

AN ANALYSIS OF ALVIN PLANTINGA'S
PHILOSOPHICAL AND APOLOGETIC SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The twelve point classical apologetic is set on the sure and firm foundation of reality as knowable. Though not disputed by the average individual, in philosophical circles since Descartes this premise was the critical issue of discussion. Before this modern period, the question of reality was thought to be dealt with and virtually unquestioned. After Descartes, however, proof of the existence of reality had to be dealt with in logical and rational arguments before one was to be justified in its acceptance. Practically every major philosopher since Descartes accepted this presupposition and began from rational thought to explain and argue to the external world. The results were devastating for Christianity as Kant and those subsequent to him separated fact and value, what is knowable from unknowable, and left belief in the existence God in the realm of the unverifiable. As was noted, the classical apologetic begins in reality and our ability to determine truth based on its correspondence to our propositions. If one cannot begin here, then there is no real evidence for God's existence as it is based solely on logical argument and experience, which ultimately leads to fideism.

A major figure in Christian philosophy today, Alvin Plantinga, has developed a system which seeks to give those of the faith a rational defense for belief in God without having to provide or rely on traditional arguments. He seeks to defend theism by showing that belief in God is no different than other widely accepted beliefs such as the existence of other minds and external reality. These, he notes, have been debated and argued over incessantly throughout the modern period and no good or acceptable solution has been found. That being said, there is still no sensible person who doubts their existence, therefore, why should we discriminate against belief in God when it seems just as reasonable and is held by the majority of individuals. His system, called *Reformed Epistemology*, though it is opposed to the foundationalism of Descartes, accepts

uncritically Cartesian presuppositions about reality that lead to the evidentialist problems to which he objects. In doing so his Rational apologetic can never provide a basis for reality and subsequently leads to a belief in God which is no more or less provable than the existence of other minds, extended matter, or memory beliefs.

The purpose of this paper will be, first, to explain his philosophical system. This will include his critical assessment of Cartesian Foundationalism and his positive approach, called Proper Function, to the issue of evidentialism. After this we hope to investigate: (1) Whether Professor Plantinga's scheme follows from *reason* or by way of *causal* explanation due to inductive analysis, (2) Is his system holding itself up by its own epistemological bootstraps, i.e., Does it beg the question, and (3) What are some logical conclusions of his epistemological system specifically concerning theistic belief. From this, we hope to criticize any system that is fundamentally based on rational principles of the mind rather than external reality.

A Rational Basis for Belief in God

Other Minds

As a Christian Philosopher, Alvin Plantinga is naturally concerned with belief in God, and the rationality of this belief which is held in contempt by much of the academic community. His initial inquiry began with *God and Other Minds*,¹ which set the groundwork for subsequent models and explorations into this topic. In this work he is primarily concerned with the difficulties that attend providing a rational basis for theistic belief. His thought on this issue surfaces as he works through the traditional arguments for the existence of God (cosmological, ontological, and teleological), and those against God's existence (e.g., the problem of evil). He determines that neither approach is conclusive and notes that there are certainly other beliefs we hold to daily which meet a similar fate; for example, the existence of other minds. Yet, the only credible argument for other minds, viz., the analogical argument, is at best uncertain leaving our

¹Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

belief unjustified, at least in the traditional sense of justification.² Still, even though one might hold that belief in other minds is uncertain, no one could seriously, or rationally, dispute that there *were* other minds; at least no one could do it consistently. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, beliefs such as memory of one's past, and perception can also be included in this skeptical category and shown to be deficient in producing conclusive evidence; yet, these are accepted by most without reservation. If this is true, then we have rational beliefs (or at least beliefs accepted as rational by most) that have no real or acceptable evidential argument upon which they are based. Concluding thus, Plantinga equates this type of belief with the theistic belief he hopes to defend. In other words, if there be similar beliefs which are acceptable and commonly viewed as rational with no convincing evidence, then a theistic belief which has no basis in evidential argumentation can be justifiably accepted as well. In the preface to a recent edition of *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga clarifies his position by stating that "more exactly . . . my aim was to reply to that objection taken in the context or perspective of classical (Cartesian and Lockean) foundationalism"³ where the "objection" is that of appropriate *evidence* for a particular belief.

Presuppositions

The realist, however, would undoubtedly ask why one is precluded from having evidence for other minds (persons), memory beliefs, and perceptual beliefs.⁴ What, in Plantinga's presuppositional foundation, must he accept for this to be the case? In a revealing comment he remarks:

One crucial lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy – Descartes through Hume, roughly – is just this: relative to propositions that are self-evident and

²Ibid., 187-211.

³Ibid., xi.

⁴Plantinga does to consider himself a realist in the Reidian sense. He accepts many of Thomas Reid's conclusions that man *must* posit reality in order to be effective, even live, each day. See *Warrant and Proper Function* and *Warranted Christian Belief*.

incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable. Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me; at any rate, no one has given good reason to think any of them is.⁵

For Plantinga, and most modern philosophers, we cannot have appropriate evidence for these beliefs due to the fact that the early skeptics of the modern period have precluded it as such and have built a wall which most uncritically accept as insurmountable. However, if Descartes, Hume and other early ‘enlightened’ philosophers are to be summoned in providing a basis for the presently examined epistemological system, viz., reformed epistemology, then one can be sure a consistent and coherent method for obtaining an adequate conception of external reality may never be reached. This is precisely what was learned from the Cartesian experiment and should be apparent given proper reflection of its strictures and philosophical venture subsequent to this experiment.⁶ Plantinga understands well that the error of Descartes was in attempting to build an entire structure of beliefs upon a sure and solid footing of rational ideas. To obtain this footing, one should question everything through methodic doubt until that which was certain could be obtained: *I think, therefore I am*. Yet, in obtaining the *Cogito*, Descartes had produced an unnatural bifurcation of mind and body, which is still unchallenged by most in epistemological circles today. Subsequent to Descartes, philosophers have been attempting to resolve this conflict by building a bridge from the mind to reality. Plantinga realizes this and understands full well that the endeavor has been unsuccessful but he thinks the problem is in foundationalism and more specifically, the deontological nature that results from an internalist approach to the issue. If the object of knowledge is the idea or representation in the mind, then how does one know that the idea is an accurate copy of the object in reality? This has been the critical question in

⁵Ibid., 60.

⁶For a more thorough treatment of this topic, see: Etienne Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, trans. Philip Trower. (Front Royal: Christendom Press, 1990).

philosophy since Descartes and after three centuries it seems painfully obvious that there can be no rational solution if one begins in the mind. In this system, one can never know reality directly through sense experience. Our senses can be wrong, and since they can be wrong some of the time, how do we know when they are bringing our minds accurate information? This is where Plantinga and modern philosophy begin.

What Constitutes Evidence?

The presumption of skepticism in knowing eternal reality, easily explains why one cannot have *evidence* of memory, perception, or other minds. Does this, however, mean that one is left to fideism in regard to these? According to Plantinga, not at all. He responds by noting that his “claim is that belief in God is properly basic; it does not follow, however, that it is *groundless*.”⁷ A belief is basic in Plantinga’s system “if I believe it and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions.”⁸ He explains the difference between grounds and evidence:

If I see someone displaying typical pain behavior, I take it that he or she is in pain. Again, I do not take the displayed behavior as *evidence* for that belief; I do not infer that belief from others I hold; I do not accept it on the basis of other beliefs. Still, my perceiving the pain behavior plays a unique role in the formation and justification of that belief; as in the previous case it forms the ground of my justification for the belief in question.⁹

In his article *Adequate Evidence for Religious Assent*, Thomas Sullivan further explains the difference between grounds and evidence for Plantinga:

It would appear that “grounds” differ from “evidence” on Plantinga’s account by reason of the fact that “evidence” is to be understood as a form of *belief*, i.e. *propositionally packaged material* [emphasis mine], while grounds are not. The reason memory or sight of

⁷Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, ed., “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 78.

⁸Plantinga, *Faith and Rationality*, 46.

⁹Ibid.

something doesn't count as evidence is that these experiences are not *beliefs* from which something else is inferred.¹⁰

Plantinga emphasizes this very thought in *Warrant and Proper Function*:

The modern classical foundationalist holds that when I believe propositions about the past, or about other persons, or about external objects, I must have *propositional evidence* for these beliefs if they are to have warrant for me: and the stronger the evidence the greater the warrant.¹¹ [emphasis mine]

Plantinga contrasts this classical foundationalist view with the foundationalist view of Thomas Reid. When one is appeared to in a particular way, let us say that S is appeared to “treely” (i.e., S perceives a tree), and the other conditions necessary for warrant are met,¹² then warrant for that belief is satisfied. But it isn't required that I *believe* that I am appeared to or that the design conditions are met.¹³ “What counts for the warrant of the belief in question is not my *believing* that I am appeared to in such and such a way, but simply my *being* appeared to in that way.”¹⁴ What Plantinga is saying is that when I am appeared to in a certain way, I do not *believe* this, i.e., have an evidential basis in experiential propositions, I am simply appeared to in this way and have *grounds* for this experiential knowledge due to the fact that this is how we are designed to work in the appropriate environment. Sullivan notes however, that *grounds* taken in this way appear to be nothing more than evidence: “Unless ‘grounds’ are *cognitive* grounds, i.e., unless ‘grounds’ supply reason with information, having ‘grounds’ says nothing for the rationality of one's beliefs. If, however, ‘grounds’ are cognitively grasped data, they would seem to be the very stuff most people call ‘evidence’.”¹⁵

¹⁰Thomas Sullivan, “Adequate Evidence for Religious Assent,” in *Thomistic Papers IV*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy (Houston: The Center For Thomistic Studies, 1988), 84.

¹¹Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 183.

¹² These conditions include the basic tenets of the Plantinga's design plan; viz., cognitive apparatus functioning properly in an environment for which they were made based on a design plan successfully aimed at truth.

¹³Ibid., 184.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Sullivan, 84.

Plantinga's intent is to refute the foundationalism of Descartes' clear and distinct ideas (an appropriate undertaking in view of its obvious problems), yet it leads to inconsistent conclusions that might be avoided would he consider the possibility that evidence (i.e., experiential propositions) has ontological priority. Propositions have their base in metaphysical reality and if made complete constructs of the mind, one will never achieve knowledge of reality; again, this is what we have learned from Descartes. From this starting point then, Plantinga develops his criticism of foundationalism and its derivative, internalism.

From Classical Foundationalism to Internalism

Plantinga is not against all Foundationalism, just what he call classical Foundationalism. This is a noetic system of beliefs that are based on fundamental propositions for which there is appropriate evidence. Being thus supported by this sure foundation, all beliefs in one's system can be accounted for in a systematic and rational manner. According to Plantinga, the fundamental principle of classical foundationalism is: "First, a proposition is properly basic *if* it is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, and second, a proposition is properly basic *only if* it meets this condition."¹⁶ He continues, "According to the foundationalist view some of my beliefs are basic for me: the rest, naturally enough, are nonbasic for me held on the evidential basis of other beliefs I hold."¹⁷ Understanding why Plantinga rejects classical foundationalism and develops proper function becomes apparent when viewing the effect that Descartes and Locke, the initiators of this type of foundationalism, have had on modern philosophy. His critique of the present situation in epistemology is based on the notion of three connected topics: internalism, justification, and deontology. Internalism is the idea that knowledge (or as Plantinga puts it, "belief that is warranted") comes as a result of some state, or states, which are internal to

¹⁶Plantinga, *Faith and Rationality*, 59.

¹⁷Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 71.

us.¹⁸ To be more specific, this notion of epistemic internalism results in warrant for a person via states or conditions of which one is aware. Awareness though, in an intimate and easily accessible way; whether by reflection, Cartesian certainty, or perhaps some other method. The cognizant, therefore, must have some sort of special access in which he cannot non-culpably make a mistake in judgment.¹⁹

Justification is of course that third element, and along with true belief was thought to be sufficient for knowledge. This all changed, however, after Edmund Gettier's analysis of the issue. What Gettier showed, in his "Smith owns a Ford" or "Brown is in Barcelona" examples, was that justification is not sufficient for knowledge.²⁰ But what is justification exactly? Plantinga discusses differing notions from contemporary epistemologists about justification in which it is seen as "being formed responsibly, being reliably produced, being such that the believer has adequate evidence, being formed on an internally accessible and truth conducive ground, being an evaluation of how well the believer has pursued her epistemic goals, and so on."²¹ On this there is widespread disagreement; but to see from where this disagreement stems one must investigate deontology, or more specifically, deontological justification.

In fact, if one is to properly define justification in modern schemes, the thing that is implicit and common to most theories is deontology. Plantinga notes that Descartes and Locke are the modern instigators of epistemic justification. Descartes held that one should always abstain from judgment on anything when the clarity and distinctness of that decision is not present. There is a "light of nature [which] teaches us that the knowledge of the understanding should always precede the determination of the will."²² Error results when a willful judgment is made apart

¹⁸Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 5.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Edmund Gettier, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*, *Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123.

²¹Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 11.

²²Ibid., 12-13.

from the presence of a clear and distinct idea. Locke held that one who did not use reason in seeking truth was not doing as he ought or showing the creator his due (who, being the one who gave him those very cognitive capacities, was deserving). One who does not use reason will be held accountable and he who acts against reason “transgresses against his own light, and misuses those faculties, which were given him.”²³

In both cases, the cognitive agent appears to have epistemic justification that is deontological in nature. Each speaks of using the “light” given an individual and notes the obligation to oneself, and ultimately to God, for properly using their cognitive apparatus. According to Plantinga, it is this sense in which deontological justification is the basis for traditional and contemporary forms of internalism and should be rejected due to the fact that Gettier problems have shown such theories to be deficient. In addition, many other beliefs we accept in the basic way (memory beliefs, perception, etc.) cannot be accounted for in this traditional sense.

Proper Function and Design

Plantinga shows in his analysis that the failure of the internalist’s position results from a certain cognitive malfunction that is consonant to each. He gives examples that serve to make his point. Perhaps there is an Alpha Centaurian Scientist who, unbeknownst to us, scrambles our cognitive capacity to properly interpret experiential data. Or, there is a Cartesian demon who seeks to fool one into believing some falsity. In these and other examples he provides, a person may have deontological justification in the internalist’s sense, and yet still be lacking warrant for a given belief. Indeed, this is what Gettier revealed. One may be justified in believing a falsehood even though he has met the internalist’s criteria for justification; whether by way of Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas, Locke’s evidentialism, or Roderick Chisholm’s contemporary form of internalism. What is needed is a scheme that accounts for the *external* factors which lead to warranted belief. Accordingly, for Plantinga, the first place to start in developing a necessary

²³Ibid., 13.

condition for knowledge should be with proper function. Proper function suggests that a belief will have warrant for me if “my cognitive equipment, my belief forming and belief maintaining apparatus or powers, be free from such malfunction.”²⁴ In other words, a belief will only have warrant for me if my cognitive equipment behaves as it was designed.

As a first step, proper function is necessary for warrant but certainly not sufficient. Plantinga explains by illustrating the following example. Suppose you have just had your cognitive physical where you annually have it, at MIT of course, and pass in perfect epistemic health. You leave and poof, instantly and without your knowledge you are beamed to a planet circling Alpha Centauri where conditions are quite different from earth. For instance, whenever an elephant passes by, a strange sort of radiation is emitted which causes you to form the belief that a trumpet is sounding somewhere nearby. Your cognitive faculties are in order, yet this belief carries no warrant for you.²⁵ What is needed is a corollary condition: that you are in the proper environment. A belief will have warrant for you if and only if your cognitive apparatus is functioning properly in the appropriate environment for which it was designed. A man in an underwater environment can function, for example, but this is not the surrounding for which he was designed. Designed, that is, “by God or evolution (or both).”²⁶ In addition, it should be noted that though our cognitive apparatus must be functioning properly, it need not be perfect; it can come in degrees. In a similar way, one’s hearing need not be perfect in order to hear a train coming.

So we now have at least two conditions for warrant: one’s cognitive faculty functioning properly and that faculty functioning in an appropriate environment. Is this sufficient though? Surely not, for what of a climber in the Alps who is confronted with a situation in which his life is at stake. A situation in which he believes more than the evidence warrants that he might make

²⁴Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 4.

²⁵Ibid., 6-7.

²⁶Ibid., 7.

a tremendous leap across a crevasse and indeed does.²⁷ In this situation, there appears to be nothing wrong with his cognitive machinery. He is in the appropriate environment, yet he lacks warrant for his decision. In this, the faculties responsible for beliefs are produced by wishful thinking, or optimism needed to escape death, etc. As a whole, man may be designed to do many things. A heart is designed ultimately to contribute to the individual's survival, but a more immediate purpose is to pump blood. In similar fashion, the purpose "of our cognitive faculties (overall) is to supply us with reliable information: about our environment, about the past, about thoughts and feelings, and so on."²⁸ To be sure, our design is such that our epistemological faculties will respond to the appropriate circumstance. In other words, our beliefs will be formed based on the circumstance in which we seek knowledge; whether that be beliefs due to memory, testimony, perception, or *a priori* truths. The key to the theory of this design plan is that "what confers warrant is one's cognitive faculties working properly, or working according to the design plan *insofar as that segment of the design plan is aimed at producing true belief*."²⁹ The reason the previous situation does not illustrate warrant for the climber is that his belief that he might make the jump is driven by survival and not truth.

Finally, there is at least one more criterion we must add to this first approximation: reliability. For an example, Plantinga suggests the situation in which one of Hume's infant deities engages in an experiment to design rational beings in an appropriate environment. The experiment fails horribly though and the resulting effect is that most of the beliefs formed by these beings are false.³⁰ Here, all three conditions are met; (1) there cognitive apparatus is working properly, (2) it is working properly in the environment for which it was designed, and (3) the relevant component of the design is aimed at true belief. Yet the individuals created still

²⁷Ibid., 11.

²⁸Ibid., 14.

²⁹Ibid., 16.

³⁰Ibid., 17.

lack warrant for their belief. The reason is that the design is not a *good* design. More exactly, “The module of the design plan governing its production must be such that it is objectively highly probable that a belief produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to that module (in a congenial environment) will be true or verisimilitudinous.”³¹ This is easy to overlook since we naturally assume, or take for granted that our faculties are functioning according to a good design.

To summarize then, as a first approximation, a belief B will have warrant for S if (1) S’s cognitive apparatus in producing B are functioning properly, (2) S’s cognitive environment is similar to the one for which it was designed, (3) the appropriate components of S’s epistemic apparatus are aimed at successfully producing true belief, and (4) the design is a good one; i.e., there is a high objective probability that the belief formed for S in the appropriate environment is true.

From here, Plantinga to explores the common problems in epistemology today. He considers memory beliefs, perception, testimony, and *a priori* beliefs to name a few. In each, the apposite solution comes by way of proper function and design. The reason we can accept other minds, or memory beliefs as rational is because this is how we were designed to function in the appropriate environment. The reason perception is to be relied upon is that we were designed to function in this way. And the reason that belief in God is rational and properly basic for the theist, is simply that God designed us to function in a way so as to form beliefs intimating his existence.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PROPER FUNCTION

Custom as the Condition for Proper Function

Is it not at this point, however, one begins to recognize something is amiss in his formulation of an adequate epistemological scheme? It is indeed Plantinga’s desire to present a rational basis for belief in God (or at least to show that theistic belief is not irrational), and from this, as

³¹Ibid.

presented in *God and other Minds, Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warranted Christian Belief*, theistic belief is claimed to be no less rational than belief in other minds, memory beliefs, or belief in physical objects. Since these are beliefs that cannot be shown evidentially (propositionally) to be valid, and since we cannot live consistently without presupposing their validity, then, theistic belief may also be included in this category of beliefs. Why is this so? Apparently because many people simply find themselves with the belief that there is a God and accept it in the basic way. Finding theistic belief, other minds, physical objects, and memory beliefs as basic in an individual's noetic belief structure we come to understand that it is rational to do this because we were *designed* to form beliefs in this way when we are functioning properly in the appropriate environment with our cognitive faculties aimed at acquiring truth. But is it not immediately apparent from the preceding argument that we have been given nothing more than a possible *cause* for these beliefs and not the *reason* we might expect?³² Would not Hume be the first to decry this explanation as nothing more than customary inference?

Our idea, therefore, of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, and the consequent inference from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connexion.³³

Why is it that we make this connection from our belief in other minds, or physical objects to an argument that these exist in external reality? Hume would argue that it is by way of custom that the constant conjunction of our beliefs makes this necessary connection. One perceives the beauty of nature and forms the belief that there is a God that created the world. From what he observes in the world, he forms the belief that this God must be a good God because there is

³²Henry Veatch, "Preliminary Statement of Apology, Analysis, and Critique," in *Thomistic Papers IV*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy (Houston: The Center For Thomistic Studies, 1988), 40-41.

³³David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding : A Critical Edition*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 150.

goodness, that which God gives to sustain us is good, and so on. Later this person feels guilty because of something he has done and concludes that God has made him feel this way. Yet, it in no way follows that this person has a *reason* for this belief in Plantinga's system. Here, one begins to realize the trap Professor Plantinga has fallen into by accepting the presuppositions of Hume's skepticism of external reality, for if one cannot know it directly but must proceed as Plantinga does, then Hume's arguments concerning custom as the cause of our continued necessary connections become immediately relevant. There is no rationally inescapable way one may reason to the necessity of external reality and beliefs that follow logically and immediately from it. The only escape from this skepticism comes through the Aristotelian/Thomistic interpretation that external reality is known intuitively and undeniably. The affirmation of physical objects (external reality) is self-evident and based not on evidential propositions in the Cartesian sense, but on metaphysical reality. It is actually undeniable that *I* exist; it is self-defeating to claim I cannot *know* external reality.

But if Plantinga's system fails by confusing causes with reasons in adducing the rationality of widely accepted beliefs such as the existence of physical objects and other minds, what of the belief in dispute; viz., belief in God. Plantinga explains: "Belief in the existence of God is in the same boat as beliefs in other minds, the past, and perceptual objects; in each case God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we form the belief in question. But then, the belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of reason as those other beliefs."³⁴

Note that the underlying reason for belief in God is not that it is comparable to these other beliefs, but that all of these beliefs are present due to the fact that this is how we were so constructed. And yet, do we not immediately arrive at the conclusion previously offered; viz., that this explanation necessitates nothing more than one's cause for the belief in question?

³⁴Plantinga, *Faith and Rationality*, 90.

Perhaps one might speculate a psychological or social cause for theistic belief,³⁵ yet this is no *reason* for the belief.

As an example, suppose I am a stressed, perhaps even a psychotic student in a graduate program and am convinced of the belief that all my professors are out to fail me from the program. I have no physical evidence and nothing I could show anyone else to verify my belief. I tell my best friend and he advises me to come to a series of meetings in which we meet with each professor individually and as a group. He then remarks that I have nothing to worry about as each professor has cordially offered to help and advise me any time I need assistance. I observe, however, that this is really the genius of their plan and when we leave they will resume their actions against me. They will never let me pass through the program.

It should be apparent that even though I might have *causes* for my belief that they are out to fail me, I have no *reasons* for that belief. There might be any number of causes for my belief that they want to fail me, but I still lack reason or grounds for that belief.

In *Warranted Christian Belief* Professor Plantinga responds to the challenges of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Marx believed that theistic belief resulted from a sort of social disease or dysfunction while Freud held that belief in God arose, among other things, from a sort of wishful thinking on the part of the believer. The argument from Freud would be similar to that which we have just argued; namely that psychosis or some form of psychological process might be the cause of our theistic belief. Concerning this idea of wishful thinking, Freud comments: “These [religious beliefs], which are given out as teachings, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes.”³⁶

³⁵Indeed Plantinga does examine these very issues in Chapter 5 of *Warranted Christian Belief*. He does little, however, to relieve the fact that this *could* be the cause of theistic belief even though it is not likely.

³⁶Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. And ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 30; quoted in Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 139, n. 8.

Plantinga responds to this and similar beliefs which follow immediately from the speculation of Freud and Marx: “Is there any reason to believe these things? Is there any evidence for the F&M [Freud and Marx] complaints?”³⁷ Plantinga then attacks the question of whether Freud is right, or can he present any evidence³⁸ that would validate this claim. Concluding that the only explanation (or evidence) Freud gives is that many young people give up religion when they come of age and are able to break from their father’s authority, Plantinga dismisses his claim immediately. He notes: “Now things *could* be like this; and in the nature of the case maybe this sort of thing can’t be demonstrated. Still, why should we believe it?”³⁹ Indeed, this knife cuts both ways and one might question why Plantinga’s argument should be accepted over Freud’s in view of Hume’s argument of constant conjunction and necessary connection. Presumably, the answer would be that this is how we were designed to function in the appropriate environment. It seems, however, that the only difference between Plantinga’s argument and Freud’s theory is that more people accept one (theistic belief) over the other (wishful thinking). Even if Plantinga’s proposal is a better explanation of the way people act in forming theistic beliefs, it still does nothing to eradicate Hume’s criticism. Plantinga is locked into his belief system, Freud in his belief system, and others in their various systems; and we can never know who might be right due to the fact that all we have adduced is possible causes and not reasons.

Even though he rejects the claim, fideism cannot be avoided given the assumptions of Plantinga. In *Faith and Rationality*, after noting that “belief in the existence of God is in the same boat as belief in other minds, belief in the past, and perceptual objects,”⁴⁰ he comments that “from this vantage point we can see, therefore, that the Reformed epistemologist is not a fideist

³⁷Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 194.

³⁸Evidence in the context of the discussion of Freud and others includes empirical evidence along with any other form. See *Warranted Christian Belief*, 195.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁰Plantinga, *Faith and Rationality*, 90.

at all with respect to belief in God.”⁴¹ Yet, if Plantinga cannot defend his assumptions in light of the fact that knowledge of physical objects and other minds must undeniably exist, as we have seen above, then he cannot defend himself against the claim of fideism.

Induction and Circularity

But that which we have seen thus far only precedes a more penetrating claim; specifically, that the design plan and proper function falls prey to circularity. In Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* he formulates what has come to be known as the riddle of induction, or as Plantinga notes, the *old* riddle of induction, namely, “What makes it right or rational to follow inductive methods in forming beliefs?” The new riddle of induction, explained by Plantinga as “What makes a property projectable?” is provided by Nelson Goodman, but for our purposes Hume’s question will suffice. He informs us as to the problem he sees with induction:

As to past experience, it can be allowed to give *direct* and *certain* information of those precise objects only, and that precise period of time, which fell under its cognizance: But why this experience should be extended to future times, and to other objects, which, for aught we know, may be only in appearance similar; this is the main question on which I would insist. The bread, which I formerly ate, nourished me; that is, a body, of such sensible qualities, was, at that time, endowed with such secret powers: But does it follow, that other bread must also nourish me at another time, and that like sensible qualities must also be attended with like secret powers?⁴²

Why is it we feel the necessity to predict some future effect based upon a present cause? Usually, it is from the fact that we have always observed it to occur in particular manner previously. That being the case, it still does not follow that the effect will follow with certainty. If one has always observed that the sun has risen in the east early in the morning, it does not follow that it will tomorrow rise in the east early in the morning. Simply because every man we

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Hume, 4.2.16, 30.

have encountered is a rational being, it does not follow that all men are rational beings, Hume would reason.

Plantinga questions though, “*are* these inferences ungrounded, unfounded, irrational, or without justification? But what, precisely is the complaint?”⁴³ Is it not rational to reason this way? Surely its not irrational in the sense of someone being psychotic, or dysfunctional. Is it that one might be deontologically unjustified in reasoning this way? Presumably not, for according to Plantinga, “there are no intellectual duties – at any rate none of us know of – to refrain from forming the belief in this way.”⁴⁴ Is it that we cannot have some type of Cartesian certainty? This should be of no hindrance to us, however, for as we have seen, there are many beliefs with which one might not acquire this type of certainty (e.g., memory beliefs, other minds, and physical objects). Finding no legitimate objection, Plantinga continues and ends his chapter on induction in *Warrant and Proper Function* with the following:

The old riddle of induction, therefore, is the question ‘What makes it right or rational to follow inductive methods in forming beliefs?’ Hume thought there was no solution. The new riddle of induction is the question, ‘What makes a property projectable?’ Goodman thought the answer was entrenchment. Both Goodman and Hume are wrong; there is an answer to each question, and it is substantially the *same* answer. What makes it right to form belief in that inductive manner is just the fact that this is how a properly functioning human being forms beliefs; and what makes projectable properties projectable is just the fact that properly functioning human beings project them. But given that these projections and beliefs meet the other conditions of warrant (given that these beliefs and projections are formed in an appropriate cognitive environment and that the modules of the design plan governing their production are successfully aimed at truth), that is sufficient for warrant.⁴⁵

What makes induction reliable, or rational, is that this is simply how properly functioning human beings were designed to function in the appropriate environment. Designed by whom? Well, God of course. But how do we know, or why do we accept belief in God to be rational?

⁴³Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 126.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 136.

Presumably, because when one examines the beliefs of people as a whole, i.e., *performs an inductive analysis*, it becomes apparent that belief in God is accepted in the basic way. And what makes this a viable way to establish the rationality of this basic belief? It is simply the way properly functioning beings were designed to function. Hence, we have a circular argument as to the viability of knowledge in general, and more specifically, knowledge and belief in God. To be fair, Plantinga seems to recognize this, yet still accepts that we can form rational beliefs using induction. Commenting on Hume's skepticism of induction he remarks: "So what precisely is supposed to be the problem? . . . Is it that we can't give a noncircular argument for the reliability of induction? That's true enough; but the same holds for deduction, and if it does not disqualify the latter, why should it disqualify the former?"⁴⁶ Plantinga maintains that simply because we cannot give a non-circular argument for induction, this does not mean that it is irrational to use inductive techniques, or that we cannot have knowledge from them. Indeed, we would be hard pressed to find anyone who could consistently deny induction as a viable approach to obtaining knowledge and manage to function on a daily basis, and to this extent Plantinga is certainly correct. Yet this is not the issue. One certainly need not give a rational explanation of every cognitive process he performs or for every belief he might accept. But if anyone engages in developing a positive epistemic theory that will take into account the procedure by which we know, then that theory must *at least* be non-contradictory, and non-circular in its reasoning. If it does not meet even these basic standards, then perhaps the problem is not in reality or in our ability to understand it as such, but in the cognitive scheme which refuses to cohere with it.

Additional Problems

Professor Plantinga's system is circular because it attempts to work around the problems of skepticism after accepting its presuppositions. The skepticism of Hume is of an indelible sort if one buys into his assumptions, and for Plantinga, along with his reformed epistemological

⁴⁶Ibid.

brethren, all that is left if one is to hold to realism, is a kind of pragmatic solution. We observe and accept our experience of an external physical reality, other minds (persons), memory beliefs, etc.; yet since skeptical arguments have left us without a basis of knowledge, a pragmatic approach provides the best solution one might hope for due to the fact that we could not function if the common things we accept daily were not true. Yet as soon as one takes this step, the only answers available to questions such as, "Does God exist," become causes and not reasons; and yet, as we have shown, causes are certainly not reasons. This does not necessarily mean that the causes Plantinga cites are not true, but the reasoning by which one comes to this conclusion cannot be shown to be valid or follow a rational process. There *could* be many different ways to account for the beliefs in question and a pragmatic approach would only provide a *test* for truth or rationality and in no way the *measure* of it. The point is that Plantinga's system fails due to the fact that he cannot consistently maintain a rationally defensible position.

Certainly, I do not mean to propose that experiential evidence, the type Plantinga cites in maintaining that belief in God is basic, is invalid or irrational. Nor do I propose the Cartesian or Lockean schemes to be adequate, as they are ineffectual and stifled due to unrealistic expectations. I merely suggest that one must have *some* evidence upon which his theistic belief is based; whether that be through the perception of order and beauty in creation, by testimony, or by way of reasoned philosophical argumentation grounded in metaphysical reality. Plantinga asserts that we do not ordinarily reason through propositions or infer from nature that God exists; we simply accept this as a basic proposition. He insists that if one is pressed hard enough, he might claim his beliefs are based on observations or propositions, but this is not how we normally form the belief that God exists; we simply accept this as a basic belief. However, can this be consistently upheld? How do people normally come to believe in God? Most would claim they either believed by way of testimony, from some sort of teleological inference, or from reasoning to God's existence philosophically. None of these need be taken to their extreme; the point is simply that belief is based in some way on what we normally define as evidence. Plantinga actually wants to assert Platonism as the theory of how we acquire knowledge in

general and belief in God specifically. He proposes that our beliefs about God, and presumably all of our beliefs, are occasioned by God.

It isn't that one beholds the night sky, notes that it is grand, and concludes that there must be such a person as God: an argument like that would be ridiculously weak. . . . It is rather that, upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, these beliefs just arise within us. They are *occasioned* by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them.⁴⁷

However, it is up to the Platonist to explain why it is only *after* we have some sort of evidence that comes through the senses (testimonial, teleological, or philosophical), that this belief in God arises from within. How might this be shown as actually true? And as a believer, where is the benefit in accepting innate ideas such as the theistic belief Plantinga proposes? If God exists and has designed man in such a way as to function properly in the appropriate environment, why should we assume that design is such that it will leave us vulnerable to an insuperable skepticism, such as Hume's, by which we conclude our senses would send us mistaken information. If He has designed man and the world in which we live, then would He not have the wherewithal to equip us with a defensible position against Hume and others? It certainly seems Plantinga invokes the divine veracity to underwrite sensory perception. If this is so, "what is necessary to overcome sensory skepticism is an *additional* (innate) intuition to the effect that the senses *are* reliable. But then, why is this any better than the insight that they are reliable based on sensory experience itself?"⁴⁸ That being the case, the innate idea approach in terms of theistic belief appears to be confusing, unnecessary, and disproportionate with how we ordinarily come to a knowledge of reality.

⁴⁷Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 175.

⁴⁸ Thomas Russman, " 'Reformed' Epistemology," in *Thomistic Papers IV*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy (Houston: The Center For Thomistic Studies, 1988), 199.

CONCLUSION

Professor Plantinga's system has many positive and acceptable conditions for a theory of knowledge. The need for proper function in our cognitive faculties as well as the requirement that said faculties are aimed at truth seems to be a necessary condition for knowledge. In addition, the pragmatism his system entails is a welcome and needed test for the rationality of belief in God as it stresses the experiential basis of that belief. The motivation to provide a solid and defensible position for Christians against the relentless assault of modern skepticism and evidentialism is commendable; yet the sacrifice of its acceptance of skeptical arguments by Descartes, Hume and others, can only lead to conclusions of the type arrived at by Professor Plantinga. If reality cannot be known directly then the truth of our propositions about God, or anything for that matter, cannot be verified. The classical apologetic argues that reality must be knowable in order to know that there is a God that exists. What Plantinga has done is effectively lock theists, atheists, and pantheists in their own respective bubbles. From his position, he sees no need to verify the rationality of theism anymore than others' minds or external reality. In fact, for Plantinga rationality in the traditional sense is deontological in nature and presupposes some sort of duty in acquiring knowledge. It is internalism that is at fault and his move is to make an external approach viable. This move fails because causes are substituted for reasons and lead one down the inevitable path of fideism.

That being the case, the reformed epistemological system espoused by Plantinga should be rejected. Rejected due to its acceptance of skeptical presuppositions, its circularity in accounting for induction, and its unnecessary and perhaps unverifiable position concerning innate knowledge of God's existence.

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