is epistemically vicious, in particular epistemically un-humble, but on the other hand it seems an important tool for safeguarding important true beliefs in an epistemically hostile environment. When faced with the choice between epistemically vicious but true religious beliefs, on the one hand, and epistemically virtuous yet possibly false ones, she picks the truths. Particularly since the truths are on the important matter of religion, there is no contest here.

But I want to convince the dogmatic-but-true believer that her epistemic purposes would be better served by epistemic humility. In fact dogmatism comes with the greater epistemic risks, and humility with the greater promise. We must first note, however, that some dogmatic-but-true believers might resist this picture entirely, claiming that they can be epistemically humble after all. So I'll start by addressing this objection.

### 3. Is the Dogmatic-but-True Believer Epistemically Humble After All?

Epistemic humility is a virtue of one's intellectual character. Intellectual character virtues contribute to a person's cognitive excellence, and in this way they tend in favorable contexts to bring about true beliefs and understanding. Whether the cognitive behavior

that an account of epistemic humility describes does facilitate these epistemic aims, then, is an important desideratum in evaluating that account.

In claiming that she can be epistemically humble after all, it is the *doxastic account* of this virtue on which the dogmatic-but-true believer has set her sights. This account, like most others, locates epistemic humility as the virtuous mean on a scale between the vices of epistemic arrogance and epistemic servility (Church, 2016, 413-414; Hazlett, 2012, 220; Tanesini, 2018, 417-418; Whitcomb et al. 2017, 516-517). The doxastic account construes epistemic arrogance as the vice of thinking more highly of your epistemic state than you ought, and epistemic servility as the vice of thinking less highly. Epistemic humility emerges as the virtue of thinking of your epistemic state just as highly as you ought. It is thus marked by a higher-order belief (or other doxastic attitude, which could be dispositional or implicit) toward the rest of your beliefs (Hazlett, 2012; Church, 2016).

One problem with the doxastic account is that it does not do enough to motivate intellectual excellence. For higher-order insight into the reasonableness of one's beliefs is compatible with leaving those beliefs as they are no matter what that insight reveals. You can be epistemically humble by realizing that your beliefs are reasonable, but also by realizing that they are unreasonable – and in the latter case, realizing this suffices for epistemic humility on the doxastic view, regardless of whether you act to change matters (cf. Whitcomb et al., 2017, 514). So too for the dogmatic-but-true believer. Whatever the epistemic status of her beliefs, she can count as epistemically humble on the doxastic view simply by recognizing what that status is. She might even hold beliefs that she knows to be unreasonable, thinking after the fashion of Kierkegaard that God demands unreasonable beliefs as a test of one's trust in him. The doxastic account does not give any reason for thinking that higher-order awareness of the epistemic status of your beliefs will motivate epistemic improvement.

A second problem is that doxastic view fails to distinguish epistemic humility from the two opposing vices, epistemic arrogance and epistemic servility. I do not have the space to give an account of either vice, so must rely on intuitions about what paradigmatic arrogant or servile behavior looks like. As it happens, the four dispositions of dogmatism fit the bill. That these can be an outworking of epistemic arrogance may be unsurprising, for I take it that this was a live suspicion all along. Confident belief in spite of counterevidence may well arise from the a priori conviction that one is above the need for doxastic refinement, even if one cannot yet explain what is wrong with the counterevidence. The same epistemically arrogant assumption can bring a person to weight his own religious doctrines so heavily that they explain away counterevidence a priori. The cognitive disposition to overlook features of the world that generate counterevidence could easily arise from an epistemically arrogant cultivation of lazy perceptual habits. Finally, epistemic arrogance is surely one prominent possible motivation for eschewing information from outside of one's narrow community. Indeed, Hazlett (2012), a proponent of the doxastic account, uses “dogmatic” as a synonym for “epistemically arrogant”, saying that dogmatism itself is “a vice that contrasts with intellectual humility” (220).

What might be more surprising is that the dispositions of dogmatism can also be an outworking of the opposing vice of epistemic servility. The dogmatic-but-true believer might be unwavering because he is towing a party line, abandoning independent critical thought to his community – *groupthink* (Janis, 1982) is a classically epistemically servile phenomenon. Servility can motivate one to do things that might otherwise seem hard to explain, such as openly defying undefeated counterevidence to hold fast to community

beliefs. And an epistemically servile worry about his community's disapproval might explain why the dogmatic-but-true believer ascribes community doctrines much more evidential weight than any counterevidence that he might stumble across. Epistemic servility could induce him to passively allow his cognitive habits to develop in such a way to dispose him not to even notice counterevidence. Finally, epistemic servility could lie behind his tendency to submit to his community's isolation from outside influences.

Whether arrogant or servile,<sup>iii</sup> all of these behaviors are permitted by the doxastic account, for they are all compatible with the higher-order recognition that one's beliefs are formed and sustained in these ways. Since the doxastic account aims to carve a space for epistemic humility that excludes epistemic arrogance and epistemic servility, and since this aim is stable across multiple accounts of epistemic humility (Church, 2016, 413-414; Hazlett, 2012, 220; Tanesini, 2018, 417-418; Whitcomb et al., 2017, 516-517), we may conclude that the doxastic account is mistaken.

A dogmatic-but-true believer might object that, far from being epistemically arrogant or epistemically servile, she is simply doing the best that she can with the resources that she has. All of her evidence, including possibly powerful religious experiences, converges around the truth of her religious beliefs, so these just do seem true to her. But even if they didn't, her whole way of life and hope for eternity center around those beliefs and so would justify doing her utmost to maintain them. I have two responses. First, that her religious beliefs simply seem true is what we would expect, given the reach of her dogmatic dispositions to filter information. Second, we may grant that the believer is doing the best that she knows how to do, in accord with values that she holds dear. But this is perfectly compatible with epistemic arrogance and epistemic servility. Both of these epistemic vices can arise from holding something very dear indeed, not least one's beliefs or one's community. What makes them epistemic vices is the way in which they filter the information that has a chance of getting through to one.

This should make it clear that, although the dogmatic-but-true believer might take offense at the result that she is either epistemically arrogant or epistemically servile, offense is the last thing that I intend. These epistemic vices are the price that she herself has chosen to pay for the greater epistemic good of true core religious beliefs. And this great epistemic good is surely worth an exacting price. What I will argue, however, is that this good need not come at the cost of epistemic humility. On the contrary, religious truth as well as religious understanding, perhaps surprisingly, are *better* achieved by cultivating this virtue. To see this, we need to look more closely at what epistemic humility is and what precisely is epistemically un-humble about the dogmatic-but-true believer.

## 4. Epistemic Humility as Owning Your Limitations

On the *limitations-owning* account, a necessary condition for epistemic humility is having a certain stance toward your cognitive limitations (Whitcomb, et al., 2017; Tanesini, 2018; Kidd, 2016). Kidd says that this stance includes the disposition to recognize your properties as an epistemic agent (2016, 396), Tanesini calls this stance "concern" toward your limitations (2018, 401), and Whitcomb et al. call it "owning" them (2017, 517); I will use the latter terminology.<sup>iv</sup> Owning your limitations involves certain dispositions, such as the disposition to feel dismay about them and to try to counteract them

(Whitcomb, et al. 2017; cf. Kidd 2016, 396-397). It also requires a measure of awareness of them: you must have some knowledge of what they are and when they tend to arise, and you must be disposed to notice them when they do arise (Whitcomb, et al. 2017; Kidd, 2016, 396). This is compatible with making some mistakes about them (Tanesini, 2018, 405), but it is incompatible, I take it, with *systematic* error about them.

One advantage of the limitations-owning account is that it shows the connection between epistemic humility so construed and epistemic improvement: a person who is aware of her cognitive limitations and owns them is much better positioned to achieve such epistemic goods as true beliefs and understanding than someone who, in accord with the doxastic account, simply has insight into the epistemic status of her beliefs. Another advantage of the limitations-owning account is that it helps explain precisely what is un-humble about the dogmatic-but-true believer, and why epistemic humility is a virtue that even he should cultivate.

The dogmatic-but-true believer, I will argue, has cognitive limitations that he does not own. He may be unaware of them, or he may be aware of them but think that owning them would threaten his true religious beliefs. In the first case he lacks epistemic humility by happenstance, and in the second by choice.

Let's look at some cognitive limitations to which the dogmatic-but-true believer is subject. First some set-up. These limitations arise from a particular feature of human cognition, namely the tendency of our minds to strive toward coherence. Cognitive coherence is the state in which we have parsed all of our evidence into a sense-making whole, so that every belief fits with the rest. Our minds achieve coherence by, among other things, deploying heuristics and biases that automatically categorize experiences to yield a comprehensive representation of reality.

Our efforts toward coherence face resistance from reality. For reality is complex, prone to surprise us in ways that throw our categories into disarray. The cognitive dissonance that this generates is uncomfortable (Solomon, *et al.*, 1991) and so calls for resolution. So the mind works to resolve dissonances or to prevent them from arising to begin with. There are two ways in which it might do so. First, in response to surprising new input it might complicate our categories, generating new categories, dividing or overhauling existing categories, and so forth. This prospect can be daunting, however, since these are the categories by which we have always made sense of things. The second, arguably less exacting, way to deal with (or prevent) surprising dissonances is to simplify *our input itself*. As we saw in the second section, we may even fail to uptake information that does not fit our categories. And if surprising information does slip through, we may interpret it so that it fits into them.

Dogmatic belief is sustained by the second strategy: by simplifying the input with minimal upheaval to one's overall beliefs. This strategy has its advantages for the dogmatic-but-true believer whom we have in mind, since her core beliefs roughly map onto reality. But it also results in the following cognitive limitations:

(1) *One-sided evidence*. The dogmatic-but-true believer's evidence is one-sided: apt to confirm rather than disconfirm her beliefs. This is clearly beneficial for her core religious beliefs, which we have stipulated are true; but it also is problematic in several ways. One is that peripheral religious beliefs and her non-religious beliefs may wind up false because the believer lacks a complete picture; this is limitation 2 below. Another is that her categories will remain simplistic (limitation 3 below); another is that she will be at a disadvantage when it comes to epistemic self-evaluation (limitation 4).

(2) *The tendency to form false-positive beliefs.* One might think that true core beliefs, by influencing your evidence, promote further true beliefs by serving as background evidence and by influencing what you perceive and how you perceive it. They can indeed do this – but perhaps surprisingly, they can also promote a certain sort of false belief. For true beliefs, especially if held dogmatically, can influence your experiences in ways that overshoot. Consider an example: Suppose that a person believes dogmatically, and truly, that God is at work in the world. She will be prone to experiencing or interpreting purely banal events as God’s providence or judgment – even if they are not. Or a religious believer who, we will suppose rightly, believes that sin has noetic outworkings may, we will suppose wrongly, evaluate an atheist’s objections as being weaker than they are, because she unconsciously epistemically downgrades the atheist himself.<sup>v</sup> We may call false beliefs resulting from the influence of an overall true worldview *false-positive beliefs* (Dormandy, 2018a, 60). Dogmatic-but-true religious believers have a strong tendency to form false-positive beliefs, which in their turn become additional one-sided evidence that helps generate even more false-positive beliefs.<sup>vi</sup>

(3) *Simplistic categories.* One-sided evidence, including false-positive beliefs, helps sustain a third cognitive limitation in the dogmatic-but-true believer: oversimplified categories. When you receive evidence in shapes that slot neatly into your categories, you will not need to alter those categories and they will tend toward the simplistic. Consider for example a belief system on which there are only believers or nonbelievers: the ambivalent or struggling are apt to be classed as either one or the other; or consider a belief system on which the Bible is literally true and thus science, where it contradicts a given Bible reading, wrong; or on which the church is guided by God, so those who question it on any point are mistaken. Dogmatic-but-true religious believers are susceptible to oversimplifying reality.

(4) *Limited ability to critically self-assess.* A believer with one-sided evidence, false-positive beliefs, and simplistic categories will not be in a good position to reflect critically on his epistemic state. Many aspects of his belief system will remain implicit, taken for granted, or unexplored, because they have not been subject to challenge. This is compatible with his core beliefs being true and may reflect itself in poor reasoning or shallow understanding (see the sixth section).

If the dogmatic-but-true believer is to be epistemically humble on the account that we are considering, he must be able, compatibly with his dogmatism, to own his cognitive limitations. But this he cannot do. For owning his limitations, as we saw, implies being disposed to counteract them. Yet these cognitive limitations are intimately linked to his dogmatic attitude in such a way that counteracting the one would result in counteracting the other. Let me explain:

His dogmatism, as we just saw, helps to generate these cognitive limitations; so if he were to counteract them he would have to take measures against the unwaveringness, and perhaps even in some cases the confidence, of his beliefs. And these limitations in turn help sustain his dogmatism, in the following ways: (1) One-sided evidence, including (2) false-positive beliefs, confirms his confidence and gives him a weightier body of background beliefs in the light of which he can more easily dismiss what counterevidence may slip through. (3) Simplistic categories foster the simplistic perception that contributes to his receiving mainly one-sided evidence. (4) Limitations in his ability to epistemically self-criticize ensure that little will obstruct a belief-forming process that solidifies his already existing beliefs – and they will hamper any attempts to improve matters. The dogmatic-but-true believer’s dogmatism and cognitive limitations, then,

stand or fall together. He cannot be epistemically humble without chipping away at his dogmatism itself.

## 5. Is the Dogmatic-but-True Believer Cognitively Limited?

The dogmatic-but-true believer might respond by denying that she has the abovementioned cognitive limitations at all – or at least by claiming that, if her cognition exhibits the characteristics in question, they are not in her case limitations. After all, she may say, God guides her cognition. Her evidence is one-sided, but he ensures that it is truth-conducive. He protects her from false-positive beliefs and ensures that her categories are apt to their purpose (and anyway the fundamentals of the faith are simple). Finally, even if she is hampered in epistemic self-evaluation, she can trust God to take care of her epistemic housecleaning. This believer will conclude that, since she does not have these cognitive limitations or since, if she has these characteristics but they are not limitations in her case, she can count as trivially epistemically humble on the limitations-owning account. You cannot own limitations that you do not possess.

What are we to respond? We must concede that, given our starting assumption, the dogmatic-but-true believer is cognitively blessed in many ways. But the above line of reasoning goes too far. The level of divine cognitive guidance to which it appeals is far stronger than even the more robust available versions of this doctrine. Consider for example Plantinga's influential theory of the *sensus divinitatis* (2000, 171), for which he claims inspiration from John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas. The *sensus divinitatis*, as Plantinga spells it out, is a cognitive mechanism which, when God repairs it of the noetic effects of sin (as he does for believers), enables people to experience God's traces in the world. In this it is abetted by the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*, 178) which stirs the believer's feelings to long for God. The resulting affectively laden religious experiences are quasi-perceptual in nature, similar to "seeing" those traces of God, including for example the truth of scripture.

But the *sensus divinitatis* and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit do not even come close to protecting believers against the sorts of error described here. It is plausible that the *sensus divinitatis*, being a cognitive mechanism, is itself susceptible to pushing the believer's evidence in a one-sided direction and to generating the occasional false-positive belief (Clark and Barrett, 2011) – especially with the additional affective influence of the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. The dogmatic-but-true believer, however, will doubtless insist that the *sensus divinitatis* is unique among cognitive mechanisms in lacking these deleterious side-effects. But even if she is right, the *sensus divinitatis* as Plantinga construes it operates strictly within its own sphere. It senses *religious* aspects of reality; it does not override the believer's other cognitive or affective mechanisms, which are still free to generate one-sided evidence, false-positive beliefs, simplistic categories, and to impede her epistemic self-assessment.<sup>vii</sup> Indeed, even and perhaps especially the powerful longing for God produced by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit is prone to generating false-positive beliefs, by dint of the very strength of the emotions that it generates.

One might worry that, if we call the dogmatic-but-true believer epistemically un-humble due to her formation of beliefs from religious experiences, by parity of reasoning we are committed to the claim that each and every one of us is un-humble due to our

formation of beliefs from run-of-the-mill sensory experiences. For everyone has cognitive mechanisms that help us perceive reality and that are susceptible to influence by our prior beliefs, affections, and other mental states. In response, there is no real worry here. I am not claiming that the very idea of quasi-perceptual experience of divine reality is epistemically un-humble. What I am claiming is un-humble is being closed to the suggestion that those experiences can ever mislead. Our visual or auditory experiences can be undermined by counterevidence (say, that we were subject to an optical or auditory illusion); so, surely, can our religious experiences. Franz Werfel's novelistic depiction of the prophet Jeremiah is illustrative of the way in which one can be misled even by divinely gifted religious experiences. Werfel describes the art of discernment that must be mastered even by those who experience true prophetic communication:<sup>viii</sup>

Many saw pictures, many heard the voice. Yet being selected to receive these heavenly gifts is not the only thing that makes one a genuine prophet .... The real prophet's art consisted in hearing "rightly", or separating out the divine murmur from all of the murky additives of the passions, covetings, and willings stemming from one's own nature.

Just as the person who receives genuine prophetic communication can be misled if he is not careful, so can the person who has genuine religious experiences. Epistemic humility helps her avoid this.

At this point, the dogmatic-but-true believer might postulate a stronger doctrine of divine cognitive guidance than Plantinga's, on which God co-opts *every* aspect of our reasoning. But this idea, I take it, is unsupported even by stringent interpretations of the sources of revelation that our believer takes seriously. Even though many traditions hold that basic faith in God is a divine gift, they do not say that God also ensures that *everything* that one subsequently comes to think is true (Moroney, 1999, chapter 1). Even those who think that God predetermines even our (apparently) free actions, including our beliefs, do not think that he predetermines us to perform *only good* actions or indeed form *only true* beliefs. (And anyone who does think this rejects my starting assumption that, although the dogmatic-but-true believer's core beliefs are true, her peripheral beliefs might not be; this leaves us at a dialectical impasse.) Indeed, most sources of revelation contain hardy excoriations of doctrinally errant believers, apparently assuming that such cases are bound to arise. So unless the dogmatic-but-true believer departs significantly from standard accounts of divine cognitive guidance, this objection – that she lacks cognitive limitations and so can trivially count as epistemically humble – is unavailable to her. More than this, denying that one is cognitively limited is itself another example of epistemically un-humble behavior – though once again, behavior that the dogmatic-but-true believer thinks necessary in order to preserve her true religious beliefs.

## 6. Competing Epistemic Goods?

The dogmatic-but-true believer, as we saw, chooses dogmatism over humility because she thinks that cultivating epistemic humility would, in our secularized world full of misleading counterevidence, endanger her true core religious beliefs. It is better, she judges, to be straightjacketed into a fundamentally fairly good doxastic state than to risk even that by seeking perfection.

What are we to make of this tradeoff? At least three worries challenge the believer's negative assessment of epistemic humility. First, we saw in the fourth section that epistemic humility threatens her unwavering confidence, in her core religious beliefs as well as her peripheral religious beliefs and her non-religious beliefs. Eschewing humility helps preserve this unwavering confidence in her core beliefs, which are true – but the side-effect is that she remains unwaveringly confident in her peripheral religious beliefs and her non-religious beliefs, some of which are bound to be false. Forfeiting the truth on non-core matters may seem a small price to pay. But in fact it is a serious matter. For core religious beliefs are epistemically related to her peripheral religious beliefs and to her non-religious beliefs. If enough of the non-core beliefs – or if the wrong subset of them – are false, then her belief system as a whole, though right about core religious matters, may wind up erring significantly.

To see this, consider that it is natural for religious believers to integrate their religious beliefs with what they think in other areas, such as natural science or politics. Yet core religious beliefs do not imply anything about these areas on their own, but only in combination with auxiliary beliefs on peripheral and non-religious matters. If these auxiliary beliefs are false, they may lead the believer to deduce further falsehoods. Look at the way in which Christian believers drew on peripheral religious beliefs about interpretations of scripture, and non-religious beliefs deriving from pseudo-anthropology, to align themselves with the apartheid regime in South Africa, with European fascist movements in the run-up to World War II, and with the pro-slave agenda in the antebellum United States. Similar points may be made about some of the perennial conflicts over science and religion: false beliefs about the interpretation of certain Biblical passages relating to astronomy led the church for centuries to hold that its core beliefs were incompatible with astronomical developments. I take it that the limitations of dogmatism, including one-sided evidence, false-positive beliefs, simplistic categories, and an inability to epistemically self-assess, played a role, and that a dose of epistemic humility could have quickly set things right.

Moreover, too many false auxiliary beliefs may threaten one's true core beliefs themselves. If the believer somehow comes to feel the disconnect between her belief system and reality, she may blame her core beliefs alongside the false auxiliaries, and abandon the whole lot. This outcome is all the more probable given the tendency, cultivated by her dogmatism, to see the world in black and white and to lack the skills of epistemic self-evaluation. Epistemic humility, among other things, promotes the kind of subtle and complex reasoning that can help a person see what her core beliefs really commit her to and what they do not.

The second worry is that eschewing epistemic humility forfeits understanding. Understanding is the epistemic good of having an overview of a domain and grasping how its elements fit together (Elgin, 2017). A young child uses three-dimensional models to achieve a rudimentary understanding of atoms, but a nuclear physicist understands how this model only scratches the surface. A religious believer, to deepen her religious understanding, must move beyond the oversimplifications that are the hallmark of dogmatism. Cultivating epistemic humility is part of how this is done.

Dogmatic believers might object that the gospel is at root a simple matter, requiring the basic understanding that a child could achieve. My response is that, even if the basics are simple (like the atomic model), the workings of God – simply because of the kind of being he is – are infinitely complex. Surface-level understanding suffices for many

purposes, but deeper relationship with God, of the kind that the dogmatic-but-true believer wants to cultivate, is furthered by deeper understanding.

Moreover, shallow understanding can also wind up threatening a person's core true beliefs themselves. For we cannot guarantee ourselves a life free of counterevidence (no matter how we may try). Cultivating understanding is a better way to uphold our core beliefs in the face of it than eschewing counterevidence. Think of Job, who starts off with basic understanding of God, but whose faith is threatened by the massive incoherence of God's appearing unjust by letting him suffer so horribly. Job's comforters take the dogmatic approach: explaining away the counterevidence in terms of their own narrow categories. Job, by contrast, seeks understanding – and this search is precisely what winds up not only saving his faith but deepening it (Dormandy, 2018b). Whether he achieves theoretical understanding is doubtful, but what he does achieve, by way of a jaw-dropping religious experience, is a second-personal, phenomenological, grasp of what God is like (Stump, 2012). Understanding, then, can be precisely what preserves one's core beliefs in the face of counterevidence. Yet in order to achieve it, one must chip away at one's cognitive limitations, especially the tendency to oversimplify.

This brings me to the third worry. Epistemic humility involves exercising and developing cognitive abilities – so eschewing it involves leaving these abilities unexercised and undeveloped. Epistemic humility requires, first, *having* the cognitive ability to discern one's epistemic limitations among other features of one's cognitive landscape; and it requires, second, *working to develop* whatever abilities one needs to overcome those limitations. These abilities presumably include, at the very least, sharpening one's skills of critical thinking. A person who declines to cultivate epistemic humility, then, will lose out on the exercising and developing of important cognitive abilities. This means that, should the epistemic going get tough as it did for Job, the dogmatic-but-true believer may lack the cognitive muscle to think her way through. She may also be unable to hold her own against a disagreeing interlocutor who, unlike her, is intellectually able to perspective-shift and so can appeal to her from within her own worldview. On top of this she will be all the more susceptible to cognitive manipulation, and will be overall a less effective epistemic agent in general. Cultivating epistemic humility, by contrast, can help her excel as an epistemic agent. It is much better to empower her to explore for herself how her core truths hold up in a world that can sometimes mislead, than to leave her at the mercy of that world. She will presumably pick up more non-core truths, and deeper understanding, along the way.

So epistemic humility is not the obstacle to true religious beliefs that the dogmatic-but-true believer worries that it is. On the contrary, her own dogmatism poses the greater risks. One risk is a worldview that is badly off kilter with reality, another is shallow religious understanding, and a third is compromised epistemic agency. These three worries are epistemically problematic in themselves, but they can also endanger the core true beliefs that the dogmatic-but-true believer wants to preserve. Cultivating epistemic humility combats dogmatism and hence mitigates these dangers – even for someone who has been epistemically blessed, as the dogmatic-but-true believer has.

In conclusion, one might think that holding true religious beliefs dogmatically is the best or even the only way to preserve them in our fallen world full of misleading counterevidence, but this is a mistake. Cultivating epistemic humility – in the sense of being aware of one's cognitive limitations and working to counteract them – puts even true religious believers in a much better position to achieve epistemic excellence and, in so doing, a deeper and more agile religious cognitive life.

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<sup>i</sup> I will suppose for simplicity that these characteristics do not come apart.

<sup>ii</sup> I argue elsewhere that Plantinga's Reformed epistemology legitimates dogmatic belief in this way (Dormandy 2018a, 73-75).

<sup>iii</sup> Such behavior can also be explained in other ways; what matters here is that they often are signs of epistemic arrogance and epistemic servility.

<sup>iv</sup> For Whitcomb et al. (2017) this stance is necessary and sufficient, whereas for Tanesini (2018) it is only necessary.

<sup>v</sup> For a discussion of how we can unwittingly epistemically downgrade people, see Saul (2013).

<sup>vi</sup> Those who take evidence to be necessarily true can re-formulate these points in their preferred epistemological framework.

<sup>vii</sup> For a more detailed argument see (Dormandy, forthcoming).

<sup>viii</sup> Werfel (1981/1937), 376. My translation.