

Safe disbelief

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Many people take themselves to know that some central tenets of the world's major religions are false. They take themselves to know, for instance, that there is no personal God who listen to prayers; that there is no afterlife in which the faithful are rewarded; or that the Quran is not of divine origin. Most of these people take themselves to know these things without having some special expertise. They have not studied or read much philosophy, theology or religious history. They did not come to their views through careful exegesis of sacred texts. They are unable to spell out *a priori* arguments against the existence of gods or to rebut fine-tuning arguments. They are not aware of proper formulations, and standard replies to, the problems of evil or divine hiddenness. Yet they take themselves to know that some — or all — central tenets of the world's major religions are false. In this paper I try to make sense of, and defend, their view. I will do so from the standpoint of a safety account of knowledge, though most of what I say can be reframed in reliabilist, virtue-theoretic or proper-

function terms.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 spells out the thesis I will defend, namely, that *if the atheist worldview is true, disbelief is often knowledge*. Section 2 sketches the safety account that I rely on. Section 3 argues for the thesis, highlights ways in which disbelief can *fail* to constitute knowledge, and considers some objections.

1 The thesis

Some preliminaries are in order. First, on *religious disbelief*. By “religious disbelief” I mean *belief in the negation* of various religious claims. The term “disbelief” is also used for mere lack of belief or the inability or refusal to believe, but these fall outside my scope. Moreover, I focus on disbelief in *classical, robust* religious claims such as the claim that there is a personal God who listen to prayers, that the faithful are rewarded in afterlife or that the Quran is of divine origin. I leave aside disbelief in more elusive religious claims such as the claim that there is a Destiny or the bare claim that there is a God — where this is compatible with a Spinozian God. I also leave aside the rejection of various non-doxastic attitudes that may be called “religious” — such as a sense of awe and humility when contemplating what there is. Finally, I assume without further ado that these claims are falsity-apt. That should not raise objections from those who think that a personal God or an afterlife are impossible things. But those

who take concepts such as those of “God” or “afterlife” to be deficient may deny that the claims are even false. I will not address their views here.

Second, on the *disbelievers* I am interested in. Disbelief is not the preserve of atheists. Almost all theists disbelieve the robust claims of some major religions.¹ Jews commonly believe that Jesus does not listen to prayers; Christians believe that Muhammad was not a prophet; both reject pagan beliefs. Theists may even disbelieve central tenets of a religious tradition they identify with. Sizeable numbers of people who identify as Christians disbelieve in afterlife or a personal God, for instance.² Undoubtedly some of these theists take themselves to know that these claims are false — be they claims of other religions or their own. I am interested in disbelief in both atheists and theists. But I restrict my scope in three ways: I am only concerned with *modern, ordinary* disbelievers who disbelieve a *third-party claim*. Let me explain. By “modern” I roughly mean members of post-Enlightenment societies. By “ordinary” I mean people who have the kind of general education one receives in, say, contemporary China or western countries, but who do not have special expertise in theology or the study of religion. By “a third-party claim” I mean a claim that does not originate in the disbeliever himself or herself — in the sense that she or he is not the first to bring the claim among humans. The vast majority

¹Possible exceptions are extreme forms of religious scepticism and religious pluralism.

²See Luis et al. (2008), for instance. Among U.S. Protestants surveyed, 20% believe in a God that is an “impersonal force”, 14% that the Bible is not the word of God, 12% that there is no afterlife. The numbers are 29%, 27%, 15% among Catholics and 50%, 53%, 45% among Jews.

of people are confronted with religious claims as made by third parties — parents, friends, public figures, texts, or even fictional characters. Some think they have rediscovered or confirmed these claims on their own. But they do not think that they *originate* them. The proviso excludes two kinds of cases. First, cases of disbelief in religious claims that nobody has ever brought forward. Most people, I assume, believe that it is not the case that there are exactly six gods who have an intense interest in the destiny of male ants, cloud-shaped pebbles, grey hair, birdsongs, small pools of salty water and anaerobic bacteria, respectively. Disbeliefs of that type are worthy of study, but they raise special issues and I suspect that they are too numerous and varied to receive a blanket treatment. Second, cases in which one comes to disbelieve a mystical experience one has. For instance, one may have the experience as of God or Jesus giving them a personal message — hence a religious claim that one is the first human to contemplate — and treat the experience as illusory. These cases also raise special issues and are better left aside here.

Let us call my object *ordinary modern disbelief*, or *disbelief* for short. Now consider disbelief in the claim that there is a personal God who listens to prayer. Trivially, if there *is* such a God, nobody knows that the claim is false. What is far less trivial is whether *if there is no God*, ordinary disbelievers who disbelieve that claim *know* that it is false. Analogously, it is trivial that if there is no God, theists do not know that there is one; much less whether if there is a God, they can know that there is one. The con-

ditional claim is the one I want to examine here. More precisely, I want to examine the view that:

If the atheist worldview is true, ordinary modern disbelief is often knowledge.

By “the atheist worldview” I simply mean that our world is without personal or supernatural god, souls and afterlife. By “often” I mean that (conditional on the assumption) knowledge-constituting disbelief is a common occurrence. I do not mean that every or most disbelief is knowledge. But I do mean that knowledge-constituting disbelief is achieved by unexceptional people in wholly unexceptional circumstances. Focusing on the conditional claim has two advantages. First, it avoids the deadlocks of theist vs. atheist debates: it is a claim that both sides can happily agree with. Second, it delineates the properly epistemological part of the question whether disbelief is knowledge by setting aside its metaphysical component — whether the atheist worldview is in fact true.

2 The bare safety account of knowledge

I rely on a safety account of knowledge (Williamson, 2000, Sosa, 1999, Pritchard, 2005), though much of what I say can be reframed in terms of reliabilist (Goldman, 1986), proper-function (Plantinga, 1993) or virtue-theoretic accounts (Sosa, 2007; Greco, 2010; Pritchard, 2010). It is fair to say that most epistemologists today see these as the best accounts of knowledge

at our disposal. In addition, they have three features that are important for my project: they divorce knowledge from proof, they do not require a special notion of “evidence” or “grounds”, they are readily applied to necessary truths. I come back to these points below.

On a bare safety account of knowledge, one knows something if and only if one’s belief is safely true. Williamson (2000, 100) formulates the idea of a safely true belief as follows:

One’s belief that p in case α is safe iff one avoids false belief in cases sufficiently similar to α .

In other words, to evaluate whether the belief of a person at a time is safe — and thus, on the bare safety conception, whether it constitute knowledge — we consider whether beliefs that are sufficiently like it are true. These can be other beliefs of that very person or another one, held at the same or different times, in actuality or in some counterfactual situation. To illustrate, one may come to know that a cup is chipped by seeing a chipped cup in good light and at a short distance. On the safety account, that implies that beliefs sufficiently similar to that one are true. For instance, it should not be the case that, had the cup been a millimeter further away or the light a bit dimmer, one would have mistakenly thought that the cup was not chipped.

What makes two beliefs similar enough, for purposes of evaluating safety? No clean reductive set of necessary and sufficient conditions is to

be hoped for here (Williamson, 2000, 100). That is the so-called *generality problem* — initially formulated for reliabilist accounts (Goldman, 1979; Conee and Feldman, 1998). Defenders of safety accounts see it less as a problem than an inevitable feature of any accounts of a notion that is not introduced by straightforward stipulation — on par of accounts of causation, modality, reference and so on. The best we can do is to use our judgements about knowledge as a guide to the relevant notion of similarity. In particular, we may make confident judgements on conditionals of the following form: *if one forms a false belief in that case, then one fails to know in that other case.*

That being said, we can lay out some factors that contribute to relevant similarity among beliefs. I will list some; it is beyond the scope of this paper to defend them. These are at best guidelines; we can think of counterexamples.

1. *Similar content.* A belief *that the cup is chipped* is similar in content to a belief *that the cup is not chipped*. A belief *that there is a horse nearby* is dissimilar in content to a belief *that it is raining*. Similarity in content makes for relevant similarity.
2. *Similar history.* Similarity in the history of beliefs makes for relevant similarity — much more so than similarity in consequences. This includes similarity in processes of belief formation or sustenance (sometimes called “methods” or “basis”) that are dear to re-

liabilists and virtue theorists.

3. *Spatio-temporal closeness*. Spatio-temporal closeness makes for relevant similarity. It is commonly granted that the presence of a few fake barns in some area deprives local car drivers, but not all car drivers on Earth, of their ability to know a barn on sight.
4. *Modal closeness*. The kind of modal closeness popularized by Lewis' semantics for counterfactual is often assumed to contribute to relevant similarity (Williamson, 2000, 123–4).
5. *Phenomenal similarity*. Similarity in appearances contribute to relevant similarity; more precisely, similarity in how appearances relate to a belief's content. For instance, the visual appearance of a chipped cup relates to the belief that the cup is chipped as the visual appearance of a non-chipped cup relates to the belief that the cup is not chipped.

The chipped cup pair of cases illustrate the five headings — assuming for the fourth that the cup could easily have been a millimeter further way.

The safety conception has several advantages for our project. First, it avoids the *best-argument view*. On a view that was widespread in Antiquity, one does not know something unless one can articulate the best arguments for it and reject the best objections to it. While it is nowadays rarely ever defended as a proper account of knowledge, the best-argument view still exerts a non-negligible influence. It notably crops up in the claim

that lay people cannot know in the face of expert disagreement (Frances, 2005).³ In our case, the claim implies that one expert on religious matters who is a theist is sufficient to prevent any lay person to know that there is a God; and similarly, one atheist expert deprives any lay theist of knowledge. The best-argument view is unwarrantedly skeptical. Lay people can surely know that sugar causes heart diseases, even though there may well be an expert dietetician who disagrees. The safety account squarely rejects the best-argument view. Whether one knows does not depend on what arguments one has, but on whether one's belief belongs to a truthful kind.⁴

Second, the safety account avoids the search of "evidence" or "grounds" of disbelief. It has often been assumed that one knew that there was no God only if one had good independent evidence or grounds that there was none. But the question of what, if anything, provides evidence or grounds for religious claims or their denials has proved vexing. For instance, it is disputed whether suffering is evidence that there is no loving God. Moreover, cases of perceptual knowledge and innate knowledge (folk theories) cast doubt on the idea that the evidence / grounds model of knowledge

³What we will say about experts holds whether one understands "experts" broadly so as to include people who appear to have expertise — whether they do have some or not — or more strictly. Thanks to Arturs Logins here.

⁴This is not to say, of course, that expert opinion has no impact on lay knowledge. Widespread disagreement among experts may make it so that one's opinion that p acquired through the view of one group of experts is similar enough to another person's opinion that not- p acquired through the view of another group of experts. If so, neither of them knows.

is adequate. The safety approach avoids it entirely. Intuitive belief that a certain object will fall, for instance, will count as knowledge as long as it belongs to a relevant group of true beliefs. Whether it relies on proper evidence or grounds is irrelevant.⁵

Third, the safety account is not trivialized by beliefs in necessary truths. A variety of conditions on knowledge have no meaningful applications to beliefs in necessary truths. Some modal conditions on knowing p — such as Nozick’s (1981, chap. 3) sensitivity — essentially appeal to possibilities in which p is false. Various evidentialist conceptions assume that entailment is a form of evidential support; it follows that anything is good evidence for a necessary truth, and thus pretty much any belief in a necessary truth has good evidence. Such conditions are problematic in our context because it is controversial whether religious claims are contingent. By contrast, the safety account is meaningfully applied to beliefs in necessary truths. Suppose that one follows a mistaken procedure to carry out divisions. The procedure may yield some true results by accident; for instance, it may lead one to form the correct belief that $33 \div 3 = 11$. On a standard view, that is necessary truth. Yet the belief is not knowledge because it is similar enough to other, false beliefs that one forms or could

⁵The advantage is also adduced in favour of so-called “Reformed epistemology” in the epistemology of religion (Alston, 1991; Plantinga, 2000). Let me stress however that in arguing that disbelief is safe, we do not argue that it is “properly basic” in Plantinga’s sense — that is, roughly, not based on further beliefs. Our point here is that even if disbelief is based on arguments and further beliefs, what matters for its safety is not the quality of the arguments themselves, but rather whether these make the belief relevant like, or unlike, false beliefs.

have formed following the same procedure.⁶

3 Safe and unsafe disbelief

The safety account is a *good company* view of knowledge. A belief constitutes knowledge if it is in a good company: that is, if beliefs sufficiently like it are true. It fails to constitute knowledge if it is in a bad company: that is, if it is sufficiently like some false belief. To argue that disbelief is knowledge, we need to argue that it is in good company, and in good company only. Now a false belief is *ipso facto* in bad company; so trivially, if there *is* a personal God, an afterlife, texts of divine origin, and so on, then the corresponding disbeliefs are not knowledge. To argue fully that disbelief is knowledge, one would have to get into arguments against the existence of God, life beyond death and so on. Here we sidestep these questions and focus on the conditional claim: if the atheist worldview is true, then disbelief is often safe — and hence, on the safety account, constitutes knowledge.

The argument that disbelief is often safe (conditional on the atheist worldview) is straightforward:

1. Many (modern, ordinary) religious disbeliefs only have *other religious disbeliefs* as companions.

⁶See Manley (2007) for a similar point.

2. If the atheist worldview is true, all religious disbeliefs companions of actual disbeliefs are true.
3. So if the atheist world view is true, many religious disbeliefs are safe.

Take an ordinary modern disbeliever who thinks that the Quran is not of divine origin. Typically, his belief will fall in a class that comprises only beliefs such as: the belief that the Vedas are not divinely inspired, the belief that the book of Mormon is not divinely inspired, the belief that no living Christian has talked to Jesus, the belief that there is no divine decree against drinking alcohol, and so on.⁷ If the atheist worldview is true, all these beliefs are true. So the ordinary modern disbeliever's beliefs are safe.

To see that the point is far from trivial, contrast with religious *belief*. Suppose there is a God who listens to prayers, and that one believes that there is. Still, one's belief may have as companions the belief that *only Christians will go to Heaven*, or the belief that *Muhammad is God's prophet*, and so on, and any one of these beliefs may well be false. Note in particular that one believer's belief may have as companions *another believer's* belief where the two are jointly unsatisfiable; in that case none of them is knowledge.⁸ Religious diversity is thus a *prima facie* hurdle for religious

⁷Some further beliefs that may count as relevantly similar are disbeliefs in witchcraft, paranormal claims and the like. They are perhaps not strictly speaking *religious* disbeliefs, but they are also true if the atheist worldview is.

⁸Assuming that similarity is symmetrical. Safety can be cashed out in terms of a non-symmetric counterpart relation (see the model in Williamson, 2009). But the relation may nevertheless hold symmetrically between these two particular beliefs.

knowledge. Not so with disbelief.⁹

Premise 1 holds for many disbeliefs, not all. Here are some cases in which disbelief arguably has further companions that make it unsafe even when true:

- *Blanket distrust of authority.* A disbeliever disbelieves religious claims as part of a massive distrust of experts. Their religious disbeliefs are on par with their belief that relativity is false, that there was no 9/11 attacks, or the like.¹⁰
- *Sophisticated disbelief.* A disbeliever came to disbelieve religious claims upon reading the obscure and spurious last *opus* of a fashionable French philosopher. Their disbelief is on par with their beliefs that democracy negates itself or that entertainment is the immanent *telos* of contemporary politics.¹¹
- *Religiously motivated disbelief.* A disbeliever believes (correctly) that Muslims do not go to Heaven after death. But they do so because they think that they are sent to Hell. Another disbeliever believes

⁹Here I am only highlighting a *prima facie* hurdle on the safety of religious belief to show that the safety of true disbelief is not trivial. I am *not* arguing that religious belief is not safe even if there is a God. For if there is a God who is intent on us knowing some religious truths, then that God probably ensures that we satisfy whatever condition must be satisfied for us to know them (Plantinga, 2000, 188-9).

¹⁰That is a reason why *premodern* disbelief is not obviously safe. The people who, on a first contact with a missionary, disbelieve their claims, may form disbeliefs that are on a par with disbelief in many true reports of facts of Western life.

¹¹I assume that the disbeliever would otherwise have continued to believe the religious claims in question, and that they have genuine beliefs in the fashionable philosopher's claims.

(correctly) that God will not help them in a occurrence because they believe (incorrectly) that God hates them. In both cases their true disbelief is on par with a false religious belief.

Cases of disbelief in some central tenet of one's own professed religion often fall in the last category. For instance, a Christian may believe that there is no Hell, but that belief may be quite similar to their belief that there is a God who loves mankind. If the atheist worldview is true, the latter is false and hence the former unsafe. The same can be said for any disbelief that is motivated by one's religious views. However, I doubt that most disbeliefs of theists fall into that category. Theists disbelieve many claims of other religions quite like ordinary atheists disbelieve them — roughly, as *prima facie* implausible claims that some people believe out of hope, fear or habit and that are not worthy of detailed examination. The same can be said of many cases of disbelief in the tenets of one's own religion: much Christian disbelief in afterlife or miracles is more on par with atheist disbelief than it is with their own belief in the existence of a personal God. So even though religiously motivated disbelief is common among theists, I would not say that it is dominant.

So even though religiously motivated disbelief is unsafe, if the atheist worldview is true, I doubt that much disbelief of theists is religiously motivated.

Such cases aside, are there objections to (1) and (2)? Against (2), one may argue that even if the atheist worldview is true, there are *modally*

close worlds in which it is false. Disbeliefs have false companions in those worlds and are thus unsafe. The metaphysical claim is highly dubious. The existence of gods or afterlife is not like the outcome of a dice throw or a mere rearrangement of local matters of fact. We can plausibly assume that if religious disbeliefs are true, there are true at close possible worlds as well.

Against (1), one may try to put forward further non-disbelief bad companions for disbeliefs. Here are some candidates.

- *False moral beliefs.* One's religious disbelief is on par with false moral beliefs, such as the belief that human life has no value.
- *False scientific beliefs.* One's religious disbelief is on par with false scientific beliefs, such as the (presumably false) belief that science will someday allow humans to extend their life indefinitely.
- *False sociological or psychological beliefs.* One's religious disbelief is on par with false sociological beliefs that all church authorities are insincere or all believers deeply insecure.

The moral cases is unconvincing. Moral beliefs and religious disbeliefs are very dissimilar in content. It is not even clear that moral beliefs have a content that is truth-apt or that is truth-apt in the way that factual beliefs — and, we assume, religious disbeliefs — are. They are typically dissimilar in history: for the most, people do not come to their moral views by simple unreflexive denials of third-party claims. In my view the best candidates

here are unreflexive rejection of third-party moral claims — such as early rejections of racial or gender equality or the way in which most people reject vegetarianism. Still, if some false moral beliefs of that kind count as similar enough to religious disbelief, they surely count as similar enough to *true* moral beliefs held in a fairly unreflexive manner — such as current rejections of racism or slavery. The implied moral skepticism is *prima facie* implausible.

The scientific case is not convincing either. The history of typical modern disbeliefs and false scientific beliefs look similar insofar as both are influenced by science. But the role of ordinary scientific beliefs in both histories is markedly different. Typical scientific beliefs are roughly inflated, over-optimistic or over-generalized versions of scientific ones. By contrast, the role of scientific beliefs in religious disbelief is chiefly to defeat certain routes to religious belief. Up to the Enlightenment it may have appeared that the best scientific theories required the truth of certain religious claims. One could even argue that disbelief in those claims was unsafe at the time — though I am by no means convinced that it is so. One of the consequences of modern scientific progress has been to make scientific (dis)belief dissimilar to religious (dis)belief, so that the two do not stand or fall together.

The sociological and psychological cases are in better standing. Contents are again dissimilar. But disbelief is at least sometimes based on perceptions of unsincerity or other mistaken psychological judgements.

However, it is not clear that disbelief is predominantly like that. Moreover, it is disputable whether a belief based on an unsafe belief is itself unsafe (see *e.g.* Luzzi, 2011).

4 Conclusion

Everybody but the most extreme religious sceptics and pluralists harbours some religious disbelief. Atheists notably disbelieve religious claims, but pretty much any theist also disbelieves many religious claims. Most disbelievers, theists and atheists alike, disbelieve claims in the absence of special expertise and in the face of apparent expert disagreement. That would be quite a rash attitude on their part if it was impossible for them to know that those claims are false. In this paper I have explored one way to make sense of their view. I have argued that *if the atheist worldview is correct*, then disbelief is often knowledge. I have done so by relying on a safety conception of belief, under which a belief constitutes knowledge if it belongs to a relevant group of true beliefs only. Similar points could be formulated in reliabilist, proper-function or virtue-theoretic terms. Hence contemporary externalist theories of knowledge appear consistent with the view that ordinary atheist disbelievers themselves hold — roughly, that there is no god and they know it. This goes some way towards explaining the rationality of their disbeliefs.

Several questions remain to be addressed. We have not examined whether

if some particular theist view is true, then disbeliefs consistent with that view are safe. So we cannot claim that externalist theories of knowledge are compatible with the *theist* disbeliever's view — roughly, that there is God but that they know that it is not like what differing religions say it is. We have not examined whether *if some particular theist view is true*, then religious belief is safe. We have not explored in detail how these facts about knowledge impact on the rationality of beliefs and disbeliefs. These are topics for further study.

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