Religious Studies (2016) **52**, 63–79 © Cambridge University Press 2015
doi:10.1017/S0034412514000560

Is Augustinian faith rational?

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Abstract: **The Augustinian conception of faith – according to which faith and belief precede knowledge and understanding – appears to entail an epistemic violation. For Augustine, faith is exercised when a testimonial report that P is believed on the basis of that report. This reconfigures the factors involved in assessing whether what is believed on faith is believed rationally. The specific goal of this article is, however, to determine whether believing specifically Christian testimony – and, thus, faith – is rational. Jonathan Adler identifies six forms of background evidence that constitute epistemic reasons for believing testimony. At least five of them appear to be fulfilled for Augustine in the case of believing Christian testimony. Thus, Augustinian faith is supported by epistemic reasons, and should be considered rational.**

Introduction

Mark Twain once said that, 'Faith is believing what you know aint so' (Twain (2010), 66). Though somewhat brash, this remark is germane to a perennial concern among philosophers: namely, that faith (which we will leave undefined for the moment) seems to be involved in, or just is, a violation of epistemic norms. This article will be concerned specifically with the Augustinian conception of faith, which has seemed especially susceptible to this indictment (Pasnau (2000), 80). Augustine's well-known aphorisms, which convey that faith and belief precede understanding and knowledge (*lib. arb.* i.3; *conf.* vi.7; *trin.* xiii.1, xv.2),[1] seem to indicate that faith entails an epistemic deficiency at the front end of the doxastic process. That is, faith appears to involve assenting to a proposition before having epistemic reasons to believe that proposition is true.[2]

I thank Robert Pasnau for a host of comments that benefited this article greatly.

The question, then, that this article will attempt to answer is this: does Augustine conceive of faith as a means by which agents form beliefs in the absence of, or at least in the presence of inadequate, justificatory reasons? I will attempt to answer this question by pointing out a feature of Augustine's epistemology that, though often noted, is not often discussed with respect to its bearing upon the rationality of faith. This feature is the connection of faith and testimony in Augustine's work (Gilson (1960), 27–28; Nash (1969), 25–26; King & Ballantyne (2009)): he commends faith, not in just any propositions, but specifically in those that come from *testimony* (*lib. arb.* ii.1–2; *conf.* vi.7; *trin.* xiii.2). Propositions, taken on faith to be veridical, are grouped in the same class as propositions whose truth we take for granted – and presumably rationally so – yet have learned on the basis of testimony.[3] The importance of this for a discussion of Augustine's conception of faith is that it reconfigures the factors involved in determining whether what is believed on faith is rational. The hearer's background knowledge concerning testimony – the things she knows about informants in general – is of particular importance, given that background knowledge may provide epistemic reasons for believing (or withholding belief concerning) a given testimonial report. (This point will be explicated below.) I will attempt to determine whether, when viewed in this light, Augustine's conception of faith is rational.

The nature of faith

First, we must establish what Augustine means by faith. I will begin by delineating what Augustine says faith is *not*. To start with, faith is not believing something merely because one wants it to be true (*trin.* iv.6). A mother believing her son to be a 'good boy' in spite of a wealth of evidence to the contrary is an example of what faith isn't. Augustine explicitly exhorts his readers to be parsimonious about what they believe. 'Care must, of course, be taken lest the mind, in believing what it does not see, picture it to itself as something which it is not, and so hope for and love that which is false. For if this is done, it will no longer be . . . faith unfeigned' (*ibid.*). Those engaged in wishful thinking are more concerned with what they want to be the case, than with what actually is the case. Given the caution he suggests, it appears as though Augustine takes wishful thinking to be a kind of doxastic vice that one may fall into unawares. Faith, in contrast, is fundamentally concerned with what is, in fact, the case. Second, faith must also be kept distinct from flat-footed credulity – believing everything that one is told (*ut. cred.* 22). Though it is inappropriate to be sceptical of everything one hears – for instance, that the two adults one grew up with are one's parents – it is also inappropriate to believe everything that one is told. Faith, though sometimes taken to be a form of the latter, follows a middle course between these two (King & Ballantyne (2009), 207–211).

Finally, faith is not merely holding an opinion – a state of mind Augustine claims is 'never faultless' (*ut. cred.* 25). For Augustine, faith must be distinguished from

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opinion at least partially because of the presumption he takes to be implicit in holding an opinion. On his view, in holding an opinion one takes oneself to have knowledge when one lacks it: 'If one diligently considers the difference between thinking one knows, and believing upon authority what one knows one does not know, one will avoid the charge of error and boorish pride' (*ibid.*). When one has faith, it appears that one recognizes her lack of knowledge but, nevertheless, believes what she is told. If I hold myself to know that the malfunction in my car is the result of a faulty timing belt when I know little or nothing about automobile mechanics, I am guilty of holding an opinion. Faith is different: when I have faith, I recognize that I do not know what is wrong with my car; I simply believe the mechanic when he tells me that, for instance, the fuel injection system is the culprit.[4]

Notice that the passage cited above contains a substantive summation of what Augustine takes faith to be: 'believing upon authority what one knows one does not know'. First of all, this shows that Augustine takes faith to involve *believing* something; believing is what faith *does* – it is a central constituent, or operation, of faith (*trin.* xiv.11). In *On Free Choice of the Will* Augustine closely associates faith and belief. Through the voice of Evodius, he writes: 'Although I hold these things with unshaken faith . . . I do not yet *know* them' (ii.2). Though we believe the things that we know, we often do not know the things we believe, given that our mere beliefs lack some kind of justification, or warrant. The point is, however, that what Evodius holds by faith, he *believes*. At the culmination of the passage, Augustine affirms the connection between faith and belief by replacing the word faith with belief: 'No one becomes ready to find God unless he first believes what he will afterwards know' (*trin.* xiv.4).

This may seem a precarious way to go about acquiring beliefs, however. Is it not an epistemic violation to believe what 'one knows one does not know'? After all, isn't knowing that one does not know that P itself reason for withholding belief that P? As noted above, this seems to suggest that Augustine holds that one may, by faith, believe things that one has little or no justificatory reason to believe – and do so with impunity. When we consider this, in conjunction with the fact that many of the propositions of the Christian faith that Augustine commends to his readers are prima facie implausible, faith appears to amount to believing in a way that is *dissonant* with reason.

In proceeding, I will consider something like consonance with reason, or reason-responsiveness, to be the litmus test of the rationality of beliefs.[5] If a belief is consonant with reason, or formed appropriately in response to reasons supporting it, it is rational. If a belief is dissonant with reason, or formed in spite of compelling reasons that suggest otherwise, it is irrational. If a particular proposition lacks reasons for or against it, the appropriate response – the one consonant with reason – would be to withhold belief. This is admittedly vague, but will provide enough of a framework to rearticulate the challenge for Augustinian faith. There seem to be epistemic reasons to think that many of the propositions of the

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Christian faith are false (e.g. their prima facie implausibility), and Augustine's conception of faith seems to imply that an individual who exercises faith and believes those propositions may not possess epistemic reasons in favour of them. It would seem, then, that the proper response – the one consonant with reason – would be to consider many of the propositions of the Christian faith false, or at least to withhold assent to them until one possesses epistemic reasons to assent.

In determining whether this challenge succeeds, it should first of all be pointed out that Augustine's conceptions of belief and knowledge, at first glance, seem to diverge in important ways from how they are contemporarily understood. He appears to have emerged from his foray into academic scepticism as one very hesitant to say that he knows anything. In his early work, the *Soliloquies*, Augustine claims only to know that transient things are to be spurned and eternal things are to be sought, and nothing else (*sol*. i.5). Though one might rightly respond that such radical statements are found only in the early Augustine, he was still attempting to subdue sceptical arguments in his late works (*trin*. xv.21–25). And, as we'll see below, Augustine at one point believed we could not even know historical facts (*ut. cred*. 25). As a result, much of Augustine's writing admits of a significantly narrower conception of knowledge than is commonly held today (Hoitenga (1991), 60–61).

For much of his career, Augustine held that a given agent's beliefs are not knowledge if they have not been seen to be the case by the agent herself. This may mean seeing by sense perception, but it may also mean a rational 'seeing' (*lib. arb*. i.7; *epist*. 147.6): for example, grasping the logical relations that exist between propositions such that one may entail another, or recognizing that 7 + 5 = 12, or understanding a concept such as justice. On account of this, of those sources generally taken to be sources of knowledge (i.e. perception, memory, testimony, introspection, reasoning, and rational insight), Augustine appears not to admit testimony. For a belief's being a testimonial belief *ipso facto* implies that an agent has not seen it to be the case for himself. His perspective concerning historical facts is illustrative: 'I believe that the most wicked conspirators were once put to death by the virtuous Cicero. Not only do I not know that, but I am quite certain that I cannot possibly know it' (*ut. cred*. 25). Yet, given the details of Augustine's epistemology, this attitude towards testimony should not be surprising.

Augustine's notion of belief, on the other hand, is very similar to what beliefs are often held to be today. He held them to be 'thought with assent', much like propositional attitudes of assent (Gilson (1960), 27). The important thing to notice, however, is that if Augustine circumscribes the class of beliefs that are dubbed 'knowledge', then the class of beliefs that he considers mere beliefs entails a substantial portion of what most today consider knowledge. And since this is just what Augustine seems to do, his urging us to 'believe what we know that we do not know' is not necessarily as epistemically suspicious as it initially appears. This is

because the beliefs that Augustine commends to his readers may possess justificatory reasons after all, even if Augustine refuses to call them items of knowledge.

So, faith, for Augustine, is required for believing things that we have not seen for ourselves (Hoitenga (1991), 60), or somehow experienced personally (Nash (1969), 25). It takes faith to believe the thoughts of others (*trin*. ix.11), to believe in the occurrence of historical events (*ut. cred*. 25), and presumably even the events conveyed in a nightly news report (that is, if they were not accompanied by visual documentation). Faith is not the means by which we believe just any proposition, but the means by which we believe putatively reliable testimony (Gilson (1960), 27–28). And since we, in the present-day milieu, often consider testimonial beliefs to be knowledge, it should not be surprising that Augustine thinks that his readers should believe, or have faith in, at least some of the propositions that come by way of testimony. If believing testimony is rational, why should we not allow that faith is rational? Augustine's argument for this conclusion can be found in a number of his works (*conf*. vi.5; *trin*. xv.12). It is a *reductio ad absurdum* that may be stated as follows:

i. If we were to disbelieve the deliverances of testimony (or to not exercise faith), then we would have to disbelieve, for instance, that our parents are actually our real parents, and that cartographers are correct in asserting that there is a Mediterranean Sea.
ii. It would be absurd to disbelieve that our parents are actually our parents and that the Mediterranean Sea actually exists.
iii. Therefore, it is absurd always to disbelieve the deliverances of testimony (or to not exercise faith).

In putting forth this argument, Augustine was, at least in part, demonstrating that testimony is an indisposable source of knowledge. (Though he might say at this point that it is an indisposable source of *belief*.) The issue is this: if we deny that we are warranted in believing testimony, then myriads of things we take ourselves to know are really not known. 'If we refused to believe things that we have not experienced personally, we could never know the facts of history [among many other things], which are based upon the testimony of others who we take to be authorities' (Nash (1969), 25). A fruitful human life, then, could not be lived: 'Unless we believed what we were told, we would do nothing at all in this life' (*conf*. vi.5). So, it is epistemically unwarranted and prudentially absurd, Augustine maintains, to refuse to believe at least some testimonial reports. That is, not only do we have little or no reason to doubt many testimonial reports,[6] neither could we get on with life except by believing them. Nevertheless, it does not appear as though Augustine allows that testimony is a source of knowledge.

This, however, seems to be merely an appearance, and the result of consulting early texts on the issue. King and Ballantyne have made a convincing case that, at some point in the latter portion of his career Augustine's view of testimony changed, and thereafter he *did* consider testimony a legitimate source of

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knowledge (King & Ballantyne (2009), 198–199). They cite the following passage, among others: 'Our knowledge ... consists of things seen and things believed. In the case of things we have seen or are seeing now, we ourselves are our own witnesses. In the case of things we believe, however, we are led to assent by the testimony of others' (*epist.* 147.3.8). Additional textual evidence to this effect which directly contradicts the position of his early writings may be found in other late works (King & Ballantyne (2009), 198–199).

These passages may evoke renewed concerns about the nature of faith. Augustine came to hold that testimony may transmit knowledge; yet faith is still required for belief in the Christian scriptures (*trin.* xiii.2).[7] And since faith and belief come before knowledge, doesn't this show that the mature Augustine realized that what is believed by faith is epistemically inferior to other kinds of testimonial beliefs?

This is true only if Augustine sets Christian testimony somehow below other forms of testimony. Yet, he seems to consider them to possess at least equal status (*civ.* xix.18). Moreover, some passages even suggest that he considered the Christian scriptures to be a specially reliable form of testimony.

> If I do not show you something so that you hold it as seen and perceived by a sense of the body or of the mind ... it remains for you only to believe or not believe it. But if it is supported by the clear authority of those divine scriptures ... it must be believed without any doubt. But you may believe or not believe other witnesses or testimonies. (*epist.* 147.1.4)

Beyond this, Augustine held that faith is required for believing more than just Christian testimony. For by faith 'we believe what we do not see' (*ibid.*, 147.3.8); once we see something for ourselves faith will no longer be necessary (*trin.* xiv.4). This applies to the everyday testimonial beliefs as well as the more remarkable ones (*ibid.*, ix.11). Thus it seems safe to say that, for Augustine, faith is operative in many of – perhaps all – our testimonial beliefs. From this, we may extrapolate an important point about the late Augustine's view of faith: if faith is required for believing testimony, and testimonial beliefs may be knowledge, then having faith that P is compatible with knowing that P. It is also worth noting that this does not somehow undermine faith's preceding knowledge. Given faith's role in the doxastic process – that of being a necessary means for some beliefs – it remains anterior to knowledge.

Finally, the articulations of the nature of faith we have been discussing come mainly from Augustine's early works, which contain the clearest expressions of faith and belief preceding knowledge and understanding (*lib. arb.* i.3–4; *ut. cred.* 25). As was discussed above, during this period of his career he did *not* consider testimonial beliefs to be knowledge on account of the stringency of his epistemology. But it should be noticed that the change in the mature Augustine concerning the epistemic status of testimony, far from vindicating worries about faith, actually goes some way in suggesting that what is believed by faith is rational. For if believing testimony is rational, and if believing testimony is the primary

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operation of faith, then it seems to follow that what is going on when someone exercises faith is also rational. In sum, the later taxonomical developments in Augustine's epistemology seem only to support the idea that faith may be rational.

Now, if we grant that it is epistemically permissible to believe testimonial reports, we effectively legitimate Augustine's conception of faith – at least in some cases. But the question of whether believing specifically Christian testimony is legitimate, or rational, will, doubtlessly, not get off the hook so easily. Though we naturally consider it rational to believe that the adults we grew up with are, in fact, our parents on the basis of them telling us that it is so, many would be hesitant to believe an informant who claimed that a particular individual had come back to life after dying. But should we seek to investigate either matter, it turns out that we are ineluctably dependent upon informants. That is, all that we have to go on for many of our testimonial beliefs is testimony itself.

This brings us to the Vulnerability Problem, identified by Jonathan Adler (2012) – a problem that threatens the positive epistemic status of specifically testimonial beliefs. It can be demonstrated in the following way. Reflection suggests that there is something odd about our being accustomed to accepting the deliverances of testimony as veridical. Testimony comes from normal people who are capable of lies, misleading expressions, faulty reasoning, etc.; and it is impossible to verify all that we hear. In fact, it is not feasible to attempt to verify even a substantial portion of it. Thus, it appears as though the routine testimonial beliefs we acquire – about the sum in our bank account, about tomorrow's weather, about our car's mechanical issues – rest solely on the word of authorities whom we, in many cases, have reasons to doubt (Adler (2012)). The problem does not simply point out that we may be wrong about our testimonial beliefs; rather, it points out that, in contrast to many other kinds of beliefs, there appears to be a distinctive paucity of epistemic support for our testimonial beliefs. This is the vulnerability problem, and it applies to Christian testimony just as readily as to other kinds.

The problem may be compelling enough to persuade one to reject premise (ii) in the argument above, namely, that it would be absurd to disbelieve that our parents are actually our parents and that the Mediterranean Sea actually exists. If my grounds are remarkably weak for believing that the two adults I was raised by are actually my parents, then perhaps I should not believe that they are. Many children have been fooled into thinking that frauds were their real parents. And if I do not believe something as fundamental as this, why should I not reject other testimony as well? Moreover, if I doubt that my parents are my parents, how can I possibly believe something as implausible as a historical personage coming back to life after dying?

Background evidence as epistemic reasons for believing testimony

Thus far we have seen that faith, for Augustine, means believing on testimony that a particular proposition is true. Yet, Augustine's conception of

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faith – and, more specifically, the Christian testimony it endorses – is still threatened by the vulnerability problem. In this section, I will present a solution to the vulnerability problem and attempt to determine whether Christian testimony, in particular, is vindicated by the solution.

In 'The epistemological problems of testimony', Adler presents six types of background evidence which serve as 'evidence available to us of the trustworthiness of the testimonial setting and of the credibility of what is asserted in the core cases and well beyond' (Adler (2012)). The six types of background evidence, or conditions, are:

1. The Predominance of Truthful Testimony
2. Truthfulness as the Norm
3. Reputations and Sanctions
4. Impersonal Knowledge of our Informants
5. Motivation, Social-Moral Bonds, Cooperation
6. Prior Plausibility

These conditions, according to Adler, 'can serve as evidence or epistemic reasons because they are incorporated into our corpus of beliefs and shape our testimonial practices' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, they let us know that not all testimony was created equal: those deliverances that are not supported by some or all of the background conditions are often not believed by the hearer – and rightly so. Taking background evidence into account, premise (ii) of Augustine's *reductio* argument potentially acquires a supportive clause:

i. If we were to disbelieve the deliverances of testimony (or to not exercise faith), then we would have to disbelieve that our parents are actually our real parents, and that cartographers are correct in asserting that there is a Mediterranean Sea.
ii. It would be absurd to disbelieve that our parents are actually our parents and that the Mediterranean Sea actually exists, *given the background evidence supporting the trustworthiness of the informant.*
iii. Therefore, it is absurd always to disbelieve the deliverances of testimony (or not to exercise faith).

Viewed in this light, premise (ii) is not nearly as easy to reject. Why is it absurd to disbelieve your parents and cartographers? It is absurd because (1) most parents and cartographers – along with almost everyone else in society – usually tell the truth, and (2) are, in a sense, generally obligated to tell the truth. Further, they will likely (3) be branded liars or lousy map-makers if they don't, and (4) parents and cartographers are not typically deceptive or incompetent with respect to who their children are and geographical facts, respectively. (5) Not only do social/cooperative bonds to tell the truth naturally exist between speakers and hearers, they seem more binding between parent and child, and cartographer

and traveller. Finally, (6) in normal cases, given our corpus of beliefs, it is very plausible to believe that the two adults who raised us are indeed our parents, and that certain land masses and bodies of water exist in putative locations. Thus, it turns out that, the vulnerability problem notwithstanding, we have much reason to accept premise (ii).[8]

Augustine's argument, however, only opens the door to the acceptance of specifically Christian testimony, but does not necessarily vindicate it. It remains to be seen whether Christian testimony fulfils the background conditions with similar adequacy – at least in Augustine's view. If it does, the faith involved in believing Christian testimony will have epistemic reasons undergirding it. In what follows, I will attempt to determine, on the basis of textual evidence, the degree to which these conditions may have been operative as epistemic reasons in Augustine's considerations concerning faith.

It will be important to bear in mind throughout this section that in order to determine whether Augustine's conception of faith is rational, we need not show that all (or even some) of the background conditions were, in fact, met for him. It may be the case that Christian testimony only adequately fulfils few (or none) of them. What matters for the purposes of this article is whether *Augustine* considered the conditions fulfilled. If he did consider them fulfilled, then he possessed epistemic reasons for believing Christian testimony – whether those reasons are *sub specie aeternitatis* adequate or not. To show that the background conditions are, indeed, met for Augustine would be a much larger goal (and much too big a task for this article). Instead, we are expressly concerned with whether Augustine considered the conditions fulfilled (and that he was aware of no compelling reasons to disbelieve Christian testimony), because this will help illuminate Augustine's conception of the basic structure of faith. It is the fundamental concern of this article to determine whether that structure is reason-responsive, or rational.

Adler's first two conditions are (1) 'the predominance of truthful testimony' and (2) 'truthfulness as the norm' (Adler (2012)). Concerning the former, truthful testimony is the standard in almost all human societies. Though we are aware of numerous cases of false testimony and cultures that tend to be less honest than others, these stand out to us only because truthful testimony is pervasive. So, while various kinds of misleading testimony are prevalent, they are rightly considered aberrations (*ibid.*). Second, truthfulness is also the norm in interpersonal communication. In fact, truthfulness *must* be the norm for communication: if dishonesty were common enough, interpersonal communication would break down entirely, given that hearers would begin to assume that much of what they are told is not the truth (*ibid.*).

Though it would be safe to assume that Augustine's social setting was like most of the rest of civilization, and naturally fulfilled these two conditions, there is also textual evidence that this was the case. The fact that Augustine takes the examples in his *reductio* argument to have force is evidence of the predominance of

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truthfulness in his society. If his contemporaries were accustomed to being dealt false information about their parents or geography, the argument would not be persuasive. That is, it would *not* be absurd in the least to disbelieve that the two adults who raised one are one's parents, or to be agnostic about whether a given map accurately represents the earth's surface. It is also relevant to note the stock Augustine explicitly places in historical documents which report past events (*ut. cred.* 25). Were such documents frequently found to be spurious, Augustine would doubtless place less weight on them.

Augustine's reaction to his pupils' deception in Rome is further evidence of the predominance of truthfulness, and truthfulness as the norm, in his society. He describes them as 'breaking their word out of love of money treating fairness as something to be flouted' (*conf.* v.22). He even clearly states that this kind of deception among his students was something that he was unaccustomed to, and viewed as a serious moral violation. If breaking one's word was normal in the Roman Empire, Augustine should have considered this business as usual. Yet, because he was so scandalized by it, it seems safe to say that, though deception was probably a common occurrence in Augustine's social setting, truth-telling was still the standard and the norm.

The third condition Adler identifies is the winnowing role that 'reputations and sanctions' play in our appropriation of testimony (Adler (2012)). Testimonial sanctions are present in every society in one form or another. Characteristically dishonest people are branded liars and, thereby, are no longer considered reliable sources of information. Like the boy who cried wolf, the testimony of a characteristically dishonest person often eventually becomes invalidated given the reputation he acquires, and is thereby effectively removed from the pool of testimony that there is prima facie reason to believe. The function of the reputation of those who are characteristically dishonest, therefore, serves as a safeguard for veridical testimony in that hearers are often aware of the reputations of their informants. In addition to this, there are multifarious consequences for dishonesty in societies, including fines, imprisonment, and ostracism, among others. Thus, given that hearers are aware of the negative consequences for dishonesty, this gives the hearer reason to believe an informant is being honest.[9]

As was the case with the first two conditions, though the censoring effects of reputations and sanctions are present in almost all human societies in one form or another, there is evidence that they were operative in Augustine's society. This is demonstrated conspicuously by the remarkable amount of effort Augustine invested in discrediting those he believed to be heretics. He worked tirelessly in writing tracts discrediting heretics in order to capitalize on the powerful effect that damaging their reputations could have upon public opinion (Brown (1969), 194). This ability to discredit others by representing them as unreliable sources is indicative not only of truthfulness as the testimonial norm in Augustine's society, but especially of the constraints upon false testimony that sanctions and reputations provide.

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An 'Impersonal Knowledge of our Informants' is the fourth background condition Adler recognizes. One of the reasons we are able to trust testimony is because we, as hearers, are often able to identify particular individuals and situations in which dishonesty or incompetency is likely to be manifest (Adler (2012)). For instance, it is clear that panegyrics were a form of testimony wherein hearers knew some type of dishonesty would be afoot (*conf.* vi.6). For us in the modern world, a politician's speech is a paradigm case in which to expect false testimony. The question at hand, however, is whether the Christian testimony which emanated from the writers of the New Testament and their circumstances is a case in which we should expect dishonesty or incompetency.[10]

Many consider the writers of the New Testament to have been, first of all, dishonest (Habermas (2001)). It has been suggested, for instance, since the first century that they stole the body of Christ, claimed he had been resurrected, and sought to elevate themselves in propagating the Christian religion. Their competence has also been questioned. Because cultures in antiquity were not acquainted with many scientific principles, it is alleged that they often mistook natural phenomena for miracles, and were, furthermore, overly credulous about their occurrence. The miracle stories of the Gospels, so the claim goes, are a case in point of the accounts of such credulous individuals.

Augustine's attitude towards Christian testimony with regard to this condition is multifaceted and evolves throughout his life, and, as we'll see, relates to his attitude towards the plausibility of Christian testimony. Now, given that most kinds of informants are not found to be dishonest or incompetent, it seems fair to place the onus of proof upon the individual who claims that Augustine *did* find Christian informants either dishonest or incompetent. Nevertheless, there is substantial textual evidence that Augustine eventually found Christian informants to be neither. His early impression of Christianity is set against a Manichean backdrop. Manicheanism was initially presented to Augustine as an exclusive and sophisticated ideology (*conf.* iii.4), attracting the intelligent and disciplined, who would deal out conceptual problems for Christianity (*ibid.*, vii.3), while having ready answers when challenged. In contrast, Christians seemed unable to defend the coherence of their beliefs when confronted by Manichean questions (*ibid.*, v.11, 14). Moreover, the Christian Old Testament seemed to Augustine a crass piece of literature (*ibid.*, iii.4; Brown (1969), 49–50). The general impression that emerges, then, concerning Augustine's attitude towards Christian testimony is that, while concerns about dishonesty never seemed to be entertained, concerns about incompetence were perhaps a factor which motivated his preference for Manicheanism. That is, Manicheanism simply seemed to have more adequate answers about the nature of reality.

His concerns about the coherence of the Christian picture of reality, however, must not have been enormous. For in no place does his attitude towards the Christian religion reflect his attitude towards the pseudo-religion of astrology. Augustine approvingly recalls being advised by a certain 'man of good judgement'

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to abandon any involvement in astrology, on the grounds that the art is utterly bogus (*conf.* iv.3). The same man (a former astrologer), claimed that, 'he did not wish to make a living out of deceiving people' (*ibid.*). In the *City of God*, Augustine at length dismantles astrology as a valid source of information (v.5). In sum, given his assessment of astrology, it is clear that Augustine did not hold that religious claims were beyond the measure of truth and falsity, and that certain religious traditions were replete with frauds. And while his position on the veracity of Christian testimony undulated, there is no evidence that he took Christian informants to be guilty of fraud.

His concerns about the *incompetence* of Christian informants, on the other hand, were certainly present. These, however, began to be resolved as a result of his exposure to Ambrose in Milan, and his own intellectual development. Ambrose's allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of the Old Testament allowed Augustine to view it as a rich and sophisticated work – something worthy of God – rather than 'earthy' and facile (*conf.* vi.6; Brown (1969), 50). And, as will be described in greater detail below, the intellectual tables began to turn: for Augustine, conceptual problems for Christianity were being resolved, while they were beginning to multiply for Manicheanism (*conf.* vii.2–5, 12–20).

Beyond these considerations, in general, Augustine's mature attitude towards the putative writers of the New Testament seems to be one of reverence. Augustine recognizes the prolonged suffering endured by the apostle Paul for his beliefs (*ibid.*, xiii.26), and presumably inferred that this is not the kind of activity of a charlatan, seeking his own advantage. Further, Augustine was aware that Paul also presented a conditional that seemed far too severe in its implications for the taste of a fraud: 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile' (I Cor. 15:17). Apparently with this passage in mind, Augustine lays bare his beliefs about the veracity of the Christian scriptures:

> If the writings about [Christ] were wrong in so describing him, everything else would be suspected of being a lie, and there would remain no salvation for the human race based on faith in these books. So because the scriptures are true, I acknowledge the whole man to be in Christ . . . (*conf.* viii.19)

This, of course, leaves open the possibility that both Paul and Augustine were simply incorrect in thinking that the events recounted in the Gospels actually happened, but it excludes the possibility that Augustine believed the writers were either deceptive or incompetent. Thus, we should conclude that Augustine considered condition (4) to have been met.

The fifth condition, 'Motivation, Social-Moral Bonds, Cooperation', concerns the fact that most inhabitants of a given social setting are characterized by a desire to assist others in that setting in a beneficial way. In most cases informants have no motive for dishonesty, and, furthermore, have reason to tell others in their social environment the truth for their mutual benefit when others want and expect it (Adler (2012)). Human beings are, by and large, cooperative creatures. Even

though they are almost always motivated in the first place to achieve their own ends, they are often also motivated to help others achieve their ends. Of course, there are also ample motives for dishonesty, refusing to cooperate, and for betraying social bonds; yet, it is generally true that people, most of the time, aim to help others.

While this does not seem to be a difficult condition for most societies to meet, particular positions Augustine takes on the nature of human beings make it questionable whether he would affirm that this condition is ever met by societies. He recollects the psychology behind his own breaking of social bonds as evidence of the nature of humanity *tout court*: 'I became evil for no reason. I had no motive for my wickedness except wickedness itself' (*conf.* ii.4). From this he extrapolates that, 'Pure and clear intentions . . . are not to be found [among humans] except by returning to [God]' (*conf.* ii.6). If human beings characteristically pursue wickedness for its own sake and good intentions can only be found when they return to the Christian God, then the vast majority of humanity (and thus human societies) are characterized by reprehensible motives. This at least suggests that, on Augustine's reckoning, this condition is not met by his society or most others.

In spite of this appearance, however, in the *City of God*, Augustine allows that normal humans – those who are members of the 'earthly city' – are sometimes motivated to pursue mutually beneficial ends, such as peace (xv.4). Later, Augustine discusses the earthly city's adulterated form of social cooperation: '[The earthly city] still was linked together by a kind of fellowship based on a common nature, although each group pursued its own advantages and sought the gratification of its own desires' (xviii.2). Yet, this fellowship is perpetually infected with division: 'Hence, [the earthly city] is generally divided against itself, and one part of it oppresses another, when it finds itself the stronger. For the conquered part submits to the conqueror, naturally choosing peace and survival at any price' (*ibid.*). In sum, the conception of human society one gathers from Augustine's writings is that it both is and is not characterized by an inclination to honour social bonds through cooperation. The honouring of bonds, according to Augustine, seems to be, in most cases, contingent upon whether that which calls for cooperation aligns with the interests of the individual. And we know that this is often not the case. In light of this, it seems safest to be agnostic as to whether Augustine considers this condition fulfilled in his society – or any other.

Finally, testimony is filtered on the basis of its 'prior plausibility'. That is, people naturally evaluate testimony, at least in part, on the basis of how a particular report fits with the rest of their beliefs (Adler (2012)). So, the informant who claims to have walked from Cleveland to New York City in a day will be challenged, and probably not believed, given the implausibility of her claim. The beliefs we hold about the speed at which humans are able to move, the distance between Cleveland and New York, and the duration of a day are background evidence

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which may serve to rule out the above testimony as implausible. Thus, our corpus of prior beliefs helps us recognize when testimony does not add up.

Augustine's evaluation of the plausibility of Christian testimony is interesting, and quite different from contemporary evaluations. As noted above, being a man of letters, Augustine found it difficult to believe that divine revelation could come through literature as supposedly crude as the Old Testament (*conf.* vi.6; v.25). He also found the Christian explanation of evil to be untenable, given that it held that God created everything, yet did not create evil (*ibid.*, iii.12). Where did evil come from, then? To this question he thought the Christian had no answer (*ibid.*, v.20). Augustine was also deeply troubled by the Christian doctrine of the incarnation: that God at a point in time inhabited a human body (*ibid.*, iii.12; v.20). His concern, however, arose not from the conviction that there is no God to become incarnated, or from a sense that, even if there was a God, the incarnation would be a metaphysical impossibility. Rather, Augustine's concern was that flesh would somehow defile deity. This shows that Neoplatonic and Manichean ideas concerning the baseness of flesh appear to be among those beliefs via which Augustine initially evaluated the plausibility of Christian testimony.

These difficulties, however, were one by one resolved for Augustine during his time under Ambrose. As mentioned above, Ambrose's metaphorical and allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament revealed a level of sophistication in its composition that would lead Augustine to regard it as unparalleled in its profundity (*conf.* v.14). Also, during this time, Augustine determined that evil does not have any independent existence, but is merely a privation of goodness (*ibid.*, vii.12–14). Evil's origin, then – if it can even be said to have one – is simply in the good entities that God created. Thus, God is not its cause. Finally, Augustine came to view the incarnation of Christ as a remarkable sacrifice, not as a defilement, which resolved the Neoplatonic and Manichean problems. It meant that God – the greatest of spiritual beings – took on flesh altruistically, as a burden for humanity's sake (*ibid.*, vii.13–14).

These, however, are not the only conceptual difficulties with which Augustine was concerned. In one place, he does briefly address some of the matters that garner modern attention and debate: namely, the miracles contained in the New Testament, such as the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ. An early section in *On the Trinity* demonstrates Augustine's awareness that the implausibility of these miracles having occurred may threaten the plausibility of the entire Christian system of beliefs (*trin.* viii.7). In response he writes, 'It profits us to believe, and to keep firmly and unshakenly in our heart, that … God was born of a woman … since we know what omnipotence is, we also believe in the power of His miracles and of His Resurrection' (*ibid.*). The idea seems to be that, if we accept that God is all-powerful, there is nothing impossible about the miracles of the New Testament. Even as shrewd a philosopher as David Hume agrees that the miracles of the New Testament are possible – though he also claims that it is staggeringly improbable that they occurred.[11] Augustine,

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however, is not concerned with whether it is improbable that they occurred; rather, his aim seems to be to establish that, given the existence of an omnipotent God, there is nothing metaphysically impossible, or conceptually incoherent, about the occurrence of miracles. Stated differently, if the physical domain is causally closed, then miracles are impossible. If God exists, however, the physical domain is not causally closed, and miracles (insertions of mass energy) are possible. Therefore, even the most surprising events conveyed by Christian testimony may not, in Augustine's estimation, be dismissed on account of their inability to cohere with other beliefs about the world.

Notice that the treatment of this final condition gives a hint of Augustine's regard for the prima facie implausibility of certain Christian testimonial reports: he considers their implausibility neutralized, and no longer an epistemic reason for rejecting Christian testimony. As a result, while there are reasons to accept Christian testimony, the reasons to reject it are answerable for Augustine. Thus, there are both reasons supporting faith in Christian testimony, and an absence of compelling reasons to reject it.

Now, the concern may arise that in suggesting that faith requires that an agent be aware of the fulfilment of the background conditions, we are excluding the non-intellectual from being able to exercise faith – a suggestion that is far from Augustinian. I, however, do not think that this requirement does exclude non-intellectuals. The background conditions Adler identifies vindicate testimony not solely for the careful evaluator, but for the average agent in the average context. Monica, for instance, whose faith Augustine revered, was probably just as aware as he of, for instance, the frequency of dishonesty, the role reputations play, and significant details about those she spoke with. And though she did not evaluate the plausibility of Christian testimony with the same intellectual rigour as her son, she certainly had some type of framework of beliefs through which to evaluate it. Even small children baulk at certain far-fetched claims on account of their not cohering with other beliefs they possess. Thus, background evidence is operative as epistemic reasons for believing testimony for the average person, as well as the intellectual.

Conclusion

On this analysis, Augustine in all probability held that Christian testimony met at least five of Adler's six conditions. Whether *we* consider them to be met, though important, is another question, and does not affect the aim of this article, namely, to demonstrate something about the structure of Augustine's conception of faith. Though he may have made mistakes in determining whether Christian testimony meets these conditions, his assessment of Christian testimony seems to be, at least substantially, based upon a reasoned evaluation of whether or not it met them. And since he found that Christian testimony does meet at least five of the background conditions, he therefore had reasons to believe it. And,

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thus, Augustine's conception of faith – with respect to specifically Christian testimony – ought to be considered rational.[12]

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Notes

1. See reference section for particular translations.
2. A favourite exhortation of Augustine's is: 'Believe, and then you will understand' (*lib. arb.* i.3).
3. Cushman (1956), 288–289. According to Cushman Augustine goes even further than this in maintaining that faith is conceptually prior to all knowledge.
4. As will be discussed in more detail below, Augustine may have changed his attitude toward such cases in his late years. This, however, as I will argue, does not substantially affect my thesis.
5. Robert Audi characterizes epistemic rationality as 'consonance with reason' (Audi (2001), 222).
6. It seems as though there is some kind of Reidian principled credulity at work here. That is, it seems that confirming evidence is not required by Augustine, and that one should believe testimony unless one has reason to disbelieve it. This is how King and Ballantyne interpret Augustine (King & Ballantyne (2009), 211–212). Other passages, however, do not seem to suggest as much: 'But you may believe or not believe other witnesses or testimonies by which you might be persuaded to believe something to the extent that you consider that they have or do not have sufficient weight to produce faith' (*epist.* 147.1.4). Further, the list of testimonial sources that Augustine endorses in *Confessions* vi.5, for instance, consists primarily of informants he knows something about. Thus, it is difficult to say what Augustine's position is on whether confirming evidence is required in validating testimony. More will be said below concerning the role background evidence plays in validating testimony; this will, I hope, shed some light on Augustine's view of the place of confirming evidence.
7. I will use 'Christian testimony' as shorthand for any particular fundamental Christian doctrine found in the Christian scriptures.

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8. I will say a bit more here concerning the role of confirming evidence for Augustine, and its relation to background evidence. Background evidence usually plays a tacit role in a hearer's weighing of a testimonial report. On account of this, background evidence may be construed in one of two ways. First, a Reidian – one who does not believe that confirming evidence is required for believing testimony – may not construe the background conditions Adler identifies as *evidence*. The Reidian may take the background conditions simply to be an aspect of the epistemic setting of most knowers – the water in which we swim, as it were – and, thereby, unconsciously allow background evidence to underwrite his principled credulity, while not considering it a form of confirming evidence. Correlatively, if a background condition is *not* met – say, one is in the midst of a deceptive group of people, where truth is not the norm – the Reidian would probably consider this *disconfirming* evidence, rather than an absence of confirming evidence. This construal of background evidence very well may have been Augustine's – that is, if, indeed, he held a Reidian view of confirming evidence. Background evidence may have been operative in his willingness to believe testimonial reports, even if he did not recognize it as confirming evidence.
   On the other hand, one may take a Humean view (the view that testimony requires confirming evidence in order for it to be believed) and construe background evidence *as* confirming evidence. On this view, any given testimonial report requires some type of additional support. But this is precisely the role Adler believes background evidence may play for testimony. As mentioned above, it is possible that Augustine held a view more like this. Whichever view he took, however, background evidence would not fail to play an integral role in validating testimony.
9. That is, if an informant could be imprisoned for dishonesty in a certain setting, this provides reason to believe that what he is telling is the truth (albeit not very compelling reason).
10. I wish to avoid addressing the complicated issues surrounding biblical authorship, and do not think conclusions about it will substantially affect my argument. Thus, I will proceed as though Augustine is correct in assuming traditional authorship.
11. Hume (1961), 390–392. It is worth noting here that testimony containing anomalies does not necessarily annihilate the plausibility of the testimony, or the rationality of believing it. Hume thought it did. However, if a trustworthy source claims that an anomaly has occurred, one has reason both to believe the source and to disbelieve the source. Neither can be ruled out a priori, as Hume suggests. Both carry evidential weight.
12. It may be said here that Augustine's conception of faith should be considered *internally* rational, given that what was shown concerning it pertained specifically to whether *Augustine* – and not anyone in general – had reasons behind it.

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