

D.Phil. Thesis Abstract

Bi-Level Theistic Evidentialism: A Foundationalist Case for the Compatibility of Theistic Evidentialism and the Reformed Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga

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1. The Background

The epistemology of religious belief ratified during the Enlightenment, and which has dominated both philosophy of religion and Christian apologetics well into the 20th century, maintained that theistic belief is rational only if it based on or supported by evidence in the form of adequate reasons (where such reasons involve other epistemic states or rational beliefs of a person which are theologically neutral in nature). This tradition of **theistic evidentialism** has provided a philosophical basis for the project of natural theology in modern philosophy, and in the light of the Humean and Kantian critiques of the possibility of a natural knowledge of God evidentialism has led to a basic objection to theistic belief, namely that there is no evidence for such belief and consequently it is not epistemically justified.

During the last 20 years a new perspective on the rationality of religious belief has arisen and presented a fundamental challenge to Enlightenment evidentialism. Developing within the context of critiques of the epistemological assumptions of Cartesianism and the Enlightenment, and equally inspired by claims about the nature of religious knowledge in the Reformed theological tradition originating with John Calvin, the new movement has, *contra* evidentialism, developed the claim that theistic belief can be rational and constitute knowledge even if a person has nothing in the way of the appropriate propositional evidence required under the epistemology of evidentialism. More precisely, there are some people (at certain times and under the appropriate circumstances) for whom theistic belief is rational and constitutes knowledge even if it is not based on evidence in the form of adequate reasons which provide appropriate, adequate support for theistic belief. This anti-evidentialist alternative to evidentialism is called **Reformed epistemology**.

2. Thesis Statement

In the present thesis, I undertake a philosophical analysis of the central claims of these two positions in religious epistemology and develop a theory which establishes an important middle ground. More precisely, I argue that *there is an epistemically adequate form of theistic evidentialism which is compatible with the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga*. The aim is achieved by developing an epistemology which simultaneously accommodates (i) the internalist

intuitions which generated classical evidentialism, (ii) the necessity of natural theology, and (iii) the actuality of immediate theistic knowledge. Procedurally, operating within the framework of a modest version of epistemological foundationalism, I develop a set of evidentialist requirements for theistic belief which are compatible with the central claims of Plantinga's religious epistemology (and some of which are entailed by it). The major determinants of my epistemically adequate form of evidentialism are (1) the epistemic relevance of defeating conditions, (2) the distinction between reflective and unreflective rationality, and (3) cognitive malfunction.

3. *The Arguments*

A. Defeater Based Evidentialism

The twin pillars of Plantinga's epistemology are rationality as the proper functioning of one's cognitive system and warrant as the condition (enough of) which transforms true belief into knowledge. A belief will have warrant only if it is produced (or sustained) by a cognitive mechanism functioning properly in accordance with a design plan aimed at the production (or sustenance) of true belief, and the more firmly one believes a proposition the more warrant it will have for one. Moreover, the human cognitive design plan stipulates the conditions under which a cognitive system will - if functioning properly - undergo change in some sector in response to new experiences and beliefs. Call this a defeater system. The conditions which affect such noetic modification will be reasons for believing that, given some experience *e* or belief *b*, a belief *B** is likely to be false (rebutters) or reasons for supposing that the ground of *B** is inadequate (or a cognitive process unreliable) (undercutters). The change which results from the acquisition of such defeaters will either be the deletion of *B** from *S*'s noetic structure (complete defeat) or a person's holding *B** less firmly (partial defeat). Since warrant requires proper function, this includes the proper functioning of one's defeater system. One's belief (to degree *N*) will have warrant only if one does not have a defeater against that belief (to degree *N*). Call this the no defeater condition.

I argue that a particularly important evidentialist requirement follows deductively from the aforementioned features of Plantinga's epistemology. If we assume that some person *S* holds a basic (epistemically) warranted theistic belief at time *t*₁, *S*'s acquiring a defeater for this belief at *t*₂ entails that *S*'s *remaining* rational and (epistemically) warranted in holding theistic belief (at least to the degree *S* does) requires that *S* have an appropriate defeater-defeater - a defeater against the original defeater. Roughly, such defeater-defeaters will be reasons for supposing that there is a God (as in natural theology) or that the original defeater lacks the efficacy initially attributed to it (as in so called negative apologetics), and where typically such reasons do not supervene on *S*'s basic theistic belief. Moreover, I argue that *S*'s having such defeater-defeaters entail that *S*'s theistic belief is at least partly nonbasic, as it will be causally sustained by such reasons either in whole or in part.

First, given the acquisition of a defeater against basic theistic belief, the *rationality* of *S*'s

continuing to hold that belief (at least with the degree of firmness S did) depends on S's having defeater-defeater reasons. Moreover, the *warrant* of S's belief likewise depends on this, for if the appropriate modification does not occur in the relevant segment of S's noetic structure, S's cognitive system is not functioning properly. Third, whether one's theistic belief constitutes *knowledge* depends on the presence of a defeater-defeater. This is not only a corollary of its being necessary to warrant, but because a certain degree of warrant is necessary for knowledge and degree of belief affects degree of warrant. Where S acquires a partial defeater for his theistic belief, if S is functioning properly, S will hold the belief with a less degree of firmness than S did before acquiring the defeater. S will be rational and his belief warranted, but it may not possess enough warrant to transform true belief into knowledge. Here defeater-defeaters allow S rationally to hold theistic belief with a degree of firmness, and so degree of warrant, required for knowledge. Thus, the presence of defeating conditions to theistic belief provide circumstances in which the epistemic status of theistic belief crucially depends on the presence of propositional evidence. This is what I call defeater-based evidentialism.

B. Cognitive Malfunction.

The second major plank in my evidentialist case draws on the notion of cognitive malfunction which figures prominently in Plantinga's epistemological theory. One of the ways in which a belief fails to have warrant (and so fails to constitute knowledge) is by arising from cognitive faculties which are not in proper working order, which are subject to malfunction or dysfunction. On a Christian theistic metaphysics cognitive malfunction is the result (indirectly at any rate) of sin in the human personality. Within the Reformed theological tradition there has been much emphasis on what the older Princeton theologians of the 19th and early 20th century called the noetic effects of sin. The central cognitive module of immediate or basic theistic belief formation in Plantinga is the *sensus divinitatis*.

Another evidentialist requirement exploits the ways the *sensus divinitatis* may be thought to malfunction as a result of sin. Such an account will show that for some people, whose circumstances include the exemplification of any one of the several cognitive malfunctions to which the *sensus divinitatis* is subject, propositional evidence will be necessary (to varying degrees) if such people are to have epistemically warranted belief in God. A case for the existence of other theistic relevant cognitive modules which generate or sustain theistic beliefs is presented. Even though these mediate sources are subject to similar cognitive malfunction (as a result of sin) the justification of mediate warrant for some people rests on a principle of the variable instantiation of the noetic effects of sin, according to which different cognitive systems will be adversely affected by sin in different ways and to varying degrees. But unless we postulate mediate sources as well as immediate sources for theistic belief, it will be hard to account for the fact that despite the noetic effects of sin, there is genuine natural knowledge of God possessed by many people. The conclusion is somewhat unorthodox and may appear somewhat startling: if man is totally deprived propositional evidence for belief in God is necessary, for some people will not be able to form epistemically warranted belief in God (or even mere belief in God) unless they have reasons, such as those supplied by natural theology. Ultimately, Plantinga's design plan theory must account for the damage done to the human

cognitive system, and as I shall argue this requires a distinction between a pre-lapsarian and post-lapsarian design plan.

C. Reflective Rationality

A. and B. constitute what I call **modest evidentialism**. Drawing on the multi-level foundationalism of William Alston, a strengthened evidentialist requirement is developed on the basis of a distinction between first-order theistic beliefs and second-order beliefs in the rationality or justification of theistic belief(s). Even if a person's belief that *p* is immediately justified (and let us suppose *only* susceptible to an immediate justification), this does not rule out finding reasons for the higher-level belief that one is so justified. Moreover, I develop Alston's suggestion that the only mode of justification for such higher-level beliefs is mediate. This gives rise to *the strong higher-level evidentialist requirement*, and the satisfaction of such a requirement leads to what I call *reflective rationality* - a process of critical reflection on our doxastic states aimed at the forming of justified (or warranted) beliefs about the epistemic status of theistic belief.

The concept of reflective rationality serves provides a critical commentary on the classical evidentialist tradition and points to a new way of thinking about the function of natural theology.

Presupposing that individuals are typically critically reflective (or at least ought to be), and frequently assuming the Cartesian thesis about the mind's transparency to itself, the evidentialist tradition has failed to distinguish between unreflective rationality (having a rational belief that *p*) and reflective rationality (having a rational belief that one's belief is rational). Consequently, requirements for the latter have been made requirements for the former. Although there is no strong lower-level evidentialist requirement for theistic belief, I shall argue for the restricted necessity of reflective rationality for one's being justified in holding theistic belief(s) given some of the defeating conditions canvassed in the earlier chapters. This analysis further suggests that the evidentialist tradition has failed to distinguish between the conditions required for being appropriately related to the epistemic goal (of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs) and those for being a responsible seeker after such an epistemic state, especially in the presence of certain defeating conditions.

Secondly, although one may be reflectively rational about one's own theistic belief by rationally considering the adequacy of one's actual ground for believing it, one may also exhibit reflectively rationality about a particular theistic *proposition* (typically the proposition that God exists) by rationally considering the adequacy of the evidence for that proposition (and so what would constitute an adequate ground for theistic belief is one were to hold it on that basis). The basic distinction here falls on differentiating between the kind of evidence *e* which provides evidential support for *p* and the kind of (logical) evidence *e** which provides support for judgements about the force, weight, or adequacy of *e* for *p*, as well as the kind and degree of investigation and critical assessment which goes into arriving at such judgements. The distinction is developed with discussion of the relevant categories of epistemic and subjective probability. My conclusion is that since propositional evidence is necessary for reflective rationality, the resources of natural theology become crucial for satisfying such an epistemic

desideratum, thereby contributing toward a Reformed conception of *fides quaerens intellectum*.

4. Concluding Comments

The conjunction of *modest evidentialism* with respect to theistic beliefs at the lower level and *strong higher-level evidentialism* constitutes an epistemically adequate version of evidentialism which is compatible with Plantinga's religious epistemology - what I will call **Bi-Level Evidentialism**. The argued thesis establishes that even if theistic belief is proper basic for some people under the appropriate circumstances so that reasons are not necessary for them, the presence of defeating conditions entails a wide range of circumstances in which propositional evidence, and the evidence of natural theology in particular, is necessary for some people to form or retain epistemically warranted theistic beliefs. There is a doctrine of the proper nonbasicality of theistic belief. Lastly, and of broader philosophical appeal, the theory suggests the ways in which externalist theories of justification (or warrant) and knowledge are compatible with various internalist constraints on the conditions under which some beliefs are justified or constitute knowledge.