

Believing by faith, by John Bishop. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 250. H/b. \$75.00

In this book John Bishop aims to rehabilitate fideism. Bishop argues for a moral fideism according to which, under certain conditions, a subject possesses moral justification to believe that theism is true (or, in Bishop's terminology, to take theistic claims to be true with full weight in one's practical reasoning) (see Ch 2, p. 33). Bishop's foil throughout the book is 'moral evidentialism' (p. 62). Moral evidentialism is the sum of *epistemic evidentialism*, which Bishop understands as the claim that epistemic entitlement requires evidential justification (Ibid.), and *the moral-link principle*, that 'people can be morally justified in taking beliefs to be true only if they do so with epistemic entitlement' (Ibid.). In place of moral evidentialism Bishop advocates 'supra-evidential fideism,' whose 'distinctive claim is . . . that passionately, non-evidentially, motivated faith-commitments may, under certain conditions, be made with *epistemic entitlement*' (pp. 174-5). Bishop's view, thus, rejects *epistemic evidentialism* by holding that one may be epistemically entitled to beliefs that are not evidentially justified.

The key claim in Bishop's book is thesis (J+).

(J+) Where p is a faith-proposition of the kind exemplified by the propositions taken to be true in the context of theistic faith, it is morally permissible for people to take p to be true with full weight in their practical reasoning while correctly judging that it is not the case that p's truth is adequately supported by their total evidence, if and only if:

- (i) the question whether p presents itself to them as a genuine option;
and
- (ii) the question whether p is essentially evidentially undecidable;
and
- (iii) their non-evidential motivation for taking p to be true is of a morally acceptable type;
and
- (iv) p's being true conforms with correct morality. (p. 165)

Regarding the Jamesian condition (i) an option is 'a decision between two hypotheses on a given issue' (p. 125). The genuineness of an option consists in its being live, momentous, and forced (Ibid.). Live and momentous options are ones that represent real and significant possibilities for the subject. A forced option requires a decision to either take a proposition to be true or false in practical reasoning, though as Bishop observes this is a contextual feature (p. 126).

A central part of understanding (ii) is Bishop's *thesis of the evidential ambiguity of theism*. This is the thesis that given the evidence and evidential standards sanctioned by 'the rational empiricist evidential practice' the evidence for theism is necessarily ambiguous (on necessity see p. 140). Bishop's discussion of (iii) and (iv) is brief (pp. 165-6). These conditions are intended to rule out immoral faith ventures such as venturing for the Nazi Religion (p. 166). Regarding (iii) Bishop identifies morally respectable passional motivations for faith ventures with those that issue from a well-developed virtuous character (p. 165, note 10). One challenge to this, though, is that some morally acceptable religious motivations *bring forth* rather than 'issue from' a well-developed virtuous character. Another challenge directed at (iv) is that it is

redundant. Whatever force (iv) has it may be captured by (iii); if the content of a faith venture doesn't conform with the correct morality it's hard to see how the motivation to act on that content can be morally acceptable.

In sum the situation for the reflective theist is, according to Bishop, as follows. The theist finds herself with passional motivation to believe that theism is true. She is deeply affected about whether or not to take as true the basic principles of theism (what Bishop calls 'framing principles'). These principles are presented to her as live, momentous, and forced options. Moreover, these principles cannot be decided on evidential grounds: the considerations for and against these principles are counterbalanced. Yet, given that her motivation for believing theism is morally acceptable, she is morally permitted to believe that theism is true, even though she rightly recognizes that her beliefs are produced and sustained by a non-evidential process. Significantly, though, the theist sees this passional prompting as making accessible otherwise inaccessible truths.

Now that we have a synopsis of Bishop's position let us examine it. One of the more difficult aspects of Bishop's discussion is his idiosyncratic terminology. Witness the seven page glossary in the introduction (pp. 19-25). Speaking for myself I was often frustrated wading through novel lexical terrain when the conceptual topography can be revealed without this extra burden. In the following I focus on three critical points.

1. Bishop's discussion regarding crucial claims is often vague and brief.

(a) Bishop intends to mark a significant distinction between 'holding true' and 'taking to be true' (p. 33). This is intended to mark the distinction between belief and practical commitment, and it is supposed to reorient philosophy of religion away from the justification of belief to the justification of practical commitment. But his explanation of this distinction rests on one rather unconvincing example (p. 34). Moreover, the notion of belief is conceptually tied to practical commitment in such a way that it's difficult to see how one can have a *sustained* policy of using a claim *with full weight* in one's practical reasoning and not believe it. Of course, one can occasionally use a claim for practical reasoning without believing it (e.g., I'm operating on the assumption that my students will complete all their assignments), but Bishop intends to defend a stronger thesis that one can lead a life of using a claim *with full weight* in one's practical reasoning without believing it. It's *that* distinction that I find questionable.

(b) Bishop's discussion of the evidential ambiguity of theism rests on an imprecise definition of evidential ambiguity. He defines this as follows:

The truth of a proposition, p, is evidentially ambiguous if and only if the total relevant evidence neither shows p's truth nor p's falsehood to be significantly more probable than not, where the total evidence is, furthermore, systematically open to viable overall interpretation, both on the assumption that p is true and on the assumption that p is false (p. 20)

But on this definition it is consistent with p being evidentially ambiguous that p is both supported and explained by one's evidence. All that is required for this is that the support isn't *significant* and that the evidence can be interpreted on the assumption that p is false. But many a coherentist

(and some foundationalists too) will accept *that*, but resist the claim that the evidence for p is *ambiguous*. This is significant for evaluating the epistemic status of theism since a coherentist justification for theism may accept the thesis of evidential ambiguity as Bishop explains it but nonetheless insist that one has good evidential justification for believing theism is true. If Bishop wishes to resist this consequence then the thesis of the evidential ambiguity of theism should be formulated in terms of the evidence for theism being counterbalanced.

(c) Bishop describes the central evidential practice as *the rational empiricist evidential practice* (pp. 66-8). Here's the definition:

Rational empiricist evidential practice is the evidential practice that assumes deductive and inductive standards for inferential evidential support, and allows as basically evident only incorrigible and self-evident truths (including fundamental logical and mathematical truths) and truths evident in sensory perceptual experience under 'normal' conditions (i.e., in the absence of recognized overrides such as conditions known to create sensory illusions, etc.) (p. 24).

In order to be useful for evaluating the claim that theism is evidentially ambiguous this practice needs to be filled out in a number of ways. For starters one would like to see the relevant principles governing prior probabilities, the conditionalization principles, and principles for diachronic rationality. Once these principles are filled out then we can begin to evaluate whether the situation is indeed one of ambiguity. For details see Richard Swinburne's project in *The Existence of God* 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 2004), and, perhaps, also J.L. Mackie's project in *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford University Press, 1982). As the Swinburne and Mackie references suggest there will be disagreement once the principles are filled out, but disagreement itself doesn't show that the situation is evidentially ambiguous. This is also one of the places in which Bishop's discussion skates across deep epistemic issues. It may be improper to bellyache that Bishop didn't give more attention to the deep epistemic issues in the background (because that would be to want a different book and fail to appreciate the merits of the actual book), but it is hard to accept the setup to Bishop's discussion when a more careful analysis of key issues (the nature of evidential justification, the role of pragmatic factors in epistemology, the role of diachronic considerations, the issue of epistemic permissiveness, the epistemic significance of disagreement, etc.) would likely yield a much different situation.

(d) After arguing that the fideist-evidentialist debate ends in a stalemate apropos truth-related considerations, Bishop looks for a moral justification for fideism. He concludes this discussion with the following:

I have argued that arriving at ... an impasse [between evidential considerations for supra-evidential fideism and evidentialism] may be enough to secure a requirement for a mutual, broadly political tolerance between supra-evidential fideism and hard-line moral evidentialism. (p. 228)

It's not evident what Bishop means by 'a mutual, broadly political tolerance', and moreover it's unclear how this can be a defense for fideism (see #2 below). Further, we already knew that there *is* a moral reason to tolerate other philosophical positions. No one *really* knows that their

philosophical views are true and, even so, you shouldn't throw people in jail for dissenting with one's views. W.K. Clifford didn't bring suit against William James. Moreover, as Feyerabend said, 'Let a thousand flowers blossom.'

2. Regarding the main thesis (J+) Bishop doesn't give us an argument to the effect that we have a good epistemic reason to endorse (J+). He observes that the reasons for (J+) are indecisive (Ch 8 & spec. p. 207). He argues, however, that there may be a moral preference for acting as if (J+) were true (Ch 9). So the situation is this. Bishop aims to defend the moral permissibility of doxastic ventures and he does so by 'suggest[ing]... that direct *moral* considerations may be produced which at least recommend the supra-evidential fideist over the hard-line evidentialist position' (p. 228). This, however, is an insufficient defense of (J+). Consider this analogy. It may be morally permissible to act as if utilitarianism is true and *if* utilitarianism is true then paternalism is--occasionally--morally permissible. But it doesn't follow from this that paternalism is--*even occasionally*--morally permissible. *Mutatis mutandis* for the moral permissibility of doxastic ventures. The fundamental problem here is the transitivity of moral permissibility. As the analogy is intended to suggest it may be morally permissible to act on the basis of *false* theories (note *again* that Bishop doesn't offer an argument that (J+) is true). A false moral theory may imply that a certain action is morally permissible. But given the falsity of the theory the specific implication is *not* morally permissible. This is the situation I think Bishop's reflective theist finds herself in and I don't see how, apart from an argument for (J+), Bishop's considerations of moral preference allay this situation.

3. My last concern centers on the challenge from Bayesian Decision Theory. This challenge brings together a number of problematic aspects in Bishop's discussion. The significance of this is that one can exercise authentic faith even if one doesn't fully believe that theism is true. Let me explain.

Bishop aims to defend the moral permissibility of a full doxastic venture. A full doxastic venture involves '(1) taking it to be true (with full weight) that God exists in ... practical reasoning; and (2) doing so while holding that God exists (i.e., while having the belief that God exists); while yet (3) recognizing, correctly in accordance with the relevant norms, that it is *not* the case that his or her total available evidence adequately supports the truth that God exists' (pp. 106-7). Bishop contrasts a full-doxastic venture with a *sub-doxastic* venture which involves only (1) & (3). Bishop concedes, though, that a '*fully* doxastic venture is *not essential* to authentic theistic faith' because the doxastic condition (2) isn't necessary (p. 120).

I was left wondering why we needed a defense of the moral permissibility of a *full* doxastic venture given this concession. Bishop's position aims to be a rival to an evidentialist position. But authentic faith is compatible with evidentialism and the claim that theism is counterbalanced by the evidence. Bayesian decision theory makes sense of how this could be so. As long as one's utility on theism is sufficiently high, it is consistent with any non-zero probability on theism that one enjoys a rational practical commitment to theism. The virtues of this position should be apparent. It requires no modification to evidentialism and it is compatible with genuine faith. Richard Swinburne has developed this view in *Faith and Reason* 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 2005).

A related concern focuses on Bishop's discussion of Pascal's wager. Surprisingly Bishop wants to distance his position from Pascal's. He does this by contrasting 'engaging in self-manipulation [by] intentionally inducing passionate causes for a certain belief in order to

satisfy an essentially non-epistemic desire to have that belief (such as, e.g., the desire to reap advantages believed to flow from it)' (p. 119) with '*already* [having] a passionately caused tendency to hold the proposition to be true' (Ibid.). Bishop's thought, I take it, is that aiming to produce in oneself the belief that God exists on the basis of expected utilities is morally unacceptable and, given (iii) of (J+), this venture is not morally acceptable. However, this misunderstands the nature of Pascal's Wager. The fundamental point of the wager is that one has a reason to act as if theism is true. The wager needn't concern more fine-grained motivations for actions; rather--to repeat--the upshot of the wager is that rationality considerations strongly favor practical commitment to theism.

In the end I recommend Bayesianism over fideism. A religious believer may maintain her religious convictions even though she recognizes her beliefs fail to be more probable than not. As a rational agent that conforms to the rule to maximize expected utility as long as her utilities apropos theism are high enough, rational practical commitment to theism is consistent with any non-zero confidence in theism.

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