

A Critical Review of Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*

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IN HIS RECENT BOOK *Warranted Christian Belief*¹ (hereafter WCB), Alvin Plantinga applies to questions of religious epistemology the considerable epistemological machinery that he constructed in *Warrant: The Current Debate* and in *Warrant and Proper Function*.² In the latter work he argued for a position best described as “teleological reliabilism.” On his view, a belief has warrant (that quantity enough of which turns true belief into knowledge) if and only if it is produced by a properly functioning, successfully truth-aimed cognitive faculty that is operating in an environment for which it was designed. Furthermore, in such conditions the more firmly a belief is held, the stronger is its warrant. In this critical review, I will briefly present the key points of WCB and then focus on two features of Plantinga’s account that I find particularly problematic. Before launching into the difficulties, let me say that like his other two works in epistemology, WCB is chock full of interesting arguments, clever examples, and important insights. What we have here is the final payment on a promissory note issued in the early 1980s when Plantinga first began to address issues in religious epistemology. Then (and notoriously) Plantinga defended the position that belief in God is “properly basic,” although he was quick to admit that at the time he lacked an account of proper basicity. One of the chief functions of WCB is to present and defend just such a theory.

WCB is divided into four sections. Part 1 introduces the fundamental issues that the book will address and takes on a few preliminary challenges to the project. Part 2 is entitled “What is the Question?” and it is here that Plantinga begins to be more explicit about the precise issue that will concern him. Plantinga refers to the metaphysical question of the existence of God as the “*de facto* question.” In contrast to this is the main topic of WCB: “the *de jure* question” concerning the justification or rationality or warrant of belief in God. What is of interest to Plantinga in this part

¹Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), pp. xx + 508. \$60.00 hb, \$24.95 pb.

²*Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993).

of the book is a better understanding of the claim that belief in God is in some way intellectually deficient. He proceeds to generate possible answers by enumerating theories of justification, rationality, and warrant and, for each, asking if the *de jure* objector is arguing that belief in God does not satisfy that theory's condition of epistemic permissibility or excellence. So we get discussions of classical foundationalism and evidentialism, modified deontological justification, reliabilist justification, and a number of conceptions of rationality. In each of these cases, Plantinga argues, the objector should not be understood as claiming that belief in God fails to satisfy the epistemic theory in question. Why not? Because either the account is so easy to satisfy that the claim that Christian belief founders on it is simple to refute (this is the case, Plantinga believes, with deontological justification) or the account itself fails to capture all instances of the given notion (classical foundationalism and Alston-justification are accounts discarded for this reason).

Here I pause to make a first critical point. Plantinga's method of eliminating certain candidates as answers to the *de jure* question is as follows. Step one: sketch a theory of justification or warrant that entails that the possession of an alleged epistemic virtue E is necessary and sufficient for justification or warrant. Step two: show that there are beliefs that are "reasonable, rational, or sensible" (Plantinga's terms) that lack E. Step three: conclude that the *de jure* question cannot be a complaint that theistic belief fails to exemplify E.

But this line of reasoning fails to do justice to the potential "complaints" that it so quickly dismisses. That a particular epistemic virtue cannot bear the weight of being a necessary and sufficient condition for justification, rationality, or warrant does not tend to show that the virtue is not necessary for some varieties of belief to have one or more of these favorable epistemic statuses. That there are justified beliefs that are not based upon adequate evidence or a truth-conducive ground (Plantinga argues that memory beliefs are sometimes based on neither) is not a sufficient reason to rule out the *de jure* candidate's complaint that Christian belief is irrational because there is insufficient evidence or no available truth-conducive ground for belief.

This point can be made clearer, I think, by considering a non-religious case. There are people who believe that a large human/ape creature roams the forests of the northwest regions of North America. I believe that not only does Bigfoot not exist but also that those who believe that he does have a belief that is less than fully rational or justified or warranted. What *exactly* is my complaint against Sasquatch believers? It is not easy to say. But should I *rule out* that the defect is a lack of evidence or truth-conducive ground simply because I think evidentialism and Alston-justification do not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for justification, rationality, or warrant? Or consider another example. Two scientists differ in regard to which theory their data best support. One asks the other why he believes as he does and he answers that he really does not have a reason; he can think of no evidence or ground for his belief that theory A is right and B wrong. It just seems right to him. His colleague is taken aback by his response and accuses him of an "unjustified" belief. Not implausibly, she thinks that he should only believe that the data

support A over B if he has some reason or evidence for thinking this. Should she withdraw her opinion if an epistemologist convinces her that memory beliefs can sometimes be justified even in the absence of evidence? Surely not. Why? Because the fact that an epistemic virtue is not necessary and sufficient for the justification or warrant or rationality of *every* belief does not entail that it is not necessary for some. Thus, it seems to me that there are likely to be a plethora of perfectly fine or appropriate *de jure* questions even if Plantinga is right about the failure of other candidates as accounts of justification, warrant, and rationality. One might find belief in God not epistemically in the clear because it is not based on a reliable ground, or does not cohere with the doxastic system of a rational agent, or is not in keeping with the agent's evidence.

It is not until the fifth chapter that Plantinga hits on what he takes to be the heart of the *de jure* objection. Anyone who has read his other two works in epistemology will not be surprised by where Plantinga locates the issue, that is, at warrant and proper function. Plantinga interprets the objections by Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx as being of a piece and as claiming that religious belief is primarily the result of psychological processes that are not truth-aimed. Freud's claim is that religious beliefs are the product of wish-fulfillment and hence an illusion; Marx objects to religious belief on the ground that it is the product of psychological dysfunction, produced by a perverted world-consciousness. But, says Plantinga, they share a common theme.

And here we come to the heart of the objection by Freud and Marx: when they say that Christian belief (or theistic belief, or even perhaps religious belief in general) is *irrational*, the basic idea is that belief of this sort is not among the proper deliverances of our rational faculties. It is not produced by properly functioning truth-aimed cognitive faculties or processes. It is not produced by belief-producing processes that are free of dysfunction and whose purpose it is to furnish us with true belief. And this means that the presumption of the reliability of properly functioning cognitive faculties does not apply to the processes that yield belief in God or Christian belief more broadly. The fundamental idea is that religious belief has a source distinct from those of our faculties that are aimed at the truth (p. 151).

So at last we have Plantinga's formulation of the *de jure* objection to Christian belief: it lacks warrant because it is not the product of successfully truth-aimed, properly-functioning cognitive faculties operating in an appropriate environment.

In order to *refute* the charge that religious belief lacks warrant, Plantinga would need to show that religious belief is (or at least can be) warranted. But recall that Plantinga's characterization of warrant is "that quantity enough of which will make true belief knowledge." So, for a belief to be warranted is for that belief to be likely to be true (Plantinga is explicit about the need for a reliability condition on warrant). Thus, in order to refute the *de jure* objection, that is, to show that it is false that belief in God is never warranted, Plantinga would need to demonstrate that there are occasions when belief in God is likely to be true. But that is not such an easy thing to do this side of providing a plausible argument for the existence of God. Plantinga himself states later in the book that if there is no God, then belief in

God is probably not warranted. This seems right, particularly for one who adopts Plantinga's teleological version of reliabilism. It is not easy to see why there should (or even how there could) be a reliable theistic-belief-producing faculty in a naturalistic world. So, the prospects for refuting the objector are slim to none without a good argument for the existence of God.

But philosophers are not limited to refutation in responding to critics. Plantinga's reply, developed in part 3 of WCB, can be seen not as an attempt to refute the objector but instead to *neutralize* her claims. His aim is not to show that belief in God is warranted but only that there is no good reason to think that it is not.

Plantinga responds to the *de jure* objection by constructing two models of how Christian belief can have warrant. But what is a model here and how does model construction serve to neutralize the objection? To the first part of this question, Plantinga offers the following explanation:

[T]o give a model of a proposition or state of affairs S is to show *how it could be* that S is true or actual. The model itself will be *another* proposition (or state of affairs), one such that it is clear (1) that it is [epistemically] possible and (2) that if it is *true*, then so is the target proposition. From these two, of course, it follows that the model is possible. (p. 168)

To these conditions, Plantinga adds the further claim that there are no cogent objections to these models that are not cogent objections to the truth of Christianity itself.

Leaning on the writings of John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas, Plantinga suggests in the first model that the human design-plan calls for an innate disposition (the *sensus divinitatis*) implanted in us for the purpose of producing belief in God. In certain circumstances (for instance, reading the Scriptures or taking in the starry heavens), this faculty is triggered and naturally produces theistic belief. The *sensus divinitatis*, then, is innate even though its deliverances are not; they are the product of an inborn disposition operating in the circumstances for which they were designed. The *sensus divinitatis* is seen as a cognitive faculty with many similarities to our perceptual and memorial faculties. In particular, the *sensus divinitatis* produces beliefs that are properly basic, that is, that are justified and even warranted although their justification or warrant is not a product of their being supported by an argument or propositional evidence.

The first model is intended to show how beliefs in the existence of God can be warranted. The aim of the second is to do the same for specifically Christian beliefs. This model crucially includes claims of divine communication through the Scriptures and the "internal instigation of the Holy Spirit" (p. 206). This instigation produces faith and is "therefore a source of belief, a cognitive process that produces in us belief in the main lines of the Christian story" (p. 206). Furthermore, this process is truth-aimed and functioning according to design in an appropriate environment, and so the beliefs that it produces are warranted and can even count as knowledge if held firmly enough.

In the fourth and final part of WCB, Plantinga turns his attention to the topic of epistemic defeat. A reader of the first three parts of the book might believe that they show only that belief in God could be warranted in circumstances in which few of us (or at least few of us who are at least reasonably well educated) ever find ourselves. For they show only that, in the absence of epistemic defeat, Christian belief can be warranted. However, the doubtful reader continues, there are defeaters for standard Christian belief and so even if belief could be warranted in the absence of defeat, defeat is not absent, and so belief is not warranted (even if, by chance, the model should be true).

To my mind, some of the most interesting discussions in WCB happen in part 4. In particular, it is here that Plantinga develops his general epistemology in important ways. To address the objection in the preceding paragraph, Plantinga expands his account of the nature of epistemic defeat. What he says is complex and deep; a full treatment of it must wait for another time. But for now it is sufficient to note that Plantinga thinks that what counts as a defeater is relative to the design-plan of the subject in question. For a proposition P to defeat belief B for S, the truth-aimed part of S's design-plan must call for S to cease believing B when S comes to believe that P. Plantinga spends the final chapters of his book arguing that, given his account of defeat, none of the standard objections to traditional Christian belief (that is, those grounded in postmodernism, pluralism, Biblical criticism, and the problem of evil) is a successful defeater.

In sum, what we get in WCB is an argument for a conditional claim: if Christianity is true, then in all probability belief in the fundamental truths of Christianity is (*ultima facie*) warranted. Plantinga sees this as still significant since he claims that a current objection to Christian belief is that, even if it were true, it would be irrational (or unwarranted). I am not sure that Plantinga is right about the extent to which atheists and agnostics claim that even if true, belief in Christianity is irrational. I think rather that those who argue the irrationality of religious belief rather than its falsity set their sights as they do because they take its falsity for granted. How, they want to know, could an intelligent person believe something so obviously false?

There is not space here to engage in detailed evaluation of either the basic or the extended models that Plantinga offers. The claim that the models are epistemically possible is likely to be considered dubious by some. Plantinga seems to think that the models are not only epistemically possible, but logically possible too. He writes, "The sense of possibility here, however, isn't just broadly logical possibility . . ." (p. 168). However, given Plantinga's understanding of God as a necessary being, he is not in a position to help himself to the logical possibility of either model since the very logical possibility of each entails the existence of God. However, this point is not crucial since it is the epistemic possibility that is significant here.

My primary concern with Plantinga's treatment of the epistemology of religious belief centers on a feature of his more generic epistemology, but one that is perhaps brought into sharper relief in the context of religious epistemology

than it is elsewhere. The fundamental idea is that a belief is warranted if and only if it is produced by a properly functioning, successfully truth-aimed faculty. When the epistemology of Christian belief is at issue, Plantinga is fond of giving examples of a person's belief in God being triggered by, for instance, seeing a snow-covered mountain, reading the Scriptures, or feeling guilty. This is fair enough: these are the kind of circumstances in which Christians frequently do claim to sense the presence of God and hence form the appropriate beliefs. But we must tread carefully here. For Plantinga's view is that there are no *a priori* constraints on what can produce warranted belief. The triggering circumstances in the standard examples that Plantinga cites tend to have two features: (a) they are experiential, and (b) their content has a traceable connection to the content of the beliefs that they produce. So, for example, when one looks at the starry heavens, one forms the belief that "God made all this." The triggering circumstance involves an experiential state that includes a percept of the stars together with a feeling of awe. And the content of this state is in a way traceable to the belief that God is the creator. For the stars naturally (in humans, anyway) evoke feelings of awe and a sense of wonder; it is not a huge step from there to the thought that the cause of such things must be awe-inspiring and finally to an omnipotent creator. Again, the point is not that one can (much less that the believer *does*) construct a good argument from the trigger to the target belief. Rather, it is only that there is a traceable connection between the content of the trigger to the belief that it triggers. Even when the initial input is a feeling of guilt or a recognition that one has done something wrong which then produces the belief that God disapproves of what one has done, there is an obvious (though not perceptual) experiential state that bears a content-relation to the belief produced. Again, it is natural to cite such examples and for a pair of reasons. First, these are the kinds of case that religious believers report; and, second, as a class, they also bear a striking resemblance to perceptual beliefs in that the triggering circumstances involve experiential states with content that is significantly related to the content of the resulting belief.

The problem is that these features of triggering circumstances are, on Plantinga's view, only a contingent feature of our design-plan. As things stand, we are constructed so that when we are in those circumstances, we will form the belief in question. But there are no *a priori* restrictions on what can be a triggering event for a belief. We can, for example, imagine a design-plan according to which the belief "God loves me" is triggered by the sound of the word "cracker." This is a case where one of the features of the examples that Plantinga cites holds but the other does not: hearing the sound of "cracker" is an experiential state but one that bears no content-relation to the resulting belief. Yet, there is no reason in principle why the triggering event should have to be an experiential state. Suppose one were able to register at a non-conscious level the presence of a certain sound wave without consciously experiencing a corresponding sound. Now there is no *a priori* reason why God could not have rigged us up so that when we non-consciously detect the presence of these sound waves, we come to believe that "God was at work in Christ redeeming the world." And if God were to have so constructed us and if the faculty that would produce the belief were successfully truth-aimed and operating in the

right kind of environment, then on Plantinga's view it would produce warrant. Furthermore, if we were designed so that not only we would come to believe as we do but that we would come to believe it with maximal strength, then we would have maximal warrant. There would not be any belief that would hold that could have any more warrant—it would be epistemically on a par with “If I think, I exist” and with “I am currently in pain” as it is believed at a moment of intense pain.

But things get even more counter-intuitive. To see this, first consider the above objection, but as it would be made to a standard (as opposed to a teleological) reliabilist. Here the concern with proper function and design-plan drop out, but the case is still one in which the subject has a reliably formed belief about a fine point of theology that is produced by a seemingly unrelated, not consciously detectable sound wave. Now, suppose that this process is (somehow) nontrivially reliable. The reliabilist will have to admit that the theological beliefs so formed are *prima facie* warranted. So it might appear that this objection is no more or less damaging to Plantinga than is a standard objection to reliabilist theories of justification.

It turns out, however, that the problem is considerably worse for Plantinga. For while the reliabilist might be stuck granting *prima facie* warrant, she will be quick to invoke a “no defeater” clause to block a claim of *ultima facie* warrant. For a defeater is a reason to think that a belief is false or unreliably formed. In the above case, if the subject knows nothing about the mechanism that produces the belief and if it has no other ground, then she ought to think that it is ungrounded and hence unreliably formed. The reliabilist might well insist that the belief is thereby defeated since a properly reflective subject would believe that she had no ground for the beliefs and that ill-grounded beliefs are unreliable. So, the beliefs are reliably formed but not *ultima facie* warranted because, if the subject were to do an adequate job of rational reflection, she would see that she has reason to think them unreliable. Now, I am not saying that a reliabilist would have to say just this or that there are no complications in this particular reply, but this is a broad outline of a reliabilist response to these kinds of cases. The nature of defeat, from a standard reliabilist perspective, is centered on the twin concerns of truth and reliability.

With teleological reliabilism, however, it is a different story. On Plantinga's view, a defeater is a belief that in a properly functioning truth-aimed system knocks out the belief that it defeats. So, what counts as a defeater is relative to the specification of the design-plan. Now, we can stipulate that, in the case in question, the belief is significant enough that God builds *no* defeating conditions into the design-plan. So, even when reflecting and seeing no basis for the belief and believing that beliefs with no such basis are likely to be unreliably formed, the believer continues in her theological belief and even continues to believe it with maximal subjective certainty. The belief then continues to be as warranted as the *cogito*.

Here is one final twist. God might have made us so that when we consider evidence for the nonexistence of God or the unreliability of the Scriptures or the illusory nature of religious experience, the strength of our theistic belief would actually increase. Maybe all such evidence is in the end deeply misleading and God does not want us to err in matters of ultimate importance. So a student, call her

“Faith,” takes a philosophy of religion class from a brilliant atheist who presents convincing versions of arguments for all of the above theses. She cannot see a thing wrong with any of them. But in accordance with her design-plan, the strength of Faith’s conviction in the central tenets of Christianity is thereby strengthened, not weakened. Indeed, perhaps with enough apparently sound arguments for the falsity of Christianity her belief will become maximally warranted!

Now Plantinga can, of course, say that the human design-plan is not like this. There are potential defeaters for God’s existence and the claims of Christianity, and we are not made to believe more strongly when we confront them. That is probably true (although given Plantinga’s assumptions about the damage that the Fall has done to our faculties where belief in God is concerned, I am not sure how he can be confident in reading off the design-plan from our actual cognitive function). But, even if that is right, the counter-example remains in place. For Faith’s belief is produced by a successfully truth-aimed, properly functioning cognitive faculty operating in an appropriate environment; it is also undefeated and believed with maximal firmness. Plantinga’s epistemology entails that beliefs with these properties are maximally warranted—hence, they are as warranted as one’s belief in one’s own existence.³

So WCB is, by my lights, not without its problems. Yet, commanding universal assent has never been a necessary condition of great philosophy. And WCB’s virtues are many. The account that it offers is deep, novel, complex, and interesting. It deserves a place alongside William Alston’s *Perceiving God* on the shelf of destined-to-be classics in the epistemology of religious belief.

³Thanks to Jack Lyons and Christopher Hill for helpful conversation.