The challenge of religious disagreement

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1. THE CHALLENGE

Today we continue our discussion of issues related to belief in religious doctrines. Our question today is: should widespread disagreement about religious doctrines lead us to reduce our confidence in those doctrines?

Here's an example: suppose that I give you and 9 other randomly selected students from the course a math problem. You are fairly certain that you've found the correct answer; but when I ask all of the students to reveal their answers, you find that all 9 of the others have arrived at the same solution — and that it's not yours. In this situation, do you think that it would be rational to lower your confidence in your answer?

How about if 3 of the others agreed with you, but 6 did not?

One might think that this is something like the situation that we find ourselves in with respect to religious belief. Christians, Jews, and Muslims believe in a personal God; atheists, Buddhists and some Hindus do not. Christians believe that Jesus is God; no one else does. And Christians disagree between themselves over plenty of things as well.

The question is: how should we respond to this situation?

One popular way to press the challenge is to point out that, had you been raised in a very different part of the world, you would likely have had different religious beliefs. This is a challenge is some principle like the following is true:

> If had you been born in a different culture, you would not have believed some claim P, you should suspend belief in P.

Is this principle true?

Another response: none of the differences between religions really matter. Some problems with this idea.

2. THE CASE FOR CONCILIATIONISM

The conciliationist says that we should treat the disagreement of others with us as evidence against our own beliefs. But this raises the question: which others?

Suppose that you find yourself disagreeing with someone awful at math. Should this cause you to be less confident in your mathematical judgements?

Let's call people that have all the relevant qualifications your *epistemic peers*. One who says that disagreement with an epistemic peer should *not* cause you to lower your confidence is (in Plantinga's terms) an exclusivist or (in Christensen's terms) a defender of the steadfast view.

A challenge for the steadfast view: Mental math.

A challenge for the conciliationist: Careful checking.

Christensen gives an argument that the Conciliationist can explain the intuitions about careful checking. Can the defender of the steadfast view give any parallel account of mental math?

3. PLANTINGA'S ARGUMENT FOR EXCLUSIVISM

Plantinga argues, in effect, that conciliationism is self-refuting, in the sense that one who adopts this view will, if he follows its advice, be forced to abandon it. How does that argument work?

What is Christensen's response?

He presents the following principle:

> Minimal Humility: If I have thought casually about P for 10 minutes, and have decided it is correct, and then find out that many people, most of them smarter and more familiar with the relevant evidence and arguments than I, have thought long and hard about P, and have independently but unanimously decided that P is false, I should become less confident in P.

Is this principle true? Is it self-undermining in the way that Conciliationism is?

Concluding question about the relevance of the Condorcet jury theorem, which says that only moderately reliable subjects can still add up to rather impressive evidence. It implies that the probability of a majority vote among subjects with a >50% chance of being correct increases with the number of voters. (For example, a majority vote among 10,000 voters each of which has a 51% chance of being correct is almost 98%.) Some restrictions on the applicability of the theorem in the present context.