

GUY AXTELL

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF: THE BASIC BELIEF APOLOGETIC AS ANTI-SKEPTICAL STRATAGEM

*"A man must consider what a blind-man's bluff is this game of conformity.
If I know your sect I anticipate your argument."*
Emerson, 'Self-Reliance'

ABSTRACT. Today we find philosophical naturalists and Christian theists both expressing an interest in virtue epistemology, while starting out from vastly different assumptions. What can be done to increase fruitful dialogue among these divergent groups of virtue-theoretic thinkers? The primary aim of this paper is to uncover more substantial common ground for dialogue by wielding a double-edged critique of certain assumptions shared by 'scientific' and 'theistic' externalisms, assumptions that undermine proper attention to epistemic agency and responsibility. I employ a responsibilist virtue epistemology to this end, utilizing it most extensively in critique of Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000). Epistemological externalism presages, I also argue, a *new demarcation problem*, but a secondary aim of the paper is to suggest reasons to think that 'responsibilist externalism,' especially as glossed in virtue-theoretic terms, provides its proponents with the ability to adequately address this problem as we find it represented in a potent thought-experiment developed by Barry Stroud.

1. ANTEING-UP TO PLAY EXTERNALISM AGAINST SKEPTICISM

Externalism in epistemology was one of the most significant developments in philosophy during the second half of the twentieth century, an event that we are given to understand is somehow linked with the end or transformation of the 'Modern' period in philosophy. But externalism in Christian apologetics has had a startling impact in that field as well, and embodies its own, still more acerbic criticism of Modernist thought and its presuppositions. Moreover, the claims made

on behalf of contemporary *theistic externalism* must be considered together with those of its naturalistic siblings if one is to be in a position to assess the adequacy of the ‘externalist turn’ in epistemology as a strategy of response to radical skepticism. Alvin Goldman and other philosophical naturalists reject epistemic access internalism in part because of its “skepticism-breeding consequences” (2002, p. 8). As Robert Brandom (1998, p. 387) puts it, reliabilist externalism “underwrites a naturalistic epistemology” for thinkers such as Goldman. But one of the keen ironies in the prominence that externalism enjoys today is that its ascendance has been no sure boon for the philosophic naturalism that first motivated it. Those who led in providing externalist responses to radical skepticism now wake up to find themselves with strange bedfellows. Their appeals to externalist conceptions of knowledge and justification are shared, but not their philosophical naturalism with its conception of epistemology as contiguous and continuous with the sciences. Today we find that the ‘generous optimism about knowledge’ that naturalists thought secured by their externalist responses to Pyrrhonism, can rather easily be appropriated and extended to combat the domain-restricted or (hereafter) *local* skepticism directed since early-modern times against those ‘religious enthusiasts’ born of the Reformation. Since it was they whose entitlement to believe was first called seriously into question in a philosophical way by the empiricist John Locke, Christian apologetics that employ theistic externalism threaten to undo much of the work of the epistemological turn associated with the birth of Modernism.

The best example of contemporary theistic-externalism as an anti-skeptical strategy is likely to be Alvin Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000). Following John Calvin, Plantinga says that when a person’s faculties are working in the manner they were designed for they believe in God automatically—this being part of God’s design-plan with humankind—and have a ‘natural knowledge’ of his existence. This illustrates why it is unsurprising that Reformed

epistemology, with its historical roots in Calvin, is at home amongst externalist theories, and rejects the internalism it finds shared across the rationalist and empiricist branches of Modernist thought. The proper functioning of one's faculties, including that of the special faculty for awareness of God that Calvin termed the *sensus divinitatis*, is not typically accessible to the agent's own consciousness; but, Plantinga will insist, neither are these required conditions for warrant on an externalist account:

Why suppose that if God proposes to enable us to have knowledge of a certain sort, he must arrange things in such a way that we can see an argumentative connection between the experiences involved in the cognitive processes he selects and the truth of the beliefs these processes produce? That requirement is entirely gratuitous and also false, since it doesn't hold for such splendid examples of knowledge as perception, memory, and *a priori* intuition (Plantinga, 2000, p. 331).

Talk about raising the stakes! This and similar passages suggest that any localized skepticism directed against religious belief will inexorably deflect back, leading to a more global and debilitating skepticism, if the 'classical foundationalism' of the Modernist era in philosophy is retained. A more liberal conception of properly basic beliefs thus becomes not the salvation of religious faith, but of Reason. With rejection of classical foundationalism goes also the evidentialist ethics of beliefs to which Hume and Locke gave birth, this being tied closely with the epistemological internalism and deontologism that Plantinga sees motivating its criticisms of Christian believers.

In Part 3 of the paper, I respond to Plantinga's attempt to place theistic belief in 'epistemic parity' with commonsense beliefs that most naturalists would describe as basic in the sense of enjoying immediate (or untransferred) warrant. But before making that response, I want to explore a quite different aspect of issues of parity, by placing them within the broader context of the debate regarding radical skepticism. This I do in Section 2, below, utilizing the useful distinction that Barry Stroud (2000) draws between 'scientific externalism' and 'theistic externalism'.

2. THINKING GLOBALLY, BETTING LOCALLY: STROUD ON RADICAL AND RESTRICTED SKEPTICISM

Stroud finds epistemological externalism an unsatisfying response to Pyrrhonism. He explains why by drawing upon what he sees as the *equipollence* between two mutually-exclusive versions of it, the *status quo* ‘scientific externalists’ and their ‘theistic externalist’ counterparts. In his Enlightened Descartes Case, Stroud has us reflect on “what an ‘enlightened’, or ‘externalist’ but otherwise Cartesian theory might look like.” (Stroud, 2000, p. 318) In turning to epistemological externalism, our imaginary Descartes would give up the key internalist premise about what his own thought experiment requires in order for his methodological doubter to make good his intended re-ascent out of the depths of doubt. He would give up the premise that you don’t know something unless you know that you know it; this is just as the externalist wishes, since they argue that Descartes’ internalism and infallibilism led to acknowledging a gap between justification and truth that would have deeply skeptical implications were epistemic externalism not available as an alternative approach.

Now if we agree with this enlightened Descartes in rejecting access internalism and taking an alternative, externalist approach, Stroud’s example continues, then the circularity objection to Descartes’s use of God as a guarantee of what we know—an objection often still taken as devastating to Descartes—becomes “no objection at all.” For “If ‘externalism’ were correct, Descartes’s inability to prove that God exists and guarantees the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions would be no obstacle to his knowing the truth of whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives” (Stroud, 2000, pp. 317–318).¹ Stroud concedes that if the imagined externalist Cartesian theory were true, we would know many of the things we think we know, and so skepticism would not be correct. But of course few of those who Stroud calls scientific externalists would take Descartes’s claims to knowledge on this basis seriously. They would not abide such a theistic

externalism mimicking the anti-skeptical strategies of their own scientific externalism.

Stroud himself is skeptical of the externalist explanation given by his imaginary enlightened Descartes, and is right to take it that a scientific externalist would typically join him thus far. But being more globally skeptical than either of the two figures in his example, he then goes on to pit them one against the other: "The question now is whether an 'externalist' scientific epistemologist who rejects Descartes's explanation and offers one of his own is in any better position when he comes to apply his theory to his own knowledge than the imagined 'externalist' Descartes is in" (2000, p. 319). Why should one of naturalistic persuasion suppose that his scientific externalism allows *him* to side-step skepticism, when by his own concession the accounts offered by theistic externalists fail to adequately address the form of skepticism directed against *them*? Is the former *really* in a better position, *vis-à-vis* the skeptical challenge that *he* confronts?

The scientific 'externalist' claims he does have reason to believe his explanation of knowledge and so to be in a better position than the imagined 'externalist' Descartes. But the way he fulfils that condition, if he does, is only in an 'externalist' way, and therefore in the same way that the imagined Descartes fulfils the conditions of knowledge, if he does (Stroud, 2000, p. 320).

This is what I will hereafter refer to as *Stroud's Challenge*, one that typifies how the turn to externalist epistemology presages a new demarcation problem. Stroud thinks the scientific externalist can't provide the demarcational explanation he obliges them to give, and so the Enlightened Descartes Case suggests to him that externalist epistemology packaged together with philosophical naturalism really brings nothing substantively new to the table for discussion of what philosophers call radical skepticism. The pertinence of *Stroud's Challenge* to our own study should be apparent as well, because although he doesn't mention Plantinga, there are indeed similarities between Reformed epistemology and the theistic externalist Stroud describes for us. Now some years before

Plantinga capped off his trilogy on warrant and proper function by applying it in the negative apologetics of *Warranted Christian Belief*, his account was described by Ernest Sosa (1993) as a kind of virtue epistemology, or at worst a close cousin to it, both being “versions of generic reliabilism.” Thus the challenge of demarcation that Stroud poses for scientific externalism, to the extent that it is deemed reasonable, becomes a serious challenge to virtue and agent reliabilisms as well.

This, in particular, is why I here present the virtue-theoretic response that I will give to Plantinga as being caught up in this broader debate over radical skepticism; it is why, as we make our response, we will also have to pay attention to the relationship *between* local and radical skepticism. Theistic externalism is a stratagem of response primarily to a localized skepticism, whereas Stroud’s scientific externalist, like the mainstream epistemological tradition with which he is associated, likely endorses such a restricted skepticism at the same time that he takes externalism to allow him to side-step ‘radical’ skepticism. The difference of *levels* of skepticism that we find here doesn’t itself relieve the scientific externalist of his demarcational burden. Stroud thinks it is reasonable to demand an explanation of why he holds warrant-externalism to provide response to radical skepticism, while denying to the theistic externalist a similar success in response to localized skepticism about religious utterances. The Enlightened Descartes Case, then, presents us with a second instance of a stakes-raising, ‘epistemic parity’ gambit, that is, an argument where an initially localized skepticism is said to be without ‘criteria’ needed to contain it to its initial target; as with Plantinga, this gambit suggests that the logical force of the sceptical arguments employed will be deflected back upon their employers with far more demoralizing consequences.

Attempting to show that this is not the case will engage us in what Michael Williams (2001) calls epistemology’s “problem of demarcation”; this being itself a complex issue, I can here only hope to provide a sketch of what a fuller response to the demarcational concerns raised by Plantinga and

Stroud, respectively, might amount to. But the sketch I do provide—that of a virtue-theoretic and hence an *agent-based* account of demarcation—need not be thought to reinvolve evidentialism or to reflect the ways in which Plantinga says philosophical Modernism has impugned the reasonability of religious belief. Having now brought radical skepticism to the table through Stroud's example, we acknowledge sitting across from some very high-stakes players, and must prepare to start anew, watching closely how the cards are cut. In the next section I engage Plantinga's basic belief apologetic as an instance of theistic externalism. Should our response to him be philosophically adequately, it can then assume a place as a dialectical move against our second opponent, directly aiding us in arguing that *Stroud's Challenge* to the scientific externalist can indeed be met. In following up on this latter concern of the paper, I will return in my conclusion section to the inter-dependent relationship between radical and local scepticism, as we find it illuminated in Stroud's thought experiment.

3. RESHUFFLING THE DECK: PERSONAL VIRTUES AGAINST THE BLIND-SPOTS OF EXTERNALISM

There already exists keen interest in virtue theory among both secular and Christian scholars. In this section of the paper, my criticisms of Plantinga's accounts of warrant and rationality are part of an attempt to uncover a more substantial common ground for dialogue between Christian and secular thinkers who have research interests in virtue theory. At least I hope that they will serve to stimulate a more direct engagement between these groups over their commonalities and differences. Clearing out the obstructions that block this common ground of inquiry will require that we wield a double-edged critique against certain extremes in the camps of both the naturalist and Christian (roughly, Stroud's 'scientific' and 'theistic') philosophers who appropriate externalist strategies of response to skepticism; I shall try to show how both of these groups sometimes actually

debilitate externalism as an anti-skeptical strategy, when, whether by mere neglect or by design, they undermine proper regard for responsible epistemic agency and personal justification.

As an example of what I mean about the neglect of active agency being shared *across* the naturalist/non-naturalist divide, consider a strong involuntarism about belief, something endorsed by any number of philosophical naturalists, and crucial to Plantinga's view as well. The irony is that while few of the former group would approve the function that it finds in his basic belief apologetic of insulating particular Christian beliefs from criticism, Plantinga draws support for his involuntarism by pointing to it as an accepted methodological assumption in mainstream naturalistic epistemologies. My concern here is over an overtly narrow conception of agency, one that compares the epistemic agent to an input-output machine. Plantinga has become quite adept over the years at appropriating such obtuse assumptions of *methodological* naturalism, while refitting them to be rubbed in the faces of *philosophical* naturalists. Illustrating this "mirror-image of the philosophical naturalist's project," he writes that "...we can think of the *sensus divinitatis*, too, as an input-output device: it takes the circumstances mentioned above as input and issues as output theistic beliefs, beliefs about God." (Plantinga, 2000, pp. xiv, 174–175) So there are, it seems to me, 'enthusiasts' in the camps of *both* scientific and theistic externalism, as evidenced by the 'blindspots' that they share in common.² If philosophers take relatively passive or non-reflective beliefs as paradigmatic of human knowledge, as strong versions of naturalism would have us do, or take questions of reliability as *replacing* the explanatory work once done by appeal to reasons, they will find themselves with less rather than more to say to a theistic externalist who takes belief in God as an instance of spontaneous belief with immediate warrant.

Turning more directly to his text, Plantinga takes his critique of epistemic internalism and evidentialism as undoing most aspects of the epistemological turn; this seems appar-

ent from his key claim that there are no *de jure* objections to Christian belief that do not depend upon answers the objector has previously given herself to a *de facto* question: "So the *de jure* question we have finally found is not, after all, really independent of the *de facto* question; to answer the former we must answer the latter" (2000, p. 191). By this, Plantinga essentially means that all criticism of Christian belief as epistemically irresponsible or irrational presupposes an alternative naturalistic metaphysic that assumes the falsity of Christianity; such criticism cannot otherwise be motivated. These oft-repeated claims in the book are intended dialectically to reverse the burden of proof, demanding something like that the objector first prove a negative; they furthermore leave us with extremely weak constraints on epistemic entitlement, or what I will hereafter call epistemic 'prerogative.'³

But Plantinga's account faces a decisive dilemma in relation to its 'extended A/C model' (Aquinas/Calvin) and the way that it extends the warrant attributable to generic theistic belief (if the *sensus divinitatis* is functioning properly in an individual according to God's design plan), to warrant for *specifically Christian* belief.⁴ The production of warranted Christian belief must be different than that of theistic belief through the *sensus divinitatis*, and Plantinga models it as belief reliably produced through the IIHS, or Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit.⁵ But can such an extension of the basic model make theoretical sense, when the IIHS is not a human faculty at all, but an outer instigator of the inner process of belief-acquisition? The motivating idea seems to be that a belief can be 'properly basic' if it derives not just from a properly functioning faculty, but from any 'process' initiated by a genuine revelation.⁶ But if Christian belief is supernaturally caused directly by God, and is not the result of a faculty on the human side, then, as Richard Gale (2005) charges, it cannot have any 'function,' and neither can it be said to 'malfunction' or to be subject to a pathology. To render these concerns as a dilemma for Plantinga:

(1) One can maintain a strong analogy between the two sorts of belief—i.e., Christian belief and theistic belief more generally—but at the cost of distancing Reformed epistemology from traditional conceptions of Christian faith as a virtue for which the agent is praiseworthy.

Or

(2) One can allow that the analogy is weak because of a more substantial role played by volition in Christian faith, but at a cost of depriving the former beliefs of the spontaneity needed for them to be candidates for passive, immediate warrant.⁷

This dilemma represents a serious problem for Plantinga's attempt to model the warrant for Christian belief externalistically, and analogously to how generically theistic belief would have warrant if produced reliably through a *sensus divinitatis*. Yet it is important to understand that this is merely negative apologetics anyway on Plantinga's part: He doesn't equate providing a *model for warrant* with *establishing warrant*, nor could he. He "doesn't claim that belief in God and the deliverances of the IHS *do* have warrant. That is because in all likelihood they have warrant only if they are true, and I am not arguing that these beliefs are in fact true" (2000, p. 347). Instead what this apologetic aims to show is only that it is possible and "subject to no philosophical objections that do not assume that Christian belief is false" (2000, p. 351). By the same token, however, Plantinga realizes that he is saddled with conceding that if there is no such person as God, then

it is unlikely that belief in God is produced by a process that is functioning properly in a congenial environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief. So if theistic belief is false, it probably has no warrant. Freud is right: If theistic belief is false, it probably is at least very likely that it has little or no warrant. (Plantinga 2000, p. 188).

These would seem to be large concessions, revealing the basic belief apologetic as essentially the strategy of a blind man's bluff, one premised on a way that the world might be, but without offering reasons for outsiders to adopt its motivating first

philosophy. Yet the Reformed epistemologist will be quite content with this outcome, content to unseat the epistemological turn *en toto* along with personal justification, and to defend his basic believer with an epistemic bill of rights that makes the incommensurability of first philosophies its own first article. Something like this, at least, seems intended when Plantinga (2000, pp. xii–xiii) writes, “Hence there aren’t any decent *de jure* objections that do not depend on *de facto* objections. Everything really depends on the truth of Christian belief; but that refutes the common suggestion that Christian belief, whether true or not, is intellectually unacceptable.”

Our direct concern in this paper is limited to the Christian ‘basic believer’ whose modes of belief acquisition and maintenance Plantinga’s extended A/C model provides an apology for. But one worry of a more epistemological sort is that once Plantinga has made this move, his basic believer is no longer expected to be able to connect (abstract) objective and (personal) subjective justification in an intellectually satisfying way. Retaining some essentials of the epistemological turn, I invert the course of Plantinga’s approach, and conclude that what the basic belief apologetic should indicate to philosophers is how ‘unmixed’ forms of externalism tend to undermine proper regard for epistemic responsibility and agency.

Being ‘belief-based,’ Plantinga’s account fails to do justice to the common-sense view that the same (objectively warranted) belief might be held by different agents, with greatly differing degrees of epistemic responsibility and conversational prerogative. A related worry, to which we can now turn, is that he would actually have us reconceive the primary sense of *rationality* as being a judgment that flows directly from warrant. I refer to his externalistic notion of ‘rationality as proper function,’ and some of *Warranted Christian Belief*’s boldest claims are put in terms of it. What is epistemologically interesting here is that Plantinga’s concession to Freud (that Christian belief would be unwarranted), on condition that theistic belief is false, also entails an analogous concession in regard to agent rationality. If rationality simply follows from

warrant, and warrant from truth, the basic believer will not pass this test either unless she is right about the first philosophy that Plantinga describes as the “*de facto* issue.” This has the effect of defending the rationality of the basic believer only by placing *attributions* of rationality into a transcendental realm beyond human capability; moreover, the implied concession that the Christian believer is rational or reasonable only if she is *right*, is a concession that theologies which retain the importance of personal responsibility in belief need not make, and, I would add, very properly so.

Our concern with these points extends directly to Plantinga’s apology for Christian religious exclusivism. Its rational support in his book is tied up with this same externalistic conception of rationality. So it seems to be apparent at this point what game our blind man (*qua* radical theistic externalist) is playing, and that he has metaphorically ‘pushed his chips all in’ on that peculiar brand of realism about Biblical revelation that motivates religious exclusivism. Firstly, when he addresses it directly, Plantinga is quite clear that the warrant of Christian belief logically entails the judgment that all other incompatible beliefs are *unwarranted*.⁸ Second, theistic conceptions of godhead are singled out among the world’s religions as somehow the *only* ones “subject to no *de jure* objections that are independent of *de facto* objections” (2000, p. 350).

Into this debate between the basic belief apologetic and its critics, I want to introduce a responsibilist virtue epistemology. We can redress the ‘blind spots of externalism’, of which we previously spoke, in both its naturalistic *and* theistic forms, to the extent that commitment to what I call *responsibilist externalism* provides an alternative to them. Just briefly then, I want to point out resources for addressing epistemic responsibility in religious belief, resources that I think we may employ *jointly* whether theists or naturalists. A responsibilist virtue epistemology emphasizes the normative applicability of the personal or reflective character virtues to all contexts of genuine inquiry. Duncan Pritchard (2003), coming from a squarely secular interest, Zagzebski (1993,

2004), giving an essentially Catholic response, and Robert Roberts and Jay Wood (2004, 2006) speaking as Christians within a Protestant, Reformed tradition, have each responded directly to Plantinga's theistic externalism in a surprisingly similar responsibilist way. They each propose that where the basic belief apologetic fails is in leaving an inadequate role for character virtues in the acquisition and maintenance of religious belief.

The dispositions at issue in responsibilist externalism—such as openness to correction, self-trust, perseverance in intellectual work, intellectual humility, a balance of intellectual daring and caution, and so on suggest (in a way that mere faculties do not) excellences of the *whole person*, and are thereby closely associated with the emotional and motivational aspects of epistemic agency. That such diverse authors each view these dispositions as important to the responsible holding of religious belief, provides a first signal of their potential as a basis for productive dialogue between theists and naturalists.

Pritchard (2003) offers a 'virtue-theoretical proposal' to Plantinga, arguing that although Plantinga's view is already regarded by some as a form of virtue epistemology, his account is "not conceived of in terms of the *right* virtue-theoretic account." Pritchard suggests that Plantinga's account should be agent-based rather than belief-based, and identifies it as a more general fault of reliabilism that it often focuses on properties of the belief rather than on properties of the agent who forms the belief. Without the integration of the personal or reflective virtues, Pritchard argues, the form of theistic externalism proposed will lack the resources to respond to certain sorts of cases where, for instance, belief may be the product of bias; should we allow this, he rightly objects, we are left with no way to "trace the cognitive shortcoming in question back to the agent's cognitive faculties where these are understood in non-reflective terms." But by contrast, "The more developed form of virtue epistemology under consideration here has no such difficulties...because it

can explain the agent's lack of knowledge in terms of a failure to exhibit the appropriate reflective virtue." (2003, pp. 64–65)

Pritchard's proposal, and his distinction between *faculty* virtue theories suited to capturing perceptual knowledge and *reflective* virtue theories, dovetails in important ways with proposals made by Catholic writers like Zagzebski (2004). We even find this kind of response to Plantinga among other Reformed epistemologists, especially Roberts and Wood. All agree that the faculty-virtues alone are an unlikely basis upon which to afford us religious knowledge, and all agree that issues of epistemic prerogative remain vital even in an era of epistemological externalism. Roberts and Wood (2006) place their focus on normative tasks of guidance and evaluation, understanding the personal epistemic virtues as having important practical and pedagogical roles to play in "promot[ing] the acquisition, maintenance, transmission, and application of knowledge." In contrast to Plantinga's understanding of proper function in terms of specifically cognitive faculties, or 'parts' of the person, they hold that the proper functioning of the agent as 'person' needs to be taken in a far more holistic sense: "Traits of the person and not merely traits of the faculties are the basis for warrant in many important cases." (2004, 4)

Zagzebski (1993, p. 209) finds Plantinga's account of warrant for Christian belief "too externalist, insufficiently voluntarist, and insufficiently social." There is little in the way of intellectual character that affects belief on his model, and so undoubting assent seems enough for faith, and faith is in no strong sense a theological *virtue* for which an individual may be deemed admirable or praiseworthy. From the agent's perspective, Christianity's soteriological faith becomes "heavily, if not totally, a matter of luck." (Zagzebski 1993, p. 202) These points of criticism are of course objections to the *theological* adequacy of Plantinga's Neo-Calvinist apologetic, as suggested by a Catholic thinker. But they tie together with more directly philosophical points, such as his form of doxastic involuntarism mentioned earlier. As both Zagzebski and

Roberts and Wood seem to take it, then, attempts to understand the excellences of the virtues in terms of the proper functioning of machines are philosophically deficient, and shown so by the implied disassociation of cognitive processes from the emotional and motivational dimensions of the whole person. As Zagzebski (1993, p. 5) puts it,

The difference between Plantinga and those who want to see a stronger internalist element in the account of warrant is probably less a matter of dispute about ...whether a warranted belief involves properly functioning faculties than it is a dispute about the extent to which the properly functioning believer is self-reflective.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1. *Epistemic Responsibility and Prerogative: A Response to Plantinga*

Like Williams (2001), I have maintained the importance of personal justification for knowledge, while rejecting with him as unsound the view that makes personal justification “wholly dependent on a special kind of grounding: evidential justification, strictly so-called” (Williams 2001, p. 24). Rejecting what Williams calls the ‘Prior Grounding Requirement’ to which access internalism is committed, entails rejecting the evidentialist view that all responsible believing must be believing-on-evidence. Williams says that this requirement actually “drains the notion of personal justification of much of its interest”; I agree with that, and depart from Williams not over his mixed-externalism or his pragmatism, but only in my attempt to supplement them with a virtue-theoretic account of personal responsibility and epistemic prerogative. So I agree with Plantinga in rejecting what we might call the ‘unholy alliance’ between internalism, deontology, and evidentialism. But this conjunction of views can be abandoned without thereby abandoning the personal responsibility dimension of justification/warrant; an intellectually praiseworthy religious believer will be one for whom the reflective virtues play an indispensable and abiding role.

Our utilization of the reflective virtues to fill out an account of personal justification can and should be understood as reflecting a drive towards mixed externalism in epistemology, rather than as recoiling into an internalist or evidentialist ethics of belief. Plantinga would receive from me a big chunk of what he seeks in his *Warrant* trilogy, because proponents of agent-based approaches simply wouldn't take interest in judgments as grandiose as that all Christian, or all religious belief, is intellectually irresponsible. My criticism fell on Plantinga's new apologetic strategy to support what still seems to me the very old-fashioned attitude of Locke's religious enthusiasts, including their religious exclusivism and sectarianism. Yet I do not presuppose how, once common-grounds are established, the envisioned dialogue between naturalists and Christians over the intellectual virtues would play out. Responsibilist virtue epistemology may cut the cards quite differently; I suspect it would effectively recast the issues of rationality in ways that make obsolete certain aspects of an evidentialist ethics of belief.

This stance does not prevent me from being highly critical of what is perhaps the key thesis of *Warranted Christian Belief*, that without a philosopher first presupposing the *falsehood* of Christian belief, "there isn't the faintest reason to think that Christian belief lacks justification, rationality, or warrant." (Plantinga 2000, p. xiii) This makes taking one kind of dogmatic stance the only way to contest another. Insofar as Plantinga's negative apologetic invokes an unmixed form of theistic externalism (and rejects thereby a more moderate responsibilist externalism), we have sound *epistemic* grounds on which to find fault with these philosophical aspects of his two A/C models. Additionally, insofar as Plantinga's basic believer, as an epistemic agent, is a Christian religious exclusivist, I believe that it is again the correct response of a broader audience to reject Plantinga's attempts to eschew personal justification in the way that his basic belief apologetic permits and even prescribes.

There are of course numerous contemporary strategies for supporting the reasonability of religious belief, pragmatism, sceptical fideism, and post-modernism among them. His chips all in, Plantinga regards these strategies as simply exhibiting “a failure of nerve,” because they face less bravely than does he such potential epistemic defeaters as the problems of religious diversity and the ramifications of Biblical-historical criticism. Pragmatism in philosophy of religion, for instance, can be taken to lead either to tempering the strength of cognitive commitment in Christian faith, or to tampering with its content—in particular, the historical character of creedal claims; such responses to potential epistemological defeaters are rejected by Plantinga as compromising what *he* thinks required by Christian faith. Now I cannot hope to persuade those who agree with Plantinga over these points, any more than I could persuade a radical skeptic like Stroud of the adequacy of my response to him. Moreover, our focus on Plantinga’s basic believer has been too restricted to draw conclusions about all possible defences of religious exclusivism, or again, about the adequacy of all possible forms of theistic externalism.⁹ But my criticism of the basic belief apologetic has at least provided argumentative reasons to think that some of these other options indicate better strategies in support of the reasonability of religious faith and commitment than the strategy of ‘blind man’s bluff’ that I have taken as characterizing Plantinga’s basic belief apologetic.

4.2. *Responsibilist Externalism and the New Demarcation Problem: A Response to Stroud*

A detailed treatment of Plantinga’s work would need to more fully engage his arguments for ‘epistemic parity’ between theistic and common sense beliefs. But we have drawn attention to how this parity gambit works in converse relation to that of Stroud’s Enlightened Descartes Case, since the former author wants to retain but liberalize a foundationalist account, while the latter thinks the lesson is that no (foundationalist)

appeal to the basicity of certain kinds of belief can escape the Pyrrhonian problematic.

Ironically, Plantinga and Stroud nevertheless share the view that the scientific externalist's claim to uniqueness in having a viable anti-skeptical approach, is the stuff of arbitrary preference or merely circular support. For Plantinga this view is reflected in his charges of analytic epistemology's chauvinism, and in his repudiation of philosophical modernism and the epistemological turn that it inaugurated. For Stroud, by contrast, this view is reflected in the Enlightened Descartes Case with his presumption that the scientific externalists cannot show what is wrong with a theistic externalist's mimicking of their every move. So Stroud's stake in our contest stems from quite different intentions: he uses a generalized worry—that the scientific externalist cannot satisfactorily explain how he is “in a better position than the imagined ‘externalist’ Descartes” —to support the conclusion that there is *nothing* to satisfy an intellectual craving to understanding how human knowledge, in general, is possible. Now the scientific externalist's goal is not to *persuade* the skeptic, but only to explain adequately how human beings can know anything at all. Stroud I think caricatures the scientific externalist by presenting him as a ‘pure’ externalist, and I have argued that if we instead bring into play a mixed or responsibilist externalism (and more specifically, a responsibilist *virtue epistemology*), then *Stroud's Challenge* can indeed be met.

So it may be unclear how far Plantinga is correct in assimilating evidentialism with epistemological internalism, but it *is* clear that the turn to externalism in epistemology must lead us to recast the very demand for reflectively good reasons in new and more satisfactory forms. While all externalist epistemologies can utilize a third-person perspective on warrant in responding to radical skepticism, our account becomes distinctively virtue-theoretic when we utilize as well the reflective virtues and the philosophical discriminations that they can help us make whenever issues of localized scepticism arise. In addressing normative judgment about different domains of

theoretic research, or about epistemic agents themselves, a virtue epistemologist should not appeal to *metaphilosophical* generalizations about manifest asymmetries between scientific language *vis-à-vis* other kinds like evaluative, metaphysical or religious. Our focus on the intellectual responsibility of the agent as the normative property to be evaluated makes our approach one describable as agent-based. We can, then, agree with Stroud that theistic externalism is inadequate if it models an agent who typically achieves warrant “*only* in an externalist way”; for the model itself will then block the road to inquiry as to whether the target beliefs have been responsibly acquired or maintained.

We have also shown that our approach, because it retains the importance of personal justification for epistemic prerogative and for knowledge, is available only to a responsibilist externalism and not to forms of reliabilism or externalism that turn non-justificationist. If our response to Stroud is possible only within such a mixed account of knowledge and justification, then those forms of scientific externalism that retain this character are, I maintain, the *only* ones that can be rescued from *Stroud's Challenge*. Reforming what Stroud calls scientific externalism is thus also crucial to my undertaking. The critique is thus to be taken as double-edged, as I maintain that there are forms of philosophical naturalism fashionable in analytic epistemology today that in fact debilitate rather than improve epistemological externalism as an anti-skeptical strategy. As Williams (2005, p. 253) nicely puts it: “We cannot simply confront the skeptic with an externalist reply. We must earn the right to make use of externalist insights by embedding them in a deeper diagnosis of the skeptic's epistemological presuppositions.”

In conclusion, Francis Bacon spoke of two contrasting ‘moral ways’: one beginning with an outer show of plainness and certainty, but ending with surrender to insurmountable difficulty; and another beginning with inner acknowledgment of difficulty and uncertainty, but cautiously building towards a reasoned communal confidence. This is how I see the rela-

tionship between our background metaphilosophical assumptions, and the challenges that epistemologists face in dialogue with radical skepticism. If epistemologists begin attributions and agent-evaluations with ‘certainties’ about the unreasonableness of religious and metaphysical belief, ‘certainties’ amounting to universalizing assumptions about demarcation to which they are no longer entitled, then they will—just as Stroud alleges—end with deeper and more general doubts. But if they begin by conceding that a new demarcation problem arises with externalism that can only be addressed by the marriage of responsibilism to externalism, what they might yet discover are resources for increasing confidence in their abilities both to distinguish among and to improve agent performance in the various domains of human inquiry. This latter ‘way’ or dialectic serves the Christian philosopher just as well as the naturalist, and, I would hope, sets an irenic tone for further discussions between them.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ Stroud (2000, pp. 317–318) writes that Descartes “would not have to know that he knows these things. As long as God did in fact exist and did in fact make sure that his clear and distinct perceptions were true, Descartes would have the knowledge he started out thinking he had, even if God’s existence and nature remained eternally unknown to him.”

² Brandom (1998, p. 373), to whom this talk of ‘blindspots’ alludes, puts it this way: “The primary insights of externalist reliabilism lead to a “temptation” to suppose that the concept of reliability of belief-forming processes can simply replace the concept of having good reasons for belief—that all the explanatory work for which we have been accustomed to call on the latter can be performed as well or better by the former.” So I am joining Brandom in saying the temptation “should be resisted” because it runs together questions that need to remain distinct. But I also argue that the temptation towards such a radical “recentering of epistemology” cannot solely be attributed to what he calls the “Naturalistic Blindspot,” since some forms of theistic externalism succumb to it as well.

³ Plantinga (2000, p. 498) writes, “if Christian belief is true, it very likely does have warrant; hence any objection to its having warrant will have to be an objection to its being true....” While I am highly suspicious

of this contention, I want to point out how the “pure” or “unmixed” forms of externalism found tempting amongst naturalistic philosophers can be seen as having worked to encourage just such an extreme form of theistic externalism as that invoked in *Warranted Christian Belief*.

⁴ Plantinga (2000, pp. 169–170) writes that the “A/C model entails the truth of theism and the extended A/C model the truth of classical Christianity.”

⁵ See, for example, Plantinga (2000, p. 248).

⁶ Plantinga (2000, p. 246) writes, for example, that “a process that consists in direct divine activity cannot fail to function properly.”

⁷ Plantinga (2000, p. 257) concedes that there is a problem, because “it is not obvious that one can directly transfer necessary and sufficient conditions for warrant from beliefs produced by faculties to beliefs produced by processes.”

⁸ See also Axtell (2003a).

⁹ See also Quinn and Meeker (2000), and Axtell (2003b).

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