

## **Warranted Christian Belief and Internal Justification**

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In *Warranted Christian Belief*, much of the strength of Plantinga's argument that the *de jure* objection to Christian belief collapses to the *de facto* question depends on the way that he characterizes the *de jure* objection. In the initial chapters of the book, he considers two different general characterizations of this objection, both of which he rejects: that Christian belief is irrational and that the Christian believer is not fulfilling some epistemic duty. He considers several different variations within these two different categories, and rejects them primarily for two reasons: first, he claims it is not clear what epistemic duty or what rule of rationality the believer is supposedly violating; and second, he claims that any irrationality or lack of justification involved in holding theistic beliefs is equally present in sensory or other basic beliefs. Having rejected irrationality and lack of justification as possibilities, he concludes that the *de jure* objection is some form of (Plantinga's interpretation of) Marx and Freud's argument: Christian belief is *unwarranted* (according to Plantinga's conception of warrant); it is a result of some cognitive process that is either malfunctioning or is not aimed at producing true beliefs. That is, the Christian believer has not fulfilled some external condition or conditions of justification. In responding to this objection, Plantinga develops his overall theory that theistic and Christian belief are almost certainly justified if their content is true; if God created us, beliefs gained by using the mechanisms he gives to know that he exists will obviously be warranted.

I will argue that by conceiving of the *de jure* objection as one that depends on external factors, Plantinga only pushes the question back a step. He still has not

addressed the issue of whether we have a right to or a reason to believe in God. His only arguments on this front are that the way in which it is supposedly irrational or unjustified is unclear and that sensory beliefs and other basic beliefs have the same epistemic status. I will argue that the first response collapses to the second and that the second is flawed. Though sense perception, like theistic belief, is only hypothetically warranted, this is not the same thing as there being only circular reasons to believe it, as Plantinga claims. First, I will show that Plantinga's rejection of irrationality and lack of justification stems from his claim that sensory perception, like theistic belief, is hypothetically warranted. Second, I will argue that this claim, though true, is deceptive and that though the two types of belief have the same status in terms of external justification, they are not equally justified internally. Finally, I will conclude that Plantinga offers us no reason to believe in God, and therefore the burden is on him either to provide such a reason or to give a plausible argument that such a reason is unnecessary.

#### Why Plantinga Compares Theistic and Sense-Based Beliefs

In rejecting the possibility that irrationality or lack of justification is a legitimate *de jure* objection, Plantinga does not conclusively establish that theistic belief is rational or justified, but instead shifts the burden of proof to the objector. He describes a Christian believer who is well-read, has tried to be honest with herself, and who nevertheless believes firmly that there is a God. He says that "there could be something defective about her, some malfunction not apparent on the surface. She could be mistaken, a victim of illusion or wishful thinking. . . nevertheless, she isn't flouting any discernable duty. She is fulfilling her epistemic responsibilities" (Plantinga 101). He considers many of this believer's supposed epistemic duties using models of justification as sufficient evidence, justification as deduction or induction from indubitable propositions, rationality as proper function,

rationality as deliverances of reason, means-end rationality, and others, and concludes that she is not violating any of them.

However, his basic argument for this is simply that it doesn't seem like she is violating any of these duties. This would ordinarily be quite a weak argument, but he strengthens it by comparing it with our ordinary belief. After considering the possibility that most of our beliefs are unjustified, he concludes that the classical picture of justification is too strong. If we took it seriously, almost none of our beliefs would be justified: "either most of our beliefs are such that we are going contrary to epistemic obligations in holding them, or (the classical picture of justification) is false" (Plantinga 98). Therefore, the argument that the theistic believer isn't obviously violating any epistemic duties collapses to the argument that our ordinary sense perception and other beliefs share the same epistemic status as theistic belief. That is, theistic and sense-based beliefs are both in violation of the strict standards of justification of the classical picture, but sense-based beliefs are indisputably justified, and therefore there is no good reason to think that theistic beliefs are not also justified.

However, Plantinga ends his direct discussion of justification and rationality at this point, which leaves the story only half told. Up to this point, Plantinga has introduced the following argument:

1) If two types of belief have the same epistemic status, there is no *prima facie* reason to believe that one is more justified than the other.

2) Sense-based beliefs and theistic belief have the same epistemic status.

Therefore,

C) There is no *prima facie* reason to believe that sense-based beliefs are more justified than theistic beliefs; the complaint that theistic belief is unjustified is not a legitimate *de jure* objection.

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Though this is a valid argument, Plantinga has not shown (2). All he has shown is that both theistic and sense-based beliefs violate the classical picture's standards of justification. But this does not necessarily mean that they have the same epistemic status. If the obvious justification of sense-based beliefs shows that the classical picture is false, before he can claim that these two types of belief have the same epistemic status, he must present some new theory of justification and show how both fulfill certain conditions that give them this status. In other words, this kind of proof by analogy works only if Plantinga can first prove that these are analogous cases.

Though Plantinga does not frame it this way, at least not explicitly, I believe that the rest of *Warranted Christian Belief* can be seen as an attempt to show that sense-based belief and theistic belief have the same epistemic status. He does this by developing his theory of hypothetical warrant; if God does exist, then theistic belief is very likely to be warranted. Likewise, if the outside world does exist as it is presented to us, our sense-based knowledge of it is very likely to be warranted. Both have the same epistemic status: internally, we find ourselves almost compelled to believe in them – certain beliefs just feel right. As Plantinga says about accurate memories, “the belief. . . seems right, acceptable, natural; it forces itself upon you; it seems somehow inevitable (the right words are hard to find)” (110). Externally, hypothetical warrant puts them in the same epistemic category of beliefs that are warranted if they are true.

So why all this comparison to sense-based beliefs? If theistic belief is “inevitably forced upon us” and is warranted if it is true, is this enough to show that we have a right to believe it? I would argue, and Plantinga seems to agree, that it isn't quite enough, because it's still not obvious what good reason we have to hold theistic beliefs. Characterizing theistic belief has not resolved the *de jure* question

or reduced it to the *de facto* question, but has introduced another, higher level *de jure* question, which I will call the *de juris jure* question. That is, when and how are we justified in believing these kinds of propositions? If I find a certain proposition slowly “forced upon me,” and I know that it is warranted if it is true, am I justified or do I have a good reason to give my assent to it? Whatever the answer to this question is, the important issue is that it is not obvious. This is why Plantinga argues that sense perception shares the same epistemic status – sense-based belief is obviously justified, and if it turns out that it is hypothetically warranted and internally adopted because it “seems right,” then this will prove that we are justified in adopting such propositions, and therefore *prima facie* justified in holding theistic beliefs. Plantinga seems to have recognized that the *de juris jure* question would come up, and he attempted to forestall it by including sense-based and theistic beliefs in this same category of hypothetically warranted beliefs.

Does this Comparison Work?

Plantinga is correct to say that both sense-based beliefs and theistic belief are only hypothetically warranted. However, he is wrong to say that they share the same epistemic status and therefore that there is no reason to think that theistic belief is less justified than sense-based belief. This is because sense-based belief is hypothetically warranted (or hypothetically externally justified) and actually, non-hypothetically, internally justified. Theistic belief is hypothetically warranted (or hypothetically externally justified), but it is not clear that it is internally justified. In other words, the basic difference between the two is that sense-based belief has hypothetical warrant that nevertheless still offers an actual good reason<sup>1</sup> to believe it.

<sup>1</sup> Swinburne makes an argument that is similar in some respects and claims that hypothetical warrant does not justify the believer. He maintains that all beliefs, however they are warranted, still require some evidence. I don't believe this objection is valid, however; as Plantinga has pointed out, there are many beliefs we have that we have no non-circular evidence for. Sense perception is a prime example. My argument retains Swinburne's insistence on some form of external justification, but does not presuppose

Theistic belief has hypothetical warrant that does not offer any such good reason.<sup>2</sup>

According to Plantinga, there are several conditions that must be fulfilled for a belief to be warranted. The belief must come from a properly functioning cognitive mechanism acting in the environment for which it was designed (a congenial environment), according to a design plan that is aimed at generating true beliefs and is relatively successful at doing so. Furthermore, if all these conditions are fulfilled and the belief is warranted, it must be also be true. Plantinga defines a congenial environment in such a strict way that if a belief is totally warranted, the properly functioning cognitive mechanism cannot yield a false belief. If this were not the case, if warranted false beliefs were possible, then Gettier problems would arise.<sup>3</sup>

A belief that is hypothetically warranted is one that, if it is true, fulfills all of the conditions of warrant. Beliefs of this kind are not common, and it is easy to mistakenly attribute hypothetical warrant. For example, a man who claims that he knows of some vast conspiracy in which his local Kiwanis Club is using its awesome power to subtly torment him and his family may feel vindicated if such a scheme is uncovered, and we may be tempted to say that he is hypothetically warranted: that is, if there is such a conspiracy, he is warranted in believing there is. But the fact that he happened to be right does not mean that that belief was gained by some properly

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that this must mean some form of evidence.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of the following analysis, I will assume that Plantinga's theory of warrant is correct. However, the argument could be reformulated to apply to most theories of warrant or external justification.

<sup>3</sup> Plantinga's argument that his theory of warrant implies that any warranted belief is true is unconvincing and somewhat *ad hoc*. He claims that if an environment is suitably congenial to one's cognitive faculties, it will not allow the cognitive faculties to form a false belief. This itself is not entirely implausible, but he then defines these "mini-environments" in such a way that it is possible that the only thing "uncongenial" about them is that the belief in question is false. For example, he considers the possibility that though he seems to know that his car is outside in the parking lot, it is possible that it has been stolen. He concludes, however, that this creates a mini-environment for which his faculties were not designed. However, other than making his belief false, I don't see how this environment is uncongenial. Did God (or evolution) not prepare our cognitive faculties for a world in which things are sometimes stolen? Whatever the answer to this question, however, the important issue is that Plantinga considers warrant to entail truth, and any plausible theory of warrant must do the same if it hopes to avoid Gettier problems.

functioning mechanism – after all, a broken clock is right twice a day, and paranoid delusions are accurate once in a while.

The issue of God’s existence, however, is very different. If God exists, then it is natural to think that he would have created our minds in such a way as to allow us to gain knowledge about him. This cognitive mechanism Plantinga (borrowing from Calvin) calls the *sensus divinitatis*. Since God created our environment and our cognitive processes, he controls all of the factors necessary for warrant; he could easily have created the *sensus divinitatis* as a properly functioning cognitive mechanism operating in a congenial environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth.

Sense perception is another class of beliefs that are genuinely hypothetically warranted. If sense-based beliefs are true, then we are in the environment God or evolution intended us to be. We are not brains in a vat or victims of a deceiving demon. If sense-based beliefs and our scientific inductions based on them are true, then the evidence we see for evolution supports the idea that our cognitive faculties were designed for this real environment. And if our sense-based beliefs are true, these faculties are obviously fairly reliable about giving us true beliefs. So here again, sense perception accounts for all factors necessary for warrant. It explains the source and design plan for our cognitive mechanisms, how we are to judge when they are functioning properly, and the type of environment for which they were designed.

However, there are also other types of beliefs that are hypothetically warranted that seem less acceptable. We have seen an example of a conspiracy theory that is not hypothetically warranted, now let’s consider a slightly modified example that is. Suppose our local eccentric from the previous example believes not only that the local Kiwanis Club is subtly tormenting his family, but that it has in fact made the entire human race the subject of a *Truman Show*-style reality show that is watched

by trillions throughout the galaxy. However, the Kiwanis Club has been gracious enough to adjust our brains in such a way that we intuitively know that this is the case, and knowing this, if we choose to opt out, we will be taken to a different planet where our privacy will not be invaded. Unfortunately, through natural depravity and self deception, everyone else in the world has completely blocked this cognitive mechanism that the Kiwanis Club was gracious enough to plant in our brains. Only our enlightened local eccentric, because of his amazing natural virtue, has seen the light, and having chosen to opt out, he expects that any day now he will be taken to another planet. This example seems more ridiculous than the first conspiracy theory, and yet this one is genuinely hypothetically warranted. If there is such a conspiracy, the Kiwanis Club is in control of all factors necessary for warrant. They have created the cognitive mechanism, chosen the appropriate environment, and made sure that this mechanism does indeed yield true beliefs (when it is not destroyed by people's natural depravity, of course).

So what is the difference between these examples? None of us would want to say that our local eccentric's vagaries have the same epistemic status as sense-based beliefs, but what is there to distinguish them? I argue that what distinguishes sense-based beliefs from LEV (local eccentric's vagaries) is the same thing that distinguishes sense-based beliefs from Plantinga's version of theistic belief – there are good reasons to believe in sense perception, and there aren't good reasons to believe the other two. In other words, while the external justification, the warrant, is of the same status in all three cases (i.e., it is hypothetical), the internal justification is very different: sense-based beliefs have internal justification, the other two do not.

But what are these good reasons to belief in sensory perception, and what about the reasons often given for theistic belief? The reasons to believe in sensory perception are manifold. First, sense perception is coherent in a very precise way. Our feeling of the edge of a table, for example, lines up exactly with where we see

the edge of the table, which is exactly where we would calculate the edge to be using sonar imaging, etc. This precise coherence has resulted in extremely complex theories and physical laws that admit of no exception. Even at the quantum level, where determinism doesn't seem to hold, we can still explain our observations probabilistically, and these probabilities are consistent. Second, in addition to being coherent at any given time, sense perception has (at least until this moment) maintained the regularities described by natural laws. Strictly speaking, to predict that these regularities will continue in the future goes beyond immediate sensory evidence, but to forestall an objection on these lines we can simply change the discussion from one about simple sense-based belief to one about what I will call "sense-based belief that has been accurate in the past and will continue to be accurate in the future." This type of belief is hypothetically warranted just as sense-perception, theistic belief, and LEV are, and there are also good reasons to believe it. With this addition, sense perception becomes an essential guide to learning from the past, predicting future events, planning for the future, working toward goals, and manipulating the environment. In essence, whether or not it is strictly true, even if we are brains-in-a-vat, believing in sensory perception is the foundation of virtually every human goal, need, and desire.

Some may argue that belief in God has similar benefits and good reasons for it. Belief in God, it is claimed, gives the believer purpose in life, psychological comfort, and possibly some communal feeling with other believers. But these kinds of reasons are just as present in our local eccentric's vagaries. The eccentric has been a given a purpose and comfort by his belief that he knows the truth, and he may get some feeling of community if he can convince others to join his cause. These benefits, however, are very different from those gained from believing in sense perception. Though there may be some coherence in theistic beliefs or conspiracy theories, it is nowhere near the degree of coherence present in sense perception, and

therefore these beliefs have much less predictive power. Second, theistic belief is beneficial in a way that gives the believer certain goals and fulfills certain desires. Sensory belief, on the other hand, does not so much fulfill certain desires as it does provide a means for the believer to fulfill whatever desires he or she might have. Theistic belief only works when working toward very specific goals, whereas sensory beliefs underlie virtually all goals. Specifically – and this is probably the most important way in which the reasons to have theistic beliefs is different from the reasons to believe in sense experience – sensory belief is necessary for survival, and theistic belief is not. Therefore, though we may have a reason to want to hold theistic beliefs (as we may have reason to want to believe in the *Truman Show: Earth Edition*), we don't need to hold them. On the other hand, if we want to survive for longer than a few days, we need to believe in sensory perception.

The point of these contrasts is to show that Plantinga's attempt to validate his version of theistic belief by comparison to sense-based belief fails, because he fails to appreciate that though they are both hypothetically warranted and therefore have the same status in terms of external justification, there are not equally good reasons to believe in both: they do not have the same epistemic status in terms of internal justification. However, some may not be convinced by my contrast between the benefits of theistic belief and the benefits of sense-based belief. But even such objectors have to admit that the fact that both types of belief are hypothetically warranted cannot by itself imply that we are equally justified in believing both. This is shown by the example of the Kiwanis Club conspiracy. Clearly this belief, even though it is hypothetically warranted, is less internally justified than sensory perception. So Plantinga or anyone who believes that there are good reasons to hold theistic beliefs must show how theistic belief is justified if the similar case of the Kiwanis Club conspiracy is not. Simply comparing theistic belief to sensory perception does not make theistic belief justified, because the ways in which theistic

belief is similar to sense-based beliefs are the same ways in which Kiwanis Club conspiracy beliefs are similar to sense-based beliefs.

#### Conclusion

The argument I have presented may seem hostile to theistic belief, but this is not my intention. My argument is simply that Plantinga's model of theistic belief fails because he does not offer us any good reason to believe in it. He explains to us how it is hypothetically warranted, but he does not show it to be internally justified. There may be good reasons to believe in God, or it may be that this is the kind of belief that doesn't need warrant. Plantinga has attempted to give a model in which our beliefs in God are warranted but also aren't held to the same standards of other types of beliefs. But this model fails; rather than allowing us to have our cake and eat it to, we are left unable to do either. We are left trying to defend theistic belief in terms of warrant, but we are also not given good reasons for that belief.

Plantinga could rescue his model by explaining how we have good reasons to believe in God, but even if he were to do this, his theory could only be rescued by giving up one of its central tenets: that the *de jure* objection to Christian belief collapses to the *de facto* objection. By pushing Plantinga back a step and asking when we are internally justified in holding a hypothetically warranted belief, we find that in these cases, we still need to have some good reason to hold a belief, and this is exactly what Plantinga has failed to provide. So the *de jure* objection is replaced with the *de juris jure* objection: we may be warranted in holding Christian belief if it is true, but without compelling evidence that it is, we are left without any good reason to believe, and therefore are unjustified in doing so.

This critique, I believe, points us toward one of the two paths that Plantinga attempts to synthesize. Either we accept the need for rational, empirical, or psychological evidence for the existence of God, or we embrace the idea that faith is

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unjustified, irrational, absurd, or in some other way not subject to the same standards that knowledge is. Whichever way we choose, the first step in moving beyond Plantinga is going back to what he rejected.

### References

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