

**Review of Aaron Rizzieri's**  
***Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief and Practice***

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Aaron Rizzieri. *Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief and Practice*, Palgrave MacMillan, October 2013, 184 pages, \$100.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1137009401.

**Abstract:** In *Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief, and Practice*, Aaron Rizzieri examines the implications of pragmatic encroachment as an epistemological view for philosophy of religion. He argues that one of the significant implications of this view is a form of epistemic internalism concerning epistemic justification for action-guiding beliefs. He also argues that this view gives us a reason to favor hope in the existence of God rather than belief when the evidence for God's existence is either counterbalanced or inscrutable. In this review I summarize and critique the major arguments in each of the book's chapters.

**Keywords:** epistemology, philosophy of religion, pragmatic encroachment, William James, Alvin Plantinga

The topics Aaron Rizzieri covers in this book reveal his acute awareness of the current trajectories of both contemporary analytic epistemology and contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. Interwoven throughout the book's brief introduction and the six chapters that follow is a rich account of the salient aspects of the recent history of both these subfields of philosophy, and the questions raised are natural outcroppings of the work that has been done in these subfields. The central focus of the volume is the

somewhat narrow question of what the implications for philosophy of religion are if a particular epistemological view (pragmatic encroachment) is true. However, I think the implications of a number of Rizzieri's arguments extend well beyond what follows if pragmatic encroachment is true.

The book's first chapter is the most purely epistemological in nature. The point of the chapter is to argue for the epistemological thesis (or perhaps better put, the set of epistemological theses) known as pragmatic encroachment. There is variation among epistemologists as to how exactly pragmatic encroachment is best expressed. But the fundamental notion is that in addition to the factors traditionally considered relevant to whether or not one knows a particular proposition (factors like, e.g., truth, belief, justification, sufficient evidence, etc.), a putative knower's practical interests are also relevant to whether or not she knows that proposition. This is typically cashed out in terms of more significant practical interests resulting in a need for greater justification for a belief in order for that belief to constitute knowledge.

The first chapter itself is likely to be of the greatest value to those unfamiliar with the literature on pragmatic encroachment. For such individuals, this chapter serves two valuable functions. First, it explains what pragmatic encroachment is. Second, it provides reasons for one to take pragmatic encroachment seriously. Thus, the first chapter prepares the reader to understand, and to care about, those things that follow if pragmatic encroachment is true. Rizzieri doesn't identify any one claim as constituting pragmatic encroachment. Rather he speaks of "encroachment principles," and examines and defends a number of claims that are in keeping with the spirit of pragmatic encroachment. Despite

some novel ideas, the arguments that Rizzieri offers in chapter 1 in favor of these encroachment principles are unlikely to sway one who is well-informed of the epistemological literature on pragmatic encroachment. Such individuals will likely either already be convinced of the truth of pragmatic encroachment (and thus not need swaying) or won't be convinced by the arguments Rizzieri offers given their familiarity with other arguments for pragmatic encroachment in the literature. However, I think even for those who don't accept pragmatic encroachment, the subsequent chapters of this book offer valuable arguments and insights.

In the remainder of the book Rizzieri assumes the truth of pragmatic encroachment and explores its implications for philosophy of religion. In the first part of chapter 2, Rizzieri examines "how encroachment affects the level of evidence required for justification that a miracle has or has not taken place when this justification is constituted by an inference to the best explanation."<sup>35</sup> He focuses on the miracle of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One might think initially, given the significance of the resurrection, that pragmatic encroachment would entail that one needs a higher level of evidence than is normally required for justification of historical claims in order to be justified in believing that the resurrection occurred. Rizzieri provides a qualified rejection of this position via an appeal to an asymmetry in what is practically at stake in believing that Jesus rose from the dead versus what is at stake in not believing that Jesus rose from the dead. Rizzieri argues that what is risky is failing to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and that as a result, pragmatic encroachment only affects the level of evidence needed to believe the

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<sup>35</sup> Aaron Rizzieri, *Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief, and Practice* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 39.

proposition that it is not the case that Jesus rose from the dead. This is a clever suggestion, although I find the view that believing that Jesus rose from the dead lacks significant risk rather implausible. Or at the very least it strikes me as implausible that there are many circumstances under which, practically speaking, there isn't such risk. In the latter portion of chapter 2, Rizzieri generalizes certain conclusions reached concerning belief in the resurrection to religiously-significant propositions more generally and raises some interesting points about the distinction between belief and hope (which will become relevant in the discussion of chapter 6).

Rizzieri's goal in chapter 3 is to show that if one accepts pragmatic encroachment then one ought to accept the following conclusion: "a person of normal ability can often become aware of the grounds that justify her action-guiding beliefs and the efficacy of these grounds."<sup>36</sup> Rizzieri claims that that this conclusion follows from the following two premises (where *p* stands for any proposition):

(P1) A variety of principles of encroachment establish strong links between epistemic justification that *p* and the conditions under which one is open to criticism on moral or prudential grounds when one acts as if that *p*.

(P2) There can be principles which link epistemic justification and moral and prudential criticisms regarding action as if that *p*, only if a person of normal ability can often become aware of the grounds that justify her action-guiding beliefs and the efficacy of those grounds.<sup>37</sup>

While these premises could likely have been presented in a more elegant fashion, Rizzieri provides good reason to take both premises to be true, and given the validity of the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 62

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 62

argument, he provides good reason to accept the aforementioned conclusion. It would be hard to overstate the significance of this conclusion for the remainder of the book. Most of the arguments in chapters 4 – 6 depend on this conclusion in one way or another.

The centrality of this conclusion in the remainder of the book is part of what makes this book relevant even to those who reject pragmatic encroachment. This is because one can easily accept the conclusion that “a person of normal ability can often become aware of the grounds that justify her action-guiding beliefs and the efficacy of these grounds,” without accepting pragmatic encroachment. In fact, many will likely find this conclusion more plausible than pragmatic encroachment. Thus, anyone who finds themselves inclined to accept this conclusion ought to care about what Rizzieri says in the latter half of the book about religious belief and practice.

Rizzieri’s target in chapter 4 is Alvin Plantinga’s well-known and greatly influential externalist religious epistemology, which is a paradigmatic form of Reformed Epistemology. Plantinga’s religious epistemology emphasizes the importance of the proper functioning of our belief-forming faculties for warranted beliefs and de-emphasizes the type of internal awareness of the grounds of justification that Rizzieri argued for in chapter 3. So it is not hard to see how Rizzieri’s conclusions in chapter 3 would lead to a rejection of Plantinga’s view. Rizzieri’s exposition of Plantinga’s view is relatively accessible (although it might prove challenging for one unfamiliar with analytic epistemology). His critique of the view is thoughtful and reasonable. The critique draws out clearly the relevant intuitions that often leave those with internalist sympathies uneasy with a view like Plantinga’s (i.e. a view where the significance of internalist justification for one’s belief is marginalized).

Rizzieri's rejection of a dominant view in contemporary religious epistemology like Plantinga's sets the stage for Rizzieri to provide his own positive view. This is the task of chapter 5. Rizzieri begins the chapter by reminding readers that he, in this book, is mainly concerned with an epistemology of action-guiding beliefs (i.e. beliefs that guide our actions), and rightly states that, "[r]eligious beliefs such as 'God exists,' 'Christianity is true,' or 'God has commanded X' are indeed action-guiding for the practicing believer; similarly belief in the denials of these propositions is also action-guiding for many atheistic people."<sup>38</sup> He follows this up by noting that "[t]his accounts for the enduring importance and controversy which surrounds such beliefs."<sup>39</sup>

The focus of Rizzieri's account in the first half of the chapter is making more precise his conclusion in chapter 3 that "a person of normal ability can often become aware of the grounds that justify her action-guiding beliefs and the efficacy of these grounds." In this section Rizzieri engages with the work of a number of prominent epistemologists in parsing out several delicate epistemological matters. This is one of the more technical parts of the book and will likely be of greatest interest to epistemologists. In the latter half of the chapter, Rizzieri seeks to respond to the influential argument put forward by Michael Bergmann against internalist views about knowledge (like Rizzieri's).<sup>40</sup> As with his arguments in chapter 1 for pragmatic encroachment, what Rizzieri says here is unlikely to convince those already familiar with the literature on Bergmann's work to adopt a new position. However, for those unfamiliar with the literature, Rizzieri's response is likely to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 113

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 113

<sup>40</sup> Michael Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2006)

be informative. And for even those familiar with the literature, Rizzieri's responses may contain features new to such a reader. For example, Rizzieri's focus on just action-guiding beliefs allows him to claim that only the subset of our beliefs that are action-guiding in his sense needs to satisfy his internalist constraint.

The book closes with a chapter examining William James's claims in his seminal essay "Will to Believe" in a manner informed by the epistemic considerations featured in the earlier chapters. Rizzieri identifies two goals for the chapter. The first goal is "defending a justification norm for practical reasoning (treat  $p$  as a reason for action only if you are justified that  $p$ ) against the William James-inspired claim that there are widespread circumstances in which it is proper for a subject  $s$  to believe and act as if God exists even though he lacks sufficient (i.e. knowledge level) evidence that God exists."<sup>41</sup> The second goal is "to reveal why acting on one's mere hope that God exists is an epistemically, morally and prudentially superior path for a mature and reflective person with strong religious inclinations whose evidence renders the probability of God's existence either counterbalanced or inscrutable."<sup>42</sup>

Rizzieri spends the first portion of the chapter making clear the distinction between belief and hope. Rizzieri seems to have a common usage understanding of belief as a cognitive state in which one takes a proposition to be true. Rizzieri understands hope as "a composite concept which has both a desire component and an epistemic component."<sup>43</sup> The epistemic component is that "one can hope that  $p$  only if one neither knows that  $p$  or that

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<sup>41</sup> *Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief, and Practice*, 134

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 134

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 135

*not-p*.”<sup>44</sup> And the desire component is that “one has to want it to be the case that *p*.”<sup>45</sup> According to Rizzieri’s account, only when both components are satisfied does one hope.

After examining the difference between belief and hope, Rizzieri turns the discussion towards “justification and knowledge norms of belief and action.”<sup>46</sup> This is an important section for the overall structure of the book given that Rizzieri often switches fairly loosely between talk of justification norms and talk of knowledge norms. The picture that emerges is that Rizzieri sees knowledge norms (like “Treat the proposition *p* as a reason for action only if you know that *p*”) as ideals—i.e. how we’d like to be able to operate under perfect circumstances—and sees justification norms as “regulative” and the ones that ought to guide our behavior in everyday life given our imperfect epistemic circumstances. This move makes Rizzieri’s position both more plausible and more modest—given that it would be far more difficult and ambitious to make the case that the knowledge norms are regulative. This also helpfully clarifies Rizzieri’s take on the relationship between knowledge principles and justification principles put forward in the book. That being said, certain difficulties remain. For example, when Rizzieri speaks of justification (something which is typically thought of as coming in degrees) it is often difficult to tell whether or not he is speaking about justification—to any degree—or what he calls “knowledge-level justification” (i.e. a high enough level of justification as to constitute knowledge). Additionally, if the regulative norms are the justification norms, given that Rizzieri is discussing practical action, one might wonder what the point of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 139



talking about knowledge norms is at all. Although, given the prevalence of talk of knowledge norms in the pragmatic encroachment literature, perhaps Rizzieri's appeal to knowledge norms was unavoidable due to the nature of his project.

Rizzieri next turns to a critique of James's argument for willing to believe. Rizzieri rightly identifies James's notion of belief as "a functional concept which entails a willingness to act."<sup>47</sup> He also (rightly, in my mind) points out the problems with having such a functional concept of belief. In addition, Rizzieri makes the claim that James "completely ignores the option of having a partial belief" when choosing a belief in a situation where the evidence leaves the truth of the matter inscrutable.<sup>48</sup> I am not sure this is a fair criticism of James. After all, James sees degrees to the level at which we are willing to act on a proposition, and given James' functional concept of belief, this seems to allow for having a partial belief in a Jamesian sense. But the significance of this point is mitigated because this is not Rizzieri's main criticism of James's position.

To lay the groundwork for his central criticism, Rizzieri brings in the work of modern day fideist, John Bishop, who "defended a variation of William James's general strategy for the moral propriety of believing and acting as if God exists when God's existence is inscrutable on one's evidence."<sup>49</sup> Rizzieri praises Bishop's work for a number of reasons—including Bishop's making distinct belief from action and his recognition of degrees of belief. Still Rizzieri claims that even Bishop's version of willing to believe is

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 147. The work Rizzieri is speaking of is Bishop's book *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

inferior to the position of having religious hope. In the end, this seems to be the book's central message concerning religious practice: Having religious hope can still allow one to have all the key positives associated with religious belief, but the epistemic humility of hope—combined with its directedness via desire towards God and the good—allows one to avoid certain harms associated with belief that goes beyond what the evidence indicates.

I consider this book to be a valuable addition to both the fields of epistemology and philosophy of religion, and it is a book that anyone interested in religious epistemology will benefit from. Just as in the previous generation of scholarship the work in epistemology had a profound impact on philosophy of religion, so Rizzieri's book shows how this may happen again with the current generation of work in epistemology.