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IRRESISTIBILITY, EPISTEMIC WARRANT AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

It has been widely argued that beliefs in general are not under direct voluntary control.¹ It is not the case that we can by decision of the will (however construed) decide what to believe or what to refrain from believing in many ordinary instances of believing. Doxastic voluntarism now seems a dubious doctrine at best, regardless of how emphatic Descartes and other traditional epistemologists seemed to be in their support of the doctrine.

In this paper I want to suggest that there are certain conceptions of epistemic warrant which may fruitfully take into account this irresistibility of believing. In particular it is possible to give some sense to the notion of 'self-warrant' if the irresistibility of believing is taken seriously. I also would like to argue that this irresistibility of believing has important implications for religious belief. It will be the purpose of this paper to suggest an epistemic framework clarifying the proper role of evidence in providing warrant for one's belief in God. If belief in God is, in some instances, irresistible, then that belief may not be in need of evidence to be warranted. However, contrary to some,² I want to argue that there may well be other instances where evidences are entirely appropriate as means of providing warrant for one's belief in God.

Epistemic warrant is an ambiguous concept in ordinary language. It may refer to a certain kind of intellectual obligation an epistemic agent possesses to acquire rational beliefs.³ On the other hand, it may refer to the status of the belief in question regarding its proper relation to evidence or approximation to truth. The former kind of warrant has to do with the manner of believing, the latter has to do with the belief in relation to the evidence.⁴ It is imperative in discussing warrant that this distinction be kept in mind. In the following I would like to concentrate simply on the former notion of epistemic warrant. The following account does not entail any priority of

¹ See W. Alston 'Concepts of Justification', unpublished manuscript, pp. 6-11, for the clearest statement to this effect. See also B. Williams, 'Deciding to Believe', in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 136-151.

² I have in mind the Calvinist epistemology suggested by A. Plantinga, N. Wolterstorff and others. See esp. *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, 1983).

³ See R. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1973), ch.1.

⁴ See R. Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford, 1981), ch.1 for a discussion of epistemic warrant as construed in this latter type of way.

‘obligation-warrant’ over ‘evidence-warrant’. It is simply intended to sketch an account of epistemic warrant in an obligation-oriented sense which takes seriously the demise of doxastic voluntarism.

The model I would like to propose arises from several remarks which Thomas Reid makes in a rather classic passage in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind*:

It would be agreeable to fly to the moon and to make a visit to Jupiter and Saturn; but when I know that nature has bound me down by the law of gravitation to this planet which I inhabit, I rest contented and quietly suffer myself to be carried along in its orbit. My belief is carried along by perception, as irresistibly as my body by the earth. And the greatest sceptic will find himself to be in the same condition. He may struggle hard to disbelieve the information of his senses as a man does to swim against a torrent, but ah, it is in vain. It is in vain that he strains every nerve, and wrestles with nature, and with every object that strikes up his senses. For after all, when his strength is spent in the fruitless attempt, he will be carried down the torrent with the common herd of believers.¹

In particular notice the grounds he offers for his acceptance of ordinary perceptual beliefs. They seem to be warranted for Reid because they are irresistible in some sense of that word. As a Christian theist, Reid was inclined to think God has so created him that he came to possess this set of irresistible beliefs largely for his benefit.

There is surely some truth to this conviction. If I see a truck speeding towards the intersection at which I am standing, it is generally not within my power to refrain from believing that there is a truck headed towards the intersection. On the basis of this irresistible belief much good is accomplished – namely I do not decide to walk across the intersection while the truck is heading towards it.

Given these Reidian concerns about irresistibility, it is natural to suggest that belief in God may, like perceptual beliefs, be irresistible in some circumstances. There may well be an initial impulse, in some situations, to believe in God. The apostle Paul speaks in his letter to the church at Rome:

Since the creation of the world ... his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen ... so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:20).

It is interesting that the metaphor of sight is used here. It corresponds with the comments Reid makes in regard to perceptual beliefs. The verse suggests a certain inevitability about our belief in God. There is a sense in which the apostle seems to be arguing that none is able to claim ignorance in regard to a knowledge of God. The belief is so evident that it is ‘forced upon the agent’. It is not a matter of the agent deciding whether she ought or ought not to believe in God. The irresistibility of this belief commends the belief as a worthy epistemic candidate.

¹ *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, ed. T. Duggan (Chicago, 1970), pp. 207–8.

Beliefs are commendable because by holding them the agent fulfils certain obligations which she possesses by virtue of standing within a normative context. It may seem strange to suggest that the task of believing is a normative context but I mean here merely that there are norms or standards which apply to the game of believing.¹ These norms assess whether proper epistemic procedures have been followed. A belief is commendable (*warranted*) according to whether the agent has acquired the belief in a manner which is in accordance with proper rational procedures.²

To say 'belief *p* is warranted' (or that *s* is warranted in believing *p*) is to say something epistemically commendatory about agent *s* acquiring belief *p*. From an epistemic point of view, certain intellectual obligations have been fulfilled in acquiring (or holding) belief *p*. And conversely to say that a belief is unwarranted is merely to say something epistemically derogatory about the belief formation process. From an epistemic point of view, certain intellectual obligations have not been fulfilled.

The task then is to define these epistemically-relevant intellectual obligations. What is it about one's believing which is to be evaluated in an epistemic fashion? What goals ought to be achieved in the epistemic project?

The most plausible candidate in the literature today is what I shall simply call a 'truth-obligation'. It is somewhat vague (which may well be why it is so plausible) and it is stated in various ways.

Chisholm puts it this way.

We may assume that every person is subject to a purely intellectual requirement – that of trying his best to bring it about that for every proposition *h* that he considers, he accepts *h* if and only if *h* is true.³

And Alston says,

It is clear that to enjoy a favourable epistemic status is somehow to be favourably situated vis à vis the quest for knowledge, which of course includes the aim at believing true propositions and refraining from believing false ones.⁴

To be in an epistemically commendatory state of affairs is thus to be favourably situated in the quest for truth. Now it is far from obvious what it means to be 'favourably situated in the quest for truth'. Some, such as Descartes, took this to mean that a belief could be justified if and only if it was true, i.e. justification accrued only to the actual achievement of the obligation to

¹ I am inclined to think these standards or norms are objective and, though very general, apply to an epistemic agent whether she believes they apply or not. On this point see A. Plantinga, 'Reason and Belief in God', in *Faith and Rationality*, pp. 35–7.

² On this account, epistemology is thus construed as the search for 'proper rational procedure'. The coherentist may argue that 'reflective coherence' is the proper rational procedure. The reliabilist might argue that the production of beliefs by a reliable belief-producing mechanism is the proper rational procedure. The sceptic in turn argues that there is no such thing as a proper rational procedure and therefore no beliefs are acquired after that manner. Epistemic warrant, in this sense, has to do with the 'manner of believing' (i.e. the way in which the epistemic agent acquires her belief).

³ *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 14.

⁴ 'Concepts of Justification', p. 4.

believe truth and avoid falsehoods. Chisholm and Alston are claiming the epistemically commendable situation is one where the agent *tries* to believe truths and avoid believing falsehoods. And others such as Goldman and Armstrong have taken this to mean only that the set of justified beliefs must be produced by a mechanism which generally produces true beliefs. The contrast between these three conceptions of justification is simply this – one ties the concept of justification very tightly to truth, one ties it less tightly to truth and the other ties it even less tightly.

But what about the species of belief to which it seems inappropriate to apply any obligations whatsoever, i.e. irresistible beliefs? Strictly speaking, it is not that intellectual obligations do not apply but rather that they have been overridden by the fact of the irresistible nature of the beliefs. When it is not possible to believe otherwise and thus when the relevant intellectual obligations have been overridden, I want to suggest there is still a legitimate sense of epistemic warrant which remains. When an agent's freedom is impeded, her obligations no longer apply.

Are there any such beliefs? If we take the following definition of freedom,

If a person *S* is free with respect to given action (i.e. believing), then he is free to perform that action and free to perform that action and free to refrain; no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action, or that he will not. It is within his power, at the time in question, to perform the action and within his power to refrain.¹

It appears as if there are instances of perceptual believing where the agent is not free. Suppose I have an obligation (or believe myself to have an obligation) not to believe falsehoods and thereby come to have the obligation to stay away from reading gossip magazines and to concentrate my reading on trustworthy periodicals. This may influence what type of reading I do in my spare time. However, I cannot therefore decide which beliefs will arise when I scan the pages of the trustworthy periodical. These beliefs would be in a certain sense 'forced on me'. It is possible that I do not ever come to hold a belief *p* regarding page 302 in volume II of the trustworthy periodical if I never in fact glance at page 302. However, given certain actions in certain conditions (i.e. that I look at page 302 in normal lighting conditions with good eyesight) it is impossible that I do not come to hold belief *p* regarding page 302 in volume II of the trustworthy periodical (even if I do not know it to be page 302 in volume II). The belief may simply be that there is an object in front of me or it may be more complicated such as 'there is an object in front of me with black letters written on it in an orderly fashion'.

¹ From A. Plantinga, *Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 165–6. It may be objected that beliefs are non-basic actions and therefore freedom accrues to them in accord with the freedom of the relevant basic actions. This seems an unsuitable analysis of belief if only for the fact that the description of the relevant basic actions and context still leaves open the possibility that the relevant belief has not been described. There is an extra component in believing over and above any other action the agent performs.

Whatever this belief (or beliefs) might be, it is clear that it is causally contingent on which actions I perform but given the action which I do perform there is no such casual contingency left over. The antecedent conditions determine the belief in this case and for this reason the belief(s) is irresistible.¹ I am not free with respect to this belief(s) given the above notion of freedom.

Whatever obligations might attach to the game of believing, in cases when it is not possible to believe otherwise, the particular belief(s) in question ought to be construed as epistemically warranted.² They are warranted precisely because of the inability to believe otherwise, i.e. due to the irresistibility of the belief³ and in this sense would be self-warranted.⁴

One might object at this point that all beliefs are irresistible in some sense. If this is so then all beliefs might be justified on this account and this seems an untenable conclusion. However, the irresistibility under discussion here concerns the entire process of belief-acquisition and not the mere belief itself. There may be some beliefs which are acquired for certain conscious motives and in this sense may be under some kind of voluntary control. For example, if one were a Britisher and a committed Tory, she might only choose to read those articles which she knows favour Tory candidates and policies. She refuses to read any article which is critical of the Thatcher revolution and thus comes to hold only beliefs which are favourably disposed to the Tory party. Her own motives, under voluntary control, have influenced which beliefs she has come to hold and it is in this sense which part of her noetic

¹ I am using 'not free' and 'irresistible' in a roughly synonymous fashion since both are descriptive in this context of particular actions performed by an agent.

² Let me illustrate this by looking at a closely related example in another normative context. In most cultures it is believed that one always ought to keep one's promises. Morally speaking, if one promises to do *x* then he has an obligation to do *x*. We, however, suppose that if circumstances arise which prevent him from doing *x*, it would be permissible for him not to do *x*. If Jim promises to meet Sally on Saturday morning then Jim has an obligation to meet Sally on Saturday morning. Supposing, however, that Jim is in a car accident on Saturday morning on his way to meet Sally. Further suppose that the accident is caused by a drunken driver and Jim is completely without fault in the accident. Jim is taken to the hospital and is near death, incapable of voluntary movement. In this case it would be appropriate to say that Jim's obligation has been overridden. His failure to keep his promise now becomes morally permissible in light of the circumstances.

I want to contend that in the game of believing the situation is analogous in relevant respects.

³ I do not want to suggest that epistemic warrant is reducible to moral permissibility. Both concern actions and obligations but markedly different kinds of actions and obligations. I am inclined to agree with the argument of R. Firth to this effect in his 'Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts?' in *Values and Morals*, ed. Goldman and Kim (Boston: D. Reidel, 1978), pp. 215–29.

⁴ One objection needs to be mentioned at this point. The preceding account seems to have the consequence that if someone is brainwashed to believe *p* (or otherwise unnaturally forced to acquire belief *p*), her belief would therefore be epistemically warranted and this seems obviously false. The agent may be morally permitted to believe *p* but her belief would not be rationally warranted. The simple response would be to add a condition stipulating that rational warrant is conferred only in those circumstances where one's epistemic faculties are working naturally and properly. This condition would not be met in the brainwashing counter-examples (and related counter-examples such as the notorious evil scientist stimulating the brain in the vat) and therefore rational or epistemic warrant would not be conferred. In ordinary instances of perception where the epistemic faculties are working properly in this condition would be met and it may still be the case that the belief is irresistible. As a result, the belief would be warranted in those cases.

structure is 'resistible' and by which she may rightly be held responsible for which beliefs she has come to hold.

As gestalt psychology has made clear, motives influence beliefs. Perception is not a simple game of mapping an experience of X onto X in the real world, thereby coming up with a true belief. My perception of a traffic accident may differ greatly from the person standing beside me, because our different motives and expectations influence the act of perception. To the limited extent that I have control of these motives and expectations, I may be said to have indirect voluntary control of the beliefs which arise from that act of perception.¹

But are there still beliefs which are not influenced by expectation and motivation? Are there beliefs which, try as we might, force themselves on us in a manner not influenced by any other factors? Is it not reasonable to suppose that though many beliefs (maybe even most) are under some sort of indirect voluntary control, there still remain some beliefs which are not under any kind of voluntary control?

I have in mind here very simple perceptual beliefs, what Reid called original acts of perception also in some instances, belief in God. The perception which I have by touch of the hardness and softness of bodies, of their extension, figure and motion would be included here.² One might also include beliefs of current conscious mental states.

I am arguing for the irresistible character of many of those rock-bottom commonsense perceptual beliefs about the external world. I do not want to argue that these beliefs are infallible nor that they cannot be revised upon future reflection. This argument is an attempt to capture the intuition that we do not have much choice in accepting a realistic account of perception. It is to recognize the failure on the one hand of past attempts to provide an epistemic justification of our belief in the external world and on the other hand of the inherent implausibility of sceptical accounts of our belief in the external world. It is not an attempt to ground this belief on some further basic foundation but rather to explain why this belief seems warranted in the first instance. This belief in the external world (or more correctly, particular beliefs about particular parts of the external world) is warranted not because of some, more foundational beliefs, but because it is (often) irresistible.

The analogy between perceptual beliefs and beliefs in God seems striking at this point. The historic attempts to prove God's existence depend upon the intrinsic acceptability of the conclusion, God exists, for their apparent

¹ I sense that a full-blown Christian epistemology might want to argue that motives in this sense may actually interfere with belief in God due to the noetic effects of sin.

² I do not want to give the Lockean notion that the mind is a blank tablet imprinted by impressions. Surely it is the case that beliefs will be a function of the complexity of mental faculties and environmental conditioning. What appears as an orderly message to an American may appear as mere scribble to a Japanese. Nonetheless there remains an irresistibility in the acquisition of beliefs for both – even though the irresistibility results in different beliefs.

rational warrant. The irresistibility of belief in God in many instances suggests that, like simple perceptual judgements in many instances, this belief is warranted but not warranted on the basis of other beliefs in one's noetic system.

The sceptic still has the right to ask the question – must the agent not also believe her epistemic faculties to be working properly in acquiring this belief in God? The very ability to question belief in God and in many instances abandon that belief, characterize the post-enlightenment West and it would seem strange to foreclose on that question by alleging irresistibility in one's belief in God.

However, before answering the sceptic, we need to be clear on the proper interpretation of her question. Is the sceptic asking a limited question, i.e. What *evidence* does the agent have that her epistemic faculties are working properly when they produce this belief in God? Or is the sceptic asking an unlimited question i.e. what kind of validation is there for the epistemic agent that her epistemic faculties are ever working properly and naturally? The limited sceptic accepts the validity of certain sources of belief. The all-embracing sceptic questions the validity of all such sources.¹

To the all-embracing sceptic there is no hope of offering validation if the validation itself needs validation. The regress here is of the vicious variety and one rightly asks why we should feel compelled to enter regress on the sceptic's groundrules.² However, the limited sceptic seems far more worthy of a reply. She does not doubt the possibility of knowledge or of warranted belief. She simply doubts it in this case.

Normally, the limited sceptic supposes belief in God is a belief that could be warranted only by appeal to a large body of supporting evidence. It could only be a conclusion to a lengthy argument. On this account there is no such thing as a source of belief with respect to God. Belief in God is like a complicated scientific hypothesis which is properly acquired only with sufficient supporting evidence. If the analogy with perceptual beliefs is correct, the sceptic's account is mistaken. It may be necessary in some instances to provide supporting evidence for one's belief in God (or disbelief in God) but if belief in God directly arises in some instances from a belief-producing mechanism within us, the call for evidence for such a belief in some instances may be out of order. Belief in God, like perceptual beliefs, is acquired in the proper circumstances as a result of the very make-up of our constitution. It need not be the reasoned result of lengthy argument of natural theology. If the sceptic desires evidence it may not be necessary in some circumstances to

¹ See Wolterstorff 'Thomas Reid on Rationality' in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. N. Wolterstorff, H. Hart and J. Van der Hoeven (University Press of America, 1983), for further clarification on this notation of epistemic faculties as sources of belief.

² See R. Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criteria* (Milwaukee, 1973), for a defence of this particular reaction to the sceptic.

provide her with it, any more than it would be appropriate in some circumstances to provide evidence for your perceptual beliefs.

However, there are some cases where the sceptic is asking for evidence and it is incumbent upon the agent to provide some evidence. It will be a fundamentally different kind of evidence than the sceptic desires if the above account is accurate. It seems likely that if the sources of our beliefs are consistent (which in the end is our only hope) then one source may provide evidence of the validity of another source. Driving down the road I see a large yellow balloon-like object in the sky. But this does not prohibit me from being concerned whether I was under an illusion in acquiring this belief. As a result I stop and ask some bystanders if they see a yellow balloon. They assure me they do and because of my credulity-disposition¹ I take their statement as confirming my belief in the yellow balloon. The mere questioning of the belief does not constitute an invalid inquiry.

Must I question the belief? Obviously it depends on circumstances. Sometimes there are reasons to doubt but not always. There are some perceptual beliefs which so strike me that it would be highly unusual to doubt their veracity. Other times the belief strikes differently and the ensuing doubt is both normal and rational. Belief in God in the proper circumstances likewise may not be need of further verification. However, it is not hard to imagine those circumstances where belief in God strikes one differently (or not at all) and where the question regarding further evidence is entirely in order.

Belief in God, when irresistible, is one of the beliefs whose source may or may not stand in need of validation before we can be epistemically warranted in believing. If other sources which seem to be working normally and naturally cast doubt on it the validation concern seems entirely in order. If the belief seems to square nicely with the rest of my beliefs, the very irresistibility of the belief commends it as epistemically warranted.²

In the defence of certain Christian truth-claims, the task of providing requisite evidences may in some cases be necessary and in other cases be superfluous.³ If belief in God is irresistible for an individual, it is plausible to suggest that she is warranted in believing in God, but it may still be the case that any grounds for doubt which arise subsequently, ought to be evaluated by reference to other beliefs in her noetic structure. When belief in God is immediate and irresistible, this does not exclude a subsequent analysis of the evidence. In fact, this immediate belief in God may, at times, be eminently more plausible if it is combined with an assessment of the evidence, i.e. of truth claims made by other noetic faculties.

¹ This notion is borrowed from Thomas Reid. It is spelled out in some detail in N. Wolterstorff, 'Thomas Reid on Rationality'.

² The project of assessing how the belief in question stands sensitive to the evidence has not been addressed. I am inclined to think a reply along similar lines to those sketched above applies to this problem.

³ For example due to the foundational nature of the belief in God.

The preceding account allows for the possibility that an individual's belief in the non-existence of God (atheism), if immediate and irresistible, may be warranted. However, using a distinction of Plantinga's, the Christian apologist wants to claim that there may be a *prima-facie* warrant for this belief but not an *ultima-facie* warrant. There may be an initial warrant for the belief but it will ultimately be overridden.¹ For if it is true that God does exist and that he is an omnipotent, omnibenevolent Creator who desires that all his creatures know him, then it is likely that this God will provide grounds for doubt which will ultimately override the agent's initial belief in the non-existence of God.² The irresistibility of the belief does not ensure its status as ultimately warranted. And surely the Christian apologist is engaged in the task of making manifest why the belief in the non-existence of God ought not be considered as *properly* warranted. In this sense the foregoing account responds to the sceptic by leaving room for a limited assessment of the evidence.³

The task of Christian apologetic may operate at several levels. It may be positive in nature and provide grounds of an agent's belief in God. It may be primarily negative in nature and provide grounds for doubt for an agent's belief in the non-existence of God. It may also provide an epistemic theory whereby the agent's belief in God is warranted without reference to any evidence. In some ways these are three different tasks that have led to different apologetic methodologies and epistemic theories. If the account I have offered is correct, these tasks may be accounted for under one epistemic umbrella.⁴

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¹ Two tentative suggestions as to the nature of this ultimate justification. It may lie in eternity or it may lie within the conscience of the unbeliever recoverable only within a conversion-type experience.

² I surely do not want to claim that these grounds for doubt will inevitably convince the non-believer in and of themselves. This is so because there are more than epistemic reasons which are important to the game of believing.

³ If the above account is accepted, the apparently contrasting strategies of Calvinist epistemology (Plantinga and Wolterstorff) and that of classic natural theology (Butler, Paley, and Warfield, etc.) need not be construed as mutually exclusive for these reasons.

⁴ I would like to thank Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Richard Foley and Kelly Clark for their comments on parts of earlier drafts of this paper.