

Chapter V

Direct Analysis and Conclusions:

Introduction

In the previous three chapters, I analyzed and appraised critical responses to Plantinga's explicit religious epistemology. It may be useful now to stand back and try to get some perspective from that analysis; a great number of concerns arose from two general critiques of his work.

From the point of view of some of Plantinga's critics, belief in God taken as properly basic (not believed on the basis of other beliefs but found in a rational noetic structure) seemed to abandon that belief to inadequate substantiation. This critical view saw belief in God as necessarily a conclusion to an argument, derived from, or supported by other beliefs in order for it to be thought of as a rational belief. That is, these critics maintain belief in God without some independent (non-circular) buttressing argument (especially in the face of the problem of evil) is irrational. But we discovered that if Plantinga's critics had understood more clearly (or perhaps Plantinga had made it clearer) that he was using a weaker sense of the term "rationality" than they supposed, concerns about the need of evidential argument might have been mollified. Surely we hold some beliefs which cannot be so established and yet they are rational to hold; why not belief in God?

From another point of view, his critics thought the claim that belief in God is properly basic seemed to confer rationality to a host of other beliefs which would normally be thought of as irrational or clearly wrong by a typical "card-carrying" theist.

This critical view saw Plantinga's epistemic strategy as sort of "giving away the epistemic store." It was thought that if Plantinga's strategy would be followed then "believers" with just about any sort of belief could jump in and join the fun. However, we saw that the call from his critics should have been for more light from Plantinga about the implications of his position. Plantinga maintains (despite his use of the so-called weakened sense of rationality) that there is such a thing as objective truth even though some beliefs may not be polemically adjudicable. That is, he may not be able to demonstrate his belief in God follows from or is probable with respect to certain universally accepted self-evident or incorrigible beliefs (premises). What his critics did not see is that it does not follow from this inability that just anything goes.

There were also less shared concerns among his critics. There were concerns about the clarity of his criteria for PPB, concerns with whether Plantinga had shown that classical foundationalism was self-referentially inconsistent, concerns whether Plantinga's view of PPB was itself self-referentially incoherent, and concerns as to whether beliefs carry their evidence with them. But we also saw that these charges were either unsustainable or that Plantinga had some further work to complete on his project and the case is not closed or that his errors were of a less crucial nature. And in those cases where his project was incomplete there were good reasons to think that Plantinga could fill it out.

Obviously much of the analysis in the last four chapters prepares us to better understand the dynamics of his project. I intend to combine the insights gained and the conclusions drawn from the last four chapters, adding to them what we can learn from

some direct analysis, to form a broader appraisal of his achievements (and perhaps shortcomings).

One positive note from my earlier analysis showed that there is good reason to think that the analogy between the paradigm beliefs that are generally regarded as rational when taken as basic and belief in God is quite close. Though that conclusion was made while I was responding to his critics in the last chapter, nonetheless my analysis was directly aimed at Plantinga's claims about that. I will not redo that analysis here but will merely incorporate that into my conclusions.

The territory I shall now cover is: 1) clarify just what Plantinga's goals and purposes are, 2) identify and formalize two crucial parts of his project, and 3) assess the second argument which supports one of those crucial segments. Finally, I will draw conclusions about Plantinga's project from the investigation of these five chapters.

I

This section is devoted to stating what I take to be Plantinga's aims in developing his epistemological stance the way he does. At the beginning of his essay "Reason and Belief in God," Plantinga has this to say:

I want to discuss a connected constellation of questions. Does the believer-in-God accept the existence of God by faith? Is belief in God contrary to reason, unreasonable, irrational? Must one have evidence to be rational or reasonable in believing in God? Suppose belief in God is not rational; does that matter? And what about proofs of God's existence? Many Reformed or Calvinist thinkers and theologians have taken a jaundiced view of natural theology, thought of as the attempt to give proofs or arguments for the existence of God; are they right? What underlies this hostility to an undertaking that, on the surface, at least, looks perfectly harmless and possibly useful?¹

¹"Reason and Belief in God," p. 16.

These kinds of questions form the prolegomena to his project; as a good inquirer would do, he wants to ask the right kinds of questions that will illuminate the nature of the investigation. He goes on to say that these kinds of questions

. . . fall under the general rubric of faith and reason. . . I believe the Reformed or Calvinist thinkers have important things to say on these topics and that their fundamental insights here are correct. What they say, however, has been for the most part unclear, ill-focused, and unduly inexplicit. I shall try to remedy these ills; I shall try to state and clearly develop their insights; and I shall try to connect these insights with more general epistemological considerations.²

Implied in this, I think, is that Plantinga is attempting to use the tools of analytic philosophy, whatever exactly they are, to clarify and develop the insights of (especially) Calvin as they relate particularly to creating a theory of religious knowledge or warrant.³ It is apparent that he thinks Calvin's insight(s) on this topic, roughly speaking, are on the right track; he merely wants to focus and develop those insights.

Consistent with that general aim, Plantinga would want to show that belief in God (belief that God exists) can be held by believers in a "basic way;" here belief in God in a "basic way" means that belief is not based on or inferred from other beliefs or arguments. But it also means that belief in God is "grounded" in a certain characteristic sort of experience; belief in God, he has asserted, is not gratuitous. Hence, from his perspective, belief in God is immune from the evidentialist objection to theistic belief--the objection misses the point--propositional evidence is not necessary to hold theistic belief in a

²Ibid.

³Plantinga has written on the matter of "analytical philosophy" and Christianity. See "Christianity and Analytic Philosophy," in *Christianity Today* (1965).

rational way. Hence the Reformed objection to natural theology is sound--natural theology is not necessary to hold theistic belief in a rational way.

In summary, his basic aim, it seems, is to highlight and develop important insights related to religious epistemology. He wants to do that by focusing on and developing some of Calvin's insights on the subject. He wants to show that belief in God held in a basic way is a perfectly rational way to hold belief in God. And he wants to highlight the implications that brand of epistemology will have on a constellation of important and logically related notions and ideas. In effect he is laying the groundwork for the development of a viable religious epistemology.

II

Identifying the more crucial segments in Plantinga's developing picture of a sound religious epistemology presents a challenge. It is made hazardous in one respect because he has not really said, so far, exactly what his bigger aims have been or what is crucial to the success of that assumed project; but it seems very likely that Plantinga wants to do more than just ask questions and clarify certain epistemic remarks made by the theological reformer John Calvin.⁴ If constructing a viable religious epistemology is his aim (and I think that it is), we can better see which components of his project are crucial to its success. If Plantinga's sights are lower, we can still benefit from examining the potential of constructing a religious epistemology along the lines he is suggesting.

⁴At the time of the writing of this chapter, I could not find any explicit statement of his overarching aims in developing the insights the way he has. Subsequent to that search, I found out in a conversation with Dr. Plantinga that his ambitions in developing Calvin's insight during this time were not that of developing a full-orbed religious epistemology.

Length considerations will not allow me to defend the many facets of this inquiry; so I will, without argument (as any good philosopher would do), declare what I think are the more crucial portions of his case and then discuss their credibility. Of fundamental importance to the success of Plantinga's epistemology is showing that belief in God should be placed in the same epistemic boat as the paradigmatic beliefs. If the paradigmatic beliefs are rational to hold and belief in God is in the same epistemic boat, then it follows that belief in God is rational as well. Showing belief in God to be in the same epistemic boat as the paradigmatic beliefs is crucial to showing belief in God is rational taken as a properly basic belief. It is fitting to refer to this as Plantinga's parity argument. However, I have already shown through indirect and direct analysis in Chapter Four that this argument works.

A second segment crucial to the success of Plantinga's epistemology that I wish to identify is his claim that neither the paradigmatic beliefs nor belief in God receives anything more than trivial support by independent propositional evidence, yet they all remain rational to believe without its benefit. Plantinga asserts that all such propositional evidence to support them is reversible and thus in some sense circular. I will call this his "circularity assertion." I will call his argument against the efficacy of propositional evidence in these cases "Plantinga's evidence against propositional evidence" (shortened to PEPE). Now if PEPE works and supports his assertion, then the implications would be very substantial indeed, for not only would he be as justified in believing that God existed as he would be justified in believing the paradigmatic beliefs (the first crucial segment of his argument), it would follow from the second crucial segment (if successful): 1) the

evidentialist's objection to theistic belief (construed in propositional evidentialist terms) would be irrelevant and 2) the Reformed objection to natural theology would be valid.

Let me now formalize these two crucial theses embedded in Plantinga's project:

- (1) Surely belief in other minds, beliefs about perceptual objects, and certain beliefs about the past (call all of these the paradigmatic beliefs) are rational to hold without propositional arguments. (Premise)
- (2) What "grounds" these paradigm beliefs are certain characteristic experiences (justification-conferring conditions). They are not gratuitous beliefs. (Premise)
- (3) The conclusions of certain syllogistic arguments, since they do not ultimately rest on propositions which are themselves self-evident or incorrigible, become subject to an infinite regress of propositional arguments. Such infinite regresses do not ultimately produce any substantial evidence for the conclusion of the argument. (Premise)
- (4) The paradigm beliefs and belief in God cannot be supported by propositional arguments that ultimately rest on propositions that are themselves self-evident or incorrigible. (Premise)
- (5) Therefore, paradigm beliefs and belief in God do not receive any substantial support from propositional arguments. (From 3 & 4, & premise)
- (6) Belief in God is relevantly similar to the paradigmatic beliefs in that its "ground" is in a certain characteristic experience that is relevantly similar to the paradigm beliefs' "ground." (Premise)
- (7) A second reason why belief in God is relevantly similar to those paradigmatic beliefs is that even though propositional arguments can be constructed to support theistic belief and the paradigmatic beliefs, none of those arguments produces much of anything by way of independent support since they will all be fatally flawed by some kind of circularity. (Premise)
- (8) Belief in God suffers from the same fatal defect, as do the paradigmatic beliefs. (Premise)
- (9) Hence, belief in God is relevantly similar to those paradigmatic beliefs. (From 1-9)
- (10) Hence, belief in God is as justified as the paradigmatic beliefs are. (From 1-10)
- (11) Hence, belief in God held in a basic way is rational. (From 1-11)

(12) Hence, belief in God need not be supported by propositional evidence to be held rationally. (From 11)

(13) Hence, belief in God, even without the support of propositional evidence, is not an epistemically flawed belief. (From 11)

Theses (1)-(10) are my formalization of Plantinga's parity and PEPE arguments; (11) is the conclusion of the argument. If these arguments work then (12) and (13) follow; (12) is the basis for not taking the evidentialist objection to theistic belief seriously and (13) is the basis for embracing the Reformed objection to natural theology.

Summarizing this section: Plantinga's epistemic picture can be divided into two groups of theses: the crucial and the less crucial. As our common sense would expect, the soundness of the crucial theses in this context are necessary for the success of the general orientation of Plantinga's project, and the less crucial theses (though having a significant degree of importance) are not as necessary to the success of that general heading. Two crucial components which I have identified (and formalized) are 1) Plantinga's parity claim--it provides justification for placing belief in God in the same epistemic boat as belief in the paradigmatic examples and 2) Plantinga's evidential argument against propositional evidence (PEPE)--it undergirds his assertion that the epistemic status of belief in God and the paradigmatic beliefs are not improved by propositional arguments or evidence. In effect, Plantinga's parity argument attempts to put belief in God into the same epistemic boat as the paradigm beliefs and Plantinga's evidence against propositional argument attempts to define what kind of epistemic boat they share; it plays a key role in deciding whether the vessel is a basic or an evidential

one. Since I have already evaluated the first crucial segment, I will next turn to the second consideration.

III

This section is devoted to assessing one of those key arguments that we have identified in the section above. I will evaluate PEPE.

The Circularity Argument

I have identified a second crucial thesis in Plantinga's epistemic picture which is his assertion that propositional arguments offer little by way of support for belief in God and the paradigmatic beliefs (such evidence does not improve their epistemic status). This claim is conjoined with another assertion--that they remain rational to hold despite that fact. This is central to Plantinga's project. Nevertheless, why does he think propositional arguments deliver so little evidence for those beliefs? I have suggested that his reasons for this amount to PEPE (defined above); so, the next step, it seems, is investigating that notion. Does Plantinga present a devastating counterexample to propositional evidence? Does he argue that no arguments in general work? Does he offer an argument based on propositions that no propositional arguments work? My formalization of PEPE above ran like this:

(14) The conclusions of certain syllogistic arguments, since they do not ultimately rest on propositions which are themselves self-evident or incorrigible, become subject to an infinite regress of propositional arguments. Such infinite regresses do not ultimately produce any substantial evidence for the conclusion of the argument. (Premise)

(15) The paradigm beliefs and belief in God cannot be supported by propositional arguments that ultimately rest on propositions which are themselves self-evident or incorrigible. (Premise)

(16) Therefore, paradigm beliefs and belief in God do not receive any substantial support from propositional arguments. (From 3 & 4)

Now the thing to see, I think, is that (15) is the controversial premise. Has Plantinga shown this with respect to the paradigm beliefs and belief in God? Let me begin this analysis by asserting that Plantinga is claiming something close to (15) as we see in the following passage:

We should note first that if this thesis, and the correlative foundationalist thesis that a proposition is rationally acceptable only if it follows from or is probable with respect to what is properly basic--if these claims are true, then enormous quantities of what we all in fact believe are irrational. One crucial lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy--Descartes through Hume, roughly--is just this: relative to propositions that are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable--at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable. Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me; at any rate no one has given good reason to think any of them is. And now suppose we add to the foundations propositions that are evident to the senses, thereby moving from modern to ancient and medieval foundationalism. Then propositions entailing the existence of material objects will of course be probable with respect to the foundations, because included therein. But the same cannot be said either for propositions about the past or for propositions entailing the existence of persons distinct from myself; as before, these will not be probable with respect to what is properly basic.⁵

Plantinga seems to be advancing the following theses:

(17) if we strictly adhere to the scheme where we only believe what can be derived or is probable from self-evident and incorrigible propositions, then much of what we believe is rational is not;

(18) even if we add to that what can be derived or is probable from the senses, there are still many memory beliefs and beliefs about others distinct from myself which remain irrational if such criteria are strictly observed--again much of what we believe is rational is not;

⁵Plantinga, *RBG*, pp. 59-60.

(19) this is the lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy roughly from Descartes through Hume.

The thing to see here is that this does not constitute an argument; rather it is a list of assertions or conclusions from arguments. Plantinga has evaluated natural theology in a somewhat systematic way in his earlier work *God and Other Minds* and other places.⁶ Nevertheless, I have suggested his treatment of natural theology in its various forms has not so far been exhaustive. Because of that I must conclude that Plantinga has so far not shown PEPE to be correct. I am inclined, however, to agree with him; natural theology construed as showing God's existence either follows from or is probable with respect to certain universally accepted self-evident propositions cannot be accomplished. The reason for my agreement with him about this is that I agree the lesson to be learned from modern philosophy is that much of what we take for granted is rational to believe cannot be supported by arguments that are ultimately supported by universally accepted self-evident or incorrigible premises. So while I agree with Plantinga about this, it remains, I think, to be shown. I am also less certain that a cumulative case or "God as a hypothesis to be tested abductively" does not produce something by way of evidence for theism.

Before drawing my conclusions on this I need to say some things about the self-referential concerns I raised about PEPE. If PEPE is constructed as an argument that shows no arguments work then it is hoisted on its own petard. Or if it is a propositional argument that concludes all propositional arguments are unsound then we have the same result. The only way I can see PEPE escaping the horns of this dilemma is by escaping

⁶See Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, (New York: Ithaca, Cornell University Press), 1967. His other labors on natural theology are scattered in a great many of his published material.

between them. To do that PEPE's premises must either be self-evident, incorrigible, or properly basic (in Plantinga's sense) or derived from such. So in constructing PEPE (as I suppose Plantinga will do) this self-referential issue will be an important consideration to be taken into account.

Conclusions

This concludes my analysis of the early development of Plantinga's explicit religious epistemology and I want to say some things by way of overall evaluation. It is important to limit these conclusions for at least two reasons. First, my appraisal relates, as suggested above, to his early work on this problem. Second, even though I have tried to take a broad approach, length considerations prevent me from doing justice to all the material that has been written by him or in response to his work. Nonetheless, I think enough important work has been surveyed, analyzed, and discussed to draw the conclusions I do.

I have concluded that none of the evaluative responses to his work that I have reviewed in some detail has been able to inflict critical damage on his project. What they have uncovered is that Plantinga has some unfinished business to do. But there are valid reasons (discussed in Chapter 4) for thinking that belief in God relevantly resembles the paradigmatic beliefs and is in the same epistemic boat; if the paradigm beliefs can be rationally believed in a properly basic way, the same would be true for belief in God. Plantinga asserts that propositional evidence (deductive or inductive) does not effectively support the paradigm beliefs or belief in God because all such arguments are in some way circular; his work in *God and Other Minds* and other places give some credence to this.

However, Plantinga has not yet closed out the possibility that cumulative case arguments or treating "God as a hypothesis" cannot produce some abductive evidence for theism or the paradigm beliefs. The case is not closed. Thus, there are significant things left for Plantinga to show; we should remain "Peeping Thomists."

But even supposing that PEPE so far constructed is incomplete, Plantinga has accomplished something of great significance in religious epistemology: he has called attention to the fact that belief in God relevantly resembles certain paradigm beliefs which are typically believed without arguments and are found in rational noetic structures. If he can show decisively that the epistemic status of these paradigm beliefs and belief in God cannot be improved through argumentation (that is, construct a robust and successful PEPE) then his whole case will have succeeded. Significantly, if he does succeed, he will have developed an epistemology that even though it does not use a duty sense of rationality does not declare that almost anything (like belief in the Great Pumpkin or atheism) is also properly basic. Further, such a system would not entail acquiescent to relativism or necessarily accept religious universalism.