

A Warranted Interpretation of Plantinga

Dan Stiver

Alvin Plantinga's Gifford Lectures represent a striking new direction in epistemology that will almost certainly be at the center of discussion for some time to come.¹ He has recently followed the two volumes on warrant with a third volume applying his ideas to Christian faith in a volume entitled *Warranted Christian Belief*.² Unsurprisingly, he maintains that Christian belief can be regarded as warranted. More remarkably, however, after considering problems for Christianity such as pluralism, Marxist and Freudian projectionist challenges, and the problem of evil, he cannot find even strong arguments against it. His vigorous defense leaves the impression that it is a wonder that anyone ever has raised an objection against Christian belief in the first place. From a lesser thinker, one might easily dismiss such a claim as not serious, but Plantinga's obvious erudition and philosophical brilliance render his self-confidence more troubling and provocative, if not convincing. The initial impression is either to be completely convinced or to be left with a haunting unease, much as in first encounter with the ontological argument for God's existence where one is not persuaded but cannot quite figure out where the problem is.

In this paper, accordingly, I wish to probe where "the problem is" for Plantinga's proposal. I plan to do so largely on his own terms. One can of course reject his fundamental foundationalist epistemology of proper basicity which is the lynchpin to his defense of religion. In this sense, religious beliefs are largely matters of finding oneself having a belief occasioned by certain circumstances, much like perceptual and memory beliefs.³ In other words, I see a beautiful sunset and find myself giving thanks to God. Perhaps more directly, after hearing the story of Jesus Christ, I believe. This is not a matter of argument or inference; it is, like perception, upon being exposed to certain conditions having certain responses. One could reject this whole approach and affirm evidentialism, particularly that religious faith is evidential, based on arguments. Because I am convinced, however, that Plantinga is on the right track in rejecting evidentialism and classical foundationalism, I am going to grant much of what he says. What I am interested in is seeing whether his approach works on his own terms. Is the unease coming, therefore, only from outside or also from the inside? I will argue that even from inside his framework, a basic incoherence accounts for the feeling that for all of its flair, Plantinga's proposal floats over the realities of our situation and never quite touches down.

I will first briefly describe his account of Christian faith. then try to locate

the problem. I will then consider whether the problem is a fatal flaw or whether it can be remedied. To anticipate, I suggest that an appropriation of a more hermeneutical approach would be helpful which is ironic given Plantinga's distaste for any kind of strongly perspectival approach in epistemology.

Plantinga's Account

Plantinga begins with the familiar set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, namely, that p , that we believe p , and that p is justified. He modifies only the latter, suggesting that warrant is the preferable concept because it moves away from the corollary mistakes of internalism, evidentialism, and classical foundationalism. Warrant, therefore, is that which when added to a true belief makes it knowledge.

Plantinga acknowledges, and in fact emphasizes, that warrant is a subtle and many-faceted thing. It admits of degrees and is hard to pin down with specificity in many cases. Drawing from the common-sense realism of Thomas Reid (christening his new species of foundationalism "Reidian foundationalism"), he often implies that warrant is one of those things that is much easier to recognize than to explain.⁴ One of Plantinga's strengths is such recognition of complexity in epistemology.

A further strength is that he recognizes the limitations of evidentialism and justification in epistemology. As already mentioned, many cases of knowledge and even warrant are not cases of argument or inference. I don't remember what I ate this morning through a process of inference: I'm not hungry; I have memories of being at Denny's; I usually order their breakfast special; therefore, it is probable that I ate eggs and bacon this morning. Rather, it is an issue of "properly basic" beliefs. I remember what I ate, and apart from some kind of counter-indication, I am warranted in simply accepting that belief. Of course, Plantinga develops a much larger framework, appealing to "proper functionality." I am warranted when my faculties are functioning properly in an appropriate environment and aimed at truth. In the third volume, he additionally distinguishes between maxi- and mini-environments, arguing that one's faculties need to be in accord not only with a maxi-environment but also with the closer mini-environment.⁵

With respect to Christian belief, he draws on his earlier neo-Reformed reflections and argues for Calvin's *sensus divinitatus*, that is, a religious faculty yielding Christian beliefs. When repaired by God due to its damage in the Fall, our religious sense, instigated by the Holy Spirit, yields warranted Christian beliefs.⁶

Plantinga is at his best, as are most of us, when on the defense. He shows that it is difficult indeed to refute or even to render implausible nuanced religious claims. Similarly, however, it would be difficult to render implausible

naturalistic claims. Plantinga argues throughout his third volume that he is concerned to show that Christian belief cannot be shown to be irrational or unwarranted. Especially if one grants his definition of warrant, it is difficult to deny his success. When he considers alternative explanations such as Freudian projectionist theories or naturalistic explanations, he first of all can deny that Christian belief is an argument or explanation. Thus it does not fail, as usually charged, as an argument or explanation, even if it might be considered a weak or unconvincing one. Rather, the issue concerns proper function. Plantinga shows that any argument against Christian belief has to contend against proper function. He then points out that if Christian belief is true, there is good reason to think that the Christian's faculties would be functioning properly if they yield Christian belief. So any argument against such belief must involve the question whether or not Christian belief is true or not. And that is extraordinarily difficult to prove one way or another. What Plantinga maintains is that Christian belief *could* be warranted, depending on the truth of the Christian claims. But that is a question, like other disputed claims, that is not easily resolved. Thus, no one can say that Christian belief is definitely *unwarranted*. Christian belief does not automatically imply improper function, inappropriate environments, or aims contrary to truth. In fact, Christians claim that from their perspective, it is the atheologian whose faculties are functioning improperly—and therein lies the rub.⁷ Does Plantinga describe the Christian believer in such a privileged way that it undermines the Christian's epistemic status?

Plantinga's Problem

It is one thing, of course, to place the burden of proof on someone else; they are the ones therefore who must show that you are wrong. Sometimes they can, and Plantinga's achievement is not minimized by saying that he has shown that those who have the burden of proof have in fact failed. It is another thing, however, to make a plausible case for yourself. In the case of religious pluralism, which will be my focus, I think that Plantinga actually weakens his position unnecessarily by the way he structures the Christian view. Moreover, I think he makes his view fundamentally incoherent.

It is not easy to see this at first glance, for Plantinga ostensibly addresses the issue of religious pluralism at some length.⁸ He rather easily rebuts the general charge that differences in views undermine Christian claims. He points out that in many cases we accept and are not surprised by different views, for example, in metaphysics or set theory or in morality, without saying that we are thereby necessarily unwarranted in holding these views.⁹ He treats similarly without difficulty the imputation that Christians are unwarranted in holding their views.

others disagree. In general, we do not always say that someone is arrogant in making truth claims just because others differ. They may have good warrant for their views, and Christians claim to have good warrant for theirs.¹⁰ Plantinga somewhat gleefully and, as I say, easily, refutes these charges—too easily. This is one of those places where one feels convinced by the arguments at hand but is left uneasy that somewhere something has gone wrong. But it is not easy to put one's finger on the precise problem area.

Here is my attempt to locate the source of unease. In the case of religious pluralism as Plantinga poses it, the Christian seems to be analogous to someone being in a room and claiming that the walls are red, while non-Christians are outside of the room and also claim to know its color but disagree. The one in the room directly perceives; those outside can only infer. The only exceptions are a few in the room whose faculties are impaired or are not really interested in the truth of the question but in something else, say, disconcerting the one who sees that it is red. The example is based on Plantinga's close association of religious beliefs with perceptual and memory beliefs.¹¹ Obviously, in this case the Christian is in a superior epistemic position.

The actual situation appears to be quite different. It is more closely analogous to a number of people being in the same room, whose faculties are functioning properly, who are aimed at truth, and who disagree on the color of the walls. Normally, if a person looks at the wall and describes the color, we would say that he or she is warranted. We could agree with Plantinga that they are not arguing for their view or basing it on evidence. It is just that when confronted with those circumstances, people find themselves with a belief about the color. It is also true, however, that if there were this kind of divergence with respect to the color of the walls, the divergence would count as a defeater for the original perception, one with a great deal of weight, that would indicate that something else is impeding the accurate function of the faculties.

Having read Plantinga, one might quickly say that there is an easy answer to the second example, which in a way points back to the first analogy. In some cases, the Fall has so disrupted the *sensus divinitatus* and the willingness to seek the truth that people do not "see" correctly. In that sense, one might argue that they are not all in the same room in actual fact. Only believers whom the Holy Spirit has repaired and inspired have properly functioning faculties. This is actually what Plantinga says.¹² This response, however, will not work—on Plantinga's own grounds.

First, Plantinga argues, unlike his Reformed forebears, that humans have free will that causes them to have to cooperate or respond to the initiative of divine grace. One might then say that only Christians are in a position to recognize religious truths because only they have cooperated. Plantinga even sometimes

recognizes that one has to be in the right mini-environment or meet certain conditions. This might be like a doctor going through a great deal of training before being able to make a difficult diagnosis. If Plantinga had a view like George Lindbeck's, where the grammar of faith determines the configuration of faith, this might work. But he does not. Plantinga is much more of a realist than that. Moreover, he indicates that it is God who takes the initiative and God who enables belief much more than we do. He also notes a broad range of experiences that allow the *sensus divinitatus* to register Christian belief, from experiences of nature to particular encounters with the Bible or hearing Christian preaching. A Lindbeckian might say that one has to be formed into the Christian form of life before one can respond with specific Christian beliefs. Plantinga does not give those limitations. It is simply a question whether one freely responds to God or not.¹³ And if God is taking initiative towards people who do not respond correctly, who are nevertheless of good will, it is difficult to explain why their faculties do not deliver. And of course, we know that many people in other religions are exposed to the Bible and Christian preaching but do not arrive at Christian beliefs. In accordance with our analogy, they are in the same room but somehow do not see the same thing, which does not make sense according to Plantinga's model.

Plantinga might say that they are not sincere seekers of truth and are ravaged by sin, but this is difficult to maintain of all of these others whose spiritual life and sincerity puts many Christians to shame. In other words, it does not seem to be a question of sincerity in all cases although it might be in some. For example, Plantinga states in his earlier *Warrant and Proper Function*:

There are also those areas of cognitive endeavor marked by enormous disagreement, wildly varying opinion: philosophy and Scripture scholarship come to mind. Here the sheer volume of disagreement and the great variety and contrariety of options proposed suggest that either not all of us are such that our cognitive faculties *do* function according to the design plan, in these areas, or that it is not the case that the relevant modules of the design plan are aimed at truth, or that the design plan for those areas is defective.¹⁴

This seems to represent genuine arrogance, not spurious arrogance, for this suggests that Christians perceive truly while others are malfunctioning or misguided. Plantinga consistently indicates that when people do not respond in a Christian way, their faculties are functioning improperly, usually due to sinfulness. In Plantinga's argument against the view that differences undermine warrant, he gives examples that suggest that all parties might have warrant, for instance, in arguments about set theory. In the case of religious belief, to the contrary, he has to maintain that the difference in every case is due to ill will or to defects in

reasoning. Again, given the impressiveness of people like Gandhi, this is hard to pull off and its far-fetchedness counts against Plantinga's view. In this case, the burden of proof would seem to be on Plantinga to show the likelihood of this ill intent, not that this might be the case for some, but could it be the case for all?

Because of the audacity of Plantinga's claim, he owes something of an explanation. Otherwise, he is in the position of evangelicals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who also relied on Thomas Reid's Common Sense Realism, and, as detailed by George Marsden, who had no account for why other Christians differed from them. Marsden referred to one case where a college president could only conclude that too much smoking and long vacations were the cause of theological professors' aberrant opinions!¹⁵ Marsden argues persuasively that they were forced into this dilemma because their emphasis on the clarity of Scripture allowed no room for such divergence other than reference to perversity. The far-fetchedness of their explanation counted against their belief. I would argue that Plantinga has left himself the same dilemma, just in a more complex way. Ironically, Marsden makes a similar point in an essay in the landmark text introducing Plantinga's neo-Reformed epistemology, *Faith and Rationality*, edited by Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Marsden indicates that what he terms "the collapse of American evangelical academia," in responding to the issue of evolution as compared to their counterparts in the Netherlands such as Abraham Kuyper, had to do with the former's inability to deal with the way our thought is an organic whole and is shaped by our assumptions.¹⁶ Drawing on Kuyper, Marsden points out that sin, on the one hand, and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, on the other, can influence people to draw different conclusions. So far, he is with Plantinga against the American evangelicals who were influenced by Thomas Reid's common sense realism to go in a very different direction than Plantinga toward an evidentialism based on the perspicuity of facts to any mind, downplaying other influences. What Marsden adds to Plantinga is an awareness that other background assumptions can influence our judgments. For example, he says that sin but also "commitments to other religions" may blind us to Christian insights.¹⁷ What Plantinga's epistemology lacks is precisely such allowance for presuppositions to shape our judgments without necessarily being a matter of sin or ill will.

There might be another out, however, for Plantinga. He is almost forced to suggest that God's intentions are the difference. That is the only factor left that could account for the divergence. In general, Plantinga puts much weight on God being the one who makes it possible to affirm Christian beliefs.¹⁸ Since God is the one who enables one to see, and the person desires to see, and are in the circumstances to see, often seemingly in the same circumstances that Christian

aids some to see and does not aid others. In theology, obviously, this is a historical explanation for differences and is recognized as the Augustinian single predestination view or the Calvinist double predestination view. The problem is that Plantinga is not a good Calvinist! He puts too much emphasis on free will and emphasizes too much the nature of God as being loving and impartial toward all. There is nothing in his thought that would suggest that such partiality on God's part could be compatible with God's loving and just nature.

His problem is worsened when we see that he thinks the deliverances of grace and the divine sense are rather specific. Christians when exposed to these religious-inducing circumstances do not just arrive at vague beliefs but beliefs about God's overwhelming goodness and love towards all people, Jesus Christ being divine, dying for our sins, and their own resurrection.¹⁹ For instance, Plantinga says:

Faith is ... a firm and certain knowledge of God's plan whereby we fallen humans can attain shalom, flourishing, well-being, happiness, felicity, salvation, all of which are essentially a matter of being rightly related to God. So the propositional object of faith is the whole magnificent scheme of salvation God has arranged. To have faith is to know that and how God has made it possible for us human beings to escape the ravages of sin and be restored to a right relationship with him; it is therefore a knowledge of the main lines of the Christian gospel. The content of faith is just the central teachings of the gospel; it is contained in the intersection of the great Christian creeds.²⁰

This of course is no minimalist content. For our purposes here, the point to note is the assumed benevolence of God towards all people, not just some people. In other words, if God is partial, the beliefs that God induces, that God loves all, would be contrary to the divine action, in which God selects only some for divine favor, that make them possible. It would be odd if God caused someone to have false beliefs about God, including that God is so good as not to do such a thing!

Plantinga presumes a great deal of commonality in these Christian beliefs. It is true that much of Christendom historically has held these beliefs. He moreover acknowledges that just the "great facts" of the Gospel are involved, not *theories* of the atonement, or Trinity, or Christology.²¹ Ironically, however, many Calvinists, as well as Augustinians, Thomists, Lutherans, and Baptists have not agreed on Plantinga's great truths. They have not been convinced that God is impartially loving all and desiring everyone's salvation. In other words, Plantinga does not account for the great differences in Christianity itself between believers apparently confronted with the same situation. When he treats the issue of differences among Christians, he suggests that the problem is lack of clarity in Scripture, but here

we are talking about “the great things of the Gospel,” about which he claims there is not such opacity. Here he cannot so easily appeal to ill will or impaired faculties because the Holy Spirit has already “restored” proper function. This is akin to believers themselves being in the same room and not seeing anything close to the same thing. This is not to mention those many sincere non-Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, native Americans, Buddhists, and so on, who are well-acquainted with Christian views and the Bible, have heard preaching, and somehow arrive at very different beliefs.

If Plantinga cannot appeal to God as choosing some but not others, which is contrary to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatus*, to what can he appeal? Here is where one finds resounding silence. He evades the issue by dealing with issues of disagreement in general because this is not a case of general disagreement; it is quite specific. What he has done is change the nature of the argument in mid-stream. To respond to the problem of pluralism, he easily shows, in a general way, that in many fields different views do not undermine the integrity of the field. The problem arises, though, not from the general phenomenon of pluralism but from his very specific account of warranted Christian belief that mitigates against such pluralism. In other words, he does not show how his approach to warrant could allow for such divergence even though we know such divergence occurs. In this sense, his own argument for the possibility of difference not counting against warrant undermines his own account of proper function because it makes no room for it. Again, it is like being in the same room and not seeing the same thing, a phenomenon that would undermine the veracity of the claims to perceive rightly apart from some broader explanation. Here is the source of unease. Plantinga does not really treat this issue. The exceptions that he treats do not address the particular mini-environment. Even when he appeals to external conditions such as seeing a sunset or hearing Scripture, these conditions are so general that they are met by many in other religions. His account thus does not deal with the actual potential defeater that arises from the reality of religious pluralism. Plantinga’s serious problem is that, on his own account, even assuming the truth of basic Christian belief, his view leads to obvious inadequacy to experience and incoherence in his view of God.

A Hermeneutical Alternative

Is it possible to repair this problem, not the *sensus divinitatus*, but Plantinga’s account of it? Do Christians have to bite the bullet and bravely maintain that everyone but Christians are deprived or depraved or that God only cares about Christians, views that many if not most Christians would regard as unchristian and contrary to the deliverances of their repaired *sensus divinitatus*? Or is there

a way to regard Plantinga as basically on track, or perhaps better, to put him back on track?

This is ironically the place where a more hermeneutical approach might be of some help. I say ironically because Plantinga generally eschews the perspectivalism of hermeneutical approaches, identifying it with views that he deems to give up on truth and even warrant altogether, such as Rorty’s neo-pragmatism or French deconstruction. In fact, the one major philosophical movement of the twentieth century that he seems to neglect altogether is the hermeneutical philosophy centered around the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.²² This is unfortunate, I will argue, because this is an approach that can help make his approach coherent.

What Plantinga needs is a view that both supports an aim at truth while recognizing the obviously different perspectives that groups will have on certain issues. Admittedly, this is not easy to find, but one of the few likely candidates is hermeneutical philosophy. Interestingly, it has the same strained relationship to postmodernism as Plantinga. Plantinga acknowledges that he is postmodern in that he rejects classical foundationalism, evidentialism, internalism, and atomism, and also is concerned to uncover injustice. Beyond that, however, he rejects postmodernism where he sees it as abandoning truth and reference.²³ The same could be said for Gadamer and Ricoeur. Despite the fact that Plantinga eschews any mention of such thinkers, they appear to be his closest bedfellows.

Plantinga’s problem at this point, which he does not engage, is not his epistemological criteria so much as the evaluation of them. Granting, his epistemological conditions, I would agree with his externalism as well, which points away from an individualistic approach to a more social approach. Still, he cannot avoid the fact that different communities will adjudge these criteria differently and that one cannot escape the context of community and tradition. What is evident to one group is suspect to another. Plantinga’s recourse in the matter of religious belief is to suggest that only one community is accessing reality due to being the only ones with properly functioning faculties, with all of the attendant problems of such a social fideism.

The fact that communities are necessarily involved in judgment does not mean that universal truth claims are ruled out. Communities typically propound their beliefs with the conviction that everyone else should see it their way. And they can offer grounds, such as meeting Plantinga’s criteria, for holding their views with such confidence. Hermeneutical approaches do not necessarily rule out what Michael Polanyi called “universal intent.”²⁴ What they would say is that every such belief is situated within a tradition and a community and cannot be understood or evaluated apart from some “fusing of horizons” with such a community. Ricoeur and Gadamer would be examples of such an approach.

