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A Review of Plantinga's Defense against *de jure* Objections to Christian Belief

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Abstract: The main argument of the book *Warranted Christian Belief* by Plantinga is a distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* objections to Christian belief. *De facto* objections, according to him, are those about the truth of Christian belief, where the claim is relatively straightforward that Christian belief is false. However, Plantinga is primarily concerned with *de jure* objections, which are arguments or claims that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or irrational, or without sufficient evidence, or in some way not intellectually respectable. While the conclusion of such objections is that there is something wrong with Christian belief, Plantinga contends that the question is never explicitly formulated of what exactly is wrong; however, he finally locates a promising candidate for the *de jure* question in the complaints against theistic belief by Freud and Marx. Critics, according to Plantinga, cannot simply object to the rationality or justifiability of theistic belief without presupposing that theistic belief is false. However, I will, in this paper, argue that the epistemic objection to the rationality of theism need not presuppose the falsity of theism or Christian belief, and I will show that the most important charge against Plantinga's defense – if theism is true, it is warranted – is that it proves too much.

Keywords: *de jure* Objection; *de facto* Objection; Justification; Warrant, A/C Model.

Introduction

Alvin Plantinga, an emeritus professor of philosophy at the university of Notre Dame is a very well-known Calvinist analytic theist. Reformed epistemology is forever indebted to his contribution to the Calvin College Project

(1979-80).¹ In *Warranted Christian Belief* (hereafter, *WCB*), which is the third of

¹ (1) Reformed Epistemology, as the explicit rejection of classical foundationalism, and of the evidentialist objection to religious belief, full appearance on the philosophical scene with the publication was in 1983 in the collection of *Faith and Rationality*, subtitled *Reason*

Plantinga's trilogy,² centered on a distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* objections to Christian belief. In this paper, reviewing Plantinga's defense against these objections, I will argue that he had failed to prove an advantage for Christian beliefs among other religious traditions in making them warranted.

Unlike other works in philosophy of religion and religious epistemology, no attempt is made in *WCB* to provide arguments for God's existence, though considerable and laudable effort is put toward answering various objections to Christian belief, and is presenting a model of how theistic and Christian belief can be warranted. His main argument is that there are no plausible objections to the model that does

and Belief in God, edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. It was the result of an adjunct project at the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship in 1979-80 academic year titled 'Toward a Reformed View of Faith and Reason' done by Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, George Marsden, Rebert Manweiler, David Holwerda (all from Calvin College), George Mavrodes (University of Michigan), William P. Alston (University of Illinois), and Henk Hart (Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto). See: *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century*, D. Phillips and T. Tessin (eds.), 2001, 40.

² In the first two books, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (1993) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993), Plantinga examines and develops the epistemic concept "warrant" – a technical term, which Plantinga uses to describe the gap between mere true belief and knowledge. In the latest installment, Plantinga offers a full-defense of Christian belief via the warrant-based epistemological machinery developed in his earlier two books. The motivation is partly provided by the prevalent mood, that in the wake of objections against theistic beliefs by Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche – not to mention Flew, Russell, Mackie, and Nielsen – religion no longer has any leg to stand on.

not presuppose the falsity of theism. Of course, Plantinga has elsewhere argued about the importance of theistic arguments. In fact, he has outlined and developed a variety of such arguments himself, some of which he thinks are good.³

De facto⁴ objections, according to Plantinga, are objections to the truth of Christian belief, where the claim is relatively straightforward that Christian belief is false, given something we now know (Plantinga 2000: 191). However, Plantinga is primarily concerned with de jure⁵ objections, which are arguments or claims that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or irrational, or without sufficient evidence, or in some way not intellectually respectable. While the conclusion of such objections is that there is something wrong with Christian belief, Plantinga contends that the question is never explicitly formulated of what exactly is wrong (Plantinga 2000: 191). For example, according to Freud, theistic belief is a product of wish fulfillment. However, assuming Freud is true (contrary to what Plantinga sees), it is not entirely clear why a belief formed on the basis

³ See for example: Alvin Plantinga, 'Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments', in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Deane-Peter Baker, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 203-227; 'Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century' in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James Sennett, Eerdmans, 1998, 339-340

⁴ In fact, whether by right or not. First recorded in 1595-1605, de facto is from the Latin word *dēfactō* literally, from the fact. (Dictionary.com. Retrieved 25 February 2017)

⁵ De jure means a state of affairs that is in accordance with law; i.e. that is officially sanctioned, in contrast, de facto means a state of affairs that is true in fact, but that is not officially sanctioned.

of wish fulfillment is wrong or what, precisely, is the problem? Plantinga says that one important project of *WCB*, then, is to find a viable and a serious de jure objection to Christian belief.⁶

But there is a prior question which has to be answered: Is there actually anything as Christian belief? Drawing insight from the works of Immanuel Kant, some thinkers argue Christian belief is mistaken since we can't as much think of a being as God, infinite and transcendent he is supposed to be, let alone hold beliefs about such a being. Our human concepts can only be applied to finite things, which are not transcendent in the way theists take God to be. In the first of the four parts of the book, Plantinga addresses this concern and argues that there is no reason, at all, to accept this skeptical claim: Both contemporary interpretations of Kant (the one-world and the two-world pictures) provide no good reasons that our concepts do not apply to God, and likewise, the arguments constructed by those who appeal to Kant (Kaufman (Plantinga 2000: 41) and Hick (Plantinga 2000: 60)) are no better (Plantinga 2000: 5).

That conclusion clears the deck for the main question of the book: Is there a viable de jure objection to Christian faith? "One that does not presuppose the de facto objection and is independent of the falsity of Christian belief" (Plantinga 2000: x). In the part II of *WCB*, "What is the Question?" (Plantinga

2000: 67-163). Plantinga first examines justification to ask whether or not it can form the viable de jure criticism. In other words, is the de jure really the question whether Christian belief is rationally justified?

According to Plantinga, the question of justification of theistic belief originates in what he calls a classical package of evidentialism, deontology, and classical foundationalism – a comprehensive and a hugely influential way of thinking that has its root in the seventeenth-century but is still very much with us now (Plantinga 2000: 82). According to this version of foundationalism, only those beliefs are justified which are either properly basic or are derived from the basic ones, where properly basic beliefs are those which are self-evident (like basic mathematical truths), incorrigible (like the cogito), or evident to senses (like my current belief that I am seeing my laptop screen) (Plantinga 2000: 84). By this standard, it is clear that Christian belief is neither properly basic, nor derivable; hence, it is unjustified. However, Plantinga readily refutes classical foundationalism. First, there are plain instances of properly basic belief (like memory beliefs, beliefs in other minds, or the belief that the world is not five minutes old) which are not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Second, the criterion taken for proper basicity is itself not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, nor is it derivable from such properly basic beliefs; therefore, the classical criterion itself is self-referentially incoherent (Plantinga 2000: 94).

Critics may try to formulate other non-classical criteria for proper basicity to exclude theistic belief. Plantinga's response is

⁶ Meanwhile, we should know that the de jure question is not independent of the de facto question; he states: "... the dispute as to whether theistic belief is rational (warranted) can't be settled just by attending to epistemological dispute, but an ontological or theological dispute."

that it is entirely obvious that theistic belief can be properly basic (Plantinga 2000: 67). Considering the case of a believer, he says: “her cognitive faculties are functioning properly, she displays no noticeable dysfunction.⁷ She is aware of the objections people have made to Christian belief...and she knows that the world contains many who do not believe as she does... She thinks as carefully as she can about these objection and others, but finds them wholly unconvincing” (Plantinga 2000: 100). At the same time, she enjoys a “rich inner spiritual life” and considers the evidence provided by it to be “more convincing than the complaints of critics” (Plantinga 2000: 101). Of course, it is true that there could be something defective about her, some malfunction not apparent on the surface, that she could be wrong in her thinking such a belief. However, by thinking hard as she can, in the most responsible way she can, no matter what conclusions she arrived at, she will be not be flouting any intellectual or epistemic duty. Given that the paradigmatic meaning of “justification” in the classical picture involves that beliefs should not violate epistemic duties, our believer, then, is entirely justified in holding her conclusions. Hence Plantinga concludes that a viable and serious *de jure* objection to Christian belief cannot be developed in terms of justification – one must look elsewhere for the question (Plantinga 2000: 498).

Rationality is the next aspect Plantinga examines to find the *de jure* question (Plantinga 2000: 108-134). He considers

Aristotelian rationality; rationality as proper function; rationality as a deliverance of reason; means-end rationality; and William Alston's "practical rationality." Seven pages deal with the first four while seventeen pages are devoted to analyzing Alston's practical rationality. The conclusion: none of these kinds of rationality provide viable and serious contenders for the *de jure* question.

Plantinga finally locates a promising candidate for the *de jure* question in the complaints against theistic belief by Freud and Marx (Plantinga 2000: 135-163). When Freud and Marx say that theistic belief is irrational, the basic idea is that belief of this sort is not among the proper deliverance of reasons: it may be produced by malfunctioning faculties (like neurosis of Marx thought), by cognitive faculties aimed at something other than the truth (like wish fulfillment of Freud), or by faculties whose function has been overridden by lust, ambition, greed, and other emotional conditions. An important feature about these complaints, then, is that those who raise them are not interested first of all in the truth of Christian belief: their claim is that the belief may be true, and it may be false; but at any rate it is irrational to accept it since it is not produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly and aimed at truth. According to Plantinga, this suggests that the real *de jure* challenge to theistic belief, when critics claim that theistic belief is irrational or unreasonable or unjustifiable, is precisely the complaint that religious belief originates from an objectively disordered cognitive apparatus (Plantinga 2000: 142).

In Plantinga's terminology, this *de jure* objection can be construed as the claim that theistic belief, whether true or false, at any

⁷ “According to Marx and Marxists, of course, it is belief in God that is a result of cognitive disease, of dysfunction.” (WCB184).

rate lacks “warrant”. The idea is to distinguish warrant from “justification”, with the latter referring to individual conformity to intellectual obligations and the former to proper functioning of the cognitive apparatus. Plantinga initially introduced the term warrant to describe that property (or quantity) enough of which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief, and eventually argued that a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning properly (Plantinga 2000: xi). He further understands proper function as a case of cognitive faculties operating according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief (Plantinga 2000: xi).

According to Freud and Marx, therefore, the real problem is that theistic belief lacks warrant. That is theistic belief do not arise from the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties directed towards acquiring truth (Plantinga 2000: 136). But is that the case? In Part III of *WCB*, Plantinga, in his response, offers a model of Christian belief having warrant – a model based on a claim made jointly by Aquinas and Calvin, and appropriately termed as the Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model. The model is intended to show how it could be that the proposition “theistic belief has warrant” is true (Plantinga 2000: 168). The basic idea is that there is a kind of faculty or cognitive mechanism, called *sensus divinitatis*,⁸ in which a wide variety of

circumstances produces in us beliefs about God, in the same basic way as we find ourselves with perceptual and memory beliefs. Plantinga’s main concern with taking Calvin’s *Institutes* 1.5 evidences as suggestive of inferential knowledge of God is that as arguments they look quite weak and inadequate to ground any warranted theistic belief. Plantinga writes: “It isn’t that one beholds the night sky, notes that it is grand, and concludes that there must be such a person as God: an argument like that would be ridiculously weak” (Plantinga 2000: 175). Plantinga’s basic argument seems to be that Calvin’s account of our natural knowledge of God is more philosophically plausible if we adopt the sort of model Plantinga is proposing. Given the possibility of this model of theistic belief with warrant, then what remains of the objections by Freud and Marx that Christian belief is unwarranted? Is Christian belief still unwarranted? Only, Plantinga says, the belief is false. Otherwise, if Christian belief is true, then it is true just like God, the creator. If these things are true, then “he would of course intend that we be able to be aware of his presence, and he would have created us in such a manner that we would come to hold such true beliefs” as that there is the one called God (Plantinga 2000: 189). And if that is so, then the natural thing is that the cognitive processes that do “produce belief in

whom we are responsible. The knowledge of God’s personality, moral attributes, and intelligence arise only upon observation of the created world and reflection. Since Calvin takes idolatry to be evidence of the existence of a sense of divinity, this awareness of God is logically consistent with a great deal of fundamentally false beliefs about God. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.1–3.

⁸ A term coined by John Calvin; a natural, inborn sense of God, or of divinity, that is the origin and source of the world’s religions. For Calvin the *sensus divinitatis* is simply the awareness that there is some God and that he ought to be worshipped. God is simply the general sense of a being on whom we are dependent, and to

God are aimed by their designer at producing that belief” (Plantinga 2000: 189). But our cognitive faculties function properly according to a design successfully planned to produce theistic belief. Here, Plantinga has finally shown that the question about the truth of Christian belief is not independent of the question of warrant of Christian belief (Plantinga 2000: 190). Christian belief is warranted only if it is true. So the de jure question is, after all, not independent of the de facto one: to answer the former, we must answer the latter. This conclusion is important: what it shows is that a successful critical objection will have to be to the truth of theistic belief, not to its rationality, justification, or warrant. In other words, it shows that there aren’t any viable de jure objections independent of de facto ones. Critics can no longer therefore defend an attitude that claims “Well, I don’t know whether Christian belief is true (after all who could know a thing like that?), but I do know that it is irrational (or intellectually unjustified or unreasonable)” (Plantinga 2000: xii). Such an attitude is no longer defensible.

In the final part of *WCB*, “Defeaters”, Plantinga considers that three broad defeaters for the warrant Christian belief might otherwise enjoy: the alleged abrasive results of historical biblical criticism; a variety of religions incompatible with Christian belief together with certain related postmodern claims; and a recognition of the facts of evil and suffering in nature (Plantinga 2000: xiii). Plantinga’s conclusion is that none of these succeeds as defeaters for Christian belief.

Are Plantinga’s Conclusions Warranted?

In critically assessing Plantinga’s argument, one can point to a number of places where the argument may appear questionable.

First, Plantinga believes that Christian belief is true if it is warranted but why? In his argument, Plantinga makes use of such claims that “God has created us in such a way that we would come to hold such true beliefs,” and “God has created us with a certain faculty for knowing him” (Plantinga 2000: 188-9). He urged that it can be “entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all” (Plantinga 1983:17). Such belief can instead be “properly basic”, by virtue of its grounding in the immediate deliverances of a *Sensus Divinitatis* implanted in us by God. Notice that the argument involves making a judgment on how God acts or knows. This can be potentially problematic since an important claim in Plantinga’s defense against the problem of evil and suffering is that of limited access to God’s knowledge. On the requirement to maintain a standard of consistency with his reasoning in the defense against problem of evil, Plantinga has to explain why claims about access to God’s knowledge can be made here in his warrant defense. The issue is particularly acute since a critic can argue that God may have wanted humans to come to theistic belief through reasoning based on evidence or through mystical experiences or through some other way – and not through this innate faculty of divinity.

Of course, Plantinga may cite passages from the scripture which can lend a reading supporting such a faculty or consider Calvin’s interpretation positing such a faculty to be

authoritative. But the question pushes back one step. On what grounds can Plantinga consider his reading of scripture or Calvin's interpretation to be authoritative? An explanation is needed. Moreover, unlike many of his reformed predecessors, as Michael Sudduth has noticed, Plantinga's account of natural knowledge of God does without the long-standing reformed distinction between the implanted and acquired knowledge of God, as well as the related difference in content between them. Although Plantinga's revision has strengthened the apologetic defense of the positive epistemic status of theistic belief against various evidentialist objections, it has weakened an interesting, important, and strong epistemic function of theistic arguments or evidences that have been available in the reformed tradition. Some may judge this an acceptable trade off. But an interesting future challenge to reformed philosophers would be to maintain the sound apology against the undesirable elements of evidentialism, while also developing a stronger role for inference with respect to our knowledge of God, natural and otherwise. In short, the general recommendation would be to set limits on proper basicity (with respect to warrant) to make room for inferential knowledge of God (Sudduth 2002: 81-91).

Moving to a different objection, the important conclusion of Plantinga's defense is the claim that there is no viable *de jure* objection to theistic belief which is independent of the *de facto* objection. Critics cannot simply object to the rationality or justifiability of theistic belief without presupposing that theistic belief is false. But, of course, there is no way of demonstrating that theistic belief is false. This, Plantinga

thinks, makes it difficult, if not impossible, for any critic to directly attack the rationality of theistic belief (Plantinga 2000: 285) thereby, improving the epistemic status of one's theistic beliefs.

But the argument can be deceptive. Plantinga's conclusion is: Christian belief is warranted if and only if it is true. This does not mean that the critic is only restricted to showing that Christian belief is unwarranted by presupposing that the belief is false, rather he can argue Christian belief's lack of warrant to entail that the belief is false. This is a subtle, yet important point. It means that the *de jure* objection need not presuppose the *de facto* objection to get off the ground. In other words, the epistemic objection to the rationality of theism need not presuppose the falsity of theism or Christian belief; it can entail it. However, one can expect Plantinga's response here. According to him, a stand-alone *de jure* objection, which does not presuppose a *de facto* objection, cannot be constructed. Why? To construct such an objection, one would have to show that there is no such faculty which by its proper functioning generates theistic belief, without assuming that theistic belief is false. Of course, it is difficult to imagine a way one can show or demonstrate that such a faculty does not exist. Conceding that one cannot show this, one may still insist that there are at least no good reasons in believing that such a faculty exists. Again, Plantinga can press back by arguing that this faculty exists in the same way as our memory and perceptual faculties exist. If there are no good reasons to deny our perceptual or memory faculty, there are no good reasons to deny our faculty of divinity also.

In any case, the most important charge against Plantinga's defense – if theism is true, it is warranted and rational– is that it proves too much. Of course, there are many propositions that are not such that, if they are true, then very likely they have a warrant: an obvious example is the proposition no beliefs have warrant; other less obvious examples are the set of beliefs involved in Humean skepticism, or philosophical naturalism. And now we can see why Plantinga's strategy also violates the Rational Recognition principle. It does not permit, as Linda Zagzebsky affirms a rational observer outside the community of believers in the model to distinguish between Plantinga's model and the beliefs of any group, no matter how irrational and bizarre—sun-worshippers, cult-followers, devotees of the Greek gods . . . , assuming, of course, that they are clever enough to build their own epistemic doctrines into their models in a parallel fashion. But we do think that there are differences in the rationality of the beliefs of a cult and Christian beliefs, even if the cult is able to produce an exactly parallel argument for a conditional proposition to the effect that the beliefs of the cult are rational if true. Hence, the rationality of such beliefs must depend upon something other than their truth. That something else must be such that its rationality is understandable in principle by any rational person (Zagzebsky 2002:117-123).

Therefore, one cannot be convinced that if Christian belief is true, the A/C model is true. Plantinga asks, "Given the right affections wouldn't scripture and our ordinary faculties (reason, memory, perception, sympathy, induction, etc.) be sufficient to enable us to see the truth of the message of the gospel?" He

answers, "I doubt it" (Plantinga 2000: 270). But suppose somebody comes to believe Christian doctrine in a way incompatible with the epistemic part of the A/C model, by using more ordinary rational faculties. Suppose, for example, that she has been reading Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*. She first comes to accept some form of the Cosmological Argument; then she comes to believe it is reasonable to think that a Creator-God would want to reveal himself to his creatures, and finally she decides that she can trust the reliability of Scripture and the teaching of the Church. Her trust is supported but not wholly induced by grace. What, then? Is she rational? Well, we have already seen that the model says she is not operating according to the design plan and so she does not satisfy the conditions of rationality of the model. In any case, she couldn't believe the model anyway because the model says she believes in the incarnation as a basic belief and she knows she doesn't. But her belief might be rational according to some other model, a model that includes basic Christian doctrines, but has a different epistemic proposition in the model, one that refers to grace perfecting ordinary faculties in place of the propositions about proper basicity and self-authentication. But then, may be that model is true instead. So if Christian doctrine, minus the epistemic proposition, is true, why think that Plantinga's model is also true rather than some other versions? And if some other version is true instead, it puts quite a different light on the evaluation of the rationality of Christian belief.

Finally, Plantinga's argument can be applied more broadly. This is particularly relevant for those set of beliefs, where one can

construct a model under which beliefs in question have warrant, and such that, given the truth of those beliefs, there are no philosophical objections to the truth of the model. However, the two pillars of his model: a) we have no reason to reject it so long as we take the “demure stance”⁹ toward the truth of Christian theism, and b) if it is true, then Christian belief does have warrant, can properly apply for the other Abrahamic theisms. As Plantinga finally concedes, that is true for other theistic religions like Islam or Judaism. That means that a Muslim can, by replacing all references to Christianity with Islam in Plantinga’s book, construct a similar model to the one used by Plantinga to argue that Islamic beliefs are warranted if true. Likewise, the same can be done for Judaism. Plantinga however remains unperturbed; given his commitment to Christianity, he considers these religions as false, and therefore unwarranted.

Conclusion

Overall, Plantinga’s *WCB* is an admirable attempt by a Christian analytic philosopher to demonstrate the failure of a range of objections to Christian belief. It establishes a key logical possibility for how theistic beliefs can be warranted, and by doing so, significantly improves (one may argue) the epistemic status of religious beliefs in the present world. Despite the criticisms, Plantinga’s *WCB* makes important contributions to philosophy of religion and


apologetics, as well as religious epistemology, for which reasons it deserves to be read carefully by theists and non-theists alike.

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⁹ The term is borrowed from Stephen J. Wykstra, ‘“Not done in a Corner”: How to be a Sensible Evidentialist about Jesus’ in Book Symposium: Warranted Christian Belief, *Analytic Philosophy*, Vol. 43 (2), 2002, 92-116

بازخوانی دفاع پلنتینگا علیه دلایل ناموجه بودن باور مسیحی

رسول رسولی پورا^۱ 

چکیده: آلوین پلنتینگا در کتاب باور مسیحی تضمین شده (۲۰۰۰) بین دو دلیل کاذب بودن و ناموجه بودن باور مسیحی تمایز قائل شده است. دلایل کاذب بودن، به صراحت ادعا می‌کنند که باور مسیحی صادق نیست. اما پلنتینگا بیشتر دلمشغول دلایل ناموجه بودن باور مسیحی است که بدون توجه به صادق بودن و یا کاذب بودن، آنها را ناموجه، نامعقول، بدون شواهد کافی، و یا عقلاً غیرقابل احترام می‌شمارند. درحالی‌که جمع‌بندی این دلایل این است که باور مسیحی با مشکل مواجه است اما پلنتینگا مدعی است که هیچ‌گاه صورت‌بندی روشنی برای این که دقیقاً چه مشکلی وجود دارد ارائه نشده است؛ اگر چه او در نهایت ادعاهای فریود و مارکس را دو نامزد مناسب برای این مسئله می‌یابد. در این مقاله استدلال خواهیم کرد که ردّ معرفتی عقلانیت خداآوری نیازی به پیش فرض کذب خداآوری یا باور مسیحی ندارد و نشان خواهیم داد که مهم‌ترین حمله به دفاع پلنتینگا که اگر خداآوری صادق باشد، آنگاه تضمین شده است، این است که بیش از حدّ دلایلش، اثبات می‌کند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: دلیل نامعقولیت، دلیل عدم صدق، توجیه، تضمین، مدل آکویناس/کالوین



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