

A Timid and Tepid Appropriation:
Divine Presence, the *Sensus Divinitatis*, and Phenomenal Conservatism
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Res Philosophica, DOI: 10.5840/resphilosophica20231120110

Abstract. Plantinga develops an ambitious theistic religious epistemology on which theists can have non-inferential knowledge of God. Central to his epistemology is the idea that human beings have a “*sensus divinitatis*” that produces such knowledge. Recently, several authors have urged an appropriation of the *sensus divinitatis* that is more friendly to internalist views, such as Phenomenal Conservatism. I argue that, up to this point, this appropriation is too timid and tepid in a variety of ways. It only applies to a small fraction of theistic beliefs; it fails to play the theological role Plantinga intended the *sensus divinitatis* to play; it fails to imply that most theistic beliefs, most of the time, are justified; when combined with a standard form of Evidentialism, it actually implies that most theistic beliefs are, if justified, inferentially justified; and it is consistent with substantive criticisms of theistic belief originating in work from the Cognitive Science of Religion.

Alvin Plantinga claims that people have experiences of what I call “divine presence.” God might speak to you, praising or condemning your action; you might feel the beauty of God’s created order; you may feel God’s comfort in a difficult time; etc. In short, God feels “present” to one. Throughout his work, Plantinga analogizes these experiences to ordinary experiences of other agents. Just as I might experience my brother as being present to me in various ways, so too I might experience God as being present to me in various ways.

Of course, few deny that there are experiences of divine presence—many just maintain these experiences are illusory, the result of a malfunctioning mind. By contrast, Plantinga believes that these experiences are the result of properly functioning mental faculties, specifically, an innate faculty dedicated to producing theistic beliefs that he calls the “*sensus divinitatis*” (a “sense of the divine”). This faculty plays two roles in Plantinga’s theistic religious epistemology. First, it plays an epistemic role. It partly explains how theistic beliefs based on experiences of divine presence might constitute non-inferential knowledge. Second, it plays a theological role. It partly explains how people might acquire theistic knowledge that is central to human flourishing on Plantinga’s traditional version of Theism. Plantinga intended for the *sensus divinitatis* to play these roles in an externalist framework for knowledge, specifically, his proper functionalist account of knowledge in terms of “warrant” (Plantinga (1993a, b)).

In recent years, there have been several attempts to appropriate the *sensus divinitatis* by authors more sympathetic to internalist approaches in epistemology (see Tucker (2011), McAllister and Dougherty (2019), Gage and McAllister (2020)). Whereas Plantinga invoked his

¹ For helpful feedback on the ideas of this paper, I thank Blake McAllister, Wes Skolits, Chris Tucker, and two reviewers for the journal. This research was supported by grant 62703 of the John Templeton Foundation. The views expressed here are not necessarily representative of the views of the John Templeton Foundation or its employees; and neither the John Templeton Foundation nor its employees influenced the content of the views expressed here.

general theory of warrant and the *sensus divinitatis* in explaining the epistemic import of divine presence, these authors invoke a family of internalist principles labelled “Phenomenal Conservatism.” Phenomenal Conservatism maintains that there is an important connection between justified beliefs and “seemings”—reflectively accessible mental states whereby a proposition is forcefully presented to one as true. These internalist appropriations of the *sensus divinitatis* are intended to play similar roles as Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* but in a way sympathetic to internalist approaches in epistemology.

My thesis is that the *Phenomenal Conservatism Appropriation* of the *sensus divinitatis* is, up to this point, too timid and tepid in a variety of ways. The *Appropriation* only applies to a small fraction of theistic beliefs; it fails to play the theological role Plantinga intended the *sensus divinitatis* to play; it fails to imply that most theistic beliefs, most of the time, are justified; when combined with a standard form of Evidentialism, it actually implies that most theistic beliefs are, if justified, *inferentially* justified; and it is consistent with substantive criticisms of theistic belief originating in work from the Cognitive Science of Religion. Thus, *even if the principles of the Appropriation are true*, the end epistemic results are too timid and tepid. In arguing for this, I don’t come to bury once and for all the *Phenomenal Conservatism Appropriation*. Rather, my hope is to encourage a push for a more ambitious and robust appropriation with a fuller epistemology.

I. Highlights of Plantinga’s Religious Epistemology

Plantinga’s work on the epistemology of theistic belief is expansive (Plantinga (1967, 1983, 2000, 2008, 2015)). Plantinga is skeptical of traditional theistic arguments, seeing their epistemic import for theistic belief as being mild at best. Instead, most of his work focuses on the epistemic import of divine presence—God feeling present to one through nature, or moral reflection, or reading the Bible, etc. While a lot of his work is well-known, I’ll briefly review three key elements that are central to my discussion here.

The first key element of Plantinga’s theistic religious epistemology is that theistic belief is non-inferentially justified or known. A belief may be inferentially justified or known because of positive epistemic relations it bears to *other* beliefs a person has. By contrast, a belief that is non-inferentially justified or known is justified or known *independently* of its positive epistemic relations to other beliefs. Thus, if theistic belief is justified or non-inferentially known, the person’s theistic belief is justified or known without necessarily having inferred those theistic beliefs from the premises of some traditional argument for the existence of God. Plantinga doesn’t think non-inferential beliefs are “groundless” *per se*. Rather, they are grounded in experiences of divine presence—where one has an experience of God being present in one’s life in some way.

It is important to understand the scope of this first element. Plantinga doesn’t claim that *any* theistic belief is automatically thereby non-inferentially justified or known. His epistemology of theistic belief allows that some theistic beliefs do not constitute knowledge. For instance, it may be that a person’s theistic belief is weak and wavering, or based on silly reasons, or held despite deep reservations by the person. Rather, the idea is that, as he once put it, “many believers in God are justified in believing as they do, and indeed know [God exists]” (2008: 156). This claim is closer to what’s called a generic like corn is yellow, dogs have tails, and big cities have subway stations. The scope of these claims lies between the scope of an existential and universal statement.

The second key element of Plantinga’s theistic religious epistemology is that *de facto* and *de jure* objections to theistic belief are not independent. A *de jure* objection to theistic belief

maintains that theistic belief is irrational, unjustified, or otherwise unreasonable. A *de facto* objection to theistic belief maintains that theistic belief is false. Plantinga argues that these objections are not independent. Specifically, he defends:

Theism Conditional: If Theism is true, then theistic belief constitutes knowledge. If the *Theism Conditional* is true, then a *de jure* objection to theistic belief succeeds only if a *de facto* objection to theistic belief succeeds as well.

To be clear, the *Theism Conditional* doesn't state an entailment. Plantinga isn't claiming that Theism *necessitates* theistic knowledge, and all that comes with it (e.g., beings with sufficient complexity to have mental states representing God). Rather, *Theism Conditional* is an indicative conditional. Such conditionals can be contingently true and true only because other truths obtain (e.g., there are beings with sufficient complexity to have mental states representing God).

The third key element of Plantinga's theistic religious epistemology is the existence of an innate theistic faculty called the *sensus divinitatis* (hereafter SD). The SD is analogized to other belief-forming faculties like perception, memory, and introspection. Plantinga's account of the SD has several features. First, the SD is a belief-forming faculty that forms prototypical theistic beliefs like: God exists, God loves me, God created the heavens and earth, God disapproves of my action, etc. Second, the SD is innate and widely had by human beings. Third, the SD takes as its inputs a wide-range of experiences and circumstances. Fourth, the SD is designed by God to produce theistic beliefs. Lastly, the SD and its operations need not be introspectively accessible. For the SD to produce knowledge, people do not have to know about it or its operations through reflection and introspection.

This third element undergirds the first two in several ways. First, some critics might object to the claim that theistic beliefs constitute non-inferential knowledge. There is a standard argument—the regress argument—that *some* knowledge is non-inferentially known. But why think that *theistic belief* belongs to that category? Simply put, Plantinga's general theory of knowledge has conditions for some beliefs to be non-inferentially known and, given his account of the SD, some theistic beliefs meet those conditions (cf. (2000: 178-9)). Specifically, a true belief may constitute non-inferential knowledge when it is formed using properly functioning faculties, in an appropriate environment, in accordance with a design plan likely to produce true beliefs. But, Plantinga argues, a theistic belief can be formed using properly functioning faculties—the SD—in an appropriate environment, in accordance with a design plan likely to produce true beliefs. Of course, Plantinga doesn't think the SD always operates well. He claims that sin can corrupt the SD so that its outputs are muted and resisted by individuals (2000: 199-216). But when the SD does operate well, it can produce non-inferential theistic knowledge. (Compare: when memory functions properly, it stores the knowledge we have; but when memory is beset with disease and malfunction, like Alzheimer's, it doesn't.) So, summing up, Plantinga defends the following conditional:

Theism Knowledge Conditional: If human beings have an innate theistic faculty like the SD, then theistic beliefs constitute non-inferential knowledge.

This conditional is supported by the combination of his account of the SD and his general theory of knowledge. And, like the *Theism Conditional*, the *Theism Knowledge Conditional* is an indicative conditional and not an entailment.

Second, his account of the SD undergirds the second element of his religious epistemology as well. Plantinga argues for this conditional:

Theism Faculty Conditional: If Theism is true, then human beings have an innate theistic faculty like the SD.

(This conditional, too, should be understood as an indicative and not an entailment.) Notice that the combination of *Theism Faculty Conditional* and *Theism Knowledge Conditional* will imply the *Theism Conditional*.

Plantinga spends less time defending the *Theism Faculty Conditional* than defending the *Theism Knowledge Conditional*. But his defense is broadly theological (see Plantinga (2008: 7-9; 2000: 188-9)). Plantinga accepts a traditional form of Theism on which (i) human beings' greatest good or flourishing involves a relation to God, and (ii) accurate mental representations are central to achieving that relation to God. If this traditional form of Theism is true, then God has strong reason to ensure that human beings have accurate mental representations about God. One way to achieve such representation is through complex arguments. But ever since Aquinas (SCGI.4)—and probably before—theists have worried that complex arguments will not reach enough people. For appreciating such arguments take time, energy, education, etc. that are not had by all (or even most). By contrast, an innate theistic faculty *is* the sort of thing that could produce widespread, accurate mental representations about God.²

So Plantinga's account of the SD undergirds two key elements of his theistic religious epistemology: his argument that theistic belief can be non-inferentially known and that *de jure* objections to theistic belief succeed only if *de facto* objections to theistic beliefs succeed. But Plantinga's theistic religious epistemology is a thoroughgoing externalist epistemology. To have theistic knowledge, agents are not required to have reflective access to the SD, the environment they are in, the reliability of their belief forming processes, etc. Rather, so long as everything is functioning properly and appropriately, agents can have knowledge even without reflective access to the fact that things are functioning properly.

II. Phenomenal Conservative Appropriation

Recently, several scholars have proposed what I'll call the *Phenomenal Conservative Appropriation* of the SD (hereafter just the *Appropriation*).³ The *Appropriation* includes claims about experiences and the mind, epistemic principles, and the SD. Part of the interest in the *Appropriation* is to provide an internalist-friendly approach to religious epistemology to rival Plantinga's externalist-friendly approach. The purpose of this section is to sketch the *Appropriation* before turning to evaluating it in sections III-VI.

1. Philosophy of Mind Background

Some philosophers propose the existence of a certain kind of mental state called a "seeming." The standard, though not uncontested, view about seemings is this:

The Nature of Seemings: Seemings are *sui generis* mental states whereby a proposition is forcefully presented to a person as true.

First, seemings are mental states with propositional content; this distinguishes them from other mental states that lack propositional content, such as moods. Second, desires and intentions are also mental states with propositional content. Part of what distinguishes seemings from other mental states with propositional content is that, when undergoing or having the seeming, the proposition is "forcefully" presented as true. (See Huemer (2001: 77), McAllister (2018: 3093), Tolhurst (1998: 298-9), Tucker (2010: 530; 2011: 56), McCain and Moretti (2021: 61-2); for

² Some wonder whether Plantinga's reasoning is at odds with "skeptical theist" responses to the problem of evil. (See Fales (2003: 360-1) for an initial statement of the worry, and Moon (2017) for extended discussion of it.) I can't address this issue here, though I have in Perrine (2023).

³ Some philosophers embrace some of the views of sub-sections 1 and 2 without applying them to the SD. See, specifically, Burns (2017). Nonetheless, several of my criticisms will apply to their views as well. Swinburne (2004), Gellman (1997), and Davis (1989) defend similar principles. But they reject *The Nature of Seemings* and none of their principles are equivalent to the principles discussed here. So I won't discuss their views at length.

critical discussion Teng (2018).) Third, seemings are *sui generis*; or, at the very least, they are neither beliefs nor inclinations to believe. For one can have a seeming without a belief or an inclination to believe, such as cases involving known illusions (cf. Huemer (2001: 99; 2005: 100; 2007: 30), McAllister (2018: 3086ff.)).

A simple way to understand what seemings are is to try to induce them. Consider the following proposition: there are cats in the world. Doesn't that proposition just *seem* true? Isn't it *obvious*? Don't you feel *strongly inclined* to agree to it? Of course, you probably already believed that there are cats in the world. And because you already believed it, you probably already have a disposition to have this seeming. But when you directed your attention to this proposition, you likely had a new occurrent mental state—an experience in which that proposition is forcefully presented as true to you. This experience—like virtually all experiences—will cease to exist when your mind moves on to something new. But you will likely be able to bring this experience back into existence by once again considering that proposition.

Seemings are a kind of experience. But here it is useful to mark a distinction. Our visual experience often contains phenomenologically rich, but representationally thin, experiences composed of things like shapes, colors, occlusions, shading and the like. (And this is not an accident of the modality of vision—consider the non-conceptual but rich phenomenology of smelling freshly baked bread or roasting chestnuts.) Let's call such elements of our experiences "sensations" (following Lyons (2015)). Seemings are not sensations, so understood. For sensations do not have the rich propositional content that seemings have. So while seemings are a kind of experience, not all experiences are seemings.

2. Epistemological Principles

With the philosophy of mind of seemings in the background, let's now turn to various epistemic principles that are proposed. These principles frequently go under the label 'phenomenal conservatism.' However, while there are a variety of specific principles, the common element of these principles is that they claim that having a seeming of a certain kind is sufficient for having a certain epistemic property.

In his (2011) Chris Tucker proposes the following principle:

Phenomenal Conservatism: If it seems to S that P, then S thereby has evidence that supports P (2011: 55).

Tucker clarifies his terminology as follows: "evidence for P is strong enough to provide P with propositional justification in the absence of defeaters" (2011: 55). Propositional justification is normally distinguished from doxastic justification. Crudely put, an agent is doxastically justified in believing *p* when the agent believes *p* and believes *p* in an appropriate way. By contrast, an agent may have propositional justification for believing *p* even if the agent doesn't believe *p* or believes *p* in a problematic way (by basing their belief on bad reasons instead of good reasons they have). While a lot can, and has, been said about this distinction—see Silva Jr. and Oliveira (2022) for recent discussion—these minimal characterizations will be fine for our discussion.

Normally the qualifier *prima facie* is used to indicate a status that would be sufficient for justification, given an absence of defeaters. So given Tucker's terminological stipulation of how he uses the word 'evidence,' evidence provides *prima facie* propositional justification. Thus, given his principle and these definitions of terminology, it follows that:

Strong Phenomenal Conservatism (SPC): If it seems to S that P, then believing P is *prima facie* propositionally justified for S.

(The title and formulation is mine, intended to help distinguish it from Tucker’s official, formulated principle.)

McAllister and Dougherty (2019) propose the following principle (2019: 540):

Reasons Commonsensism: If it seems to S that *p*, then S thereby has a *pro tanto* reason for believing *p*.

A *pro tanto* reason for believing *p* is not necessarily a reason that, on its own, is sufficient for one to believe *p*. Rather, it is a reason that “to some extent” supports believing *p* (compare Dougherty (2018: 42 fn.8) on this usage). In a footnote, McAllister and Dougherty indicate that they see this principle as a weaker and more plausible version of standard formulations of “Phenomenal Conservatism” (2019: 540fn.10).

RC states a sufficient condition for S to have a *pro tanto* reason. It is not a principle about evidence or justification. Nonetheless, at several points, McAllister and Dougherty write in a way that presupposes connections between *pro tanto* reasons and both evidence and justification. For instance, at one point, they write that “it is the theistic seemings... that provide evidence” (2019: 542). At another point, they write “Potentially (if the seeming is strong enough and one’s total evidence does not include stronger reasons that oppose the content of the seeming), one can form a non-inferentially justified theistic belief” (2019: 541). So perhaps McAllister and Dougherty would accept a further principle:

Phenomenal Conservatism and Evidence (PCE): If it seems to S that *p*, then S thereby has *pro tanto* evidence that contributes some to *prima facie* propositional justification for believing *p*.

Lastly, Gage and McAllister utilize the following principle (2020: 63):

Phenomenal Conservatism (PC): If it seems to S that *p*, then in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing *p*.

Gage and McAllister don’t clarify if the kind of justification mentioned here is propositional or doxastic. But presumably it is propositional justification. As indicated earlier, *prima facie* justification is a term used to refer to justification, given an absence of defeaters. The qualifier ‘at least some degree’ indicates that (PC) is weaker than (SPC). So while (SPC) will imply (PC), the converse is not true. This principle says nothing about evidence. But some of Gage and McAllister’s comments suggest they think that seemings are a kind of *pro tanto* evidence (e.g., (2020: 71)). So perhaps they would also accept (PCE).

3. Appropriating the SD

The *Appropriation* modifies Plantinga’s account of the SD in several ways. First, the SD does not produce beliefs. Rather, it produces theistic seemings—seemings with propositions about God. Indeed, on the *Appropriation*, the experiences of divine presence that Plantinga describes probably just are theistic seemings. There are two models for how the SD produces theistic seemings. First, on Tucker’s model (2011: 61-2), the SD produces a theistic seeming in response to a sensation of some kind. Second, on McAllister and Dougherty’s model (2019: 547ff), the SD produces a theistic seeming in response to some kind of seeming that might, itself, be a response to a sensation of some kind. Either way, the immediate outputs of the SD are seemings.

Second, the SD is not a faculty dedicated to producing theistic beliefs (McAllister and Dougherty (2019: 544)). That is, there are human faculties that produce seemings and that, in some circumstances, they produce theistic seemings. An analogy might be that the experience of hearing music doesn’t require a special auditory faculty. Rather, normal auditory faculties, in certain situations, allow one to have such experiences.

Both of these changes are significant. The first change makes the SD relevant to the epistemic principles of the previous section. For the SD produces seemings, and all of those principles are formulated in terms of seemings. The second change may make the SD more empirically immune from refutation. Specifically, McAllister and Dougherty doubt that the Cognitive Science of Religion supports that there is a dedicated faculty to producing theistic beliefs. (I'll return to Cognitive Science of Religion below.)

In what follows, I'll assume that there are seemings and *The Nature of Seemings* adequately describes them. I won't contest the principles (SPC), (PCE) or (PC). Rather, my interest is whether this appropriation of Plantinga's SD produces an internalist-friendly theistic religious epistemology to rival Plantinga's externalist-friendly one. There are several reasons for thinking it doesn't.

III. Content and Theistic Belief

The first problem involves a mismatch between the contents of seemings and theistic beliefs. The source of the problem is that all of the epistemic principles—(SPC), (PCE), (PC)—relate a seeming to a belief *with identical propositional content as the seeming*. The problem is that this relation of identity of propositional content is extremely strict. As a result, all of the epistemic principles have anemic epistemic implications—they imply that certain beliefs might have some epistemic status, but they do not imply the same for other closely related ones.

To illustrate, suppose while praying, Mae has a seeming that God disapproved of her lying to her coworker and she comes to believe that God disapproved of her lying to her coworker. Given (SPC), (PCE), (PC), that specific belief has various epistemic statuses. But consider other things that Mae might also believe, perhaps even partially on the basis of that seeming: God disapproves of her; God disapproves of something she did; God loves her, even when he disapproves of her; God knows what she did; God exists. Given the specific seeming Mae has, none of those principles implies that any of these other beliefs have the various epistemic statuses. The epistemic upshot of these principles *even for people with theistic seemings* is quite anemic.

Obviously, the proposition that God disapproves of her lying to her coworker implies many of those other propositions. So one might propose the following principle:

Logical Closure of Seemings: If it seems to S that p , and p implies q , then it seems to S that q .

The *Logical Closure of Seemings* is obviously too strong. To take just one problem, p has an infinite number of implications; but when I have a seeming that p , I don't have an infinite number of seemings. Consequently, one might propose a weaker principle:

Closure of Seemings: if it seems to S that p , and it seems to S that p implies q , then it seems to S that q .

But *Closure of Seemings* is implausible as well. First, in some cases, an agent might not "put things together" so to speak so that even though it seems to them that p and that p implies q , they might not relate them to get a seeming that q . Second, there are counterexamples to *Closure of Seemings*. Everyone has had the puzzling experience of following a line of reasoning only to get a counterintuitive result. For instance, recall the first time you heard the seemingly plausible idea that for any predicate P there is a set containing only those things that satisfy P. Following a simple line of reasoning, it might have also seemed to you that this idea implies that there is a set who has an object amongst its members if and only if it doesn't have that object amongst its members—something that certainly doesn't seem correct! In cases like these, it may very well seem both that p and that p implies q but it *doesn't* seem that q . That's what's puzzling! Lastly,

the *Closure of Seemings*, when applied to theistic seemings, gets the psychology wrong. When Mae has a seeming that God disapproves of her action, she doesn't have a further seeming about the contents of her seeming. That is too over intellectualized.

Part of what is generating the problem is that seemings—like most propositional attitudes—are not closed under logical implication. Consequently, principles like (SPC), (PCE), (PC) won't on their own have implications for beliefs whose contents are non-identical with the contents of seemings. The potential significance of this problem depends upon the role of seemings in a comprehensive theory of justification. Some philosophers give seemings an essential role by maintaining, for instance, that all propositional justification requires seemings (McCain and Moretti (2021: 83, 92)) or that all the conditions that confer justification supervene on how things seem to a subject (Huemer (2006: 154-6)). If defenders of the *Appropriation* agree with such an essential role for seemings, they need to spend more time articulating principles that explain how seemings might provide justification for beliefs with non-identical contents to those seemings. Alternatively, defenders of the *Appropriation* might disagree with giving seemings such an essential role in a comprehensive theory of justification, and provide other principles connecting seemings to beliefs with non-identical contents to those seemings. Either way, defenders of the *Appropriation* have to expand their epistemology beyond the principles (SPC), (PCE), and (PC).

IV. Theologically Thin

The SD plays at least two roles in Plantinga's theistic religious epistemology. First, it plays an epistemic role in explaining how people can have non-inferential theistic knowledge. Second, it plays a theological role—it is supposed to allow for people to have theistic knowledge that is necessary for salvation and flourishing. In order to provide for this second role, Plantinga claims that the SD is both innate and has stimulus conditions that are widely-realized for producing experiences of divine presence.

The *Appropriation* deviates from these roles in several ways. First, on the *Appropriation*, the SD doesn't produce beliefs but seemings. But on the traditional and popular form of Theism, salvation is tied up with cognitive and affective states—not seemings. So to be more theologically adequate, more would need to be said about the mechanisms linking theistic seemings and theistic beliefs, especially for cases where people antecedently lack theistic beliefs.

Second, the *Appropriation* does not include the idea that the SD is innate. Now on the *Appropriation* the SD is not a dedicated faculty. But even if some trait or feature is not a dedicated faculty, it can still be maturationally natural. That is, it can still be that in the normal course of development, people developed that trait or feature. For instance, there is no dedicated faculty for learning English; but children who grow up in English speaking environments learn English. So defenders of *Appropriation* might allow that the SD is maturationally natural. Even if they think that, though, more needs to be said about the mechanisms by which it is maturationally natural. Indeed, part of the motivation for denying that the SD is a dedicated faculty is to resist empirical refutation from the Cognitive Science of Religion. But it is not clear that the claim that the SD is maturationally natural does a better job of resisting empirical refutation.

Third, the *Appropriation* does not include the idea that the SD is widely realized. Indeed, some of what McAllister and Dougherty write suggests that the SD is *not* widely realized (2019: 547-550). Specifically, McAllister and Dougherty suggest that theistic seemings are partly caused because people have extensive background beliefs about potential evidential relations linking the contents of non-theistic seemings to propositions about God. For instance, it might

seem to Mae that she did something wrong in lying to her coworker. But Mae may also have a background belief that something is wrong only if there is a God. The moral seeming, combined with that background belief, may cause a theistic seeming. But if background beliefs are necessary for theistic seemings—including contentious background beliefs like the one just mentioned—then the SD is not widely realized. For those kinds of background beliefs are not widely realized. And if the SD is not widely realized, it cannot play the intended theological roles.⁴

V. Absent Implications, Disappearing Justification, and Historical Seemings

The next problem starts with a simple observation: most normal adults have a wide-range of beliefs that they are not occurrently thinking about at any given time. This observation applies to theists and their theistic beliefs. Many theists have a wide-range of theistic beliefs that they aren't thinking about at any given time. Even the most devout theists spend time sleeping, working, exercising, playing with their children, making dinner, etc.

Consider Manny. Manny is a theist who currently lacks any theistic seemings. Perhaps Manny is sleeping, or playing an intense round of tennis, or is paying attention to his boss's directions at work, or enjoying the company of his charming romantic partner. Because Manny lacks any theistic seemings, (SPC), (PCE), and (PC) have no implications about whether or not Manny's theistic beliefs are justified. But Manny is like most theists most of the time. Thus, most of the time, the *Appropriation* fails to imply that most theists have justified theistic beliefs. Implications about justification for theistic beliefs are normally absent given these principles.

To be clear, it may be that Manny has various dispositions to have theistic seemings. Perhaps if he stopped for a moment and started to pray or reflect upon the good in his life, he might have a theistic seeming. But (SPC), (PCE) and (PC) are not about dispositions to have seemings. They are about seemings. So as long as those dispositions aren't manifesting, (SPC), (PCE), and (PC) are silent about the epistemic status of Manny's beliefs.

Some defenders of the *Appropriation* might find this result acceptable. Perhaps there are some particularly vitriolic authors that maintain that *no* theistic belief has any justification for *any* person at *any* time. Given these principles, those (hypothetical?) vitriolic authors are wrong—some theists, some of the time, have *prima facie* propositional justification for some theistic beliefs. But such a conclusion is pretty tepid. Not quite the full-throated epistemic defense of theistic beliefs many have hoped for.

What's generating the problem is that the epistemic principles (SPC), (PCE), and (PC) only have implications for the epistemic status of belief when one has certain experiences (namely, as we saw in a previous section, experiences with the same propositional content as those beliefs). But more expansive epistemological principles are needed for cases where agents still have beliefs with certain contents but lack experiences with the same content as those beliefs. (Indeed, this problem is quite pressing since most of the time the contents of our experiences are a mere fraction of the contents of our beliefs.) If more expansive principles are not provided, then given the *Appropriation*, the justification for theistic beliefs is merely absent. Consequently, it is

⁴ An anonymous reviewer raises a potential further problem. Suppose that an agent has theistic seemings only because of previously held theistic beliefs. The reviewer worries that the theistic beliefs based on the theistic seemings would not be non-inferential because the agent has theistic seemings only because of previously held theistic beliefs. I'm inclined to think the agent's beliefs would be non-inferential in such a case (for reasons described in Plantinga (1993a: 68ff.)). But it may be that the epistemic status of the beliefs based on the seeming are partly determined by the epistemic status of the beliefs that help cause the seeming. These issues are closely related to whether or not experiences can be "cognitively penetrated;" see Teng (forthcoming) for an overview of the topic.

worthwhile to briefly explore principles that could be potentially added to (SPC), (PCE), and (PC).

Some defenders of the *Appropriation*—specifically Tucker (2011: 54 fn. 5) and Dougherty (2011)—have shown sympathy with Mentalist Evidentialism, as developed by Conee and Feldman as well as others (see Conee and Feldman (2004), McCain (2014), Smithies (2019), perhaps McCain and Moretti (2021)).⁵ There is a popular way of developing Mentalist Evidentialism that will provide sufficient conditions for propositional justification that extend beyond occurrent experiences. This way of developing it has three elements. The first element is the following principle (Conee and Feldman (1985 [2004]: 83))

(EJ) Doxastic attitude D towards proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D towards p fits the evidence S has at t.

The second element is the claim that evidence consists in non-factive, representational mental states (compare McCain (2014: 10)). The third part is that S has evidence *e* relevant to a proposition p when either (i) S is occurrently aware of *e* or (ii) if S's attention were directed to p, then S would be able to bring to mind *e* (compare McCain (2014: 50-1), Perrine (2018: 438-443)). Combined, these three elements allow for factors other than one's experience to contribute to the justification of a belief. For one's belief that *p* might be justified because it fits *other* non-factive representative mental states one has that are not experiences and that one is not occurrently aware of.

However, wedding the *Appropriation* to this popular version of Mentalist Evidentialism pushes the position even further from the religious epistemology of Plantinga and others. To see this, suppose the during a mountain hike, Ricardo has a theistic seeming that God must have created the heavens and earth. Suppose on the basis of this theistic seeming, Ricardo believes God must have created the heavens and earth. (SPC) implies that Ricardo has *prima facie* propositional justification for his belief. Further, this *prima facie* propositional justification is non-inferential. Ricardo doesn't have this justification in virtue of other beliefs he has but in response to a particular experience—a seeming.

However, suppose Ricardo is driving home. Ricardo still has the belief that God must have created the heavens and earth. But he lacks any theistic seemings as he drives home. So the principles (SPC), (PCE), and (PC) lack implications about the epistemic status of his belief. Now (EJ) does have implications for his belief. Specifically, according to (EJ), his belief is propositionally justified only if it fits the evidence he has as he drives. But *ex hypothesis* he lacks any theistic seemings, and it is hard to see how his experience of the ebb and flow of traffic before him would be evidence relevant to his belief. Thus, given (EJ), if Ricardo is propositionally justified as he drives, it is because of the relation his belief bears to other non-factive mental states such as his beliefs. Thus, if Ricardo's belief is propositionally justified as he drives, then it is *inferentially* justified. So while his belief might have started off as non-inferentially justified, that non-inferential justification disappeared and is replaced either with

⁵ It is unclear if McCain and Moretti's settled view is a version of Mentalist Evidentialism. McCain and Moretti states conditions for justified beliefs in terms of a belief being a sufficiently good explanation of some evidence one has or being an explanatory consequence of a sufficiently good explanation of some evidence (2021: 86). But the best explanation of evidence agents have does not supervene upon agents' mental states. (A sufficiently good explanation for why my evil demon counterpart has an experience is that the evil demon causes it; but that is not a sufficiently good explanation—or even an explanation at all—for why I have a phenomenologically indistinguishable experience.) Perhaps McCain and Moretti need to modify their position so it is not about explanations *per se* but explanations that the subject would accept or something like that.

inferential justification or... an unjustified belief. But Ricardo's situation is representative of most theists and their theistic beliefs.

The combination of the *Appropriation* with this standard version of Mentalist Evidentialism means that non-inferential justification for theistic beliefs may very well cease to exist when the relevant theistic seeming also ceases to exist. Thus, McAllister and Dougherty are wrong when they claim that their model of the SD shows how "non-inferentially justified theistic belief... is harmonious with evidentialism and natural theology" (2019: 554). The *Appropriation* when combined with a popular form of Evidentialism may allow for non-inferential justified theistic beliefs, but in a fleeting and disappearing way. Some of the defenders of the *Appropriation* might not be bothered by this result (see some of Gage and McAllister's remarks (2020: 71-4)). But this conclusion is quite tepid in comparison to the one Plantinga sought for the SD: to produce non-inferential knowledge.

Of course, the *Appropriation* need not be wedded to Mentalist Evidentialism. Further, Mentalist Evidentialism is a version of "time-slice" epistemology; it implies that facts about propositional justification at a time are fixed entirely by other facts that obtain at that time. But Mentalist Evidentialism, like most forms of time-slice epistemology, struggles with history and etiology playing a role in determining propositional justification. So it is worth considering other principles that might supplement (SPC) and that give historical facts about seemings a role to play in propositional justification. I'll briefly canvass some simple options and argue that they are unpromising.⁶

Consider this principle:

Historical Seemings 1: If at time t it seemed to S that p , then for any time after t , S has *prima facie* justification for believing p .

Historical Seemings 1 would imply that Ricardo is propositionally justified in believing God must have created the heavens and earth as he drives even though he currently lacks a theistic seeming. But this principle is problematic on at least two fronts. First, there might be many things that seem true to an agent but the agent has entirely forgotten about them. Perhaps, some bright spring day in 4th grade, it seemed to me that the substitute teacher had a bad haircut. But soon after I forgot everything about that day, including that there was a substitute teacher. It would clearly be implausible to suggest I *currently* have *prima facie* justification for believing that the substitute teacher that day had a bad haircut. Second, even if it might have seemed to a subject that p is true at some time; at some later time, it may very well seem to the same subject the exact opposite were they to think about it. Thus, this principle would imply that a subject has *prima facie* justification for believing p when in the past it seemed to them that p even though now it would seem to them that $\sim p$. Such an implication is hard to square with the general tenor of approaches that uphold principles like (SPC).

To avoid such problems, one might propose:⁷

Historical Seemings 2: If (i) at time t it seemed to S that p , and for any time after t (ii) S still believes p , and (iii) were S to consider p then it would seem to S that p , then S has *prima facie* justification for believing p .

Supposing, as is plausible, that Ricardo is still disposed to have a seeming that God must have created the heavens and earth, then *Historical Seemings 2* implies that as he drives Ricardo is propositionally justified in believing God must have created the heavens and earth. However, *Historical Seemings 2* has an obvious problem. It doesn't account for ways in which a subject

⁶ Thanks to Chris Tucker for encouraging me to consider these alternatives.

⁷ This principle is inspired by the final paragraph of Huemer (1999: 355).

can act irresponsibly between when they initially form a belief and the present time. Suppose for instance that an agent flagrantly disregards potential evidence against their belief on multiple occasions. And yet if they were to consider the proposition, it would still seem to them to be true. Such an agent isn't *prima facie* justified in their belief, given the irresponsible way of maintaining their belief.

Lastly, consider the following principle:⁸

Historical Seemings 3: If (i) at time *t* it seemed to S that *p*, (ii) S still believes *p*, (iii) were S to consider *p*, then it would seem to S that *p*, and (iv) S maintained S's belief in a rational and responsible way, then S has *prima facie* justification for believing *p*.

Historical Seemings 3 will avoid some of the problems identified with the previous two principles. However, this principle is at odds with internalist approaches to epistemology, like those the *Appropriation* belongs to. For whether a belief is maintained in a rational or responsible way is not normally internally accessible to agents and does not supervene upon their current mental states. Rather, whether a belief is maintained in a rational or responsible way is determined by historical facts involving the agent and their actions. So while there are several principles that might allow historical facts about seemings to play a role in the justification of belief, including religious belief, they are either implausible or sit poorly with internalist approaches in epistemology.

VI. Knowledge and Conceptions of Justification

It should be clear that the epistemic ambitions of the *Appropriation* are much more timid than Plantinga's. Meeting the conditions of (PC) and (PCE) are not sufficient for *prima facie* propositional justification. Meeting the conditions of (SPC) is sufficient for *prima facie* propositional justification. But meeting the conditions of the principle is not sufficient for (*ultima facie*) propositional justification, nonetheless doxastic justification, nonetheless knowledge. Satisfying these principles means satisfying necessary conditions of necessary conditions of knowledge. Even if the *Appropriation* is right in all its contentions, it is a far cry from the epistemic ambitions of Plantinga's theistic religious epistemology.

Perhaps defenders of the *Appropriation* think it will be easy for theistic beliefs to meet all of these further conditions. While I have my doubts, I'll wait to see arguments that it is easy. But perhaps defenders of the *Appropriation* think it is significant to show that some theistic beliefs, some of the time, are justified in accordance with (SPC), (PCE), and (PC). I'll now argue that it is not particularly significant because the type of justification is, at best, a kind of blameless believing and blameless believing does not undermine some of the more important recent criticisms of theistic belief.

The earlier principles (SPC), (PCE), and (PC) all refer to justification. That kind of justification is clearly epistemic, insofar as it attaches to the normative status of beliefs. But many philosophers have thought that there are various "conceptions" of epistemic justification (compare Alston (1985, 2005), Chisholm (1988), Plantinga (1990), Swinburne (2001: introduction), Sosa (2022: chp.10)). A conception of epistemic justification further specifies the property of epistemic justification—telling us more about what the property is or how it works.

⁸ This principle is inspired by other comments in Huemer (1999: 351). Note that it is not clear how these comments of Huemer's fit with how he develops *Phenomenal Conservatism* in other works. For instance, they seem at odds with the idea, mentioned earlier, that *prima facie* justification supervenes on how things "appear" or "seem" to a person (Huemer (2006: 154ff.)). For how an agent maintains beliefs in the past is not a matter of how things appear or seem to that agent.

For instance, on a responsibilist conception of epistemic justification, epistemic justification might be identified with the property of forming or maintaining beliefs in a responsible way. On a truth-conducive conception of epistemic justification, epistemic justification might be identified with the property of being more likely than not to be true.

The most promising conception of epistemic justification for principles like (SPC), (PCE), and (PC) is a blamelessness conception.⁹ The property of epistemic justification is, or is mostly concerned with, the property of forming a belief in a blameless way. To see why, reconsider Ricardo. Ricardo has a forceful experience whereby it seems to him that God must have created the heavens and earth. It is hard to blame Ricardo for believing that God must have created the heavens and earth while he's having such an experience. Of course, he might have defeaters for such a belief; but supposing he doesn't, it is hard to blame him for believing something that strikes him as obvious in such a moment.

Thus, if (SPC), (PCE), and (PC) state conditions for blameless belief, I think they are plausible. However, while believing in a blameless way is not nothing, it is also not quite a lot either. One way of indicating that it is not quite a lot is by showing how blameless belief fails to undermine some recent criticisms of theistic belief because it is consistent with those criticisms that many theists are blameless in their theistic beliefs.

To that end, consider the following story:

Spandrel Beliefs. People have intuitive categories for the world. These categories permit the existence of invisible agents. People also have innate dispositions to attribute agency and mental states to events in their environment. Sometimes it seems to people that there is an agent in the environment, but they do not see any agent. In such situations, it seems to people that there is some sort of invisible agent, and they thereby believe there is an invisible agent. The specific name and nature of the invisible agent varies from culture to culture, time and place.

However, these seemings and beliefs in invisible agents are an evolutionary spandrel—an accidental byproduct of intuitive categories, agency detection, and cultural beliefs. Further, these beliefs are unreliable—they frequently produce seemings and beliefs of invisible agents when none is present. Nonetheless, most people do not realize this. The cognitive processes that produce these seemings and beliefs are sub-personal, and so not accessible by reflection or introspection.

Thus, most people who have these seemings and beliefs of invisible agents do not know that their beliefs are the result of unreliable processes and a spandrel of evolution.

I've presented *Spandrel Beliefs* as just a story. But many scholars in the Cognitive Science of Religion, and related fields, think *something* like this story is true if sufficiently elaborated on. (For discussion of stories like *Spandrel Beliefs*, see Boyer (2001, 2003), Atran (2002), Atran and Henrich (2010), Bloom (2009). Bloom (2005) and Bering (2011) are popularizing discussions).

However, the story *Spandrel Beliefs* suggests that there's not a lot to love about the epistemology of theistic beliefs. The story suggests that theistic beliefs are not the result of cognitive faculties functioning properly in appropriate environments. The story suggests that

⁹ Other conceptions include a deontic conception of epistemic justification and a responsibilist conception of epistemic justification. However, I argued, in Perrine (2020), that those conceptions are inconsistent with principles like (SPC), (PCE), and (PC). One could simply take the concept of epistemic justification in these principles as primitive (as, perhaps, suggested by Smithies (2019: 23, 193)). However, that option makes it harder to argue that the status involved in these principles is necessary for knowledge; compare Perrine (2018).

theistic beliefs are not reliably formed. And even if theistic beliefs turn out to be true, this is accidental. One might have just grown up in a different cultural context and formed beliefs in invisible agents that are distinct from the God of Theism. In short, while the story *Spandrel Beliefs* doesn't preclude blameless belief formed on the basis of seemings, it does preclude many other epistemic statuses we normally care about. Securing blamelessness for theistic belief does little to alleviate the looming epistemic threat of stories like *Spandrel Beliefs*.

To be clear, I'm not endorsing either the story *Spandrel Beliefs*, elaborations of that story, or the proposed negative epistemic consequences suggested by the story. Rather, my point is that the story *Spandrel Beliefs* and the potential negative epistemic consequences of it are consistent with what the *Appropriation* says about the SD. This contrasts with Plantinga's theistic religious epistemology, including his account of the SD, which is thoroughly at odds with *Spandrel Beliefs*.¹⁰

Of course, defenders of the *Appropriation* might challenge the story *Spandrel Beliefs* or the work in the Cognitive Science of Religion it is based on. They might further develop the epistemology of theistic beliefs by taking into account the cognitive science of religion (as Kelly James Clark has done in a sequence of work—see Clark and Barrett (2010, 2011), Clark and Rabinotiz (2016), Clark (2019)). But the *Appropriation* gives little comfort as it is currently developed.

VII. Conclusion

Alvin Plantinga developed an ambitious religious epistemology. Central to his religious epistemology was the idea that human beings had a *sensus divinitatis*. Recently, a number of authors have urged an appropriation of the *sensus divinitatis* that is more friendly to internalist views, such as *Phenomenal Conservatism*. I've argued that this appropriation is too timid and tepid in a variety of ways. It only applies to a small fraction of theistic beliefs; it fails to play the theological role Plantinga intended the *sensus divinitatis* to play; it fails to imply that most theistic beliefs, most of the time, are justified; when combined with standard forms of Evidentialism, it actually implies that most theistic beliefs are, if justified, *inferentially* justified; and it is consistent with substantive criticisms of theistic belief originating in work from the Cognitive Science of Religion. Hopefully a more robust appropriation, with a fuller epistemology, is forthcoming.

Works Cited

¹⁰ An anonymous reviewer wonders if defenders of the *Appropriation* might respond to the threat of *Spandrel Beliefs* by appealing to the argument of Hendricks (2021). Simplifying, Hendricks argues that hiddenness arguments against theism succeed only if a certain proposition is true, and that proposition in turn implies that if God exists, then belief in God is (probably) rational (2021: 30). Thus, those who use *Spandrel Beliefs* to threaten the rationality of theistic belief would also be committed to hiddenness arguments failing. I discuss the relationship between Plantinga's religious epistemology and hiddenness arguments more extensively in Perrine (2023). But I'll make two points. First, the threat of *Spandrel Beliefs* need not show that theistic belief is irrational, at least not in the sense of being blameworthy; rather *Spandrel Beliefs* threatens a range of other normative statuses we care about other than irrationality. Second, and more importantly, Hendricks argues that if God exists, then theistic belief would (probably) constitute knowledge and derives from that conditional that if God exists, then theistic belief is (probably) rational. But Hendrick's argument that if God exists, then theistic belief would (probably) constitute knowledge assumes an externalist epistemology—including an account of the SD—that the *Appropriation* rejects (see Hendricks (2021: 30, 30 fn. 5)). So defenders of the *Appropriation* couldn't rely upon Hendrick's argument in responding to the threat of *Spandrel Beliefs*.

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