

Introduction

Religious epistemology is of prime importance to Christians. First, it is important because the knowledge of God's existence is of obvious and fundamental relevance to theism in general and Christianity in particular; claims to knowledge of this kind are scrutinized under the domain of religious epistemology.¹ Second, belief in God's existence has come under sophisticated attack by non-believers. At the heart of many of these attacks on theism are theses that are the stock and trade of epistemologists. Any attempt to respond effectively to these attacks apologetically will demand a penetrating analysis of related subjects like rationality, justification, and epistemic virtue, which leads us into the field of religious epistemology.

Despite some pessimism among the non-believers about theistic epistemology, there exists an impressive body of literature in which theists are currently advancing, articulating, and defending their claim to know that God exists; it is a project that has gone on at least since the days of Augustine. Yet, nearly two millennia later we (theists) still lack a consensus on just how to go about the project of developing an adequate religious epistemology. A survey of the current alternatives on the subject reveals that it yet remains a buzzing controversy.² There are many reasons for the existence of such a

¹H.P. Owen, "Theism" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, New York: Macmillan Company, (1967) VIII p. 97, defines theism as signifying "belief in one God (theos) who is (a) personal, (b) worthy of adoration, and (c) separate from the world but (d) continuously active in it." This is roughly what I mean when I use the term theism throughout this paper and, I take it, so does Plantinga. See his "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Reason*, ed. with Nicholas Wolterstorff, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). pp. 16-93. See especially pp. 18-20 for his use of the term.

²Much of the current disagreement in recent religious epistemology (and epistemology in general) comes from two disparate epistemic camps: the so-called internalists and externalists. The internalists (the dominant tradition in more recent epistemology) tend to emphasize evidence, justification, attempting or achieving epistemic excellence, etc.

state in religious epistemology, not the least of which is the whole discipline of doing epistemology has proven to be a very difficult, complicated, and demanding task.

Currently there is widespread agreement that an important project of modern philosophy--that of building a comprehensive system of beliefs derived (deductively or inductively) from foundational beliefs that are themselves self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses--has been undermined.³ Present day, post-modern accounts of knowledge concede a weakened sense of the term knowledge (a point not always understood). Thus, many of the late twentieth century epistemologists, following Plato's distinction in *Theaetetus* between mere true belief and the something "moreness" of knowledge, suppose that knowledge is justified true belief (JTB) with some additional or fourth condition to somehow handle Gettier problems.⁴ Put more formally, knowledge is a claim to know a certain proposition p is true for subject S , and it implies that p is a belief for S at some time t , that p is true, and that S possesses justification, or can give an adequate account, or is epistemically within her rights for that belief at some time t . When S has a certain amount of this kind of justification, whatever that is, S is said to

Here the emphasis on knowing has to do with conditions within the direct or privileged access of the knower to obtain. The externalists tend to emphasize reliable means and modules of knowing and also emphasize, to some degree, the adaptation of our cognitive mechanisms to the environment. Here the emphasis on knowing has much more to do with things outside the direct access of the knower to secure. For example, if I am, in fact, the "brain in a vat," or controlled by a Cartesian devil then my chances of really knowing things as they are seem quite low. See James Sennett's explanation of these emerging concepts in his article, "Toward a Compatibility Theory for Internalist and Externalist Epistemologies," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (September 1992).

³This conclusion remains controversial; by noting this trend, I do not intend necessarily to endorse it. However, it does seem reasonable that if knowing implied only that which cannot be doubted, we would know very little indeed. The live question is what do we know that can be doubted and what would that theory look like?

⁴See Edmund Gettier's "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" in *Empirical Knowledge*. ed. Paul K. Moser. (Rowan & Littlefield, 1986), pp. 231-233. Gettier's brief but celebrated essay offered insightfully conceived counterexamples to the justified true belief picture of knowledge; many think they have made the JTB proposal look considerably less plausible as the ideal epistemological strategy.

know *p*. The problem is this: is this account of knowledge adequate or nearly adequate and should Christians be seeking an answer for their account of the knowledge of God by adopting the same epistemology? And if not, from what consideration should we begin?

Alvin Plantinga, the John O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at Notre Dame University, has suggested an interesting way of responding to those questions, offering a different starting point and explanations for the discussion; his approach is sometimes thought of as resting between the evidentialist and the fideist strategies. Plantinga's epistemology is self-described as Reformed epistemology. That somewhat infelicitous title is not meant to imply that the term "reformed" is being used in the sense that one reforms from alcoholism or, by analogy, some similar cognitive addiction; but rather the term is Plantinga's "footnote" to the philosophical roots of his epistemic ideas: the theological reformer John Calvin. Plantinga is deservedly cited for not only the depth of his analysis in philosophy of religion, but also his breadth of topics covered in his writings. Because of length considerations I will not be considering directly, per se, in this thesis Plantinga's analysis of the ontological argument, his views on essentialism, possible worlds, or divine knowledge, to name a few. Also, I will not offer any in-depth analysis of his "free-will defense" against the problem of evil except to the extent it is relevant to his overarching strategy of developing an explicit religious epistemology.

Roughly speaking and subject to some qualifications, Plantinga's initial strategy in coming to terms with religious epistemology considers belief in God as analogous to belief in the existence of other minds or of our memory beliefs. These beliefs are neither self-evident (understood to be true by definition) nor incorrigible themselves (beliefs about our subjective experience), nor can they be derived deductively or inductively from

purely self-evident or incorrigible beliefs; but they are surely rational to hold. The same is true, claims Plantinga, for belief in God (belief that God exists).

Plantinga's epistemic project has more recently developed such that this could be described in slightly more technical terms, to which I now turn. In an attempt to distinguish knowledge from mere true belief, Plantinga suggests that the term "warrant" may be used as "that quantity or quality," whatever it is, a sufficient amount of which provides a satisfying and accurate account of knowledge.

Plantinga's recent and more developed strategy rejects the internalist's account of warrant with its emphasis on justification and privileged personal access to whatever makes for warrant and also finds fault with the major externalist account of epistemology: reliabilism. Instead, Plantinga argues that the crucial component of warrant is the proper function of our cognitive faculties in the producing and sustaining of belief. This concept of proper function "is intimately connected with the idea of a design plan, a sort of blueprint specifying how properly functioning organs, power, and faculties work."⁵ As Plantinga sees it, "a belief has warrant if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no malfunctioning) in a cognitive environment congenial for those faculties, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth."⁶

In light of this brief outline of Plantinga's early and more recent projects, we can see that his account bears directly on our problem of developing an adequate religious epistemology. He is steering us away from the JTB formula for knowledge into a new

⁵Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 4.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 7.

area to be explored. Though Plantinga's views on religious epistemology are widely discussed as both powerful and original contributions, nonetheless they remain controversial, even within the community of faith.

It is the thesis of this paper that the direction of Plantinga's early religious epistemology is substantially correct; it offers a mainly accurate account of how certain beliefs that imply the existence of God are naturally and rationally formed in certain grounding circumstances. Thus, they provide grounds for taking God's existence as a properly basic belief, that is, not based on any other beliefs, yet found in a rational noetic structure. It will be argued that his parity argument succeeds in showing the crucial similarity among belief in God and several important paradigm beliefs (whose rationality is generally unquestioned when taken as basic beliefs). In addition, it will be claimed that his circularity argument (unsystematic though it is), undercuts the effectiveness of evidential arguments as a means of improving the epistemic status of propositions the evidence alleges to support.

My project is to examine and evaluate Plantinga's main approach in the early development of his explicit religious epistemology, the notion of properly basic beliefs and related concepts. I will also preview how that initial phase developed into his more recent notion of proper function. The first five chapters of this thesis relate especially to Plantinga's "picture" of epistemology as developed and finally expressed in the essay, "Reason and Belief in God."⁷ The Addendum to this thesis is an introduction to the

⁷See "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Reason*, ed. with Nicholas Woltersdorff, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) pp. 16-93.

advancement of that picture into a more fully developed theory of knowledge or of warranted belief presented in his *Warrant and Proper Function*.

Chapter One will summarize Plantinga's development of the notion of properly basic belief and its relationship to theism following the general outline of his essay, "Reason and Belief in God."

Chapters Two, Three, and Four, principal chapters in this thesis, will organize and classify important responses to Plantinga's project so that they may be examined and evaluated in some detail. This investigation will be limited to some of the topics covered in Chapter I (and handled roughly in the same order). Less time will be spent on the topic of Aquinas and Foundationalism, an important and interesting but not crucial segment in Plantinga's work. All of this is to prepare for my own examination.

Chapter Five will be devoted to presenting my analysis and evaluation of the early development of Plantinga's epistemic project. I will reflect on the aims and accomplishments of Plantinga's work up to "Reason and Belief in God" and assess the merit of his project.

The main purpose of the Addendum will be to survey this more recent and developed approach, noting some of his important concepts and making a few suggestions about how a part of it might go. An important topic to be discussed will be his analysis of the internalist and externalist debate. I will investigate Plantinga's counterexamples and whether they accomplish what they intend, namely the decisive defeat of evidentialism (the position that you have warrant for belief only if you have evidence for it and only if the belief fits the evidence). I will discuss the relationships between Plantinga's counterexamples and Gettier problems. I will consider Plantinga's

formulation of "proper function" and its relationship to reliabilism. I will make a serious attempt to extend (or more accurately follow up) some of Plantinga's thoughts on proper function as it relates to some of the insights of Augustine.