

Why Mennonite Pacifists Should be Reformed Epistemologists

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I. Epistemology

The importance of epistemology to religious belief, as well as the reason for the varying ways the relationship is viewed, immediately becomes apparent, for religious believers of all stripes are committed to believing propositions that many are equally as committed to disputing. Thus, the relationship of religious belief to epistemology is viewed in vastly differing lights. There are some who think that religious belief either flourishes, withers, resists, requires, or is neutral with respect to sustained thought about the nature of knowledge.

Now consider Christian pacifism, characterized roughly as including the belief that at least one condition of faithful witness to Christ is a categorical rejection of violence.¹ For ease of reference, I will identify this condition as the “unrestricted pacifist thesis” (T), and I will cast (T) as follows:

(T) Followers of Christ ought to reject violence in all forms in every circumstance.

At the very least, pacifism is a bold assertion about the way the world is — an assertion that many thoughtful, intelligent, and moral people judge to be false and, perhaps, immoral as well. Thus the pacifist faces a significant epistemological task — namely, to provide an accurate account of the structure of one’s cognitive life according to which pacifist beliefs are justified or warranted. To be sure, having such an account is no guarantee that another person will *agree* that (T) is justified, even when that person is another theist, another Christian, or perhaps even another Anabaptist! But surely for the pacifist who thinks that (T) is justified, it would be helpful to have *some* plausible account as to why *she herself* should think that (T) is a true and good belief.

Now we get to the proper subject of this paper, for I want to argue against a type of “Pacifist Epistemology” being advanced by some pacifists in part for the purpose of supporting (T), either explicitly or implicitly. Although there are no books to date that deal exclusively with pacifism and epistemology, there already are two emerging approaches to peace-motivated theories of knowledge. One approach is represented by Nancey Murphy, who uses

historical and contemporary Anabaptist thinkers as resources for complementing Alasdair MacIntyre's epistemology.² A second pacifist approach, the one I will consider, is represented by Chris K. Huebner and Ted Grimsrud.³ Though Murphy draws on John Howard Yoder (among others) in order to correct what she sees as deficiencies in MacIntyre's approach, Huebner and Grimsrud are anchored more solidly in the Yoder school, due to their reluctance toward the systematization that finds expression in Murphy's work.

My view is that the best epistemological context for one's pacifist beliefs is within Reformed, and not Pacifist, epistemology.⁴

II. Pacifist Epistemology

A. Summary

Chris Huebner in "Globalization, Theory and Dialogical Vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the Possibility of a Pacifist Epistemology" and Ted Grimsrud in "A Pacifist Way of Knowing: Postmodern Sensibilities and Peace Theology" both appear to endorse the following set of theses, the conjunction of which is what I am calling Pacifist Epistemology.

The first premise of Pacifist Epistemology is the normative conditional that if one is a pacifist, then there ought to be consistency between one's pacifist convictions and one's method of epistemic evaluation. Let us call this *the consistency thesis*. Says Huebner, "the message of Christian pacifism can be compromised when it is articulated by a medium that is somehow implicated in the question of violence."⁵ That this is so is more readily seen in the current context of globalization which, in its philosophical dimension, illuminates the "interrelationship between medium and message" (50). Huebner doesn't give us the form of the "question of violence," but presumably it is something akin to inquiring about any thing whether it is violent, be that thing a person or a medium.

The second thesis uniting Huebner and Grimsrud is their common judgment that the medium of "modern epistemology" is intrinsically violent, and thus should be rejected. Let us call this the *historical thesis*. According to this thesis, pacifists who embrace modern epistemology are immediately in violation of the consistency thesis. But, what is modern epistemology, and why might we think it is intrinsically violent? Neither Huebner nor Grimsrud provides an explicit sketch of the target they have in view but they give enough clues for us to get a sense of what they have in mind. Huebner cites

with approval Yoder's rejection of problematic "categories of the epistemological mainstream" with its method of "starting from scratch," and its preoccupation with "theoretical dualisms" and "abstract principles." Such epistemological discourse is viewed as a "rhetoric of finality" and constitutes epistemological violence. Grimsrud at least offers a type of historical story in support of his view that modernity and modern epistemology are intrinsically violent, though I think his reading of Descartes and Locke is wrong — but more on that below. The modern emphasis on reason, says Grimsrud, is an unprincipled claim to authority, power, and domination. Indeed, today's multinational corporations are allegedly the direct philosophical descendents of Descartes.⁶

Thus far we have two *negative* restrictions embodied in the consistency thesis and the historical thesis: don't be inconsistent and don't be "modernist." But it is the third dimension of Pacifist Epistemology in which we get a *positive* epistemological criterion stating that epistemic evaluations must be made according to the standard of one's pacifism. Call this the *pacifist-foundationalist thesis*, so named because pacifism is the control-belief according to which all other beliefs and epistemic criteria are subordinated.⁷ This leads Huebner to speak of "vulnerability" and "patience" as epistemic virtues. One is epistemologically *vulnerable* if one's beliefs are, at least in principle, open to revision (in contemporary epistemology this is called *epistemic fallibilism*). One is epistemologically *patient* if one tolerates dissenting views (in contemporary epistemology this is called *being polite*). Reading Huebner I get the impression that neither epistemic fallibilism nor politeness is present in contemporary epistemology, but that is simply not the case.⁸ At any rate, for Huebner, vulnerability and patience are epistemic virtues because they are seen as epistemological exemplifications of one's pacifism and thus flow out of the pacifist-foundationalist thesis. Grimsrud makes his commitment to the pacifist-foundationalist thesis explicit:

"Pacifism" is the belief that nothing is as important as love, kindness, and peaceableness. One consequence of this belief is a complete rejection of violence under any circumstances. For a pacifist, peaceableness is the central orienting point of life. . . . For a Christian pacifist, this central orienting point of peaceableness is understood in terms of the character of God.⁹

Thus, Grimsrud first endorses (T) and then grants (T) foundational status.

B. Critique

We set out to ask if Huebner-Grimsrud Pacifist Epistemology has the resources to account for a positive epistemic evaluation of the pacifist thesis (T):

(T) Followers of Christ ought to reject violence in all forms in every circumstance.

I think we can see that it does not, for while I am happy to endorse the consistency thesis, I think that the historical thesis is false and the pacifist-foundationalist thesis is in need of significant repair.

1. The Historical Thesis

The historical thesis states that modern epistemology is intrinsically violent, and therefore cannot be endorsed by pacifists. With respect to the history of philosophy this is a curious claim, for consider the fountainheads of modern epistemology, Descartes and Locke. Cartesian epistemology is many things — certainly it is a rationalist epistemology (given Descartes’s emphasis on a priori knowledge) as well as an infallibilist epistemology (given Descartes’s view that knowledge implies certainty). Cartesian epistemology is also a species of foundationalism, for Descartes sensibly believes that some beliefs are justified without being based on other beliefs. But it’s hard to see how rationalism, infallibilism, and foundationalism constitute an intrinsically *violent* position. Indeed, neither Huebner nor Grimsrud has shown that this is the case, veiled references to the evils of theoretical dualisms (*pace* Huebner) or proliferations of scare-quotes around terms like “modern project” and “house of authority” (*pace* Grimsrud) notwithstanding.

Similar to Descartes, Locke’s epistemology is foundationalist for he, too, sensibly thinks that some beliefs may be justified without appeal to other beliefs. At the end of the day, Locke is more of an epistemological realist than Descartes and thinks that certain knowledge is “short and scanty,” for a relative minority of one’s beliefs actually count as knowledge.¹⁰ However, Locke thinks that human beings are still able to flourish because God has graciously given the “twilight of probability” as a check against false confidence in inappropriate beliefs. Moreover, it appears that Locke’s main purpose in writing his epistemological landmark, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was to provide some means of mediating disputes — more specifically, the religious disputes of the day — in a way satisfying to all parties.¹¹

Both Huebner and Grimsrud are happy to define and indict “modern epistemology”; however, the combination of veiled descriptions with a lack of textual support from live or dead “modern epistemologists” might suggest their characterization is just a caricature — a straw boy that might grow to be a straw man, but nothing more. If whatever they mean by “modern epistemology” is in fact necessarily violent, they have not shown why.¹²

Unless, of course, they mean to say that simply articulating an epistemological standard is intrinsically violent. Perhaps this is what Grimsrud has in mind when he rejects “coercive rationalism,” and Huebner when he rejects “theoretical dualisms,” perhaps with dualisms like rational/irrational and true/false in view. But that is simply to reject the concept of epistemological normativity all together. And if that’s the case, then Pacifist Epistemology itself is in serious trouble, for it is nothing if not normative. Attempting to support the historical thesis by a categorical rejection of epistemological standards isn’t going to get Pacifist Epistemologists very far, for such a move entails rejecting the very standards they wish to endorse. So, for these historical and philosophical considerations, it seems wise to reject the Pacifist Epistemologist’s historical thesis that modern epistemology is intrinsically violent.

2. *The Pacifist-Foundationalist Thesis*

Recall the pacifist-foundationalist thesis of Pacifist Epistemology, which states that pacifism is the control-belief according to which all other areas of cognitive life must be subordinated. Put another way, if one is making epistemic judgments out of step with pacifism, it is the faulty epistemic judgments, and not one’s pacifism, that must give way. This is the lesson Huebner says we must learn from Yoder, and the reason that Grimsrud gave up faith in nationalism, inerrancy, and the value of abstract normative principles in ethical theory.¹³

Now the pacifist-foundationalist thesis as it stands won’t do, for it fails to provide one necessary and important piece of information which I’ll get to shortly. I am not objecting to the *foundationalist* part of the pacifist-foundationalist thesis, for in epistemology, foundationalism is the truth of the matter. That is, if any beliefs are known or justified at all, it must be because either they are a justified member of one’s cognitive foundations, or they are validly inferred from justified premises, where justification may be traced back to the foundations.¹⁴ Construing justification in terms of coherence is either a dead-end or illusory, for coherence theories invariably wind up being

either a species of foundationalism or viciously circular. So, if one wants to avoid a pervading skepticism such that few of our beliefs are justified, let alone count as knowledge — including our unrestricted pacifist thesis (T) — then one should be a foundationalist. Moreover, I am not objecting to the *pacifist* part of the pacifist-foundationalist thesis, for a good case can be made for thinking that some type of pacifist proposition *can* be a justified member of one's cognitive foundations. Where foundationalists disagree is with respect to how a belief gains access to the foundations, and I think a good story can be told according to which certain moral premises can be *both* justified *and* not held on the basis of any other beliefs. If you think there are any beliefs that satisfy both criteria, then you too are a foundationalist.

What is missing from the pacifist-foundationalist thesis as it stands is a type of access-story explaining how (T) gains access into the foundations (or in virtue of what it is that (T) is properly considered foundational). For surely not just any belief properly merits the privileged status of belonging to epistemological foundations. Presumably, false beliefs should be excluded as well as beliefs that turn out to be only accidentally true. Thus, if (T) is going to do what pacifist-epistemologists need it to do — namely, function as a justified gatekeeper for guarding against unjustified violence-sanctioning beliefs — then we need to know in virtue of what it is that (T) itself is justified. Why should anyone think that (T) is true? Moreover, why should anyone think that (T) is worthy of foundational status?

One move a pacifist epistemologist might make is to say that (T) itself isn't justified, but that somehow (T) is still able to transmit justification or some type of positive epistemic evaluation to other beliefs that we infer from (T). But such a move is unlikely going to appeal to the pacifist epistemologist because first it would require saying that (T) itself really has nothing going for it epistemologically, and second, it would require some type of explanation as to how one might make justified inferences from unjustified premises. The prospects for this are not rosy. A better strategy for the pacifist epistemologist is to tell some story that begins like this: "Here is what's required for a belief to gain access to the foundations of knowledge . . ." and then proceed to fill in the details. Then the second part of the story should begin something like this: "And so now that we see in virtue of what a justified foundational belief *is* justified, we can see that the pacifist belief (T) is a good candidate for just such a belief . . ." and then provide those details.

Pacifist epistemologists like Huebner and Grimsrud would probably resist such a move for it smacks of “modern epistemology,” which was held to be intrinsically violent as stated in the historical thesis. But such worries are unfounded and the historical thesis itself is to be rejected on historical and philosophical grounds, and thus cannot be a legitimate barrier to explaining how justified beliefs acquire their justification. No doubt Huebner and Grimsrud think that (T) or something akin to (T) have positive epistemic status — they just haven’t told us why. In fact, with the limited resources of Pacifist Epistemology, it’s clear that they couldn’t tell us why.

C. Reformed Epistemology

This is why Mennonite pacifists or any other flavor of Christian pacifist should be Reformed in their epistemology, for Alvin Plantinga’s Reformed epistemology does have the conceptual resources to explain how warranted foundational beliefs do in fact gain their warrant. Plantinga names the prized epistemic property as *warrant*, where warrant is “that property — or better, *quantity* — enough of which is what makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief.”¹⁵ How do beliefs acquire warrant? Just in case:

that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. . . . [T]he *degree* of warrant it enjoys depends on the strength of the belief, the firmness with which *S* holds it.¹⁶

So, according to Plantinga, if I’ve got some faculty that is designed to produce true beliefs, and that faculty is working properly in the environment for which it is intended, then beliefs produced by that faculty are warranted. Plantinga holds that justified foundational beliefs get their warrant in just this way, and he includes the warranted deliverances of memory, sense, and introspection within the foundations. This makes Plantinga a different sort of foundationalist from Descartes, who restricted foundational beliefs to beliefs in necessary truths from math and logic, and incorrigible beliefs about one’s own mental states. Here’s where the “Reformed” in Reformed Epistemology comes into play, for Plantinga, following Calvin, thinks that each person has been given a faculty designed to produce belief in God, the *sensus divinitatus*, which, when functioning properly due to the

influence of the Holy Spirit, produces warranted beliefs like “God is speaking to me,” “God has created all this,” “God disapproves of what I have done,” and “God is to be thanked and praised.”¹⁷ Here the pacifist epistemologist should chime in with “God disapproves of violence in any circumstances,” supporting *that* claim with all the resources provided by Anabaptist peace-church theology.

Ironically, Pacifist Epistemology doesn’t have the resources to give an account for why pacifists should give pacifist beliefs like (T) a positive epistemic evaluation. However, Reformed Epistemology *does* have the resources to explain why, epistemologically, (T) is a perfectly respectable belief — justified, warranted, and one that may even count as knowledge such that we can *know* that (T), provided the degree to which we hold (T) is firm enough. That is why Mennonite pacifists should be Reformed Epistemologists. For everybody has some epistemology, some standard for making epistemic evaluations about their beliefs. And standards, epistemological or otherwise, are like relationships — there’s nothing wrong with having them as long as they’re the right sort. But the standards of Pacifist Epistemology aren’t the right sort, at least for pacifists who think that (T) is a justified and warranted belief — which is one clue that Pacifist Epistemology needs to be Reformed.¹⁸

Notes

¹ Obviously, a robust pacifism will require assent to more than just this negative prohibition, and will include adopting a proactive and intentional pursuit of peace.

² See Nancey Murphy’s unpublished essay, “Traditions, Practices, and the Powers: A Radical-Reformation Epistemology.” For a good summary and analysis of Murphy’s epistemology, see chapter three of Chris Bystrom’s unpublished MCS Thesis (Regent College, 2000).

³ Chris K. Huebner, “Globalization, Theory and Dialogical Vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the Possibility of a Pacifist Epistemology,” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76.1 (January 2002): 49-62; Ted Grimsrud, “A Pacifist Way of Knowing: Postmodern Sensibilities and Peace Theology,” in *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 56, no. 1 (March 2001).

⁴ See Alvin Plantinga’s *Warrant* trilogy: *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford, 1993); *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford, 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford, 2000).

⁵ Huebner, “Globalization,” 49.

⁶ Grimsrud, “A Pacifist Way of Knowing.”

⁷ See Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 2nd. ed.), especially Chapter Nine, for a discussion of control-beliefs.

⁸ For example, well-known epistemologists Laurence Bonjour, Alvin I. Goldman, and Alvin

Plantinga, in papers endorsing *a priori* knowledge and justification, each claim that even a belief held *a priori* such that it later may be revised could still be justified. See Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, especially Chapter Four); Alvin Goldman, “A Priori Warrant and Naturalistic Epistemology,” in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13, *Epistemology*, James E. Tomberlin, ed. (London: Blackwell, 1999); and Chapter Six of Plantinga’s *Warrant and Proper Function*.

⁹ Grimsrud, “A Pacifist Way of Knowing.”

¹⁰ Says Locke: [M]an would be at a great loss, if he had nothing to direct him, but what has the certainty of true *knowledge*. [John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Roger Woolhouse, ed. (New York: Penguin, 1997), IV.xiv.1.]

¹¹ See note 3 to the “Epistle to the Reader” in the Woolhouse edition of the essay.

¹² Further support against the notion that modern epistemology is intrinsically violent could be found in G. W. Leibniz (1646-1716) in his dialogical commentary on Locke. [G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding*, trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1704]). Leibniz is specifically rejecting the use of philosophical discourse as a self-serving means to power and silencing detractors.

¹³ Grimsrud, “A Pacifist Way of Knowing.” Grimsrud’s autobiographical revelations here show a blatant inconsistency in his thought, for in the same essay he both professes to reject abstract normative principles while presenting categorical abstract principles and definitions that are supposed to have normative force (see the block quote above (note 9) that shows Grimsrud’s endorsement of the pacifist-foundationalist thesis).

¹⁴ See Chapter Four of Plantinga’s *Warrant: The Current Debate*.

¹⁵ Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, xi.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁷ These examples are from Plantinga’s “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” in *Nous* (1981): 41-51.

¹⁸ Due to space limitations, the present form of my paper is without an important section — namely, one where I anticipate and respond to criticisms.
