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# THE EPISTEMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF AGREEMENT WITH EXCEPTIONAL THEISTIC PHILOSOPHERS

Felipe Miguel

Suppose that you realize that a substantial majority of the most important philosophers of all time agreed with you on some proposition *p*. Intuitively, you have gained additional evidence in favor of *p* and you should increase your confidence that *p* is true. It turns out that a large number of the most important philosophers of all time (in fact, the vast majority, if we consider, as we will, a recent poll conducted with contemporary philosophers) were theists. In this paper, I explore the epistemic significance of agreement with these philosophers with respect to their theistic beliefs. I argue that agreement with such philosophers does provide evidence in favor of theism.

## *Introduction*

What did Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and Kant have in common? Besides being some of the greatest philosophers who have ever lived, they were also classical theists or deists. Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, and Kant were professed Christian theists. Plato and Aristotle held views about God that should probably be classified as deistic. All of these thinkers formulated arguments for the existence of a God.<sup>1</sup> This also includes Socrates, as portrayed by Xenophon.<sup>2</sup> Matters are a little less clear with respect to the portrayal of Socrates' religious beliefs in the Platonic writings, though it is clear that Socrates believed that gods exist and that there is a divine reality beyond the physical world.

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<sup>1</sup>Plato (cosmological and ontological arguments); Aristotle (cosmological argument); Aquinas (his five ways); Descartes (ontological argument); Locke (argument from consciousness, cosmological argument); Leibniz (cosmological and ontological arguments, the arguments from possibility and from necessary truths); Kant (moral argument, the argument from possibility). Discussion of these arguments can be found in Oppy, *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*; Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*; Craig, *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz*; Evans, *Moral Arguments for the Existence of God*; and Chignell and Pereboom, *Natural Theology and Natural Religion*.

<sup>2</sup>Xenophon portrays Socrates as a proponent of an argument from natural beauty to the existence of a divine creator. See De Cruz and De Smedt, *A Natural History of Natural Theology*, for discussion.



Another characteristic that these thinkers have in common is that a recent poll conducted with contemporary philosophers selected them,<sup>3</sup> along with Hume and Wittgenstein, as the ten most important philosophers of all time. Although it is safe to say that half of the philosophers mentioned above were classical theists and that 30% percent of them embraced something like deism, Hume's and Wittgenstein's views are more ambiguous. While several Hume scholars believe that he was a deist, a good case can be made in favor of agnosticism and perhaps atheism as better representing his views. And while Wittgenstein seemed to be attracted to a religious form of life and to a religious way of seeing the world, there is enough ambiguity in his writings on religious matters to defy attempts to easily include him in any of these categories. In any case, it is a notable fact that 80% percent of the philosophers selected as the ten most important of all time were classical theists or deists and that the remainder 20% held ambiguous views regarding theism and cannot be indisputably declared to be atheist philosophers, considering that between 85% and 75% of contemporary philosophers self-identify as atheists.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper, I propose to explore the epistemic significance of these results. Does it provide evidence in favor of theism? Should theists increase their confidence in the existence of God once they realize that they agree with a substantial majority of the most important philosophers who have ever lived? What is, in sum, the epistemic significance of agreement with those exceptional theistic philosophers? I begin by exploring some possible interconnections between the problem of disagreement as discussed in contemporary epistemology and the epistemic significance of agreement. If disagreement with an epistemic peer can provide evidence against our belief that *p*, then disagreement with an epistemic superior or authority or expert will even more obviously defeat (partially or totally) the justification we have for believing *p*. If so, disagreement with the most capable superiors or authorities on *p* should even more obviously provide us with defeaters for our belief that *p*. The converse should then also be true: agreement with an epistemic superior or authority should give us reasons (*pro tanto* and defeasible) for thinking that *p* is true. And that should be the case particularly if we are in agreement with the most capable epistemic superiors or authorities on a subject matter.

But can we think of exceptional philosophers of the past as epistemic superiors or authorities? I will defend the view that the best way to articulate the intuition that those philosophers' views can provide additional evidential support for our beliefs is in terms of the expert-as-advisor model developed by Jennifer Lackey.<sup>5</sup> I will also argue (call this "the main argument") that the views of the most important philosophers of the past can provide evidential support in favor of certain propositions

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<sup>3</sup>We shall discuss the poll in more detail below.

<sup>4</sup>The number varies according to the poll we consider. More on this below.

<sup>5</sup>"Experts and Peer Disagreement."

when two conditions are satisfied: a majority of the most important philosophers agree with us (or a supermajority, in the case of evidence that is, in and of itself, good enough for justified belief),<sup>6</sup> and we have good reasons to think that progress has not been made toward discrediting the agreed proposition among contemporary experts on those views, toward making those views philosophically untenable among the philosophers specializing in them. I then argue that theism satisfies both conditions and that three other considerations reinforce the idea that agreement with the most important philosophers of all time with respect to theism<sup>7</sup> provides additional evidential support for one's theistic beliefs: the most important philosophers disagreed on many philosophical questions, but agreed on theism; they constituted a very diverse group of thinkers (culturally, historically, and philosophically); and they were selected as the most important philosophers of all time by a majority of contemporary atheist philosophers. Finally, I raise some objections to the claim that such considerations provide evidential support for theism and argue that one of them seems to partially undermine the evidential force of the main argument and of the three additional considerations. However, I argue that this negative consideration is not strong enough to counterbalance the combined evidential force of all the positive considerations and that, as a result, agreement with exceptional theistic philosophers can provide at least some evidence in favor of theism.

### 1. *The Epistemic Significance of Agreement*

Suppose that you are at a restaurant with a few friends and the waiter has brought the bill. You and a friend seated next to you and whom you know to be equally proficient in basic math are doing some mental calculation, trying to get to the amount that will be shared equally by all participants in the dinner. It turns out, you and your friend reach different results (\$43 and \$41, respectively). Intuitively, the appropriate response is for both of you to significantly reduce confidence in the shares of the bill.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Some philosophers (e.g., Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification*; Hawthorne et al., "Belief is Weak") take the threshold for justified belief to be anything above epistemic probability of .5 (Hawthorne et al., 1394–1395, write: "merely thinking that a proposition is likely may entitle you to believe the proposition"). I believe that the correct threshold is higher than the one stipulated by these authors, though it is difficult to say how much higher. Thus, I am stipulating that a supermajority is needed for evidence that is good enough, in and of itself, for justified theistic belief in this idealized scenario, and that a simple majority can confer some evidence, which, in the absence of additional sources of evidence in favor of theism, is not strong enough to justify theistic belief.

<sup>7</sup>In this paper, by "theism" I mean *minimal theism* (which I take to include generic classical theism, deism, polytheism, panentheism, and pantheism). Thanks to Mark Murphy for recommending this clarification.

<sup>8</sup>This is based on the famous Restaurant Check case, originally formulated by David Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement," 193.

When it comes to philosophical questions, however, unlike basic arithmetic, things are more complicated. Philosophical views are, for the most part, not easily amenable to quantification. They often involve subtle conceptual distinctions and not easily expressible insights. Reflecting on his conversations and correspondence with David Lewis on the problem of free will, Peter van Inwagen writes the following:

I am an incompatibilist and David was a compatibilist [. . .] I am convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that David understood perfectly all the arguments for incompatibilism that I am aware of—and all other philosophical considerations relevant to the free-will problem [. . .] It seems difficult, therefore, to contend that, in this matter, he was in epistemic circumstances inferior to mine [. . .] And one could hardly maintain that David was stupid or lacking in philosophical ability or that he labored under any other cognitive deficiency relevant to thinking about the problem of free will. (Not, at any rate, unless all human beings labor under this deficiency.) At the same time, I am unwilling to say that my own allegiance to incompatibilism is irrational. I can only conclude that I am rational in accepting incompatibilism and that David was rational in accepting compatibilism. And, therefore, we have at least one case in which one philosopher accepts a philosophical proposition and another accepts its denial and in which each is perfectly rational.<sup>9</sup>

In both cases, the disagreeing subjects share the same evidence, are equally capable of identifying and assessing the relevant information, and yet disagree. They recognize each other as peers—i.e., as sharing the same evidence and being equally capable in their assessment of that evidence.<sup>10</sup> Peer disagreement, however, is only one of the facets of the more general problem of disagreement. Another (related) problem involves disagreement with epistemic superiors or experts. Epistemic superiors are those who are better positioned than us to know something. Suppose that I believe that the capital of Turkey is Istanbul. I then meet a Turkish national who tells me that the capital of her country is actually Ankara.

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<sup>9</sup>“We’re Right. They’re Wrong,” 24–25.

<sup>10</sup>Unlike cases of disagreement about the sort of calculations described in the first case, which should compel significant reduction in confidence that one is right about her calculation, many philosophical disputes, such as the one described in the second case, have drawn different responses from philosophers working on this problem. One group of philosophers, known as steadfasters, and to which van Inwagen belongs, claim that reduction of confidence in *p* is not necessary, at least not in many prominent cases of peer disagreement. The reason presented by steadfasters for this response varies according to different formulations of the steadfast view. Some, like van Inwagen, allege that confidence can be maintained due to the existence of private evidence or of a special incommunicable insight that the disagreeing party supposedly lacks. Others say that steadfast response to disagreement is justified due to the epistemic priority of the first-person perspective. Others, known as permissivists, claim that there may be more than one appropriate response to give to a body of evidence. Still others claim that confidence can be maintained when one has an error theory about why the other party reached a different conclusion on the basis of the same body of evidence. The other group, known as conciliationists, defend the view that cases that configure peer disagreement compel reduction of confidence. This view is motivated by cases such as Restaurant Check.

Since she is better positioned than me to know what the capital of her own country is—i.e., since she is my superior on this question—upon learning that she believes that the capital of Turkey is Ankara, I should adopt her belief. Experts, on the other hand, are the epistemic agents who, in virtue of their training and education, are more likely than non-experts to have true beliefs about (and perhaps know) things in their domain of expertise and to be able to contribute to the development (and perhaps progress) of their field of research through creative, innovative, and insightful reflection on the main problems and questions pertinent to it.<sup>11</sup>

But the problem of disagreement doesn't seem to be restricted to disagreement with actual or living subjects, whether they are peers or superiors. Suppose that a malevolent dictator has put to death all potential dissenters in his country. This means that there is no disagreement in that specific country with respect to certain propositions, such as that the dictator is malevolent.<sup>12</sup> But had the dictator not suppressed dissent, there would have been disagreement. If the appropriate response in cases of actual disagreement is conciliation with the disagreeing parties, then this may also be the appropriate response in cases, like the malevolent dictator, of possible disagreement. If so, then radical skepticism looms.<sup>13</sup> But it seems implausible that all cases of possible disagreement should compel significant reduction of confidence. It seems that what is key in distinguishing "benign" and "malign" cases of possible disagreement is the distinction between cases in which—to return to the malevolent dictator case—one has no reason to think that there might have been suppression of dissent versus cases in which one has reason to think that there might have been such suppression,<sup>14</sup> and also between cases in which the possible disagreement provides actual evidence regarding p.<sup>15</sup> In any case, suppose that one adds to this picture the information that the potential dissenters are not inferiors or even peers, but superiors or experts—perhaps the most important thinkers in that specific area of inquiry who have

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<sup>11</sup>To be sure, while, in general, disagreement with superiors and even with experts should make us reduce our confidence in disputed matters, there are cases in which one may be justified in retaining belief and even perhaps the original degree of confidence in the target proposition despite the disagreement, such as when there is disagreement among the superiors or experts, or when one has some sort of privileged access to evidence that the experts lack, or when one has an error theory that can account for the expert's supposed inability to get things right.

<sup>12</sup>This is based on Thomas Kelly's brief sketch of a similar case ("The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," 18). Kelly argues that cases of possible disagreement like this show that Conciliationism (see n.10) is untenable.

<sup>13</sup>See Matheson and Carey, "How Skeptical Is the Equal Weight View?" for a conciliationist response to the problem of possible disagreement.

<sup>14</sup>See Barnett and Li, "Conciliationism and Merely Possible Disagreement," for an attempt to distinguish problematic from unproblematic cases of possible disagreement along these lines.

<sup>15</sup>See Bryan Frances, "The Reflective Epistemic Renegade," for a distinction along these lines.

ever lived. This seems to increase the pressure one would have to reduce confidence in the target proposition in malign cases.

In sum, disagreement often provides reasons (*pro tanto* and defeasible) for reduction of one's confidence in a given target proposition. This is especially obvious with respect to disagreement with superiors, authorities, and experts. But it is plausible to think that not all cases of epistemically relevant disagreement are actual. Perhaps possible disagreement, and perhaps disagreement with thinkers who are no longer alive, for instance, should also generate pressure for reduction of confidence in *p*. Conversely, it seems natural to think that, if disagreement with peers can provide evidence against the justification and perhaps the truth of our beliefs, then agreement with peers can give us additional evidence in favor of our beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, if disagreement with superiors has, all else being equal, greater evidential value than disagreement with peers, then agreement with superiors should be, all else remaining equal, more evidentially relevant to my beliefs than agreement with peers. And the same can plausibly be said with respect to expectation of agreement with possible and counterfactual interlocutors, especially if those interlocutors are experts and perhaps the most important interlocutors in a particular area of inquiry who have ever lived.

However, agreement in philosophy can be quite elusive. There is philosophical disagreement about nearly everything. And even when we can find some agreement among philosophers, it rarely amounts to consensus. That said, not all philosophical questions are equally controversial. In fact, to many questions, we can find a majority or vast majority of philosophers agreeing on specific answers. While some philosophers believe, for instance, that we can't know much about the external world or even about ourselves, the vast majority of philosophers have agreed that much of what we take ourselves to know is in fact known by us. According to a survey conducted by Bourget and Chalmers<sup>17</sup> on contemporary philosophers'

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<sup>16</sup>The idea that we ought to increase confidence that *p* upon discovering that a peer also believes *p* with similar degree of confidence is illustrated by the following case by Christensen:

Suppose, for example, that I am a doctor determining what dosage of a drug to give my patient. I'm initially inclined to be very confident in my conclusion, but knowing my own fallibility in calculation, I pull back a bit, say, to 0.97. I also decide to ask my equally qualified colleague for an independent opinion. I do so in the conciliatory spirit of using her reasoning as a check on my own. Now suppose I find out that she has arrived—presumably in a way that also takes into account her fallibility—at 0.96 credence in the same dosage. Here, it seems that the rational thing to do is for me to increase my confidence that this is the correct dosage, not decrease it as difference-splitting would require. But this is not inconsistent with giving equal weight to my colleague's opinion ("Disagreement as Evidence," 759).

See Easwaran et al., "Updating on the Credences of Others," for a formalization of this idea, which they call synergy.

<sup>17</sup>"What Do Philosophers Believe?"



views on a variety of philosophical questions, 81.6% of the philosophers surveyed consider themselves non-skeptical realists, 75.1% are scientific realists, and 65.7% are cognitivists about moral judgment (to mention just a few results in which they found substantial agreement). They found, however, that philosophers are sharply divided when it comes to many other questions, such as the nature of abstract objects and of epistemic justification.<sup>18</sup> Disagreement among experts may be thought to undermine the trustworthiness of those same experts in the cases in which they reach consensus. This seems to be a false assumption, however. Finnur Dellsén,<sup>19</sup> for instance, has argued, on the basis of three frameworks for non-deductive reasoning, that disagreement among experts actually increases the probability that they are correct when they reach consensus on a given topic.<sup>20</sup> In sum, agreement is elusive in philosophy, and consensus is very rare. Thus, when we discover that philosophers who frequently disagree reach a consensus or form a majority or supermajority opinion on a certain topic, we gain reasons (*pro tanto* and defeasible) for thinking that their opinion on such a topic is epistemically justified and/or true.<sup>21</sup> And that should also be the case with respect to possible and actual but non-contemporary or counterfactual philosophers, as well as non-contemporary or counterfactual experts.

## 2. Counterfactual Epistemic Superiors and Experts

Some philosophers (e.g., Zagzebski<sup>22</sup>) understand epistemic authority in terms of preemption: if we have reasons to think that someone is better than us at getting at the truth of a particular question, we should defer to that person's (i.e., the authority's) views. The authority's views should not be seen as an additional piece of evidence that should be weighted with other evidence. If we treated the authority's views as simply additional pieces of evidence, we would be worse-off with respect to our goal of getting the truth. Epistemically speaking, then, it would be far better for us to simply and wholly defer to an authority who has a better track record in getting the truth in a specific domain.

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<sup>18</sup>When it comes to abstract objects, 39.3% are Platonists, 37.7% are nominalists, and 23.0% answered "other." With respect to epistemic justification, 42.7% endorse externalism, 26.4%, internalism, and 30.8% responded "other."

<sup>19</sup>"When Expert Disagreement Supports the Consensus."

<sup>20</sup>More on this below.

<sup>21</sup>A majority might suffice to provide some evidential support for *p*, but a supermajority would be necessary for evidence that is good, in and of itself, to justify belief (see note 6). The principle I have in mind here is similar to Bryan Frances's Controversy Rule:

If you have controversial belief *B*, you become convinced that lots of intelligent people believe not-*B* (where you believe that some of these people are your peers while others are your superiors or inferiors), but you also come to think that the experts taken as a large group definitely agree with you by a significant majority, then you are reasonable if you retain your belief *B*. (*Disagreement*, 88–9)

<sup>22</sup>*Epistemic Authority*.



A major problem with such views about epistemic authority, however, is that, in many, if not most, domains, we often find experts disagreeing among themselves. In light of this and other problems with preemption views of epistemic authority,<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Lackey<sup>24</sup> has proposed an alternative model: the experts-as-advisor model. On Lackey's view, the testimony of the expert does not give us preemptive reasons; rather, it provides us with evidence that offers us guidance in the formation of our beliefs. She illustrates the advantages of her model with the deliberations in a trial where experts are summoned to the courtroom to give expert testimony on some forensic question. Rather than providing preemptive reasons, the testimony of experts provide evidence in favor or against certain hypotheses. "Indeed," notes Lackey, "jurors themselves would be superfluous in many ways if experts functioned authoritatively." And she concludes: "The experts are here, then, advising the jurors rather than dictating to them what they ought to believe."<sup>25</sup>

I want to suggest that the epistemic significance of agreement with the most important philosophers of all time is similar to the epistemic significance of agreement with experts brought to a courtroom to testify on contentious matters regarding which there may not be consensus among the experts themselves. Their expert opinions are not authoritative in the sense envisioned by preemption theorists, in which they preempt all other reasons we may have. Rather, they offer us guidance. Agreement with their views provide us with evidence in favor of our views. A crucial difference between the trial scenario and the one involving the most important philosophers of the past, however, is that we are not talking about living superiors who will be aware of all the contemporary relevant evidence, debates, and arguments for and against *p*. So I suggest that we should think of the epistemic significance of agreement with the greatest philosophers who have ever lived in counterfactual terms, as illustrated by the following thought experiment:

Imagine that time travel is possible—logically, metaphysically, and physically possible—and that a time machine that can effectively take humans to the past and then bring them back to the future has been built. Imagine further that time travel journeys have been organized to Ancient Greece, Medieval France, Modern France, Modern Germany, Modern England, and 1940s England to try to bring back to the future the greatest philosophical minds who have ever lived so that they can stay together for some time studying the more recent philosophical developments on the question of God's existence and in philosophical and formal logic and discussing such question among each other and with contemporary philosophers. After much planning and preparation, the operation is successful and we have

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<sup>23</sup>For discussion of other problems with the authority or preemption view, see, among others, Lackey, "Experts and Peer Disagreement."

<sup>24</sup>"Experts and Peer Disagreement."

<sup>25</sup>"Experts and Peer Disagreement," 239.

been able to bring<sup>26</sup> Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Wittgenstein to the present. After a year, these philosophers have been able to learn everything that is philosophically relevant with respect to the God question in the history of philosophy and in contemporary philosophy and the most relevant developments in philosophical and formal logic of the past one hundred or so years.

In this thought experiment, the most important philosophers of the past are, at a minimum, the peers of contemporary philosophers of religion when it comes to the evidence regarding theism and philosophical reasoning abilities. But they are, arguably, also superiors to them when it comes to philosophical creativity, innovativeness, and insight. As we saw above, possible philosophers, and possible experts in particular, can plausibly give us evidence in favor or against our views. Our philosophers here are not possible philosophers, however—they are real philosophers who held concrete views about a large number of philosophical questions but who are simply no longer alive. Thus, we shouldn't identify them as possible philosophers, but as non-contemporary actual philosophers, or, to use Nathan Ballantyne's expression, "counterfactual philosophers."<sup>27</sup> And they cannot be considered experts *tout court*, for they are not here, now, aware of all relevant arguments for and against the existence of God. Nevertheless, it seems that we can reach a conclusion as to whether they would likely change or retain their original views with respect to the existence of God as a philosophical question. How so? We have to think of their original views regarding *p* and suppose that they have learned about the main philosophical developments of the past decades or centuries regarding *p*. With this in mind, the crucial question is: Have such developments rendered theistic beliefs philosophically untenable? Has the philosophical debate with respect to the existence of God of the past decades or centuries shown conclusively that theistic belief is false or unjustified? Have new strong arguments against the existence of God or against the rationality of theistic belief emerged and proven to be successful whereas the same cannot be said with respect to new arguments in favor of the existence of God or against the rationality of theistic belief?

Therefore, I propose that, when assessing whether agreement with the views of a specific group of non-contemporary philosophers should give

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<sup>26</sup>This is the list of exceptional philosophers that resulted from the poll conducted by Brian Leiter, "The Most Important Western Philosophers of All Time," with over one thousand participants on who are the most important philosophers of all time.

<sup>27</sup>Counterfactual philosophers are "those who could have been working among us now but are not" (Ballantyne, "Counterfactual Philosophers," 368). The "problem of counterfactual philosophers," as formulated by Ballantyne, is a skeptical problem, in that we should expect our philosophical views to be criticized (and probably defeated) by competent counterfactual philosophers were they working among us. I believe the problem with this formulation is that it looks only at one side of the problem, for we could have reasons to think that counterfactual philosophers (perhaps the majority of them or at least of the best or most important of them) would agree with us on certain topics, thus providing additional evidential support for some of our beliefs.

us evidence in favor of our views, we should ascertain whether two conditions are satisfied:

- (a) The most important philosophers of the past (or a majority of them) held views about *p* that were the same or close approximations to mine.
- (b) The conclusions reached by those exceptional philosophers regarding *p* have not been shown to be implausible among those specializing today on *p* and related questions.

The answers to specific philosophical questions given by the most important philosophers of the past might have been original and significant decades, centuries, and even millennia ago. But since then much philosophical debate and argumentation on those questions may have come to light, and perhaps conclusively shown that the views or arguments of our exceptional philosophers are likely to be irremediably flawed, so much so that our exceptional philosophers, were they to travel to the present (as in our time travel thought experiment), would change their minds with respect to their views. In sum, my claim is that, supposing that we find philosophical views that satisfy the conditions (a) and (b), we have gained evidence in favor of those views. If both conditions are satisfied we can claim that the opinion of exceptional philosophers of the past regarding *p* provides at least some evidential support for *p*. If (a) is satisfied, we know which view with respect to a certain philosophical question can be supported by the authoritative or expert opinion of great philosophers of the past. But we also need (b) in order to characterize such philosophers as counterfactual peers or experts on *p*—i.e., so that they are not only our superiors with respect to philosophical creativity, innovativeness, and insight, but also our peers with respect to the relevant evidence and philosophical reasoning abilities.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. *The Epistemic Significance of Agreement with Exceptional Counterfactual Theistic Philosophers*

Who were the ten most important philosophers of all time? It might be difficult to find two philosophers who agree on the same list of great philosophers of the past. Hence, it seems that the best way to proceed here would be by polling contemporary philosophers on whom they think were the

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<sup>28</sup>In our thought experiment, the most important philosophers of all time would be transported to the present and would learn everything that is relevant to the God question in the history of philosophy and in contemporary philosophy. They would also learn all the developments in philosophical and formal logic of the past one hundred or so years relevant for current philosophical practice. They would, therefore, become peers of contemporary philosophers when it comes to evidence and the logical skills, but would, arguably, be superior to them when it comes to other philosophical abilities that have proven to be crucially important for progress in philosophy, such as creativity, innovativeness, and insight. Great philosophers of the past were often susceptible to making logical mistakes that well-trained philosophers today are unlikely to make (For instance, John Earman contends that David Hume's arguments against miracles reveal "the weakness and the poverty of Hume's own account of induction and probabilistic reasoning" (*Hume's Abject Failure*, 3)), thus the importance of adding the idea that our time travelers would learn the more recent developments in philosophical reasoning and logic.

most important or best philosophers of all time.<sup>29</sup> The closest thing we have to such a poll is the one conducted by Brian Leiter. In 2017, he invited readers of his blog, whose target audience is academic philosophers, to cast their votes for the “most important western philosophers of all time.” With 1160 votes cast, the following philosophers were selected, in chronological order:

1. Socrates
2. Plato
3. Aristotle
4. Aquinas
5. Descartes
6. Locke
7. Leibniz
8. Hume
9. Kant
10. Wittgenstein<sup>30</sup>

As mentioned above, a significant majority of the contemporary philosophers who participated in Bourget and Chalmers’s survey<sup>31</sup> self-identified as atheists. More precisely, 72% claimed to be atheists, whereas 14% self-identified as theists, 12% as other, and 5% percent as agnostics.<sup>32</sup> Another survey,

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<sup>29</sup>Of course, this is also a precarious method for the selection of the most important or best philosophers, for contemporary philosophers are likely to reflect to some extent some of the biases or widely held presuppositions of the contemporary philosophical and academic cultures. For instance, if atheism (or theism) is predominant among contemporary philosophers and perhaps academics in general, all else remaining equal, we should expect contemporary philosophers to favor philosophers who held atheistic (or theistic) views when casting their votes in a poll designed to select the most important philosophers of all time. However, contrary to such expectations, although atheism is predominant today among philosophers and academics in general, the vast majority of the most important philosophers of all time selected by contemporary philosophers were theists. This, I contend, should be seen as additional evidence in favor of theism, even if only a modest one. More on this below.

<sup>30</sup>In terms of number of votes, the list has a different order:

1. Aristotle;
2. Plato;
3. Kant;
4. Hume;
5. Descartes;
6. Socrates;
7. Locke;
8. Wittgenstein;
9. Aquinas;
10. Leibniz.

<sup>31</sup>“What Do Philosophers Believe?”

<sup>32</sup>Their survey was conducted in 2009 and included a target sample of 1,972 philosophers from 99 leading departments of philosophy in North America, the UK, Continental Europe and Australasia, and invited all users of the philpapers.org website to answer questions such as:

A priori knowledge: yes or no?

Abstract objects: Platonism or nominalism?

Free will: compatibilism, libertarianism, or no free will?

God: Theism or Atheism?

In total, 3,226 individuals completed the survey, including 931 of the 1,972 members of the target faculty group.

conducted by Helen De Cruz, found a different result: 25% of the participants self-identified as theists, 50% as atheists, 16% as agnostics, and 8% as "other."<sup>33</sup> Either way, if the distribution of religious beliefs among the participants in Leiter's poll reflect the distribution found in either Bourget and Chalmers's survey or in De Cruz's, we have the result that a much larger proportion of atheist—compared to theist—philosophers participated in the poll. We don't know if this proportion holds in the poll, but it seems a fair assumption,<sup>34</sup> and this suggests that the list of the most important philosophers that resulted from Leiter's poll was selected by a larger number of atheist philosophers than of theist philosophers. It is important to mention this given that the vast majority of the selected philosophers were theists. None of the philosophers in our list were obviously atheists or agnostics. Thus, the condition (a) stipulated in the last section seems to have been easily satisfied:

- *Classical theists*: Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, and Kant (total: 5)
- *Non-classical theists*: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle (total: 3)
- *Unclear/ambiguous*: Hume, Wittgenstein (total: 2)
- *Agnostic*: None
- *Atheist*: None

And what about condition (b)? A good starting point in evaluating condition (b) is to look at surveys such as Bourget and Chalmers's and De Cruz's. Note that the disparity between the two surveys when it comes to the proportion of atheistic and theistic believers among academic philosophers can be partially explained by the fact that Bourget and Chalmers's survey concentrated on leading departments, in particular at research universities. This excluded philosophers teaching at non-research religious institutions (universities, colleges, and seminaries) from their sample. This is likely to have resulted in the exclusion of a large portion of theistic philosophers (many of whom are likely to have a preference for working at religious institutions).<sup>35</sup> In any case, a more reliable indicator of the degree to which theism is a viable option among contemporary philosophers is the extent to which those working in philosophy of religion are theists. Philosophers of religion are, in general, more familiar with current philosophical developments regarding the rationality of theistic beliefs.

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<sup>33</sup>De Cruz recruited 518 academic philosophers to complete an online survey, mostly from the English-speaking world, and with different philosophical specializations.

<sup>34</sup>In fact, we have good reasons to think that the percentage of philosophers who participated in the poll who self-identify as atheists was higher than the one we find in the general philosophical population. See n. 44.

<sup>35</sup>Think here, as an illustration, of Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga famously went initially to Harvard as an undergraduate on a full scholarship, but decided to drop out after his first year and complete his degree at Calvin College, a small college from his religious denomination. Plantinga ended up (after completing his Ph.D. at Yale and briefly teaching at Wayne State University) teaching at Calvin and, later, at the University of Notre Dame (two Christian institutions) for the rest of his career. It is plausible to think that many theistic philosophers will, like Plantinga, choose to teach at religious institutions.

They are more familiar with the arguments for and against theism and, should the current debate on the rationality of theistic beliefs be unfavorable to theism, we shouldn't expect the number of theistic philosophers to be particularly high. We should also expect the number of theists entering the profession to be significantly higher than the number of philosophers of religion who are already well-established in the profession. However, these expectations are not corroborated by the available evidence. De Cruz found a significant "correlation between theism and philosophy of religion as an area of specialization." Sixty percent of philosophers of religion self-identified as theists, and only 22.7% and 6.7% self-identified as atheists and agnostics, respectively,<sup>36</sup> whereas the number of theists, atheists, and agnostics among philosophers in general are 25%, 50%, and 16%, respectively. Moreover, "most respondents," she writes, "did not report a change in their religious beliefs—only 17.6% had experienced a significant change in religious outlook since graduate school."<sup>37</sup>

De Cruz concludes from this that such a "high representation of theists in philosophy of religion is probably a result of self-selection."<sup>38</sup> Those numbers, however, can also be reasonably interpreted as indicating that philosophers of religion who are religious have not found much reason to give up their religious beliefs in light of the contemporary developments in their area of specialization. But perhaps, an objector could claim, the predominance of theists working in philosophy of religion can produce a distortion in the philosophical debate in this area. Since the atheistic side is not well represented in the profession, this may have the effect of making the theistic side look stronger than it actually is. This is certainly a legitimate concern, but we should be careful not to exaggerate it. There certainly is a large number of talented atheist and agnostic philosophers working in philosophy of religion today and they have been able to raise new challenges to the rationality and truth of theistic beliefs: new versions of the immemorial argument from evil, and formulations of related arguments, such as the argument from divine hiddenness, as well as more general epistemological problems that have seen growing application to the epistemology of religious belief, such as the problem of disagreement. These arguments, however, have been met with a variety of interesting and creative responses. And a plethora of new arguments for the existence of God and for the rationality of religious beliefs apart from natural theology arguments have emerged in the past five or so decades. During this period, it is safe to say, there has been unparalleled growth in the field of philosophy of religion in the analytical tradition. The work of philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Robert M. Adams, and Peter van Inwagen, to name a few, gave new life to philosophical inquiry about religion with the goal of understanding

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<sup>36</sup>"Religious Disagreement," 74.

<sup>37</sup>"Religious Disagreement," 74.

<sup>38</sup>"Religious Disagreement," 74.

and defending theistic belief. And today, a new generation of major theistic philosophers, such as Brian Leftow, Alexander Pruss, Lara Buchak, Dean Zimmermann, Linda Zagzebski, Eleonore Stump, C. S. Evans, John Hare, John Greco, Michael Bergmann, Robert Koons, Jonathan Kvanvig, Timothy and Lydia McGrew, Mark Murphy, Timothy O'Connor, Paul K. Moser, Daniel Bonevac, Trenton Merricks, and many others, has carried on the work of the previous generation.<sup>39</sup> If anything, theistic philosophy is much stronger today than it was fifty years ago and probably stronger than at any time since Late Modernity. Brian Leftow<sup>40</sup> goes as far as to say that, while the post-WWII expansion of university faculties ensued a golden age in analytic philosophy, it is possible to say that, in philosophy of religion, the age has been platinum, given the progress that has been made in this discipline.

Roderick Chisholm was interviewed in 1980 for a cover story by *Time* magazine about the renaissance of theistic philosophy that was noticeable in those days and testified to this transformation of the philosophical landscape:

A generation ago, atheistic empiricists like Harvard's Willard V. Quine were influential simply because "they were the brightest people," says Philosophy Professor Roderick Chisholm of Brown University, adding that now the "brightest people include theists, using a kind of tough-minded intellectualism" that was often lacking on their side of the debate.<sup>41</sup>

Twenty-one years later, atheist philosopher Quentin Smith lamented what he perceived as a process of desecularization of analytic philosophy:

The secularization of mainstream academia began to quickly unravel upon the publication of Plantinga's influential book, *God and Other Minds*, in 1967. It became apparent to the philosophical profession that this book displayed that realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original world-view. This book, followed seven years later by Plantinga's even more impressive book, *The Nature of Necessity*, made it manifest that a realist theist was writing at the highest qualitative level of analytic philosophy, on the same playing field as Carnap, Russell, Moore, Grünbaum, and other naturalists [. . .] Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga's writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians [. . .] [In] philosophy, it became, almost overnight, "academically respectable" to argue for

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<sup>39</sup>If our list were to include not only theistic philosophers working in philosophy of religion, but also theistic philosophers who had little interest (at least as revealed by their published work) in philosophy of religion, we could add to it other major contemporary philosophers such as Michael Dummett, Bas van Fraassen, Nicholas Rescher, Hilary Putnam, and Saul Kripke.

<sup>40</sup>"Whither Philosophy of Religion?"

<sup>41</sup>"Modernizing the Case for God."



theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today [. . .] God is not “dead” in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments.<sup>42</sup>

As a result, we have good reasons to think that non-contemporary exceptional theistic philosophers would find the current landscape of philosophy of religion quite receptive to their theistic beliefs. Perhaps they would be impressed by new arguments against the existence of God and the rationality of theistic beliefs. But, given that theistic philosophy has fared so well in the past few decades, given the rigor and creativity that characterizes much of the current defenses of the rationality and truth of theism, we have good grounds to think that they would, more likely than not, retain their theistic beliefs.

Therefore, the epistemic significance of these findings seems to lend support to the intuition that agreement with the most important philosophers of all time can give us evidence in favor of the beliefs we share with them. Once we realize that (i) a majority, and perhaps even a supermajority, of the most important philosophers of all time agreed with us on  $p$ ,<sup>43</sup> that (ii) these philosophers were distributed in different cultural and intellectual environments, spanning over two millennia (showing thus the pervasiveness and persistence of such beliefs among exceptional philosophers), that (iii) they disagreed on so many questions, but agreed on  $p$ , that (iv) they were selected as the most important philosophers by a majority of philosophers who believed  $\neg p$ , and that (v) contemporary philosophical debate regarding  $p$  has not in any obvious way discredited belief that  $p$ , we have gained additional reasons to believe that  $p$  is true. Theistic beliefs seem to satisfy these conditions. Theistic beliefs were held by a substantial majority of the most important philosophers who have ever lived (supposing Leiter’s poll is a reliable source of information about who were the most important). They were distributed in different cultural and intellectual environments, spanning over two millennia, comprising the Ancient world, the Middle Ages, and the Modern and Contemporary

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<sup>42</sup>“The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” 2–3.

<sup>43</sup>Our main argument may be thought to resemble the theistic argument from common consent. According to the classical versions of the argument, beliefs that are universal or nearly so should be taken to be true. In a more recent (and more plausible) formulation of the argument, Thomas Kelly (“*Consensus Gentium*”) has claimed that the datum that a strong supermajority of humans believes that God exists can provide evidence in favor of theism if the best explanation of this datum is God’s existence. A main difficulty with common consent arguments in general is that its success seems to depend on the consensus being reached independently by the individuals that form the population in question. Kelly contends that this may be a problem for theistic versions of the argument, since, according to him, it is not entirely clear that such independence can be observed in the way that theistic beliefs are ordinarily formed. This alleged problem does not seem to affect our main argument from counterfactual exceptional philosophers, since most of those philosophers offered independent reasons for their theistic beliefs. In addition, the success of our main argument does not depend on the opinions of the world’s population regarding theism.

worlds. They disagreed on many other philosophical questions, but a significant majority of them agreed on theism. They were selected as the most important philosophers of all time by a majority of atheist philosophers.<sup>44</sup> And we have good reasons to think that such philosophers, were they here among us, would find a philosophical landscape that is quite receptive to their theistic beliefs. Consequently, we should agree that agreement with those exceptional theistic philosophers does seem to constitute evidence in favor of theism.

#### 4. *A Reference Class Problem?*

So far, our main argument has been relying on polling data concerning the views of the top ten philosophers of all time. But there is something artificial about our focus on the ten most important philosophers. Leiter himself reports the result of his poll by presenting a list of the 32 top choices among the poll participants, and it is possible that this larger sample of philosophers could prove to be less epistemically favorable to theism.

Besides the ten philosophers who have already been mentioned, the other philosophers represented in Leiter's top 32 list are: Hobbes, Marx, J. S. Mill, Spinoza, Augustine, Frege, Hegel, Nietzsche, B. Russell, Kierkegaard, Berkeley, Quine, Epicurus, Rousseau, Kripke, Rawls, Carnap, Bacon, Bentham, D. K. Lewis, Democritus, and Heraclitus. And once we identify these philosophers's views regarding theism, we find that the poll's results continue to be far more epistemically favorable to theism than to non-theism. In this new reference class, the number of philosophers who can be classified as atheists or agnostics increases from 0 (in the top 10 reference class) to 9 (in the top 32 reference class), while the representativeness of theism increases from 8 to 18, and the unclear/ambiguous group increases from 2 to 5. Thus, on this broader reference class, theism is represented by 66% of philosophers, and non-theism by 44%, still a supermajority.

However, this way of thinking about the epistemic significance of those philosophers' beliefs with respect to theism is misleading. It treats the beliefs of the philosophers at the top and at the bottom of the list as having equal evidential value. A still precarious but nonetheless more accurate way of representing the epistemic significance of the opinions of the broadened reference class vis-à-vis theism is to assign scores to each philosopher proportional to the position they occupy in the list. If we subtract, for instance, .25 from their scores as we move from top to bottom, we find that theism far outweighs non-theism (73% to 27%). And if we restrict

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<sup>44</sup>In fact, given that Brian Leiter is an outspoken atheist and that he occasionally posts comments critical of religion on his blog, we should expect his audience (and thus the participants in his polls) to be disproportionately composed of atheist philosophers. Conversely, were Leiter an outspoken theist who occasionally posted comments critical of atheism, we should expect his audience to have a lower proportion of atheist philosophers than it actually has.

the non-theistic group solely to atheism and agnosticism, we find that the gap between these two positions widens to 79%–21%. As a result, even if we broaden our reference class, theism continues to have a supermajority among the most important philosophers of all time.

Let us call classical theism “*CT*,” other varieties of minimal theism (including deism, polytheism, panentheism, and pantheism) “*OT*,” unclear or ambiguous views “*U/A*,” agnosticism “*Ag*,” and atheism “*At*.” And let us assign a score of 10 to the philosopher who received the largest number of votes in the poll and proceed by assigning to each of the remaining philosophers a score that is 0.25 lower than the one of the previous philosopher:

- |                                       |                                      |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Aristotle ( <i>OT</i> ) (10)       | 17. Hegel ( <i>OT</i> ) (6)          |
| 2. Plato ( <i>OT</i> ) (9.75)         | 18. Nietzsche ( <i>At</i> ) (5.75)   |
| 3. Kant ( <i>CT</i> ) (9.5)           | 19. B. Russell ( <i>At</i> ) (5.5)   |
| 4. Hume ( <i>U/A</i> ) (9.25)         | 20. Kierkegaard ( <i>CT</i> ) (5.25) |
| 5. Descartes ( <i>CT</i> ) (9)        | 21. Berkeley ( <i>CT</i> ) (5)       |
| 6. Socrates ( <i>OT</i> ) (8.75)      | 22. Quine ( <i>At</i> ) (4.75)       |
| 7. Locke ( <i>CT</i> ) (8.5)          | 23. Epicurus ( <i>OT</i> ) (4.5)     |
| 8. Wittgenstein ( <i>U/A</i> ) (8.25) | 24. Rousseau ( <i>OT</i> ) (4.25)    |
| 9. Aquinas ( <i>CT</i> ) (8)          | 25. Kripke ( <i>CT</i> ) (4)         |
| 10. Leibniz ( <i>CT</i> ) (7.75)      | 26. Rawls ( <i>Ag</i> ) (3.75)       |
| 11. Hobbes ( <i>OT</i> ) (7.5)        | 27. Carnap ( <i>At</i> ) (3.5)       |
| 12. Marx ( <i>At</i> ) (7.25)         | 28. Bacon ( <i>CT</i> ) (3.25)       |
| 13. J.S. Mill ( <i>Ag</i> ) (7)       | 29. Bentham ( <i>At</i> ) (3)        |
| 14. Spinoza ( <i>U/A</i> ) (6.75)     | 30. D.K. Lewis ( <i>At</i> ) (2.75)  |
| 15. Augustine ( <i>CT</i> ) (6.5)     | 31. Democritus ( <i>U/A</i> ) (2.5)  |
| 16. Frege ( <i>U/A</i> ) (6.25)       | 32. Heraclitus ( <i>OT</i> ) (2.25)  |

Call now “*COT*” the conjunction of *CT* and *OT* and “*AA*” the conjunction of *Ag* and *At*. As already mentioned, we find in the top 32 list of philosophers 18 *COTs*, 9 *AAs*, and 5 *U/As*. In terms of percentages, 56% are *COTs*, 28% are *AAs*, and 16% are *U/As*. If we exclude *U/As*, we find that 66% are *COTs* and 44% are *AAs*. If we exclude *U/As* and agnostics from *AAs*, we have 72% *COTs* and 28% atheists. In terms of scores, *COTs* scored 119.75, *AAs* scored 43.25, and *U/As*, 32.75. *COTs* have accumulated 61% percent of the total score (*COTs* + *AAs* + *U/As*), whereas *AAs* have 22%, and *U/As* have 17%. If we exclude *U/As*, *COTs* have 73% of the total score and *AAs* have 27%. If, on the other hand, we exclude the scores of *U/As* and of agnostics, *COTs* have 79% of the total score and atheists have 21%.

### 5. Importance vs. Greatness

One potential constraint on the evidential significance of the main argument is that the question that was presented to the participants of the poll under consideration was “who were the *most important* philosophers of all time,” instead of who were the “best” or the “greatest” ones. The reason why the actual formulation of the poll question might be thought to pose a problem for the main argument is that “importance” seems to be a notion more tenuously associated with epistemic virtues and achievements than “greatness.”

However, there are reasons to doubt that the poll’s focus on “importance,” rather than “greatness,” would undermine the main argument. Would the vast majority of the participants have voted differently had the title of the poll been “the greatest philosophers of all time?” Would they have selected different philosophers, or selected the philosophers they actually did but in a different order? Even if their selections had been different, it is not obvious that such difference would have been detrimental to our results. In fact, it may well be the case that the locution “most important” contributed to elicit a less subjective and idiosyncratic response from poll participants than it would have been the case in the “best” and “greatest” formulations. If we are asked “which were *the best* presidents (or prime ministers) in your country’s history?,” we are likely to exhibit a certain bias toward selecting presidents (or prime ministers) who belonged to the political party that we are more inclined to support today or who implemented policies that are more similar to the policies that we favor today. On the other hand, if we are asked “who were *the most important* presidents (or prime ministers) in your country’s history?,” we are, it seems to me, more likely to take a step back and search for an answer that is less likely to be affected by personal preferences. Thus, by being asked the question in the “most important” formulation, the participants may have refrained from expressing their views in a more subjective manner.

Nevertheless, despite these reasons against the conjecture that the poll results would have been significantly different in the “best” and “greatest” formulations, we cannot completely rule this out. Hence, I suggest that we should think of this consideration as undermining to some extent the total evidential value of the main argument. However, I believe that this negative consideration is not strong enough to significantly undermine its evidential value, let alone the combined evidential force of the five positive factors mentioned at the end of section 3. We have explored (i) and (v) (i.e., the main argument) at length, and (iv) was discussed in notes 29, 34, and 44. So let us conclude this section by saying something about (ii) and (iii).

The fact that the most important philosophers of all time constitute a very diverse group of thinkers (culturally, historically, and philosophically), who disagreed on many things, makes it more likely that the things on which they agreed are true. As mentioned previously, Dellsén<sup>45</sup> argued, on the basis of three frameworks for non-deductive reasoning

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<sup>45</sup>“When Expert Disagreement Supports the Consensus.”

(Bayesianism, inference to the best explanation, and robustness analysis), that when experts reach a strong agreement on a certain view in a domain marked by disagreement, this counts positively in favor of the agreed view. Here is a brief summary of how Dellsén argues for this thesis using his inference to the best explanation framework. We know that human beings often agree and reach consensus on certain propositions not because of critical evaluation of evidence, but because of crowd psychology. Upon discovering that group G has reached a consensus on  $p_1$ , how can we know whether such a consensus was reached on the basis of critical evaluation of evidence or of crowd psychology? One way to gain evidence regarding which of these belief-formation methods was employed in the formation of consensus is by detecting G members' views regarding other propositions or theories. If we find that G reached a consensus on  $p_1$ , but its members disagreed on  $p_2$  and  $p_3$ , which of these two belief-formation methods best explains this disparity? If G members were forming their beliefs regarding domain-p theories on the basis of crowd psychology, we should expect them to mostly agree not only on  $p_1$ , but also on  $p_2$  and  $p_3$ . On the critical evaluation of evidence hypothesis, however, disagreement on  $p_2$  and  $p_3$  can be explained by the inconclusiveness of the evidence available pertaining to  $p_2$  and  $p_3$ . Therefore, critical evaluation of evidence has greater explanatory power than crowd psychology.<sup>46</sup> As a result, once we discover that G members, who agree on  $p_1$ , disagree on  $p_2$  and  $p_3$ , we have gained evidence that G's views regarding  $p_1$  are epistemically justified, and, hence, we have gained evidence in favor of  $p_1$ .

Our exceptional counterfactual philosophers disagreed on many things—on the nature of knowledge, on free will, on the best way to organize a society politically, and so on—but they (or the vast majority of them) agreed on theism. Moreover, they constitute a very diverse group of thinkers—culturally, historically, and philosophically. And despite this diversity, they mostly agreed that theism is true. These considerations, I am suggesting, support the critical evaluation of evidence hypothesis with respect to our exceptional theistic philosophers and, thus, constitute evidence in favor of theism. (i) to (v), then, can give us a great deal of evidence in favor of theism. Some of this evidence may be counterbalanced by the consideration about the distinction between “importance” and “greatness” and the reliance of the poll on the former concept. However, it seems to me that this negative consideration is not nearly strong enough to completely counterbalance the cumulative evidential value of the positive factors.

#### 6. *Can Philosophers Be Experts on Theism?*

There are two (related) additional potential difficulties with the idea that the views of other philosophers can be evidentially significant when it comes to theism. First, why think that there are experts on religious

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<sup>46</sup>Dellsén argues that the critical evaluation hypothesis is also simpler when the crowd psychology hypothesis is modified to increase its explanatory power.

matters, and on theism in particular? And, secondly, even if there are experts on theism, what makes us think that philosophers are the sort of people who can be considered experts on God? It is in fact plausible to think that, if theism is true, philosophers are not the right sort of people to be regarded as experts on theism, especially if the true version of theism is to be found within the Abrahamic tradition (Christianity, or Judaism, or perhaps Islamism). These religions seem to posit moral constraints on our access to God and to emphasize the role of private, experiential evidence in our coming to know God. If this is so, then it seems doubtful that theistic evidence and knowledge could be gained purely on the basis of philosophical inquiry, irrespective of moral considerations and of one's private, experiential contact with the divine reality.

So, first, can there be religious experts? Some philosophers think that the idea that there are experts on morality and on religion is problematic.<sup>47</sup> And even if there are experts on theism, why think that philosophers can fulfill this role? Perhaps the right sort of people to be regarded as experts on God are religious or spiritual leaders or authorities. In particular, if theism is true and the true version of theism is one of the varieties of the Abrahamic religions, then perhaps we should expect God to be selective in the way he provides evidence of his existence to humans. Blaise Pascal famously drew a distinction between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God of the philosophers. He seemed to be suggesting that philosophical inquiry does not make one really come to know God—at least not in the way God can and should be really known—and that this truly relevant form of knowledge of God requires certain moral attitudes, such as recognition of one's own moral failings, repentance for one's wrongdoings, disposition for self-sacrificial love, and trust (i.e., faith) in God. More recently, evidentialist epistemologist Paul Moser has drawn a distinction between two kinds of evidence with respect to God: spectator evidence and authoritative evidence. The first kind of evidence he associates with arguments from natural theology. Spectator evidence, however, is not, in Moser's vocabulary, genuine theistic evidence: "God," he claims, "would have no reason to offer spectator evidence of divine reality to humans."<sup>48</sup> Authoritative evidence, on the other hand, is evidence "that includes a divine call to human transformation [that] would serve God's redemptive purpose for humans."<sup>49</sup> Since the kind of theistic evidence that we are discussing in this paper (evidence from agreement with exceptional philosophers) does not ordinarily constitute what Moser calls authoritative evidence, we are to suppose that Moser would consider it to be spectator—i.e., non-genuine—theistic evidence.

I believe this objection fails if the primary distinction we have in mind is between propositional and personal theistic evidence and knowledge,

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<sup>47</sup>E.g., Frances, *Disagreement*.

<sup>48</sup>*The Evidence for God*, 211.

<sup>49</sup>*The Evidence for God*, 211.



rather than between spectator and authoritative evidence and knowledge. Even if Pascal and Moser are correct about the indispensability of the personal and moral components of theistic evidence and knowledge, it doesn't follow that propositional evidence and knowledge should be considered non-genuine evidence and knowledge. Rather, propositional evidence is better seen as a different kind of evidence that can play an important role in moving us toward acquiring personal (and perhaps authoritative) theistic evidence and knowledge.<sup>50</sup> Personal knowledge, to use Matthew Benton's formulation,<sup>51</sup> is obtained when we have a personal encounter of reciprocal causal contact with someone else and such knowledge is symmetric and distinct from propositional knowledge. Arguably, personal knowledge of God is the highest aspiration a religious believer in the Abrahamic traditions can have. This can be granted while, at the same time, we recognize that God can also be known propositionally and that such propositional knowledge can be relevant for the attainment of that higher goal. Likewise, we can say that the sort of evidence that God ultimately desires for us to have regarding himself is personal evidence, but still recognize that one can gain propositional evidence pertaining to God, and that agreement with exceptional theistic philosophers can furnish us with such evidence (which may, in the end, be a stepping stone, so to speak, for acquisition of personal theistic evidence).

### *Conclusion*

In this paper, I defended a very modest claim: the realization that the most important philosophers of all time were theists should increase one's confidence that theism is true (or, correspondently, reduce one's confidence that theism is false). I haven't said much about how much evidential support one can obtain from this realization. A number of considerations seem to speak in favor of thinking that this evidential support is high: a majority (probably a supermajority) of the most important philosophers of all time agreed on theism; the pervasiveness and persistence of theistic beliefs among exceptional philosophers: our exceptional philosophers worked in different cultural and intellectual environments, spanning over two millennia; despite strong disagreement on so many other philosophical questions, they agreed on theism; the current philosophical landscape (the period in history with the largest expansion of university faculties and of investment in philosophical research) has become increasingly more receptive to philosophy of religion and to the

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<sup>50</sup>Moser (*The Evidence for God*, 210) makes a further distinction between propositional and filial knowledge of "God's reality as one's humbly standing in a childlike, volitionally submissive relationship to God as perfectly authoritative and loving Lord and Father." He claims that "filial knowledge of God requires propositional knowledge that God exists, but it exceeds such propositional knowledge." This seems to commit Moser to the view that there is such a thing as genuine and important propositional theistic evidence.

<sup>51</sup>"Epistemology Personalized"; and "God and Interpersonal Knowledge."



question of the existence of God,<sup>52</sup> it is plausible to think that a substantial majority of the contemporary philosophers voting on the philosophers they regarded as the most important were atheists. On the other hand, these considerations seem to have their positive evidential force reduced by the fact that the poll focused on the most important, instead of the greatest, philosophers of all time. I have offered reasons to think that this consideration is not very significant, but have conceded that it should, nonetheless, be seen as detracting from the positive evidential value of the other considerations to some extent. How much? It is hard to say. But given that the positive considerations seem to be robust, it is plausible to think that although some of its evidential force may be counterbalanced, we are still left with, at a minimum, some evidence in favor of theism.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Brian Leftow writes that: "The post-war expansion of university faculties climaxed in the early 1970's. Since then, there have been more professional philosophers than ever before in history [. . .] In analytic philosophy, they have worked with more rigour and better training than even the Scholastics. It would take a surprising lack of talent among us, or perhaps some deep defect in the questions we ask, if the result were not more progress in philosophy than most periods can boast" ("Whither Philosophy of Religion?," 441). And, as mentioned above, he goes on to say that, if our philosophical age can be said to be golden, in philosophy of religion we have in fact an age of platinum.

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