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Author(s): Michael Sudduth
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Reformed epistemology and Christian apologetics

MICHAEL SUDDUTH

Saint Michael's College, 1 Winooski Park, Box #399, Colchester, Vermont 05439

Abstract: **It is a widely held viewpoint in Christian apologetics that in addition to defending Christian theism against objections (negative apologetics), apologists should also present arguments in support of the truth of theism and Christianity (positive apologetics). In contemporary philosophy of religion, the Reformed epistemology movement has often been criticized on the grounds that it falls considerably short of satisfying the positive side of this two-tiered approach to Christian apologetics. Reformed epistemology is said to constitute or entail an inadequate apologetic methodology since it rejects positive apologetics or at least favours negative over positive apologetics. In this paper I argue that this common objection fails on two grounds. First, while the arguments of Reformed epistemology are relevant and useful to apologetics, neither Reformed epistemology nor its epistemological project should be identified with a distinct school or method of apologetics. Secondly, while certain claims of Reformed epistemology seem to imply a rejection of positive apologetics, or at least a preference for negative or positive apologetics, I argue that no such conclusion follows. In fact, although unimpressed by particular versions of natural theology and positive apologetics, Reformed epistemologists have provided criticisms of each that can constructively shape future approaches to the apologetic employment of natural theology and Christian evidences.**

One of the frequent criticisms of Reformed epistemology is that it has done very little to promote the agenda of offering reasons for supposing that theism or Christian theism in particular is true, so-called positive apologetics. An even stronger criticism is that it has actually been opposed to such a project. Various writers have claimed that the distinctive features of Reformed epistemology restrict it to a mere negative apologetic, simply answering objections against the faith but failing to provide the positive backing to faith typically associated with natural theology and Christian evidences. Reformed epistemology is thus seen as constituting or entailing a weak or inadequate form of Christian apologetics. Owing to the widely held importance of Christian apologetics among

Christian theologians and philosophers, this criticism indicates a potentially serious liability of Reformed epistemology. As James Sennett has noted, 'the legitimate place, if any, of natural theology and apologetics remains one of the more serious problems for the advocate of Reformed epistemology'.[1]

In this paper I want to examine this common and longstanding criticism of Reformed epistemology. After briefly outlining the distinction between positive and negative apologetics, I will clarify the nature of Reformed epistemology and what relationship, if any, it has to Christian apologetics, especially positive apologetics. I will argue that Reformed epistemology does not constitute a school of apologetics, though it does entail a particular sort of philosophical argumentation which is useful to apologetics. While this argumentation does not in itself entail positive apologetics, neither does it entail a rejection of positive apologetics. Moreover, I will show that several alleged arguments associated with Reformed epistemology for rejecting positive apologetics or preferring negative over positive apologetics are inadequate. In this way I hope to make some progress toward resolving what Sennett and others have considered one of the more serious problems for the Reformed epistemologist.

Negative and positive apologetics

It has been commonplace in literature in the philosophy of religion to distinguish between negative and positive apologetics.[2] The distinction is roughly between the presentation of arguments that *defend* theistic and Christian belief against objections (negative apologetics) and the presentation of arguments that provide *support* for the truth of theistic and Christian belief (positive apologetics).

To clarify the distinction between negative and positive apologetics, it is helpful to consider the concept of *defeaters*, especially the distinction between undercutting and rebutting defeaters. A defeater is, broadly speaking, a condition or circumstance that undermines the positive epistemic status of a belief (e.g. rationality, justification, or warrant).[3] There are at least two kinds of defeaters, rebutting and undercutting. A *rebutting* defeater against some belief that p is an overriding reason for supposing not-p. An *undercutting* defeater is an overriding reason for supposing that the grounds of some belief that p are inadequate, i.e. do not provide the appropriate sort of support for the belief that p.[4] In each case one acquires reasons for modifying one's beliefs in some way. One either acquires reasons for accepting something incompatible with one's initial belief (rebutting defeater) or one loses one's grounds for holding the initial belief (undercutting defeater). In each case, though, one acquires reasons for giving up one's initial belief, or at least no longer holding the belief with the same degree of firmness. Objections to theism and Christianity can therefore be construed as the presentation of defeaters against theistic and Christian belief. Among these are various rebutting defeaters that provide reasons for supposing that there is no

God. Arguments from the alleged incoherence of theism and the problem of evil are two such examples. But there are also a variety of undercutting defeaters, for example, Feuerbachian and Freudian projection theories of religious belief. Unlike rebutting defeaters, undercutting defeaters attack putative grounds for belief in God, as opposed to the truth of theism itself. Since defeaters defeat the positive epistemic status of their target beliefs, both sorts of defeaters will provide reasons for supposing that theistic belief lacks positive epistemic status.

But defeaters can be defeated (by so-called defeater-defeaters), and herein lies the connection to Christian apologetics. The distinction between negative and positive apologetics emerges from a consideration of how rebutting defeaters against theistic and Christian belief can be defeated. If someone presents a rebutting defeater against theism, one can respond by either rebutting or undercutting the alleged defeater. To undercut a rebutting defeater would involve presenting reasons for supposing that the premises of the atheological argument do not adequately support the conclusion that there is no God. Plantinga's free-will defence against the logical problem of evil is such a defeater-defeater. However, one could also rebut the original rebutting defeater. If a defeater is a rebutting defeater against some proposition *p*, it will be a reason for supposing that not-*p*. But then a rebutting defeater-defeater will be a reason for supposing that *not* not-*p*, hence a reason for supposing that *p*.[5] One who attempts to rebut a rebutting defeater against theism is engaging in *positive* apologetics since a rebutter against not-*p* (there is no God) is equivalent to arguing *for p* (there is a God). But one who simply attempts to undercut a rebutting (or undercutting) defeater against theism or Christian belief is engaging in *negative* apologetics by showing that some argument against theism is not a good argument.

Now Reformed epistemology has frequently been criticized on the grounds that it favours or is exclusively committed to negative apologetics. In his paper 'Jerusalem and Athens revisited',[6] George Mavrodes was one of the first philosophers to note this apparent liability of Reformed epistemology. According to Mavrodes, negative apologetics does not provide us with reasons for supposing that theistic belief is true. It only makes theistic belief epistemically permissible, but this is a very weak sense of rational belief. It stands in contrast to a stronger sort of rationality that attaches to beliefs when we have good reasons to suppose that they are true. Mavrodes argues that not only might we want our beliefs to be rational in this stronger sense, but the task of Christian apologetics requires that Christians meet the charge of 'insufficient evidence' for God head-on by providing evidence. Reformed epistemology, he argues, does not provide us with the resources for this task. Similarly, in Gary Gutting's fictitious dialogue between a Calvinist and Catholic,[7] the Calvinist, who represents the Plantingian Reformed epistemologist, accepts negative apologetics but is wholly opposed to positive apologetics. As in Mavrodes's paper, Gutting's dialogue distinguishes between a weakly rational belief whose denial is also rational and a strongly rational belief

whose denial is not rational. In the dialogue, negative apologetics establishes only the right or permission to believe, and for this reason it establishes the rationality of theistic belief in only a weak sense. Positive apologetics, on the other hand, establishes (if successful) what a person ought to believe, and so establishes the rationality of theistic belief in a strong sense. The Catholic interlocutor suggests that one of the major difficulties with Plantinga's religious epistemology is its failure to establish the rationality of theistic and Christian belief in this stronger sense.

A more recent expression of this apologetic disappointment in Reformed epistemology is found in Gary Habermas's contributions to the Zondervan Counterpoints Series book, *Five Views on Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry. In his response to Kelly Clark's presentation of Reformed epistemology (in the same book), Habermas argues that Reformed epistemology faces a serious quandary, for the Reformed epistemologist stands 'between the Scylla of avoiding arguments and evidence in order to justify their system, and the Charybdis of fideism'.[8] While recognizing the value in the Reformed epistemologist's employment of negative apologetics, Habermas is critical of what he calls the 'Reformed epistemologist's apologetic strategy'. He writes:

> Clark does encourage negative apologetics, and his colleagues at Calvin have done an excellent job arguing that crucial Christian doctrines can be defended against objections. But where is the positive defense? … . My concern at this point, however, is that the efforts of Reformed epistemologists have not, to my knowledge, moved very far in the direction of actually establishing the truth of Christian theism. … Maybe there is a sense in which these scholars think the positive move cannot be made well. Or maybe some of them are not very interested in this step. In any case, I think Mavrodes is right about the ambivalent status of positive apologetics in Reformed thought. But without it, I wonder how Reformed epistemologists establish Christian theism in terms of their apologetic methodology.[9]

The criticisms of Mavrodes, Gutting, and Habermas each point to what these thinkers and others perceive as a basic flaw in Reformed epistemology, namely its at least ambivalent position regarding positive apologetics. Gutting and Mavrodes think that the arguments of Reformed epistemology entail a case for the rationality of belief in God in a sense too weak to measure up to the demands of Christian apologetics. This apparent deficiency of Reformed epistemology is accentuated in Habermas's critique since, in his paper and throughout the *Five Views* book, Reformed epistemology is being treated as a distinct method or school of apologetics. As such, Reformed epistemology appears to be wholly inadequate.

The project of Reformed epistemology

But are the preceding closely allied criticisms of Reformed epistemology accurate? More generally, what is the connection between Reformed epistemology and the dichotomy between negative and positive apologetics? To answer

these questions, it will be necessary to consider some of the essential components to the project of Reformed epistemology. I will outline three tiers of Reformed epistemology as exemplified in the work of the movement's principal representatives: Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

The critique of evidentialism

In his seminal 1983 essay 'Reason and belief in God',[10] Plantinga developed a detailed critique of the claim that theistic belief is irrational or unreasonable, the so-called evidential objection to theistic belief. This objection to theistic belief, as Plantinga explains it, is a conclusion derived from two premises: (1) if there is no sufficient propositional evidence for theism, then theistic belief is irrational or unreasonable, and (2) there is no sufficient propositional evidence for theism. While many theists since the Enlightenment have attempted to undercut this argument by arguing against the truth of (2) by adducing various proofs for the existence of God, Plantinga focuses instead on (1) and attempts to show that the evidentialist has no good reason to suppose that (1) is true, especially where the concept of rationality is construed deontologically, i.e. as a matter of being within one's intellectual rights or not violating any intellectual duties. He attempts to undercut the evidentialist objection by arguing that (1) is grounded in the epistemology of classical foundationalism, which is both self-referentially incoherent and has the rather implausible implication that most of our commonsense, everyday beliefs are not rational or justified. In the absence of self-referentially coherent criteria for proper basicality that exclude theistic belief, the evidentialist does not have a very strong case for (1). Hence, he has no good reason for affirming that theistic belief is irrational or unreasonable.

Plantinga has recognized, of course, that evidentialism need not be rooted in classical foundationalism or any form of foundationalism for that matter. Elsewhere, Plantinga has examined the attempt to ground evidentialism in coherentism, as well as various analogical extensions of classical evidentialism. In all these cases Plantinga argues that attempts to support an evidentialist requirement for theistic belief is unsuccessful.[11]

The defence of the proper basicality thesis

Corresponding to this critique of evidentialism is the *defence* of the proper basicality of theistic belief. The critiques of evidentialism serve not merely to undercut objections to the rationality of theistic belief, but also objections to the rationality of *properly basic* theistic belief. Hence, they purport to show that theistic belief *can* be rational (or possess some positive epistemic status) for some people in the appropriate circumstances, even if the person lacks propositional evidence or an argument in support of the truth of her theistic belief.

While Plantinga has developed this defence of the proper basicality of theistic belief in several papers, his most complete version of this defence is featured

in his more recent, *Warranted Christian Belief* [hereafter *WCB*]. As the title implies, Plantinga aims to defend not merely theistic belief but more specifically Christian beliefs, though I shall focus here on theistic belief. He aims to defend such beliefs against a variety of objections to their positive epistemic status, what Plantinga calls *de jure* objections. (*De jure* objections are distinguished from *de facto* objections that concern the truth of theistic belief). Plantinga presents a model of how theistic belief can possess a number of positive epistemic statuses (e.g. deontological justification, internal and external rationality, and warrant) without the belief being based on propositional evidence or argument. According to this model, we have been created with a disposition to form various theistic beliefs in a broad range of widely realized experiential conditions. Plantinga argues that this model is epistemically possible (i.e. consistent with what the evidence accepted by most of the participants in the discussion) and several of the more prominent objections to such a model are ultimately unsuccessful.

Although Plantinga defends the deontological rationality of theistic belief in *WCB*, his main focus in the book is a defence of *warranted* theistic belief. Warrant, as Plantinga explained in his two prior *Warrant* volumes, is that property or quality enough of which is sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge. A belief is warranted just if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a congenial environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. Plantinga argues that the best sort of *de jure* objection to theistic belief amounts to an objection to the idea that theistic belief is warranted. However, Plantinga maintains that such an objection will carry force only if one already assumes that theism is false. If theism is false, then it is likely that theistic belief, at least when held in a basic way, lacks warrant. More precisely, Plantinga shows that if theism is false, then it is likely that basic theistic belief will be the product of properly functioning cognitive faculties aimed at something other than truth (e.g. Plantinga's account of Freud's objection) or the product of cognitive dysfunction (e.g. the view Plantinga attributes to Marx). By contrast, Plantinga argues that if theism is true, then it is likely that theistic belief is warranted, even when held in a basic way. It is here that Plantinga draws attention to how the answer we give to particular epistemological questions depends on distinctly metaphysical presuppositions. Hence, the best sort of *de jure* objection to theistic belief cannot be divorced from the *de facto* objection to theistic belief.

Plantinga, of course, recognizes that the warranted status of theistic belief will depend on there being no genuine or successful defeaters to theistic belief. Such a condition is worked into Plantinga's own account of warrant.[12] So Plantinga spends the latter part of his book examining a variety of potential undercutting and rebutting defeaters to theistic belief (e.g. problem of evil, projection theories of religious belief). In each case, he argues that these potential defeaters do not constitute actual defeaters for most believers. Hence, theistic belief can be

warranted in a basic way, even for the mature adult believer who is aware of a wide range of criticisms against his theistic beliefs.

Like Plantinga, Alston has presented a variety of criticisms against evidentialism.[13] In his book *Perceiving God*,[14] he develops such a critique in the context of a detailed defence of the immediate justification of theistic beliefs. ('Justification' in this context is taken in a non-deontological, truth-conducive sense). He does this by way of an analysis of the nature and epistemological implications of 'experiential awareness of God'. Alston begins by showing that there is something appropriately designated 'experiential awareness of God' that engenders beliefs to the effect that God is doing something in relation to the subject (e.g. forgiving, loving), or that God has some perceivable property (e.g. goodness, power) – what Alston calls M-beliefs. Alston also argues that the experiential awareness of God exhibits many of the essential generic features found in sensory perception (e.g. the direct presentation of something to consciousness). So it is a kind of *perception* of God, howbeit non-sensory. Alston refers to it as mystical perception (MP). Like sense perception, MP produces its M-beliefs in an immediate or non-inferential manner, so if they are justified their justification – like sensory perceptual beliefs – is immediate, not based on argument or propositional evidence.

An important element in Alston's argument is his case for regarding MP as a socially established doxastic practice, as well as his answering several potential objections to this proposal. According to Alston, MP is like sense perception and other aspects of our cognitive establishment, in that it consists of a socially shared set of dispositions to form and maintain beliefs under particular circumstances. But then what is true of all socially established doxastic practices will also be true of MP. And this is central to Alston's argument, for he argues that it is rational to engage in any socially established doxastic practice unless we have a sufficient reasons to suppose that the practice is unreliable. Doxastic practices are 'innocent until proven guilty'. But then, if MP is a socially established doxastic practice, as Alston contends, it will satisfy a condition of rational acceptability that apply to all socially established doxastic practices. Unless there are reasons to suppose that MP is unreliable, we are reasonable to regard it as reliable and its doxastic outputs as justified. Naturally, Alston considers an array of potential objections to the reliability of MP and argues that they are unsuccessful.

In this way, Alston may be viewed as making a contribution to the defence of the immediate justification of theistic belief by establishing a kind of parity between theistic belief and other aspects of our cognitive establishment, principally sensory perception. Moreover, while Alston does not claim to show conclusively that theistic beliefs grounded in MP are prima facie immediately justified, he is presenting an argument for this nonetheless, mainly on the grounds that (1) the proposal is plausible on the face of it (especially given the similarities between MP and sense perception), (2) objections to the proposal can be met, and (3) MP

has non-trivial 'significant self-support' (i.e. features within MP that reinforce its being reliable, e.g. internal coherence). Also, while Alston does not claim to show that MP is a reliable doxastic practice, he does claim to show that MP satisfies the essential characteristics of a full-blown doxastic practice and that there are no good arguments against it being reliable. In the absence of overriding reasons to the contrary, we are practically rational to accept MP as reliable and its outputs as prima facie justified. So, in Alston the defence of the proper basicality thesis is closely connected to more positive arguments in support of the positive epistemic status of theistic belief.[15] But positive arguments are also developed by Wolterstorff and Plantinga.

Positive case for the proper basicality thesis: Wolterstorff and Plantinga

In his 1983 article, 'Can belief in God be rational if it has no foundations?',[16] Nicholas Wolterstorff developed a critique of evidentialism and a case *for* the rationality of basic belief in God. Wolterstorff notes that one can assess the plausibility of evidentialism in two ways. One can, as Plantinga does in 'Reason and belief in God', critically evaluate evidentialism by examining the plausibility of reasons for evidentialism, or one can formulate an alternate criterion of rationality and test evidentialism against that criterion. Wolterstorff does the latter. He is thereby situated to argue against the truth of evidentialism and present reasons for supposing that theistic belief is rational on the basis of its satisfying the conditions of a specific and plausible criterion of rationality.

Like Plantinga, Wolterstorff thinks of the evidentialist challenge as historically cast in terms of epistemic duties, obligations, and responsibilities, all rooted in the Lockean conception of rationality. Like Alston, Wolterstorff derives a general principle of rationality based on the work of Thomas Reid: we ought to consider beliefs innocent until proven guilty, not guilty until proven innocent. He formulates a criterion of rationally justified belief on that basis. The criterion, roughly stated, permits us to hold a belief unless we have adequate reasons to cease holding the belief. More specifically, with reference to beliefs that we could refrain from holding ('eluctable' beliefs as he calls them), we are rationally justified in holding them unless we either have or ought to have adequate reasons for supposing that they are false or formed in an unreliable manner.[17] Reasons play a rationality-removing role, not merely reasons a person has but reasons a person ought to have. Wolterstorff sees this criterion as appropriately capturing the normative requirements for deontologically rational belief. Since it is reasonable to suppose that there are cases where people hold theistic belief in a basic way but do not have, nor ought to have, adequate reasons for surrendering that belief, theistic belief is – at least for these people – rational and justified without evidence. The articulation of a criterion for rational belief and reasons for supposing that theistic belief satisfies this criterion contributes to a case for the rationality of theistic belief.

Plantinga, also, despite his emphasis of the defence of properly basic theistic belief against evidentialist objections, has also argued in support of the rationality of theistic belief. This was first evident in the now well-known parity argument found in Plantinga's 1967 *God and Other Minds*.[18] In this book, Plantinga examines several important arguments for and against God's existence (cosmological, teleological, and ontological), and then does the same with respect to arguments for and against belief in other minds. Plantinga argues that while the arguments for belief in God and other minds are far from conclusive, neither are the objections to such arguments very formidable. Arguments for God's existence and other minds have a similar dialectical structure. As proofs, they succeed and fail in similar ways. Hence, there is a dialectical parity between theistic belief and belief in other minds. These considerations are designed to support Plantinga's contention that if belief in other minds is rational, then so is belief in God. But, as Plantinga claims, belief in minds *is* rational. Hence, belief in God is also rational.[19]

The argument in *God and Other Minds* predates Plantinga's analysis of the concept of rationality and the distinction between deontological rationality and other sorts of positive epistemic status. But with that distinction more clearly drawn, Plantinga has made the case for the rationality of theistic belief more specific. According to Plantinga, most contemporary believers are deontologically justified in holding their central theistic beliefs. And the same thing is true with respect to the central beliefs of Christianity.[20] What Plantinga has not tried to do is show that theistic belief is warranted, something which Plantinga thinks he cannot do without showing that theism is true. But since the latter falls outside the scope of his project in *WCB*, so does the former.

The relationship between Reformed epistemology and apologetics

How then shall we characterize the project of Reformed epistemology and its relationship to Christian apologetics?

In the first place, it is clear that the project of Reformed epistemology as outlined above is not concerned with demonstrating, proving, or otherwise establishing the *truth* of theism or Christianity. When we examine the works that have defined the Reformed epistemology movement, we have noted three tiers of argument: (1) the critique of evidentialism, (2) the defence of the proper basicality thesis, and (3) with some restriction, arguments in support of the positive epistemic status of theistic and Christian belief. Of course, embedded in each of these tiers of the project of Reformed epistemology are important analyses of a variety of positive epistemic statuses and their implications for theistic belief, a point of no small philosophical significance. More generally, then, we can describe the project of Reformed epistemology as the aim to *clarify* and *defend* a variety of epistemic propositions, specifically propositions about the epistemic status of theistic and Christian belief, as opposed to the truth of such beliefs. Moreover,

even when we consider the more limited attempt of Reformed epistemology to provide positive arguments *in support* of the positive epistemic status of theistic belief (as opposed to merely defending such a claim against objections), the goals remain carefully fitted to the contours of an on-going project in the epistemology of religious belief.[21]

Hence, we can formulate in a general way the epistemological project of Reformed epistemology as follows:

> RE Reformed epistemology aims to clarify, defend, and – with qualification – positively support a range of second-order claims about the positive epistemic status of theistic and Christian belief.

Is Reformed epistemology a school of or distinct viewpoint in apologetics? Christian apologetics, of course, is concerned with defending Christian belief, and this is typically taken to involve defending the truth and rationality of Christian belief. And here it seems easy to see Reformed epistemology engaged in the same project as apologetics, for Reformed epistemology is interested in defending the rationality of Christian belief, as well as answering objections against the truth of Christian belief. But different schools of apologetics have different views on how exactly the faith should be defended. So, if one identifies the project of Reformed epistemology with apologetics, one is likely to see the arguments of Reformed epistemology as constitutive of a distinct school of apologetics. But since the arguments considered above do not address reasons for supposing that theistic or Christian belief is true, as an apologetic method Reformed epistemology would not include any positive apologetics. And this renders Reformed epistemology vulnerable to the negative assessment examined earlier. With Habermas, we will have to wonder how Reformed epistemologists 'fulfil a crucial component of apologetic methodology – arguing in favour of Christianity'.[22]

But the argument here is unsound. It is true that some of the goals of Reformed epistemology are the goals of apologetics, but it does not follow that Reformed epistemology is itself a distinct apologetic methodology or school of apologetics. The similarities between Reformed epistemology and apologetics stem from the fact that epistemological questions are implicated in the task of apologetics. The distinctly epistemological interest of Reformed epistemology also explains why it has not focused on evidence for the truth of theistic and Christian belief. Like other projects in general epistemology, the success and value of the project does not depend on establishing the *truth* of the beliefs the positive epistemic status of which it aims to discuss. Hence, the alleged 'failure' of Reformed epistemology as a method of apologetics is no more of a genuine failure than the 'failure' of my Toyota 4-Runner to transport me to the moon is indicative of a genuine failure on the part of my Toyota truck. Quite trivially, any project will fail to achieve some goal or another, but it hardly follows that the project has 'failed' or is 'deficient'

in any relevant sense, unless of course it fails or is deficient in reaching *its* goal. Habermas articulates a variety of 'problems' that Reformed epistemology must resolve 'before it can be considered a complete apologetic package'.[23] But this is a lot like identifying an array of 'problems' that Toyota must resolve before it can be considered a viable alternative to NASA, as supplying a complete package of interplanetary transportation. I think we must regard as unsound critiques of Reformed epistemology that presuppose that it is a distinct school of apologetics or that it purports to offer a complete apologetic package.

Suppose, then, that we concede that Reformed epistemology is not, nor purports to be, a complete apologetic viewpoint, package, or methodology. It is an epistemological project, the arguments of which *can* be deployed in apologetics in *support* and *defence* of the positive epistemic status of theistic and Christian belief. In this case, Reformed epistemology is an epistemological project that has implications for Christian apologetics. Of course, the critic of Reformed epistemology may very well concede this. The complaint may be, not that Reformed epistemology is an inadequate form of apologetics, but that it *entails* an inadequate form of Christian apologetics, either by entailing a rejection of positive apologetics or at least by showing a preference for negative over positive apologetics.

What, then, is the connection between Reformed epistemology and the negative/positive apologetics dichotomy? I think we can begin to see the connections here if we examine the relationship between positive epistemic status and defeaters according to Reformed epistemology. Although Reformed epistemology maintains that reasons are not needed for theistic belief to possess positive epistemic status, it has rather consistently held that reasons can remove or negatively affect positive epistemic status. In other words, properly basic theistic beliefs can be *defeated* by way of defeaters. So Reformed epistemology maintains what we can call a no-defeater condition for positive epistemic status:

> ND Given any person S, S's theistic belief T has positive epistemic status only if S does not have an undefeated defeater for T.[24]

This formulation will be true with respect to deontological and internal rationality, as well as epistemic desiderata such as Alstonian truth-conducive justification and Plantingian external rationality and warrant.

Now it appears that the conjunction of RE and ND entails either negative or positive apologetics, given that:

> PFD A person S* who is engaging in the project outlined in RE believes that there is some prima facie (rebutting or undercutting) defeater against theistic belief.

Take the situation where the project of Reformed epistemology aims to *show* or *support* the contention that theistic belief is rational. In this case, one aims to

show or establish that the conditions for rationality obtain with respect to belief in God, but one of these conditions is the absence of any undefeated defeaters against theistic belief. So, it looks like dialectically establishing the rationality of theistic belief requires providing good reasons for supposing that prima facie defeaters for theistic belief can be defeated. For instance, take the case of the believer being deontologically rational in holding theistic belief. If a no-defeater condition is imposed upon being within one's intellectual rights (as Reformed epistemologists maintain), then showing that some believers are within their intellectual rights in believing in God requires showing that putative or potential defeaters can be defeated.[25] Hence, there will be a need to address the atheological argument from evil, Freudian projection theories, arguments from the incoherence of theism, and the like. If these prima facie defeaters cannot be defeated, then it will be quite difficult to maintain dialectically that anyone is within his intellectual rights in believing in God.

Now take the case where the Reformed epistemology project is that of *defending* the rationality of belief in God against the epistemic objection that theistic belief is not rational. The atheist objector may take the conjunction of ND and the denial of its consequent as grounds for denying that theistic belief is rational. The denial of the consequent will in turn be based on some alleged defeater against theistic belief. Now since this is a case of defending the positive epistemic status of theistic belief, one will have to *undercut* the atheist's argument against the rationality of theistic belief. Since one of the two premises in the argument is ND, which the Reformed epistemologist accepts, the target will have to be the premise that denies the consequent of ND. One will have to show either that there is a strong reason to suppose that there is no undefeated defeater against theistic belief, or that the atheist's reasons for affirming the existence of such a defeater are inadequate. Both of these options will require producing a defeater-defeater against the defeater that grounds the atheist or agnostic's contention that theistic belief is unreasonable.

It should be fairly clear that while the conjunction of RE, ND, and PFD commits the Reformed epistemologist to either negative or positive apologetics, it does not necessarily commit him to positive apologetics. We noted above that, given ND, the contention that there are defeaters against theistic belief grounds a correlated epistemic objection to theistic belief, namely that theistic belief is not rational. Indeed, we can view this as an implication of any (rebutting or undercutting) defeater. If one has acquired a defeater for a belief B, one has acquired a reason for supposing that it would no longer be *rational* to continue to hold B (at least not with the same degree of conviction), either because one loses one's grounds for believing that B is true (undercutting defeater) or one acquires overriding reasons for supposing that B is false (rebutting defeater). We see here a point suggested in the first section of this paper, that rebutting and undercutting defeaters entail a certain kind of *de jure* objection to theistic belief.[26] Because of this

'epistemic implication' of defeaters, the defeat of such defeaters becomes crucial to both supporting and defending the rationality of theistic belief. This explains why Reformed epistemology is interested in defending the truth, as well as the rationality, of theistic belief. Given ND and RE, reasons for supposing that theism is false must be eliminated. Rebutting defeaters against theistic belief threaten the claim that theistic belief is (or can be) rational. Hence, defending the rationality of theistic belief requires defending the truth of theism against rebutting defeaters. But one may defeat such defeaters by engaging in either negative or positive apologetics (or both).[27]

The compatibility of Reformed epistemology and positive apologetics

The basic question, then, is whether the project or claims of Reformed epistemology are logically inconsistent with positive apologetics, or whether Reformed epistemology has reason to prefer negative over positive apologetics. Since arguments for the existence of God represent a paradigmatic case of positive apologetics, I will carry out the discussion with reference to theistic arguments, though the considerations will also apply to arguments for the truth of specifically Christian beliefs.

The proper basicality thesis and natural theology

The proper basicality thesis [hereafter, PBT] is central to Reformed epistemology, so it is not surprising that a few related arguments attempt to derive from PBT a negative verdict on natural theology. According to PBT, theistic arguments are unnecessary for holding theistic belief as well as for the positive epistemic status of theistic belief. But in that case one might easily conclude that the implementation of theistic arguments in apologetics is contrary to how we come to believe in God, as well as to how such beliefs are in fact justified. At best, theistic arguments are superfluous to the psychological and epistemic dimensions of religious belief.

The first thing to note here is that PBT is a thesis about the conditions for *being* rational in holding a theistic belief, not what is permitted or for that matter required for *showing* that theistic belief is rational, much less showing it to be true. So even if PBT ruled out, the necessity of theistic arguments at the level of being justified in theistic belief, the apologetic use of theistic arguments is not thereby ruled out. It is crucial to distinguish between the conditions that are implicated in a person's belief possessing some positive epistemic status and the conditions implicated in showing that this is the case.[28] Simply because theistic arguments are not needed for belief in God, or for such a belief to be justified, it does not follow that theistic arguments are not needed or useful for showing that theistic belief is justified, much less for showing that theistic belief is true, both of which

are important to Christian apologetics.[29] Also, even if theistic arguments were not necessary for rational belief in God, they might still be necessary for rational belief in the rationality of one's belief in God. That is to say, theistic arguments might play a higher-level function. In fact, it might be argued that all such higher-level epistemic beliefs require evidential support.[30] Since Reformed epistemology aims to support and defend such higher-level beliefs, theistic arguments could make an important contribution here.

But secondly, it is no claim of Reformed epistemology that theistic belief is basic for everyone in just any circumstance. Proper basicality is circumstance and person relative. For instance, only *some* people have non-sensory perceptual experiences of God that would ground basic theistic beliefs in mystical perception. Or, to draw on Plantinga's model, while everyone may possess a *sensus divinitatis*, Plantinga is clear that the disposition to form various theistic beliefs in widely realized circumstances is not always triggered due to malfunction or impedance of the *sensus divinitatis*.[31] And we have already seen how even properly basic beliefs can be defeated, so the conditions that suffice to generate such beliefs may not suffice to sustain them given the acquisition of defeaters. Lastly, perhaps for some people theistic beliefs are both experientially and evidentially grounded, such that their theistic beliefs are sustained by multiple sources or based on multiple grounds.[32] Multiple support of this sort might be especially relevant to sustaining theistic beliefs given the acquisition of defeaters. Given these distinctions and qualifications, the apologetic use of theistic arguments is far from superfluous, even if the proper basicality thesis is true.

The strong proper basicality thesis

A more plausible case against the apologetic employment of theistic arguments is suggested by a stronger formulation of PBT that Plantinga offers in places.[33] In 'The Reformed objection to natural theology' (1980), and 'Reason and belief in God' (1983), Plantinga says that one element in the Reformed objection to natural theology is the view that 'belief in God *ought not* to be based on arguments'.[34] This version of PBT is noticeably different and stronger than the standard version considered above. The stronger version does not imply that theistic arguments are simply superfluous, but rather that there is something *wrong* with a person who holds his theistic belief on the basis of such arguments. The idea is that the correct or proper way to believe in God is in a basic way, which implies that there is something incorrect, improper, or defective in holding theistic belief on the basis of theistic arguments. If this is true, then it appears that the use of such arguments in apologetics as proposed grounds for belief in God endorses an improper way to believe in God.

A crucial question, though, is how exactly we should construe the normativity here. What exactly would be wrong with a person who holds theistic belief in a non-basic way? While it is possible to construe the normativity in question

deontologically, I think it is more accurate and plausible to construe Plantinga's argument in terms of the normativity of proper function.[35] One may concede that a person could be with her epistemic rights in holding theistic belief on the basis of arguments while also maintaining that doing so is indicative of some sort of defect. More precisely, we could say that if the person's relevant cognitive faculties were functioning properly, then she would hold theistic belief in a basic way. The argument, then, would be that a person who accepted theistic belief in a non-basic or inferential manner is subject to some sort of cognitive disorder or malfunction, i.e. not forming theistic belief in accordance with the cognitive design plan for human persons. The model of theistic belief that Plantinga presents in *WCB* would seem to lend itself to this sort of argument. According to that model, if a person's relevant truth-aimed cognitive faculties are functioning properly, then the person will hold a firm, basic, theistic belief, at least given the right sort of experiential circumstances. One might take this to imply that both theistic unbelief and non-basic theistic belief are indications of cognitive malfunction. But how plausible is this line of argument?

First, is there any reason to suppose that the design plan makes the sort of specification articulated above? In *WCB*, Plantinga presents reasons for supposing that if theism is true, then the proper basicality model he presents is likely true. The reasons include God's desiring us to form true beliefs about Him and our duties to Him, and thus making provision for processes of belief formation that will include theistic beliefs. However, the argument only shows that if theism is true, then it is likely that our cognitive design-plan would have a theistic belief forming and sustaining provision, not necessarily anything as specific as *how* we would form such beliefs. It is hard to see what argument there is for the design-plan specifying an exclusively basic mode of theistic belief formation. It can't simply be considerations of degree of belief, as basic beliefs may be held with little firmness and non-basic beliefs may be held very firmly. Plantinga does indicate that the way in which we actually do form theistic beliefs is likely the way God planned it. In that case, though, the issue is an empirical one: how we, in fact, come to hold theistic beliefs. Plantinga will likely respond here that people do not typically come to belief in God on the basis of evidential considerations. Perhaps this is so if we are thinking of the sole grounds of theistic belief. But surely it is plausible to suppose that people often do hold some of their theistic beliefs at least on the partial basis of evidential considerations. There is no obvious reason why the design plan cannot specify multiple grounds for holding theistic belief, and I think Plantinga would agree here. In 'The prospects for natural theology', Plantinga admits that theistic arguments can increase the degree of warrant; but if so, the cognitive design plan must have specifications for holding theistic belief at least in part of the basis of propositional evidence.[36]

So, we should understand Plantinga's strong proper basicality thesis as maintaining that in a fully rational noetic structure, or a noetic structure in which at

least the *sensus divinitatis* and other relevant faculties are functioning properly, inference will not be the *sole* source of warrant for theistic belief. In such a noetic structure, theistic belief will not be based *solely* on the basis of argument or evidence. Clearly this doesn't eliminate theistic arguments. It only clarifies the limits of their epistemic function. Christian apologetics can proceed with the recognition of this epistemological truth. There is no reason why the apologist is forced to construe the presentation of theistic arguments as recommending such arguments to the unbeliever as the *sole* grounds for theistic belief. In fact, the offering of theistic arguments need not even be construed as a recommendation of grounds on which a person should believe in God. The arguments can just as easily be construed as refutations of agnosticism and atheism aimed at removing obstacles to belief in God, perhaps stimulating or assisting the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Secondly, though, the initial argument above contains a crucial ambiguity. Suppose we agreed that a person whose relevant cognitive faculties were functioning properly would hold a firm basic theistic belief. What exactly is the locus of the problem with a person who holds theistic belief, but in a non-basic way? The obvious entailment is that there is malfunction *somewhere* in the person's noetic establishment. There is something defective about the person's cognitive life. But is the defect the fact that the person holds a non-basic theistic belief? Or is the defect some other fact in consequence of which theistic belief is held in a non-basic way? If I am walking on crutches, this is an indication that I have some physical defect. But there is nothing wrong with my using the crutches, given that I have the defect. The best situation, of course, would be not to have the physical defect in question and thus to be crutch free. But there is nothing wrong with my relying on the crutches, even if doing so is an indication that something is wrong in the neighborhood. Something similar could said about cognitive defects.

It may be that there is some basic theistic belief-producing faculty F (such as the *sensus divintitas*) that malfunctions. As a result of F's malfunctioning, some other faculty or set of faculties is causally responsible for generating or sustaining theistic belief. In fact, given the Reformed doctrine of the noetic effects of sin it looks like there is good reason within the Reformed theological tradition to suppose that our knowledge of God is compromised by sin. One of its consequences may be damage to the operation of the *sensus divintitas*, requiring partial dependence on inferential reasoning for theistic beliefs, at least until such time as this mechanism is healed, perhaps by spiritual regeneration or faith. Even if the cognitive design plan specified an exclusively basic mode of theistic belief formation, the noetic effects of sin suggest that humans are by-and-large in a less than optimal cognitive situation, especially with respect to theistic belief. Other modes of theistic belief formation become relevant. And as Plantinga has argued, if it turned out that the faculty of basic theistic belief formation were damaged, such that another faculty or set of faculties causally generated or

sustained theistic belief, it is likely that God would have adopted these as part of the design plan. This implies that inferential reasoning can easily be construed as at least part of our post-lapsarian cognitive design plan. Once again, the apologetic employment of theistic arguments would be consistent with the underlying epistemology of theistic belief.

The dialectical force of theistic arguments

Even if we agree that there is nothing intrinsic to the proper basicality thesis itself that is incompatible with epistemic and apologetic functions of natural theology, there may very well be objections to the apologetic use of natural theology that, while not entailed by Reformed epistemology, are nonetheless consistent with it. Space constraints prohibit considering the full array of possibilities here. However, a couple of closely related objections are particularly pertinent. They both concern the dialectical force of theistic arguments, something of particular significance in apologetics.

There is, first, the view that theistic arguments are just not good arguments. If theistic arguments are logically invalid or lack cogency, their employment by the apologist may prove more embarrassing than victorious. Reformed epistemologists, of course, have been critical of the logical force of theistic arguments. Plantinga, for instance, subjected paradigm case theistic arguments to rigorous criticisms in *God and Other Minds*. With reference to the cosmological argument of Aquinas, Plantinga concludes, 'this piece of natural theology is ineffective'.[37] As for the ontological argument, 'none of the more obvious ways of stating it do in fact succeed'.[38] And finally, while Plantinga agrees that the teleological argument is the natural theologian's most powerful weapon, 'it suffers from a crucial and crippling deficiency'.[39] Hence, this argument 'seems no more successful than the cosmological and ontological arguments'.[40] His final verdict seems decisively negative: 'it is hard to avoid the conclusion that natural theology does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question with which we began: Is it rational to believe in God?'[41]

While Plantinga's verdict on natural theology in *God and Other Minds* appears wholly negative, Plantinga has since pointed out that at the time he was working with a rather stringent conception of natural theology.[42] He was calling into question certain lofty claims for natural theology, critiquing the idea that theistic arguments constitute conclusive, coercive, certain, or logical demonstrations proceeding from premises that are self-evident or to which there is universal assent among all rational people.[43] Theistic arguments are ineffective in *this* sense only, but this is a far cry from an outright rejection of theistic arguments as such. It is clearly compatible with affirming the existence of good probabilistic theistic arguments. While we might suppose that theistic arguments of this sort could never independently generate enough warrant for knowledge, they could still make some contribution to the positive epistemic status of theistic belief, and they

would remain dialectically useful to Christian apologetics.[44] Moreover, in 'Christian philosophy at the end of the 20th century', Plantinga explicitly endorses the project of positive apologetics: 'There are really a whole host of good theistic arguments, all patiently waiting to be developed in penetrating and profound detail. This is one area where contemporary Christian philosophers have a great deal of work to do.'[45] Indeed, in addition to Plantinga's positive work on the ontological argument and his more recent naturalism defeated argument,[46] his lecture entitled 'Two dozen (or so) theistic arguments' lays out just how fruitful Plantinga regards the prospects for the development of theistic arguments.[47] Therefore, Plantinga's criticisms of theistic arguments should not be construed as undermining positive apologetics, but rather as shaping it in a constructively critical manner.[48]

A second objection that raises concern about the dialectical effectiveness of the arguments relates to the highly subjective determinants of evidence assessment, for instance the implications of our passions and pre-theoretical commitments for how we view evidence. In his contributions to the *Five Views* book discussed earlier, Kelly Clark indicates his dissatisfaction with approaches to positive apologetics that fail to recognize this. 'Our believings', Clark writes, 'are inextricably entwined with our passions, emotions, and will. Our fundamental commitments shape our assessment of the evidence. … that counts as evidence, the weight that we should attach to it, and the inferences that follow from it are conditioned by our commitments.'[49] It follows that people will have widely divergent judgements as to the strength of the evidence for the existence of God, and equally rational people will disagree on these matters.

I think Clark is correct about the subjective nature of evidence assessments. But what Clark says here applies equally to negative apologetics, for here individuals are asked to weigh evidence, not evidence in support of theism but evidence against alleged defeaters to theistic belief. The same sort of subjective judgements will come into play here. For instance, consider elements in the defence of theism against the atheological argument from evil. These defences typically depend on a conception of good states of affairs, a postulated range of possible goods, the logical relations between good and bad states of affairs, as well as judgements about how good and bad states of affairs should be weighted over against each other. Such judgements often depend on the very sort of moral and metaphysical considerations implicated in our assessments of theistic arguments. In fact, Clark's point will hold also for the defence of the proper basicality thesis. Here also individuals are asked to evaluate a variety of epistemological arguments, but a casual glimpse at the literature will show a significant divergence of opinion in the evaluation of such arguments, even among Christians.

What this shows us is that whether we are attempting to construct arguments for the existence of God or arguments against objections to theism our best efforts are unlikely to meet with consensus. The lesson to be learned here is that there

are no apologetic silver bullets. We will need to disabuse ourselves of a certain naïve apologetic evidentialism that thinks that theism can be logically demonstrated or proven to the satisfaction of all rational interlocutors. But such is the fate of nearly every dialectical engagement. But this is not a reason to refuse engagement, but an indication of the limits of such engagements and how subjective factors influence them. What is needed is an approach to positive (and negative) apologetics that is, we might say, presuppositionally sensitive, that is sensitive to the way in which the factors Clark cites do affect particular individuals. But we have no good reason here to prefer negative over positive apologetics, much less a reason to refuse engaging in positive apologetics, at least none that would not justify bringing all philosophical argumentation to a screeching halt.[50]

Conclusion

Is Reformed epistemology rightly criticized on the grounds that it is or entails an inadequate form of apologetics? I think not. First, Reformed epistemology is fundamentally a multi-tiered project in the epistemology of religious belief, not a distinct school of apologetics. Secondly, as a project in epistemology, Reformed epistemology aims to support and defend a variety of claims about the positive epistemic status of theistic belief. But this very project, owing to the relationship between rationality and defeaters, is also concerned with showing that putative defeaters to theistic belief can be defeated. Hence, Reformed epistemology entails apologetically useful arguments, arguments for and in defence of the positive epistemic status of theistic belief, as well as arguments in defence of the truth of theism. Third, I have argued that some of the more straightforward reasons internal to Reformed epistemology for excluding or preferring negative to positive apologetics do not constitute good arguments against the apologetic use of theistic arguments. And the apparent dialectical weaknesses of natural theology pointed out by Reformed epistemologists are not sufficient to undermine positive apologetics, but they can and should be used to shape that project in a constructive way. Hence, Reformed epistemology has no intrinsic or principled objection to those schools of Christian apologetics that make use of theistic arguments or Christian evidences, nor should Reformed epistemology be contrasted with such schools of apologetics. I think we must conclude that the widespread reports of the death of natural theology among Reformed epistemologists have indeed been greatly exaggerated.[51]

Notes

1. James Sennett review of *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology*, by Dewey Hoitenga, Jr, *Faith and Philosophy*, **11** (1994), 347.
2. Alvin Plantinga 'Foundations of theism: a reply', *Faith and Philosophy*, **3** (1986), 313; George Mavrodes 'Jerusalem and Athens revisited', in A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (eds) *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 192–218, 197; Dewey Hoitenga, Jr, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 203; Gary Gutting 'The Catholic and the Calvinist: a dialogue on faith and reason', *Faith and Philosophy*, **2** (1985), 236–256; Paul Griffiths 'An apology for apologetics', *Faith and Philosophy*, **5** (1988), 399–420.
3. Where the conditions are experiences or other beliefs, the defeater is an internalist defeater since the cognizer has special epistemic access to such conditions, i.e. can tell just upon reflection whether or not they obtain. By contrast, externalist defeaters involve the obtaining of certain facts about the subject's environment or cognitive situation, where these are not mentally accessible upon reflection. For instance, defeasibility accounts of knowledge maintain that there can be true *propositions* that prevent over all justified true beliefs from counting as knowledge. In the present context, we are interested in internalist type defeaters. For further discussion on the distinction between internalist and externalist defeaters, see my 'Proper basicality and the evidential significance of internalist defeat: a proposal for revising classical evidentialism', in G. Bruntrup and R. Tacelli (eds) *The Rationality of Theism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999); William Alston 'Internalism and externalism in epistemology', in *idem Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 191–192; Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 359–360.
4. Thinking of defeaters as argument forms, John Pollock distinguished between reasons that attack a conclusion (rebutters) and reasons that attack the connection between the premises and the conclusion (undercutters). See John Pollock *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), 38–39. But there are also reasons that attack the *premises* of an argument. Here one gets a rebutter for one of the reasons q for some belief that p. Consequently, the belief that p is defeated in such a way that it is not rational to continue holding at least one of the reasons q for the belief that p. We can call these reason-defeating defeaters. In this paper I am using 'undercutting defeater' in such a way that it includes reason-defeating defeaters, as one might view the distinction as two ways in which a ground or reason could be *inadequate*.
5. One might suppose that if a rebutting defeater against p is 'an overriding reason q for supposing that not-p', a rebutting defeater-defeater against this defeater would be an overriding reason for supposing that it is not the case that $\langle q$ is an overriding reason for supposing not-$p\rangle$. But then my contention that one thereby acquires an overriding reason for supposing that *not* not-p would be unclear at best. One way of resolving this is to think of a rebutting defeater as the belief that not-p, as opposed to overriding *reasons* for holding the belief that not-p. But the problem can equally be cleared up on the latter account. If we are thinking of rebutting defeaters as argument forms that present reasons q for supposing not-p, a rebutting defeater-defeater against such a defeater is properly a rebutting defeater against the *conclusion* of the defeating argument form. Of course, there is a sense in which one does thereby acquire overriding reasons for supposing that it is not the case that $\langle q$ is an overriding reason for supposing not-$p\rangle$. If one acquires overriding reasons for supposing that the conclusion of a rebutting defeater argument is false, one has acquired reasons that neutralize the defeating power of the reasons q that supported the conclusion of the rebutting defeater argument form.
6. Mavrodes 'Jerusalem and Athens revisited'.
7. Gutting 'The Catholic and the Calvinist'.
8. Gary Habermas 'An evidentialist's response', in Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry (eds) *Five Views on Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 294.
9. *Ibid.*, 296–297.
10. Alvin Plantinga 'Reason and belief in God', in Plantinga and Wolterstorff *Faith and Rationality*, 16–93.
11. See Alvin Plantinga 'Coherentism and the evidentialist objection to belief in God', in R. Audi and W. Wainwright (eds) *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 109–138; Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 102–105.

12. For a detailed discussion of this and its implications for the critique of evidentialism, see my 'The internalist character and evidentialist implications of Plantingian defeaters', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, **45** (1999), 167–187.
13. See William Alston 'The role of reason in the regulation of belief', in H. Hart, J. van der Hoeven, and N. Wolterstorff (eds) *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition* (Lanham, PA: University Press of America, 1982), 135–170 and *idem* 'Knowledge of God', in M. Hester (ed.) *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 6–49.
14. William Alston *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
15. Alston confirmed by way of personal correspondence (27 May 2002) that in *Perceiving God* he intends not merely to defend the prima facie immediate justification of theistic belief but to argue in support of this proposal.
16. See Nicholas Wolterstorff 'Can belief in God be rational if it has no foundations?', in Plantinga and Wolterstorff *Faith and Rationality*, 135–186.
17. The actual formulation has a couple of other qualifications. If a person has adequate reason to give up his belief, but is justified in not recognizing this fact, he is rationally justified in his belief. And it is also necessary that the subject not be rationally obliged to think that he has an adequate reason to cease holding the belief. See Wolterstorff 'Can belief in God be rational?', 163–169.
18. Alvin Plantinga *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967, repr. 1990).
19. See Plantinga's summary in *Warranted Christian Belief*, 69–70.
20. *Ibid.*, 99–102, 177–178, 203–204.
21. Nicholas Wolterstoff defends the modest character of the claims of Reformed epistemology in 'What Reformed epistemology is not', *Perspectives*, **7** (1992), 14–16.
22. Habermas 'An evidentialist's response', 301.
23. *Ibid.*, 300.
24. This sort of formulation is suggested by several Reformed epistemologists. See Plantinga 'Reason and belief in God', 82–87; *idem Warranted Christian Belief*, ch. 11; Wolterstorff 'Can belief in God be rational if it has no foundations?', 164–172; Alston *Perceiving God*, 79, 159, 189–194; C. Stephen Evans *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 267–268, 293–295, 306. For a more detailed consideration of ND in Reformed epistemology, see my 'The internalist character and evidentialist implications of Plantingian defeaters', and 'Proper basicality and the evidential significance of internalist defeat'.
25. More technically, one must first show that there are reasons, Q, such that, even if S acquired a prima facie defeater D against theistic belief T, S would remain rational in holding T if S acquired Q (and saw the connection between Q and D). Secondly, one would have to show that such conditions are plausibly instantiated.
26. Plantinga has suggested that in some cases atheologians are not clear about whether they intend their objections to be against the truth or rationality of theistic belief. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 464. The confusion here is likely the result of a lack of clarity about the relations between defeaters, truth, and positive epistemic status.
27. It should be clear that I am not arguing that it is necessary for a person S to engage in the *activity* of defending theistic belief against objections (much less produce evidence for the truth of theism) for S's theistic belief to be justified. My argument is that some form of apologetics (negative or positive) is necessary for any person S* who accepts ND and engages in the project articulated in RE. Clearly one's theistic belief can possess positive epistemic status without engaging in the project outlined in RE, which seeks to show and defend the claim that theistic belief can possess this status. However, in 'The internalist character and evidentialist implications of Plantingian defeaters', and 'Proper basicality and the evidential significance of internalist defeat', I argued that theistic belief is subject to a defeater-defeater requirement: roughly, if a person S actually acquires a defeater for his theistic belief at time t_1, then the positive epistemic status of S's belief at time t_{n+1} will depend on the acquisition of a defeater-defeater. It is important to distinguish between this defeater-defeater requirement and the activity of showing, proving, or otherwise dialectically establishing or exhibiting the existence of a defeater-defeater against some prima facie defeater. In short, one need not engage in apologetics (negative or positive) to acquire a defeater-defeater. Hence, the positive

epistemic status of theistic belief does not depend on negative apologetics, even if supporting or defending claims to the effect that theistic belief has positive epistemic status does depend on negative apologetics.

28. For this distinction, see Plantinga 'Reason and belief in God', 71–73; Wolterstorff 'Can belief in God be rational?', 157; Alston *Perceiving God*, 71; Evans *Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, 220. A part of Habermas's critique of Reformed epistemology conflates this distinction. See Habermas 'An evidentialist's response', 294.
29. Although not accepted by Plantinga, there is the idea that a criterion for proper basicality is the availability of evidence in support of the truth of the belief, even if it is not required that a person actually have this evidence himself or base his belief on it. See Stephen Wykstra 'Toward a sensible evidentalism: on the notion of "needing evidence"', in W. Rowe and W. Wainwright (eds) *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 426–437, and *idem* 'Externalism, proper inferentiality, and sensible evidentialism', *Topoi*, **14** (1995), 107–121. If one were to take this view, then arguments for God's existence would be part of the case showing that theistic belief is rationally accepted as properly basic. It is worth pointing out that Plantinga's argument for the rationality of theistic belief in *God and Other Minds* depends on there being arguments for the existence of God that are at least as strong as arguments for the existence of other minds. While such arguments fall short of being logical demonstrations, they are nonetheless essential to his early parity argument for the rationality of theistic belief.
30. For a development of this argument and its logical consistency with Reformed epistemology, see my 'Alstonian foundationalism and higher-level theistic evidentialism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **37** (1995), 25–44.
31. Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief*, 214–216.
32. Alston emphasizes the variety of ways in which multiple sources or grounds of religious belief, including natural theology, may operate together to sustain psychologically and to contribute to the positive epistemic status of theistic belief. See Alston *Perceiving God*, 289–307.
33. The strong formulation discussed in this paragraph has been recognized by Hoitenga *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga*, 183, 209, 220–222; John Zeis 'Natural theology: reformed?', in L. Zagzebski (ed.) *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 49; Patrick Lee 'Evidentialism, Plantinga, and faith and reason', in *ibid.*, 142; and Feinberg 'A cumulative case apologist's response', in Cowan and Gundry *Five Views*, 302, 304.
34. Plantinga 'Reason and belief in God', 71; cf. 72–73. Cf. Alvin Plantinga 'Reformed objection to natural theology', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, **15** (1980), 49–63.
35. That Plantinga construed the 'ought' here along these lines is suggested by his associating 'ought' with 'correctness', 'rightness', and a 'well-formed noetic structure'. He then elaborates: 'As these Reformed thinkers see things, one who takes belief in God as basic is not thereby violating any epistemic duties or revealing a defect in his noetic structure; quite the reverse. The correct or proper way to believe in God, they thought, was not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else; the correct way is to take belief in God as basic' ('Reason and belief in God', 72, cf. 73). Plantinga confirmed this interpretation in personal correspondence (16 July 2001).
36. Alvin Plantinga 'Prospects for natural theology', in J. Tomberlin (ed.) *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991), 311–312. See also *idem Warranted Christian Belief*, 179, no. 16.
37. Plantinga *God and Other Minds*, 25.
38. *Ibid.*, 64.
39. *Ibid.*, 268.
40. *Ibid.*, 111.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, ix–x.; cf. *idem Warranted Christian Belief*, 69–70.
43. Plantinga makes this point in his 'Belief in God', in R. Boylan (ed.) *Introduction to Philosophy* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 389–406; *idem* 'Christian philosophy at the end of the twentieth century', in J. Sennett (ed.) *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 339–340; and *idem* 'The prospects for natural theology'. More recently William Lane Craig has pointed this out in 'Classical apologetics', in Cowan and Gundry *Five Views*, 45–48.

44. Plantinga has recently explained this with respect to Christian evidences: 'on my view, Christians can quite properly offer any arguments for the truth of Christian belief they think are appropriate. I doubt that these arguments are sufficient to warrant the firmness of belief involved in faith (as traditionally understood) but it doesn't follow that they have no use at all. On the contrary; they can be extremely useful, and in at least four different ways. They can confirm and support belief reached in other ways; they may move fence-sitters closer to Christian belief; they can function as defeater-defeaters; and they can reveal interesting and important connections'; Alvin Plantinga 'Rationality and public evidence: a reply to Richard Swinburne', *Religious Studies*, **37** (2001), 217.
45. *Idem* 'Christian philosophy at the end of the twentieth century', 339.
46. *Idem The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 213–221; *idem Warrant and Proper function* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), ch. 12; *idem Warranted Christian Belief*, 227–240. Plantinga's assessment of the ontological argument should be noted: 'the ontological argument provides as good grounds for the existence of God as does any serious philosophical argument for any important philosophical conclusion'; Alvin Plantinga 'Self-Profile', in J. Tomberlin and P. van Inwagen (eds) *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 71.
47. Plantinga delivered his lecture 'Two dozen (or so) theistic arguments' at the 33rd Annual Philosophy Conference at Wheaton College, October 23–25, 1986. Plantinga's lecture notes for this talk are available on the internet at: <http://philofreligion.homestead.com/files/Theisticarguments.html>.
48. Other Reformed epistemologists concur. See Kelly Clark 'Reformed epistemology apologetics', and *idem* 'A reformed epistemologist's closing remarks', in Cowan and Gundry *Five Views*, 273, 365–366, 372–373, and Alston *Perceiving God*, 270, 289.
49. Kelly Clark 'A reformed epistemologist's response', in Cowan and Gundry *Five Views*, 85.
50. I do not mean to suggest that Clark uses this argument to oppose positive apologetics as such, but he uses it to critique some approaches to positive apologetics. But one might suppose that the considerations Clark introduces at least entail a preference for negative over positive apologetics.
51. I wish to thank Dewey Hoitenga, Kelly Clark, David Matheson, Jill Maria Sudduth, and two anonymous referees for this journal for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.