Recovering a Role for Moral Character and Ascetic Practice in Religious Epistemology

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Abstract: Moral character and ascetic practice have not been major themes in contemporary analytic religious epistemology. But they have been major themes in the religious epistemologies of several influential historical figures, including the medieval Islamic philosopher al-Ghazâlî. This paper will be concerned with the place of moral character and ascetic practice in both al-Ghazâlî's religious epistemology and in contemporary analytic religious epistemology. By reading al-Ghazâlî alongside contemporary work, I aim to highlight some fruitful ideas about how moral character and ascetic practice could play important roles in religious epistemology. I argue that the exploration of these ideas may be enriched via engagement with recent developments in mainstream epistemology and virtue theory, pointing toward future avenues for such work.

Keywords: al- Ghazâlî, religious epistemology, moral character, asceticism, moral encroachment

Moral character and ascetic practice have not been major themes in contemporary analytic religious epistemology. But they have been major themes in the religious epistemologies of several influential historical figures, including the medieval Islamic philosopher al-Ghazâlî. This paper will be concerned with the place of moral character and ascetic practice in both al-Ghazâlî's religious epistemology and in contemporary analytic religious epistemology. By reading al-Ghazâlî alongside contemporary work, I aim to highlight some fruitful ideas about how moral character and ascetic practice could play important roles in religious epistemology. As we will see, some of these ideas have been engaged with to some extent by a small minority of contemporary religious epistemologists. Yet, as we will also see, there remains ample room for further exploration of these ideas, especially in light of contemporary developments in mainstream epistemology and virtue theory.

The plan for the paper is as follows. In section 1, I present three key ideas from al-Ghazâlî's discussion of the role of moral character and ascetic practice in religious epistemology, focusing on his major work *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. In section 2, I identify echoes of al- Ghazâlî's ideas in a few contemporary religious epistemologists. I then indicate how these ideas can be explored more thoroughly in light of recent developments in mainstream epistemology and virtue theory in section 3. What will emerge are some ways of making plausible the idea that a person's moral character and ascetic practices can make an important difference for their epistemic position in relation to God and God's activity in their life. I suggest these themes may be fruitful ones to explore for contemporary religious epistemologists.

1. The Religious Epistemology of Al-Ghazâlî's *Revival*

Abû Hâmid Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Ghazâlî (c.1056 – 1111) is recognized as a philosopher, theologian, jurist and Sufi mystic. Born in modern-day Iran, a key turning point in his life occurred when he decided to leave his teaching appointment in the Nizâmiyya Madrassa in Baghdad in 1095. Under the influence of Sufi literature, he had become convinced that serving political and religious elites as he did there was incompatible with the life of religious virtue to which he was called. His influential writings make the case that readers, too, should commit themselves to a life of virtue, and that their doing so is central to their achieving knowledge of God.

Around the time he departed from Baghdad, al-Ghazâlî completed the work he is probably best known for by philosophers today: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. This is a polemical work in which al-Ghazâlî attacks twenty views represented among the leading philosophers of his day. His main aim is to argue that these philosophers have not demonstrated their conclusions to be true. This reveals a weakness of their methods as methods aimed at achieving knowledge, including knowledge of God.

The Revival of the Religious Sciences, written after he left Baghdad, begins to develop al-Ghazâlî's positive alternative to the purely reason-based approach to life and knowledge-seeking he found among the philosophers and others. It is a comprehensive guide to the everyday ethical behavior of Muslims. The work is voluminous: 40 books, each genuinely book-length. It is organized into four sections of ten books each, concentrating on ritual practices, social customs, vices that lead to perdition, and virtues that lead to salvation. Much of the work involves using the Quran and other traditional authoritative sources in order to illuminate how to live well. But the work also exhibits philosophical argument, and it makes important contentions about religious epistemology which are my focus here. Indeed, as one commentator puts it, the aim of *The Revival* was nothing less than to present a "totalizing vision of the religious sciences reordered to serve the end of gaining the knowledge of God that is the substance of felicity in the afterlife" (Garden 2013, 101).

A repeated contention of *The Revival* is that knowing God is facilitated by ridding oneself of moral vices and developing moral virtues. This is an especially central theme in Book 21, *The Marvels of the Heart*. Several times al-Ghazâlî compares the ethically imbued approach to knowing God with which he is sympathetic with alternative approaches he finds less adequate. Sometimes this comparison is made via metaphors, and other times it is made via description in prose.

Perhaps the most well-known metaphor is the story of the Byzantine and Chinese artists in chapter nine, intended to illuminate the contrast between the "knowledge of the saints and prophets" and the knowledge "of the learned and the philosophers" (al- Ghazâlî 2010, 61).[1] According to the story, a group of Byzantine artists and a group of Chinese artists were vying for the approval of a king. The king directed the Chinese to decorate one side of a portico and the Byzantines decorate the other side, with a curtain drawn between the two so that they could not see what the other side was doing. The Byzantines went to their work by "gather[ing] together countless strange colors". The Chinese, however,

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[1] All quotations from the Marvels of the Heart come from the translation of Skellie (al-Ghazâlî 2010), and references are to the page numbers in this edition.

"entered without any color at all". Instead, they "began to polish their side and to brighten it" (61). When the Byzantines finished, the Chinese claimed to be finished as well, to the king's astonishment. When the curtain was lifted, the Chinese side "shone forth the wonders of the Byzantine skill with added illumination and dazzling brilliance, since that side had become like unto a polished mirror by reason of much brightening" (61-3). In an analogous manner, al-Ghazâlî claims that the approach of the saints and prophets, which he is defending, involves "cleansing, polishing, purifying, and clarifying the heart until the true nature of the Real shines forth clearly therein with utmost illumination" (63).

As the story suggests, al-Ghazâlî thinks that one can gain a higher quality of knowledge of God by ridding oneself of vices and developing virtues than one can hope to gain without doing this (cf. Trieger 2012). But his remarks elsewhere are even stronger. It's not just that one can gain better knowledge of God via the ethical life. It's that one genuinely risks being able to know God at all apart from living a life of virtue. Living a life of vice places serious obstacles in one's path to gaining any knowledge of God, while pursuing a life of virtue opens up the possibility of knowing God.

In chapter fifteen of *The Marvels of the Heart*, al-Ghazâlî describes three kinds of hearts that people may have: hearts fixed on good, hearts fixed on evil, and hearts alternating between the two. He claims that the conditions of these hearts have a significant influence on their possessor's ability to know God. In the heart fixed on evil, for example, he claims that there "rises up from passion a dark smoke over the heart that fills it entirely so that its lights are extinguished. . . . This is what the victory of appetence does to the heart, so that there is no possibility left for the heart to stop and look" (133). By contrast, the heart that is fixed on good is "furnished with the light of gnosis [i.e., experiential knowledge]", and the angel who acts as a conduit of divine revelation "sees that [this heart] is worthy to be his place of abode and alighting". The heart fixed on the good is one that is "cleared of all evil characteristics" (132) and is "filled with the things which save . . . [such as] thanksgiving, patience, fear, hope, poverty, asceticism, love, satisfaction, longing, trust, meditation, examination of conscience, etc" (133). Here we see that vice poses a potentially insurmountable obstacle to knowing God, while its absence and the presence of virtue facilitates knowledge of God.

In sum, Al-Ghazâlî concurs with certain elements[2] of Sufi thought that claim that "The way of knowledge is to put foremost spiritual striving, to abolish blameworthy traits, to cut all ties, and to advance toward God, the exalted, with utmost concern" (53). By contrast, he claims that "the light of knowledge is . . . veiled by wickedness, turbidity, and anxiety within the heart" (24). Those who follow the path of virtue and asceticism can gain access to "attainments of the grace and mercy of God" which "only appears in those hearts which are exposed to the gifts of God" (23). Exposing one's heart to God's gifts "is done through cleansing and purifying the heart from evil and from the turbidity that comes from

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[2] Al-Ghazâlî's precise relationship to Sufi thought, as well as to philosophical and legal thought, is complex and is a matter of scholarly debate. It is probably oversimplifying things to claim that he is, in the passages cited here, championing a Sufi approach to seeking knowledge of God over a philosophical approach. Rather, what al-Ghazâlî develops in *The Revival* is a unique approach to seeking knowledge of God, which he calls the Science of Praxis, which is "an amalgam of law, philosophy, and Sufism" (Garden 2013, 76). My interest in the text is to bring out the roles played by virtue, vice, and asceticism within this amalgam.

a blameworthy character" (23-4). Thus, eschewing bad moral character and cultivating good moral character is foundational for al-Ghazâlî's recommended approach to pursuing knowledge of God.

If character is so important for gaining knowledge of God, we might ask *why* it is so important. Or, putting it a bit differently, how is it that good and bad character influence knowledge of God or its absence? What are the mechanisms whereby vice stifles knowledge of God and virtue and asceticism facilitate it? Al-Ghazâlî suggests several distinct yet mutually compatible answers, each of which is worthy of our attention.

First, as anticipated in some of the passages already cited, al-Ghazâlî suggests that God may reward those who eschew vice and pursue virtue with a special revelation withheld from those who do not pursue this path. On this approach, the higher quality knowledge attained through abandoning vice and cultivating virtue does not come automatically. Rather, it remains at divine discretion, and it involves an act of divine revealing distinct from those acts of divine revealing performed in the case of those who live lives of vice.

Seeming to confirm such a possibility, al-Ghazâlî writes of the follower of the ethical path that "Not by his choice . . . can he procure the gift of the mercy of God, the Exalted. By what he has done thus far he has exposed himself to the breezes of God's mercy, and it only remains for him to wait for such mercy as God may grant to him" (55). Similarly he writes, "When God becomes the ruler of the heart, He floods it with mercy and sheds His light upon it, and the breast is opened and there is revealed to it the secret of the unseen world of spirits, and by a gift of mercy there is cleared away from the surface of the heart the veil . . . that blinds its eye, and there shines it in the real nature of divine things" (53). God is thus presented as exercising a divine prerogative to dispense special revelation to those who persist in abandoning vice and acquiring virtue.

Al-Ghazâlî is reluctant to discuss in detail exactly what such experiences of divine revelation are like, though he does include prophetic visions of the future among their possibilities. He suggests that these experiences will be fleeting, at least at the outset, saying that "In the beginning this will be like a blinding flash of lightening" (55). But he holds out for the possibility that such experiences may become increasingly continuous for the devoted follower of the path of virtue.

In several passages, al-Ghazâlî suggests a second way in which abandoning vice and pursuing virtue may influence a person's attaining knowledge of God. A person's character traits direct their attention in different ways, ultimately either toward God or away from God. As such, vices inhibit knowledge of God by diverting attention away from God and God's activities, whereas virtues and ascetic practices can aid a person's pursuit of knowledge of God by directing their attention toward God and God's activities. It is this second mechanism that underscores al-Ghazâlî's memorable remark that "whoever belongs to God, God belongs to him" (54). He likewise highlights the mechanism when he says that a person's heart is accepted by God when "it is free from all save Him, but veiled from God when it becomes wholly occupied with anything other than Him" (2).

Al-Ghazâlî views human hearts as constantly under the fire of temptations that distract them from attending to God. The heart is "a target that is being hit constantly from every direction" (131). Al-

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Ghazâlî describes in detail a litany of vices, each of which involves patterns of attentiveness that direct their possessors away from attending to God and God's activities. Of greed, for example, he writes that "whenever a man is greedy for anything, his greed makes him blind and deaf" (93). The idea here seems to be that the greedy person tends to focus their attention on the things they seek in their greed, and to the extent that they do this it weakens their ability to attend to God and God's activities. Nor are the religious immune from these effects of vice. Al-Ghazâî writes that "One of the great devices of Satan is to turn men's attention away from himself by causing them to become busied with the disputes and contentions that arise between people in the matter of sects" (101). Here again is part of his critique of the philosophers and some of the religious and legal scholars of his day: that their so-called learning ends up diverting their attention from God in ways that hinder them from knowing God.

On the positive side, al-Ghazâlî praises the epistemic significance of virtues and ascetic practices that involve patterns of attentiveness to God and to God's activities. He describes the general form of the cure for the aforementioned problems presented by vice as follows: "if you seek deliverance . . . begin with abstinence through piety, and then follow it with the medicine of remembrance" of God (108). In starker, hyperbolic terms, he describes the cure as requiring "cutting off ties with this present world and . . . emptying the heart of them . . . Nay rather he must bring his heart into that state in which the existence of all these is the same as their non-existence" (21.8). This severing of attention to the things of the present world allows for a focused attentiveness toward God. "He must not divide his thought," writes al-Ghazâlî; "He must strive that nothing save God, the Exalted, shall come into his mind" (54).

It is in this connection that we can identify an epistemic role for ascetic practices such as fasting. Al-Ghazâlî describes three levels of fasting, the highest of which is "the fast of the heart from mean thoughts and worldly worries and its complete unconcern with anything but God" (Faris 1992, 23).[3] Such fasting involves much more than refraining from typical food intake. It involves, in addition, the regulation of what one looks at, how one speaks, what one listens to, how one uses one's hands and feet, and one's keeping one's heart in a state of suspenseful waiting upon God. In each of these areas, part of the aim is to retrain one's attention. As to the regulation of what one looks at, for instance, al-Ghazâlî writes that one should "refrain from looking at anything blameworthy and disapproved, or anything which occupies the person and diverts him from remembering God" (24). Thus, for al-Ghazâlî, vices can influence one's ability to know God by diverting one's attention away from God and toward worldly things, whereas virtues and especially ascetic practices can help to retrain one's attention toward God and God's activities in such a way as to facilitate acquiring knowledge of God (cf. Garden 2013: 76).

A third mechanism whereby abandoning vice and pursuing virtue may promote knowledge of God also deserves comment. Al-Ghazâlî thinks of a person's character traits as embodying their values, and as such he thinks that they can guide a person's practical decision-making, including their decisions about how to engage with God. Because of this, people facing similar predicaments may make different

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[3] All quotations from *The Mysteries of Fasting* come from the translation of (Faris 1992), and references are to the page numbers in this edition.

decisions about whether to engage with God because they have different characters. Some character traits incline a person to be more willing to take risks, including intellectual risks, which can result in rewards, including intellectual rewards, that more risk-averse people would not take. This can lead some to exhibit faith toward God while others do not, where the relevant faith includes epistemically valuable cognitive attitudes as well as emotions and behaviors.

This mechanism appears to be at work in book 31, *On Repentance*. Al-Ghazâlî notes, for instance, that people with different moral characters treat evidence of their sin with differing levels of seriousness. On the one hand, some have the habit of "considering a sin insignificant" (Stern 1990, 82).[4] This "makes for an intense influence on the heart"—the influence being to weaken the person's motivation toward repentance. On the other hand, "sin waxes great in the heart of the believer because of his awareness of God's majesty, and when he contemplates the greatness of Him against whom he rebelled, he sees a minor sin as major" (ibid). The latter has a more accurate appreciation of the badness of sin, according to al-Ghazâlî, since the truth is that "There is no minor sin; every offense is major" (ibid). The difference in values here may lead those who are more sensitive to the badness of sin to be more strongly inclined to repent of their sins than those who are less sensitive to the badness of sin. Since repentance, for al-Ghazâlî, includes cognitive, affective, and volitional components, this difference in character and values leads to cognitive, and indeed epistemic, differences.

Al-Ghazâlî calls the cognitive element of repentance "knowledge". His conception of the relevant knowledge appears to have an important practical component. The sort of knowledge that matters for al-Ghazâlî is a cognitive state sufficient for acting as if what is cognized is true. He calls this state "faith" and "certitude". About the latter he says, "To have faith is to accept as true that Sins are a deadly poison. Certitude consists of the assurance of the acceptance of this truth, the removal of all doubt about it and finally its mastery over the heart, so that whenever the illumination of this Faith shines upon the heart it produces the fire of Regret" (31). Thus, the cognitive component of repentance appears to be a cognitive state of adequate standards to justify action—specifically, the actions characteristic of repentance.

While al-Ghazâlî talks about "certitude", it does not appear that he thinks the cognitive state constitutive of repentance needs to reach a very high evidential threshold. Given the badness of sin and the breach it causes in one's relationship with God, even relatively weak reason for thinking one has sinned against God may enable one to satisfy the "knowledge" component of repentance. This idea is perhaps most dramatically supported in the conclusion of the book, where al-Ghazâlî develops an argument akin to Pascal's wager (cf. Hossain 1984). He presents this argument in response to an imagined question from religious leaders about how to help those who refuse to repent because of "unbelief". Al-Ghazâlî advises that the unbeliever "should be asked: 'Is the truth of what the prophets said, supported as they are by miracles, possible? Or do you maintain that you know that it is impossible…?'" (130). Maintaining that it is of course possible, al-Ghazâlî then advises that the unbeliever be told the following: "If they [the prophets] are right, you are on the brink of a chastisement

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[4] All quotations from *On Repentance* come from the translation of (Stern 1990), and references are to the page numbers in this edition.

which is to continue forever. If, on the other hand, they are wrong, you miss nothing save some cravings of this passing and vexatious world. There can remain no hesitation for him, if he is intelligent, following this reflection, for there is no comparison between a lifetime and eternity" (ibid). Thus, al-Ghazali here employs a strategy of prompting repentance which rests not on high evidential standards but on high values for repentance. One needn't have very strong evidence that one has sinned against God in order to attain the cognitive state constitutive of repentance; one only needs evidence that is good enough to justify repenting, given that one has placed a high value on repentance.

Nor is the high value that al-Ghazâlî suggests should be placed on repentance driven solely by considerations pertaining to punishment or reward in an afterlife, as the above quotation might suggest. For al-Ghazâlî also stresses the value of engaging in positive relationship with God in the here and now. He writes that "in repenting of transgressions and in concern for obedience lies delight in conferring with God, repose in perceiving and obeying Him and constant closeness to Him. If the obedient had no other recompense for his deeds than what he feels of the sweetness of obedience and the spirit of intimacy in converse with God, that would surely be sufficient" (132). The implication seems to be that the virtuous might place such a high value on engaging in positive relationship with God, even only in the here and now, that they are willing to risk repenting when repentance isn't warranted rather than risk failing to repent when it is warranted. In doing so, their character can lead them to gain "knowledge" of their having wronged God that those with a more risk-averse character will have foregone.[5]

In summary, we find in al-Ghazâlî at least three potential pathways whereby abandoning vice and pursuing virtue and asceticism may lead one to gain better knowledge of God. It may do so because God may reward those who do this with a special revelation of God. It may do so because those who do this will do a better job of attending to salient evidence of God's activity in their lives. And it may do so because those who do this may relate to God in such a way as to take intellectual risks and gain intellectual rewards which would not be gained by those who do not do this. Moral character, then, plays a very important role in al-Ghazâlî's religious epistemology.

2. Moral Character and Ascetic Practice in Contemporary Religious Epistemology

While moral character and ascetic practice were viewed as central to seeking knowledge of God for al-Ghazâlî, they have not been central topics in contemporary religious epistemology in the analytic tradition. More central topics have included arguments for theism, atheism, and agnosticism; reformed epistemology; the epistemology of religious experience; and the epistemology of religious disagreement. Nonetheless, one does find echoes of the three key ideas from al-Ghazâlî outlined above represented in works of a small number of contemporary authors. In this section, I will describe some of

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[5] This is perhaps the clearest case where the knowledge gained via virtue and asceticism is propositional in nature. The first mechanism and perhaps also the second mechanism may result in *de te* acquaintance knowledge of God instead.

these works. In the next, I point to some ways in which research in this area could be further advanced via engagement with developments in mainstream epistemology and virtue theory.

One contemporary author who has sought to stress the importance of moral character for religious epistemology is Paul Moser. Moser seeks to defend an "ethics for inquiry about God" (2017: 2) that involves more than dispassionate assessment of publicly available arguments and evidence. For Moser, inquiry about God will be carried out responsibly only when one does *the best one can* in the process and not just the result . . . of the inquiry, in a manner respectful of its subject-matter" (2). Since the subject-matter of inquiry about God is a morally perfect personal being, there are unique demands for inquiring about God, including ethical demands. "Truth-seeking about God," he writes, is "ethically robust, and not just reflective or intellectual" (15).

The main way that meeting or failing to meet the ethical demands of inquiry about God makes a difference to the quality of inquiries about God, according to Moser, has to do with whether or not a person receives "salient evidence of God's self-manifested reality" (3). He raises the question, "Could it be that God enables *humans* to empower God to self-reveal to them so as to be suitably apprehended by them?" (16). His book defends an affirmative answer to the question, though Moser claims that "inquirers have overlooked the question almost universally" (ibid). According to Moser, there is "a morally significant cooperative role for humans in enabling salient evidence of God for themselves" (ibid).

According to Moser, humans put themselves in a much better position to receive salient evidence of God if they inquire into God's reality with a genuine willingness to have their own characters transformed through this inquiry so that they reflect God's perfect moral character, especially God's self-sacrificial love. They put themselves in a much better position to receive such evidence if they enter into inquiry about God with a willingness to cooperate with God in God's project of bringing about "mutual agape [love] relationships between God and every human and between all humans who interact, for the benefit of all concerned" (7). If one inquires about God without these kinds of willingness, by contrast, then receiving salient evidence of God would risk causing "harm to a potential good relationship" between oneself and God (152), as one may receive this evidence and then fail to cooperate with God. Thus, God may have an interest in providing such evidence, at God's discretion, to those who are "sympathetically open to receive and to participate in redemptive self-sacrifice, the hallmark of God's perfect moral character" (134). Whether, when, and how such evidence might be provided would remain a divine prerogative, yet given God's perfect moral character we would have better grounds to expect such evidence in cases where the inquirer follows the ethics for inquiry about God.

We can see clearly here that Moser's main focus is on the first of the three potential pathways whereby moral character can influence religious epistemology that we identified in al-Ghazâlî. Abandoning vice and pursuing virtue, or at the very least being willing and eager to do so in cooperation with God, puts one in a better position to receive at God's discretion a special revelation of God not given to all those who do not do this. Receipt of such a revelation would enable one to attain better

knowledge of God than if one did not receive it. In Moser's case, if not also al-GhazâlÎ's, the kind of knowledge gained via this pathway is *de te* acquaintance knowledge of God.[6]

A second contemporary author who has addressed the role of moral character in religious epistemology is William Wainwright. In contrast to Moser, Wainwright focuses mainly on the second and third pathways we identified in al-Ghazâlî, with the majority of his work addressing the third pathway. Wainwright's work highlights how a person's values, or "passional nature" more broadly, can influence both which available evidence a person attends to and how they evaluate the evidence they possess. Wainwright makes a case, moreover, that there are circumstances in which it is epistemically valuable to allow one's passional nature to influence one's epistemic practices in these ways.

Wainwright's comments about the way in which one's passional nature can influence the way one attends to evidence are offered primarily in contexts in which he writes approvingly of ideas expressed earlier by William James. In his interpretation of James, Wainwright highlights the way in which a person's interests, and what they find to be of use, influence the conduct of their inquiries. This occurs in scientific practice no less than in other domains of inquiry. Wainwright writes:

> It is important to appreciate how pervasive interest is. Science itself is an expression of it. Its concepts are formed by abstracting selected aspects of reality, and selection is determined by interests. (2006, 84)

We cannot attend equally to all aspects of our present or potential experiences. An important part of what makes the difference concerning what we attend to in our experience is what we are interested in, or what we value, or what we have use for.

This role for interests or values in influencing attention extends to our epistemic treatment of arguments, including arguments about religious matters. Wainwright observes:

> [E]ven if one sees no flaws in an argument, one may dismiss it from one's mind, give it little or no weight in one's practical or theoretical deliberations, or treat it as at most an interesting intellectual curiosity. William James thought that we regard something as real only when we have use for it, and something similar may be true here. Arguments are taken seriously only when they seem to us to have some bearing on how we should think or act or feel. Whether or not they appear to us to have that bearing depends importantly on our purposes. An argument may thus fail to be a good argument for someone because she doesn't have the interests and concerns needed for her to take the argument seriously. (2011, 86)

In the religious context, for example, it may be that how one attends to evidence of God, whether in one's actual or potential experiences or in arguments for or against God's existence, depends upon one's purposes and interests regarding God. One who is deeply concerned to engage in loving

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[6] For a recent treatment of the different types of knowledge of God that may be attainable, see (Benton 2018). I haven't made the distinction between these various types of knowledge central to the project of this paper, but attending more thoroughly to them would be a welcome extension of the ideas developed here.

relationship with God if God exists is likely to exhibit different patterns of attention to these sources of evidence than someone who lacks this deep concern.

This idea about how one's values or interests can influence one's attention to evidence bearing on God is also echoed in the work of John Cottingham. Cottingham advocates what he calls an "*epistemology of receptivity*" regarding topics such as music, personal relationships, and religion, in contrast to an "epistemology of control" (2017, 99). When investigating these topics we should not be "hard, detached, critical evaluators" but "open, yielding, receptive listeners". This epistemology of receptivity will involve adopting patterns of attention that can be gradually transformative for the investigator. Cottingham writes:

> What begins as a mere minimal willingness to pause and look around, becomes, as the transformations take affect, an attentive looking, and then a delighted looking; and at each stage, richer dimensions of reality come into focus. As we progress up the spiral of committed attention, we ourselves undergo interior change, and this leads to changes in perception, awareness of new relationships, which in their turn generate further transformations, both in the reality that is presented to me, and in how I perceive its meaning. (96)

What Cottingham describes here is a kind of reciprocal, mutually reinforcing process. Patterns of attention that have been adopted on the basis of a certain level of interest in certain aspects of experience yield further experiences that deepen this level of interest in these aspects, and this deepened level of interest in these aspects of experience in turn reinforces and refines the patterns of attention that have been adopted. Here, for Cottingham, one's values can and should play an important part in determining how one sees the world, what sort of worldview one adopts.

Returning to Wainwright's work, as noted above, his primary emphasis is on the third pathway whereby character can influence religious epistemology. The thesis of his book, *Reason and the Heart*, is that while "religious belief can, and perhaps should, be based on evidence", there is also a role for passional nature because "evidence can be accurately assessed only by men and women who possess the proper moral and spiritual qualifications" (2006, 3). Wainwright himself places "a high value on proofs, arguments, and inferences" in religious epistemology. But he also wishes to vindicate the idea that "a properly disposed heart is needed to see their *force*" (ibid).

Wainwright defends this thesis in part by engaging critically with the work of Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman, and William James. He notes that all three thinkers held in common the idea that "proper epistemic functioning depends on the possession of the appropriate moral or spiritual temperament" (5). For Edwards, this temperament includes the virtue of benevolence; for Newman, it requires virtue more broadly; and for James, it requires that the temperament one exhibits is common. Wainwright does not endorse the details of these views wholesale. Indeed, he cannot, since the views of Newman and Edwards pull in an opposed direction from those of James. For, virtues are not common. Nonetheless, there are central aspects of these views that Wainwright does affirm.

First, he agrees that a rightly disposed heart is needed to evaluate evidence properly in certain domains, including the domain of religion. He writes, "certain dispositions of the heart may be needed

to reason rightly about value laden subject matters" (2011, 87). In support of this claim, he argues that "all comprehensive world views integrally incorporate values. If they do, and values can't be grasped in the absence of the right feelings and attitudes, then appropriate dispositions of the heart will be needed to discern the truth of a world view. Wrong dispositions, on the other hand, will result in false judgments and intellectual blindness" (ibid).

Which dispositions of the heart are the right ones—the ones needed in order to properly evaluate evidence for God? Wainwright doesn't defend a detailed view on this matter at length. As the subtitle of his book suggests, he aims more modestly to provide only a "prolegomena" to answering this sort of question, rather than answering it. Yet, he does make a few suggestive remarks in the direction of answering it. In the Epilogue of *Reason and the Heart*, he briefly proposes that the disposition of the heart that may be needed in order to properly evaluate the force of evidence for God is "a kind of readiness to believe which is not yet belief itself", a "religious *hope* or *longing*", an "inchoate love of the good" (153). In a later paper, he briefly illustrates how such a disposition may affect a person's evaluation of evidence for God. "Our assessment of 'It is logically possible that God exists'", he writes, "may be partly determined by . . . the strength of our need for a larger meaning, or by our hunger for God or lack of it. Other things being equal, a person who . . . hungers after [God], is more likely to find God's possibility intuitively obvious than someone who . . . feels no need for God" (2011, 86). Here it seems that a character that is oriented toward embracing God in a personal way influences one to evaluate evidence for God more sympathetically.

Why does Wainwright think that this kind of disposition of the heart is the right one? The answer to this question points us to a second point of broad agreement between Wainwright and the historical figures he surveys. All of them propose that reasoning in accordance with the passions they select enhances the reliability of one's reasoning. One is more likely to reach the truth, they contend, when reasoning in accordance with benevolence (for Edwards), or virtue (for Newman), or common passions (for James), or a readiness to believe (Wainwright). In the case of Edwards, Newman, and Wainwright, the defense for this claim about the reliability of the selected passions is ultimately circular. It is the existence of a God who providentially directs the world in accordance with a perfect moral character that makes it more reliable to reason in accordance with benevolence or virtue or a readiness to believe. Yet, Wainwright maintains that the circularity here is not vicious, and may be unavoidable. A parallel circularity afflicts even sense perception: one can only defend the reliability of one's senses by assuming conclusions one reaches via the use of one's senses. Insofar as this circularity does not impugn the use of sense perception, it likewise does not impugn the use of passional reasoning. Wainwright suggests that this circular defense of the epistemic propriety of the relevant sort of passional reasoning may be the best defense of any sort of passional reasoning that can be given. And the use of some passions or others in reasoning may be unavoidable.

3. Extending Work on Moral Character and Ascetic Practice in Religious Epistemology in Light of Contemporary Developments

While we do find the above echoes of al-Ghazâlî's ideas in some contemporary authors, I want to suggest in this final section that there is an opportunity to extend and deepen work on this topic. The opportunity arises in part because of contemporary developments in virtue theory and epistemology that are reflective of al-Ghazâlî's ideas but that are not stressed in the work surveyed in the previous section.

First, in virtue theory, the role of attention in virtues has been stressed in light of situationist critiques of virtue theory. Mark Alfano, who is one of the leading figures of situationism, makes the role of attention central to his critique of virtue theory. This is because attention plays a key role in what he takes to be "the heart of the situationist challenge"—situational non-reasons (2013, 43). Situational non-reasons are features of an agent's environment which exert significant influence over their conduct without providing the agent with a reason to alter their conduct. They include, for example, ambient smells, which are associated with people more often helping others, or ambient noise of particular decibels, which is associated with the opposite. The way these situational non-reasons influence moral conduct is by "caus[ing] our attention to constrict or dilate" (49). The smell of freshly baked goods dilates our attention, while disagreeable sounds constrict it. Thus, people who may be inclined to attend to the needs of others to some extent will more freely engage in and act upon this attentiveness in the presence of the right kinds of smells, but will do so less freely in the presence of the wrong kinds of sounds. Alfano concludes that "moral psychologists neglect the power of attention and construal at their peril" (42).

While Alfano intends these remarks about the role of situational non-reasons and attention to present a challenge for virtue theory, many virtue theorists have responded to this critique by simply taking to heart Alfano's lesson about the importance of attention for virtue. Daniel Russell, for example, recommends that virtue theorists "embrace situationism and define virtues in cognitive-affective rather than behavioral terms" (2009, 324). One of the key features of defining virtues in this way is that the role of attention is stressed. For example, Russell offers the following account of compassion:

> 'compassion' [is] a character trait in virtue of which one regularly acts for compassionate reasons, acts for the sake of certain goals (e.g. the goal of benefiting others for their own sake), *attends to certain features of situations as practically salient*, classifies situations as opportunities to help (rather than, e.g., to ignore or to exploit), attaches value to certain kinds of outcomes, and so on, and adjusts one's behaviors accordingly. (324, emphasis added)

Ryan West (2018) similarly notes that "the deeper corrective for over-sensitivity to so-called non-reasons is an increased concern for and sensitivity to the morally significant features of the situations in which we find ourselves" (102). These "patterns of attention and construal," he writes, "often correlate to what we care about, [and] are themselves matters of character that play a crucial role in sensitizing us to reasons for action" (101). Making a related point from the perspective of attitude psychology, Jonathan Webber writes that "strongly held attitudes consistently manifest in judgments about their

objects and in behaviour, whereas weakly held attitudes do neither" (2016, 142). Thus, in order to improve our moral consistency, Webber recommends a positive program of moral improvement that involves strengthening our moral attitudes in accordance with virtue.

This lesson from situationism about the importance of strong patterns of attentiveness in virtues was one with which virtue theorists were already agreeable. But, the empirical work that Alfano and others reference reinforces the lesson, and deepens our understanding of its importance. Roughly, the empirical work serves to highlight something al-Ghazâlî had anticipated. The heart really is a "target that is being hit constantly from every direction". It is even being hit by stealthy influences that alter our conduct without providing us reasons to alter our conduct. As such, the importance of cultivating strong, virtuous patterns of attention is even greater than we might have appreciated.

Developments in epistemology work in tandem with these developments in virtue theory to open up an opportunity for extending work on our focal themes from al-Ghazâlî. The main development in epistemology I have in mind is the increasing popularity of views according to which the practical, and indeed, moral stakes of an inquiry can make a difference for one's epistemic standing.

The most widely known views of this type are those that embrace pragmatic or moral encroachment (see Kim an McGrath 2018 for an overview). According to these views, the epistemic value of a cognitive attitude depends not only on the extent to which this attitude is supported by one's evidence, but also on the stakes of the inquiry. The importance of not getting things wrong can raise the evidential standards required for a cognitive attitude to be epistemically justified, whereas—at least on some of these views—the importance of getting things right can lower the evidential standards required for a cognitive attitude to be epistemically justified. In the latter vein, for instance, if it is more important to hold good opinions of others when these are true than to avoid holding them when they are false, then the epistemic standards necessary for justifiedly holding good opinions of others will be lower than the epistemic standards for holding bad opinions of them (cf. Pace 2011).

Epistemic permissivism is a different view that can allow stakes, or values, to have an influence on epistemic standing. Permissivists deny that for any body of evidence, there is at most a single cognitive attitude that is the justified cognitive attitude to take on the basis of this evidence (see Kopec and Titelbaum 2016 for an overview). Instead, multiple attitudes may be permissible. Some permissivists allow that an agent's values can make a contribution to whether adopting an attitude is epistemically permissible for them. Tom Kelly, for instance, writes that "the more weight one gives to not believing something false, the more it makes sense to hold out until there is a great deal of evidence that p is true before taking up the belief that p. On the other hand, the more one values not missing out on believing the truth, the more it makes sense to take a somewhat more liberal attitude about how much evidence one expects before taking up the relevant belief" (2014, 104). Thus, on these kinds of permissivist views, what an agent values, which will be reflected in the weights they assign to getting things right versus avoiding getting things wrong about certain matters, can make a difference for whether a cognitive attitude is epistemically permissible for them.

It's not obvious that al-Ghazâlî held views such as these about epistemic value. But it is at least clear that he thought that, even in the absence of very strong evidential support, one could adopt a positive cognitive attitude toward one's having sinned against God, and that such an attitude could merit the honorific epistemic terminology of "knowledge". As such, we might see the development of the foregoing approaches to epistemic justification as detailed developments of a perspective that may have been incipient in al-Ghazâlî.

Let's consider how these developments in virtue theory and in epistemology may work in tandem to open up an opportunity to deepen and expand work on the role of moral character and ascetic practice in contemporary religious epistemology. When these developments are taken in tandem, they suggest the idea that moral character and asceticism may make not just a causal or a moral difference for a person's cognitive attitudes toward God, but they may make an epistemic difference as well. Virtues, we've learned from contemporary virtue theory, involve strong patterns of attention reflective of their possessor's values. As al-Ghazâlî anticipated, the world is full of distractions—even non-rational distractions, we've learned—that can prevent us from attending to what we should. We need virtues to navigate this cacophonous environment. And we may even need to engage in ascetic practices to help strengthen our values and hone our virtuous patterns of attention. Asceticism here may have a therapeutic purpose. Yet, we also learn from contemporary epistemology that when our patterns of attention and concern are retrained in accordance with virtue, this can influence our epistemic standing. It may lead us to better adopt justified attitudes (if a certain version of moral encroachment is correct), or it may make permissible for us attitudes that wouldn't have been permissible if we didn't have these values (if a certain version of permissivism is true). Thus, if there are moral virtues that, other things being equal, incline people more toward adopting positive cognitive attitudes toward God, they may make a positive epistemic contribution to these attitudes. And, if ascetic practices can aid practitioners to develop morally good values or patterns of attention reflective of these virtues, they too can make a positive contribution toward the epistemic value of cognitive commitments to God.

It is notable that, in contrast to Wainwright's proposal, this account of the role of moral character and ascetic practice in religious epistemology does not depend on the reliability of these in leading to accurate cognitive commitments. Likewise, in contrast to Moser's proposal, the role of moral character and ascetic practice here does not involve God's providing additional special revelation to the virtuous. Instead, it depends on a combination of views about the role of values and attention in virtues, and about the contribution of the same to epistemic standing.

I want to conclude by identifying some potential moral virtues that may play the important epistemic role in religious epistemology highlighted in this section. I'll mention three: appreciativeness, gratitude, and contrition. While I discuss these only briefly here, I direct interested readers to my (forthcoming), which discusses them in further detail. The discussion here is intended only to be illustrative.

First, consider appreciativeness. By appreciativeness, I have in mind a character trait concerned with showing appreciation, particularly of valuable features of others. The appreciative person attends

to others' positive features, including their activities and accomplishments, and where possible they enjoy recognizing the value of these and communicating that they recognize it. The highly appreciative person might prefer to err on the side of showing appreciation for others' accomplishments. If their evidence were roughly counterbalanced for thinking that someone had accomplished a praiseworthy feat, they might risk praising them for the feat and being wrong for the sake of praising them for it and being right. They place a higher value on giving credit when credit is due than on refraining from giving credit when credit is not due.

Next, consider gratitude. By gratitude, I have in mind a character trait concerned with giving thanks for the benefits others have brought about in one's life. The grateful person attends to others' contributions to the good things in their life, and where possible they enjoy recognizing the value of these contributions and communicating their thanks for it. The highly grateful person might prefer to err on the side of thanking others. If their evidence were roughly counterbalanced for thinking that someone had benefited them in a way deserving of thanks, they might risk thanking them and being wrong for the sake of thanking them and being right. They place a higher value on thanking when thanks is due than on refraining from thanking when thanks is not due.

Last, consider contrition. By contrition, I have in mind a character trait concerned with offering apology for wrongs one has done to others. The contrite person attends to their potential wrongdoings and their effects on others, and where possible they are motivated to recognize the disvalue of these and to communicate their remorse for having done them. The highly contrite person might prefer to err on the side of apologizing for their wrongdoing. If their evidence were roughly counterbalanced for thinking that they had wronged someone, they might risk apologizing and being wrong for the sake of apologizing and being right. They place a higher value on apologizing when apology is due than on refraining from apologizing when apology is not due.

It shouldn't be difficult to see how these traits—and others like them—could play the role in religious epistemology highlighted here. The appreciative, grateful, and contrite will be inclined to pay careful attention to potential activities of God and features of their relationship with God, such as God's excellence and beneficence, and their wrongdoing toward God. Moreover, they will be inclined to value these features. Given their patterns of attention and concern, they will be more strongly inclined to praise, thank, and apologize to God, and to adopt suitable cognitive attitudes toward God when doing so, than if they were not appreciative, grateful, and contrite. If these character traits are indeed virtuous—as al-Ghazâlî would likely suggest—then, given the views articulated in this section, they could make positive contributions to the epistemic status of cognitive commitments to God adopted partly because of them. Moreover, if there are ascetic practices which can encourage the development of appreciativeness, gratitude, and contrition, these too could make positive contributions to religious epistemology.

I've obviously been very brief and suggestive here. There is much more work to do on this topic. And not all of it need be flattering toward religious commitment; there may be virtues that lead away from religious commitment as well (cf. Schellenberg 2004). My purpose here has been primarily to point to the value of doing this kind of work. Inspired by al-Ghazâlî's ideas, and with contemporary

developments in virtue theory and epistemology in mind, it seems there is rich territory to explore regarding the potential importance for religious epistemology of moral character and ascetic practice.

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