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### THE DOXASTIC IDEAL IN TRADITIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PROJECT OF AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGION

The standard definition of knowledge and the concept of objective knowledge, as they were described in the epistemology sprung from the Vienna Circle, are too restricted in comparison with our natural disposal to admit different beliefs as reliable. The main guilt for this state of affairs in epistemology belongs to the so-called, in Wolterstorff's terms, "doxastic ideal", namely, the traditional picture of the ideally formed beliefs. Locke's view of entitlement was the modern expression of this ideal and Hume's analysis of beliefs about future was its first powerful criticism. If we succeed in rejecting this ideal, then it becomes possible to extend the epistemological analysis over other sorts of beliefs, religious beliefs included.

#### Some precautions

The debate concerning the possibility of an epistemology of religion has begun to occupy significant spaces in philosophical literature only in the last two or three decades. The collective volume, *Faith and Rationality*<sup>1</sup>, edited by A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff and published in 1983, marked the turning point in the growing interest process for an epistemological analysis of faith and religious beliefs. Gradually, as a consequence of this new course of ideas inside the philosophical community, chapters devoted to epistemology of religion had been included in some readers and introductory works. I should mention only two remarkable contributions of this kind that belong to some philosophers which, in the meantime, gained the reputation as authorities on this field. Robert Audi<sup>2</sup> pays a special attention to religious knowledge, as a kind of knowledge, beside scientific knowledge and moral knowledge. Nicholas Wolterstorff<sup>3</sup> wrote a chapter about epistemology of religion in a reader published in series "Blackwell Philosophy Guides", in which we can find a generous treatment of some topics traditionally proscribed.

The main topic in epistemology of religion is the application of standard explanation about beliefs and the conditions in which a belief can be qualified as knowledge to the special case of religious beliefs. It is important to emphasize that from this standpoint of view the religious beliefs are deemed reducible to propositional contents expressed through the agency of "belief that". In other words, religious beliefs are defined as

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propositional attitudes. An epistemological investigation of this kind tries to answer to questions regarding the cognitive merits of religious beliefs, their content of truth, the reliability of their formation process, their warrantability and the conditions in which an epistemic subject, guided by the aim to find the truth and to avoid the error, can give his (her) assent. Moreover, can we claim that we know something when we are aware of our own religious beliefs? Can we obtain some pieces of knowledge from our religious beliefs using the critical power of our reason?

Although we can assert with good proofs that epistemology of religion already outlined its domain, still persist some ambiguities concerning the proper theoretical place of religious beliefs in a reasonable analysis of opinions. The debate itself is full of internal traps. For example, without any doubt, the issue raised by the theoretical opposition between rational theology and revealed theology has an influence upon the accepted criteria of knowledge. On the other hand, epistemologists have proposed to distinguish between different forms of beliefs, among them, *to believe in* and *to believe that*, only the beliefs produced by the act *to believe that* being reducible to *the opinion that*, where “opinion” is taken as an epistemological technical term, appointing that propositional content which could be a candidate to the title of knowledge. Supplementary, in an analytical epistemology of religion we must take into account other propositional attitudes, such as *hoping that* something will happen, *agreeing that* some events just have happened,, or *regretting that* other events had happened.

My purpose in this article is a minimal one, as it consists only in an attempt to establish the philosophical framework favorable for an epistemological survey of religious beliefs. The first step of this project is to criticize the traditional approach on knowledge and to give up some strong philosophical presuppositions inherent along with the tradition.

### The concept of objective knowledge and the standard analysis of knowledge

In the year 1929, some members of the Vienna Circle published a philosophical manifesto entitled “The Scientific Conception of the World”<sup>4</sup> and dedicated to Moritz Schlick, the founder of the group. Their purpose was to present and to produce a new fundamental philosophical outlook that was following to establish a new kind of philosophical research based on the harmonization between philosophy and science. As that, philosophy would be found in critical method of logical analysis of language the way to clear up different philosophical controversies and many problems among the traditional philosophical ones would have been exposed as pseudo-problems or turned into empirical problems solved scientifically, at least partially.

In order to understand better this issue it is useful to talk about some sentences which are the best cases chosen by a philosopher who wants to apply efficiently the method of logical analysis. Let's suppose that someone asserts "There is a God" or "The primary basis of the world is the unconscious" or "There is an entelechy which is the leading principle in the living organism". From the standpoint of radical empiricism, regarding these sentences, we don't ask if they are true or false, but only if they express something, namely, if they have a meaning. The cognitive signification of these statements will be determined through logical analysis, in fact, through their reduction to the simplest statements which have only an empirical content. In the case of all the most sentences of metaphysics and theology we'll see that they don't carry out the empiricist criterion of meaning. So, we can conclude that this kind of sentences, although they express something, they have no conceptual content, they are "vehicle" for our subjectivity and personal experiences, but not for pieces of knowledge. In "The Vienna Circle of the Scientific Conception of the World" this idea is expressed radically: "The metaphysician and the theologian believe, thereby misunderstanding themselves, that their statements say something, or that they denote a state of affairs. Analysis, however, shows that these statements say nothing but merely express a certain mood and spirit."<sup>5</sup>

The distinctions and boundaries between knowledge and intuition, form and content, were stated for the first time in a consistent empiricist manner, in connection with the analysis of language, by Moritz Schlick, the founder of the Vienna Circle, in his three lectures delivered in the University of London<sup>6</sup>. The difference between Knowledge and intuition is defined by Schlick in the following table<sup>7</sup>.

INTUITION	KNOWLEDGE
only one term	two terms
enjoyable	useful
living	thinking
presentation	explanation
acquaintance	description
inexpressible	expression
that which is ordered	order
content	form

Schlick thought that the main result of the discussion summarized in the table above is the fact that some of the strongest prejudices are removed, first of all, that philosophy, helped by its own method, could be in possession of a special kind of knowledge. There is no intuitive knowledge because the intuitions are subjective and, then, cannot be communicated to another. For example, if I see something green, I can't

communicate to any person my sensation of green, but I can deliver to anybody, even to a blind person, some information about green colour, for example, the place of green colour inside the colours spectrum, namely, the internal relations between green colour and all the other colours. In Schlick's terminology, knowledge express a structure and the structures have the characteristic of communicability, on the one hand, intuition is equivalent with content and has the characteristic of inexpressibility, on the other hand. We know something about green only if we know that green has its proper position in white light spectrum, but our experiences of green are subjective, they can't be comparable with the feelings of another person.

Starting from this difference between the communicability of structure and inexpressibility of content, some empiricist philosophers have defined, in a narrow sense, the concept of objective knowledge. They have stated two requirements: intersubjective communicability and intersubjective testability. In their view, these two requirements are fulfilled only by natural sciences. In metaphysics and theology these demands are inapplicable and it is an error to take an intuition as a piece of knowledge which could be judged relative to them. Of course, this doesn't means that our experiences aren't useful for our life, but metaphysics and theology can't offer anything similar with a scientific theory. Finally, even to talk about a religious experience is a nonsense, because only the experiences which are intersubjective testable can be a basis for real knowledge: "if a mystic asserts that he has experiences that lie above and beyond all concepts, one cannot deny this. But the mystic cannot talk about it, for talking implies capture by concepts and reductive to scientifically classifiable states of affairs"<sup>8</sup>.

Moreover, from the standpoint of logical empiricism, metaphysics makes a supplementary mistake as it asserts that reason itself, free from any empirical sources, is able to produce knowledge. This rejection of the possibility to know something only through the use of pure reason was turned by logical empiricism into the project of the synthetic a priori dissolution. Only empirical sentences about things and the analytical judgements of logic and mathematics will be recognized as meaningful.

In spite of its obstinate work, logical empiricism collapsed. The application of the empiricist criterion of meaning, in its different versions, had as one of its consequences the elimination of law statements from meaningful discourse. A strong empiricist criterion led to unacceptable results, but the new permissive versions, those in deductive form included, have compelled their supporters to admit gradually that a methodological approach is the best way to have a narrow escape from this philosophical mess.

The failure of this reductionist epistemological programme created a favourable framework for a critical assessment of the restricted concept of

objective knowledge and, equally, for the first steps towards a new definition, more comprehensive, of knowledge.

It was outlined the so-called standard or classical analysis of knowledge<sup>9</sup>. An analysis like that lay in enumerating and defining a set of those necessary and together sufficient conditions that must be fulfilled by any belief in order to be propositional knowledge. From this point of view, which was sketched out for the first time in Plato's dialogue *Theaitetos*, only a justified true belief is knowledge.

We have in our minds and express propositionally beliefs that can be true or false. But some of our beliefs can be true by chance, accidentally, and this means that in spite of the fact we are sure regarding the truth of a statement, it can't be classified as knowledge. For example, let's suppose that somebody is superstitious in connection with number 13 and he (she) thinks that on 13 of every month it is possible to happen something unpleasant for him (her) or to get himself (herself) into trouble. This person may be subjectively sure that on 13 it will happen an unfavourable event. Let's suppose now that such an event really happened. Shall we agree to his (her) claim that he (she) had known before what would happen? Our answer will be in the negative because the truth of the statement that on 13 there would happened an unpleasant event is a pure coincidence. The condition that a belief should be true in order to be propositional knowledge is only a necessary one, but not a sufficient one. We also have to specify the grounds on the basis of which we accept this belief as true. Therefore, we have to add another condition to that of truth, namely, the demand that our beliefs must be justified on the basis of some grounds or reasons. Briefly, only justified true beliefs are knowledge. If we'll come back to the case of a superstitious person, we'll assert that this person has no knowledge because he (she) can't justify his (her) belief, he (she) can't indicate the relation between his (her) belief and truth on the basis of some reliable reasons. This kind of epistemological analysis will have strong consequences over the status of religious beliefs as we'll see in the next chapter.

### The doxastic ideal and epistemic duty in traditional epistemology

Ever since Plato and Aristotle a certain picture regarding the ideally formed belief has prevailed in epistemology. The main idea is that we are able to know by acquaintance different entities and, in the same time, our mind is in position to be aware of this acquaintance, so that when we know something we are sure that all we know by acquaintance correspond with the propositional content of our belief. Let's call, together with N. Wolterstorff, "doxastic ideal" this picture.<sup>10</sup>

There are three types of beliefs formed according to the doxastic ideal. First, there are some beliefs which totally correspond with the doxastic ideal, namely, those beliefs which have a propositional content

that correspond undoubtedly with the facts acquainted by us. These beliefs are the most certain of all. Among them we enumerate, in an epistemological order of their certainty and reliableness, beliefs formed by perceptual knowledge ( for example, “I see that this applies red“), beliefs formed with the help of perceptual or factual memory (for example, “I remember that I have seen a red apple”), beliefs formed by introspection (for example, “I know that I think of red apple which I have seen some minutes ago and I just imagine that it has a good taste”) and beliefs formed by the power of our reason itself (for example, I know that the sentence “Red is a colour” is necessary true because I know the meanings of the words which compose it).

Aristotle, concerned about the epistemic statute of demonstrative science, have mentioned a second type of beliefs formed in concordance with the doxastic ideal, namely, the beliefs formed by acquaintance with the fact that the propositional contents of the beliefs are logically entailed by propositions matched with the facts of which we are aware. The certainty is transmitted evidently from the premises to the conclusion by deductive steps which are out of any rational doubt. This is the case of deductive arguments, from Aristotle’s syllogisms to Anselm’s ontological argument.

Finally, concerned about the natural research and the epistemic statute of empirical generalizations, Aristotle added another type of ideally formed beliefs which are incapable of transmitting certainty from premises to the conclusion. This is the case of the probabilistic arguments which are inductive in character.

Traditional epistemology has taken into account only beliefs formed according with the doxastic ideal, any other beliefs being outside the knowledge. According to the doxastic ideal, the process itself of forming beliefs could offer its own warrants: the beliefs are reliable if they spring from some privileged sources of knowledge. Anyway, in traditional epistemology only the grounds (and the reasons) could be those warrants which we need in order to gain knowledge. To do your epistemic duty is the same with to have reasons for your beliefs. Only the reasons give us the right to think that we know something.

An eloquent expression of this epistemological attitude belongs to John Locke: “*Faith* is nothing but a firm Assent of the Mind: which if it be regulated, as is our Duty, cannot be afforded to anything, but upon good Reason; and so cannot be opposite to it. He that believes, without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Errour. He that does not this to the best of his Power, however he sometimes lights on Truth, is in the right but by chance; and I know not whether the luckiness of the Accident will excuse the irregularity of his proceeding. This at least is certain, that he must be

accountable for whatever Mistakes he run into: whereas he that makes use of the Light and Faculties GOD has given him, and seeks sincerely to discover Truth, by those Helps and Abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in doing his Duty as a rational Creature, that though he should miss Truth, he will not miss the Reward of it. For he governs his Assent right, and places it as he should, who in any Case or Matter whatsoever, beliefs or disbeliefs, according as Reason directs him. He that does otherwise, transgresses against his own Kight, and misuses those Faculties...”<sup>11</sup>.

Let's summarize this long passage. Locke, who is representative for western outstanding tradition, equates epistemic warrants to epistemic grounds and conceives the founding process in terms of epistemic duty. Starting from this basic statement we are able to conclude that it is our duty to believe in God only if we have good reasons to assert that God exists. We can understand now why most philosophical debates in medieval and modern philosophy have been concentrated upon a couple of theist arguments. The philosophers and the theologians thought that in this way, namely, approaching the religious beliefs in the form of a debate about arguments, they were right regarding their epistemic duty.

### **The rejection of doxastic ideal and the epistemology of religion**

The rejection of doxastic ideal begins with a doubt about epistemic duty. If we'll analyse on the whole the beliefs of us as an epistemic subject we'll see that we want to keep up some of our beliefs although we can't do our epistemic duty regarding them because these beliefs, even through their own nature, can't afford an analysis that identifies epistemic warrants with justified beliefs. For example, we think that there are other minds and we are ready to defend this belief even if, according to the doxastic ideal, we didn't do our epistemic duty. Thus we may have different epistemic warrants, others than reasonable grounds.

Generally speaking, many of our beliefs, some of them important for our life, aren't formed according to the doxastic ideal. This means that doxastic ideal isn't in fact an ideal for us.

The rejection of doxastic ideal was started by David Hume who has pointed out the case of beliefs about the future formed by induction<sup>12</sup>. Hume's problem, in essence, is this: the uniformity of nature, as a theoretical principle that is necessary in order to have a theoretical ground for our beliefs about future, is neither a priori provable (because its opposite can be conceived) nor a valid empirical inference (such an inference being circular). Because reason and experience are, in the case of uniformity principle, the only two ways through we can obtain knowledge, Hume conclude that we have no rational understanding of natural necessity, that our belief in uniformity of nature is caused exclusively by custom or habit. Let's suppose that somebody, gifted with the most

powerful faculties of reason, will be suddenly brought into our world. He (she) will notice a permanent succession of things and events, but he won't be able to obtain through reasoning the ideas of cause and effect. Such a person would be the prisoner of his own flow of experience, of his own senses data and of his own recollections stocked in memory, and he won't be able to say something about facts. After a time he will gain more experience and the world will be for him more familiar, and he will be able to suppose, on the basis of his experience, that, as a rule, an event is followed by another event, that if there is something then there is something else in connection with the first, although this basic experience didn't provide him with a good access to those hidden powers that rule the phenomenal world. However, there must be something that could explain all we know about facts, because we know more than the appearances of things acquainted with our senses. Hume thinks that our habits make the difference: "Our idea, therefore of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity, observable in the operations of nature; where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, and the consequent inference from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity, or connexion."<sup>13</sup>.

It results from this that inductive beliefs aren't cases of doxastic ideal. Nevertheless, such beliefs are indispensable for our life. Thus, we conclude that, at least, we have to revise the claim that the beliefs which do not correspond with our doxastic ideal are defective. This failure of some beliefs in comparison with the doxastic ideal doesn't mean that we have in this case a deficiency that must be removed. On the contrary, the doxastic ideal must be revised or rejected, because it is lack of utility for an analysis of those beliefs which are accepted as reliable. Moreover, the doxastic ideal doesn't explain how our mind works, because we can have beliefs that, in the same time, are admitted as reliable by us, but they are outside the borders of doxastic ideal. In conclusion, if a belief doesn't correspond with the doxastic ideal, this doesn't mean that this belief is unreliable or unwarranted. The doxastic ideal can't be used in order to attack reasonable a person that doesn't want to give up his (her) beliefs, although they aren't supported by warrants as rational grounds.

Let's consider now the ways of forming for our religious beliefs. As a rule, these beliefs are called up by some kinds of private experience, or they are the result of a personal reflection over other beliefs previously accepted, or they are an effect of a testimony born by somebody else. It so happened that somebody discover, simply, in one day, that his soul is full of faith and that he believe in God. It is obvious that such a belief doesn't correspond with the doxastic ideal. It isn't well formed according with this ideal. The religious beliefs, to a great extent, looks like inductive beliefs



about future mentioned by Hume. Consequently, although religious beliefs don't correspond with the doxastic ideal, these beliefs are justified in a proper way, for they have their own warrants and they are reliably formed. But this not means that religious beliefs are outside of any doubt. How can an epistemic subject accept *de facto* and *de jure* these religious beliefs and which are the epistemic machinery involved in this process are two topics for an epistemology of religion that was just outlined above. The rejection of the doxastic ideal is only a good opportunity for a dialogue between epistemology and dogmatic theology, more exactly, an attempt to understand the epistemological statute of religious beliefs. But, we may ask in Wittgenstein's terms, is this research a new form of life adequately for an epistemologist?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Wolterstorff Nicholas, *Faith and Rationality*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Audi, *Epistemology. A contemporary introduction to the theory of knowledge*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Epistemology of Religion", in eds. John Greco and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemology*, (Oxford, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Hans Hahn, Neurath Otto, Carnap Rudolf, "The Scientific Conception of the World: The Vienna Circle" in Otto Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology*, edited by Marie Neurath and Robert S. Cohen, (Dordrecht-Holland, Boston-U.S.A.: D. Reidel Company, Vienna Circle Collection, volume 1, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> Hahn, 307.

<sup>6</sup> Moritz Schlick, "Form and Content, an Introduction to Philosophical Thinking", in *Gesammelte Aufsätze. 1926- 1936*, (Wien, Gerold & Co., 1938).

<sup>7</sup> Schlick, 192.

<sup>8</sup> Hahn, 307.

<sup>9</sup> See A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1956); R. M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, (New Jersey Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> The phrase "doxastic ideal" is used by Nicholas Wolterstorff in his "Epistemology of Religion", ed. cit.

<sup>11</sup> John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter Nidditch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975,) 687-688.

<sup>12</sup> See David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Eric Steinberg, (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Hume, 54-55.