

REFLECTIONS ON REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

by

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"Reformed Epistemology" is the title often given to an influential body of apologetic arguments that have been offered in recent years by a group of Protestant Christian philosophers: in particular by William Alston, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. The title comes from the fact that these arguments have been said to represent the same judgments of the relationship between faith and reason that are found in the Sixteenth Century Reformers, particularly John Calvin. While I incline to think this rather domesticates Calvin for the philosophical community, I am not interested in arguing this historical point. I have my own preferred name for this set of arguments: I call them the Basic Belief Apologetic, for reasons that will be obvious when we get into the detail. I want to suggest two things in this paper. First: the Apologetic is a sound one. Second: it is far less important than it is commonly thought to be, and in fact accentuates a problem to which its practitioners seem to think it is a solution.

If we look at the condition of contemporary philosophy of religion, we find that there is quite a lot of continuing activity in traditional natural theology. The best-known example of a contemporary natural theologian is Richard Swinburne. But I think it is fair to say that the continued activity in natural theology has been upstaged by the Apologetic that I wish to discuss this morning. For if that apologetic is sound, one of the primary motives for doing natural theology is a mistaken one.

One can believe this without believing that natural theology is impossible. Indeed, Plantinga, for example, has practiced it quite often. He has revived the Ontological Proof, for instance; and his latest book, *Warrant and Proper Function*, concludes with two chapters that are obvious examples of original natural theology (with an epistemic base). If the Basic Belief Apologetic is sound, however, doing natural theology is religiously questionable, or at best unnecessary. For it has, the argument goes, been undertaken for reasons that can only seem compelling to thinkers who have been entrapped by assumptions that have dominated western philosophy since Descartes and Locke the assumptions of what the Reformed Epistemologists refer to as 'Uclassical,' or "Enlightenment" Foundationalism.

There is some unclarity, or perhaps some historical disagreement, among Reformed Epistemologists, about how far back one has to go to find the origins of the assumptions they are attacking. Plantinga writes occasionally as though foundationalism is a philosophical stance that we find in Aquinas and in Plato. But for the most part the assumptions are traced to the early modern period, and in particular to Descartes and to Locke. The historical point is not solely of antiquarian interest, since it is self-evident that the enterprise of natural theology is one that predates Descartes and Locke, neither of whom were very good at it. I shall use the phrase "Enlightenment Foundationalism" to refer to the tradition and assumptions of Descartes and Locke and those who followed them and derived their attitudes toward faith and reason from them.

What, then, is Enlightenment Foundationalism, and what are its attitudes toward faith and reason? Here follows, with apologies, a little potted history.

It all starts with Descartes, who says himself that he is seeking to lay foundations on which he will build a firm and lasting structure in the sciences. *In the sciences*. The foundations he lays are being laid so that the sciences should be free of two quite different hazards. The first, which Descartes talks about quite a lot, is the challenge of Pyrrhonian scepticism. This was enjoying a fashionable revival because of the rediscovery of the works of Sextus Empiricus. Popkin has made it very clear that scepticism is not something Descartes invented in the First Meditation, which I was taught, but something he found around him and tried to answer; he answered it by carrying some of its arguments further than they had been carried by Sextus and his followers, and then refuting them. As a result of this, he bequeathed modern philosophy a completely different understanding of what a sceptic is, which is not much like the one that existed before. For one thing, the old type of sceptic actually existed; Descartes' sceptic was merely an invented personage that it became the duty of every redblooded epistemologist to refute.

I cannot develop this here. But Descartes bequeathed the following picture of the problem the sceptic is supposed to pose. The sceptic is not, in the first place, devoid of knowledge; he has lots of it. But all the knowledge he is sure he has is knowledge of the state of his own ideas; this, however, he does have. As Hume put it later, consciousness never deceives. So the sceptic is equipped, in Descartes' view, with a bedrock foundation of knowledge, of his own mental states. The problem is the problem of moving out from this knowledge to knowledge of the "outer" or "external" world, whose very existence is problematic. So the problem Descartes sets himself to answer is that of overcoming what is sometimes called the Egocentric Predicament.

There is only one way out, if there is any. That is the discovery within the mind of some idea or ideas that can guarantee they represent a reality outside it. Notoriously Descartes tries to provide this escape route by developing the doctrine of clear and distinct ideas whose veracity is guaranteed by the proof of God's existence; the so-called Cartesian circle results from the fact that the proof of God's existence relies on the very intellectual processes that God's existence has to underwrite. This is not our concern now, however; what is relevant now is that the so-called foundationalism of modern epistemology derives from the manner in which Descartes seeks to refute scepticism, and has two key components: (1) the belief that the certainty of all real knowledge depends on the derivation of the propositions we claim to know from propositions of a privileged class that are beyond doubt; (2) the belief that the propositions in this privileged class are in it because they are uniquely accessible to -- indeed are *within* -- the subject's consciousness: such as self-evident truths (for Descartes and his rationalist successors) or sensory experiences (for Locke and *Rfs* successors in the empiricist tradition).

But Descartes was not only seeking to fend off Pyrrhonian scepticism. His hidden agenda also included he wish to create an accommodation between science and the church authorities who had shot themselves in the foot by condemning Galileo. He needed a sound theoretical base for a guarantee of *non-interference*. Galileo had been condemned by an apparently tolerant clerical hierarchy because he had been unwilling to accept the supposedly conciliatory suggestion that his astronomical claims were mere convenient devices for predicting celestial phenomena. Descartes wanted science to have the unquestionable underpinning that shows it tells us how the world outside really *fs*. The foundationalist programme is one that shows science to be the source of truth. Of course a price has to be paid: science is only the source of truth about material things. But it is that. If one is prepared to pay that price, then one has a theoretical basis for saying that all theological comment on science is henceforth inappropriate.

If this historical estimate of what Descartes was about is right, it explains the subsequent development of a cultural situation to which the Basic Belief Apologetic is a contemporary response. What Descartes has done is create a philosophical situation in which the purpose of epistemology and indeed metaphysics has not been the integration of secular knowledge and religious faith, as it was in Aquinas, but their separation. The understanding of what knowledge is is one that seeks to guarantee the autonomy of science, and naturally invites one to doubt whether there can be theological knowledge at all.

But this implication took time to be recognised, ironically because there was so much natural theology, and because its most popular form, the Design Argument, was supposedly a scientific proof. But it was eventually recognised, for two reasons: (1) the rise of deism brought about a split between philosophical proofs of God and the appeal to revelation, so that it was no longer obvious that if you proved God exists you might expect him to have revealed himself in history; (2) Hume and Kant showed, or were thought to have shown, that the proofs, especially the Design Argument, were failures. By the time they had shown this (or were thought to have shown this) the Cartesian foundationalist programme had so determined the culture of philosophy that success in natural theology was assumed, almost on all sides, to be a prerequisite for the existence of any theological knowledge whatever. Foundationalism had spawned what Reformed epistemologists now call *~evidentialism*."

This (if I understand correctly) is the contention that for belief in God to be reasonable belief, it has to be shown to be at least likely on the basis of reasons that can themselves be known to be true on the foundationalist model. That is, it has to be supported by evidence that is not itself theological in character.

Knowledge of God must be mediate or inferred knowledge, as it is in classical natural theology. The Basic Belief Apologetic, to which I now return, is a protest against this assumption.

The protest begins with a self-referential argument that Plantinga has stated several times. Why should we assume that no belief is rational if it is not either self-evident, or an incorrigible deliverance of consciousness, or inferred from some other belief that is in one of these two classes? The thesis that only beliefs that conform to this requirement are rational ones can not itself be stated without violating this principle, since it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible, nor deducible from a proposition that is. "It is no more than a bit of intellectual imperialism on the part of the foundationalist." But if we resist it we will see that belief in God may well be rational even if it is not inferred from beliefs that conform to the foundationalist programme. It might be ~ properly basic." Those who believe in God this way have not been shown by the foundationalist to have violated any epistemic or doxastic obligations in doing so.

This is the negative thrust of the Basic Belief Apologetic; and I think there is no point whatever in fighting it. But it leaves a deep uneasiness behind it, as all self-referential refutations do. For they never address the motives behind the adoption of the incautious principles they refute. Plantinga, Alston and Wolterstorff are aware of this unease, and try to address it. It comes, of course from the fact that if we put aside any requirement for independent justification for religious belief, we seem to open the way to anybody's dogmatic assertions, to a potential chaos of clashing convictions in which one enthusiast's leap into absurdity is as good as anyone else's, and (as Locke put it) ~there is nothing but the strength of our persuasions whereby to judge of our persuasions."

To head this off, Reformed epistemologists have developed a positive line of argument which I also think is sound and will not contest. I continue for the moment with Plantinga's version of it. Although a believer may hold his or her belief in God without inferring it from other beliefs (that is, may hold it as basic), this does not make it *groundless*. For it may be occasioned (or as he expresses this, "called forth") by religious experience. Such experience will not be something from the **report of which the believer then infers** some belief about God, but will be that which, nevertheless grounds his or her conviction. He proceeds to draw an analogy between belief in God and other, secular, beliefs that are also held as basic but have analogous occasions, and which we have no temptation (unless we are epistemological sceptics) to dismiss as groundless or arbitrary. (Obvious examples are sensory beliefs or inductive beliefs or beliefs about other minds.) This analogy between religious and secular beliefs is prominent in the trilogy of which he has so far published the first two volumes, and is central to the similar argument for the rationality of Christian belief developed by Alston in *Perceiving God*, which I think is the finest document of Reformed Epistemology to date.

This apologetic argument is one with an ancestry. It is used by fideistic thinkers such as Pascal and Kierkegaard, in a form that I have discussed elsewhere and have called the Parity Argument. In its fideistic form it owes a good deal to classical (or pre-Cartesian) scepticism: Pascal and Kierkegaard maintain (as I read them) that in daily life we can and must follow beliefs that reason has no chance of justifying, and that if we are prepared to do this in accepting the deliverances of senseperception, for example, there is no good reason for hesitating to accept the truths of revelation. They are indeed outside the scope of human reason, but so are the convictions of everyday life. When heard from the pulpit, this argument is sometimes put by saying that we need faith to believe that the sun will come up tomorrow as much as we do to believe that Jesus was the Son of God.

The **Reformed epistemologists** are not maintaining this, or claim that they are not. Plantinga in particular rejects the title of fideist. In seeing why he rejects this title we can see more clearly what sort of epistemological position the basic Belief Apologetic implies. It does not try to place faith outside the realm of reason, but to make us face up to the fact, or supposed fact, that post-Cartesian foundationalism has misdescribed what reason requires. Reason does not require us to construe all well-founded belief as belief that is derived from the startingpoints that foundationalism approves. Here Reformed epistemology has found a hero: Thomas Reid. As Alston and Plantinga and (especially) Wolterstorff read him, Reid saw that we are constituted so as to form beliefs about the world as the result of a wide range of quite distinct and autonomous kinds of occasion -- for example, through memoryexperiences, through the hearing of testimony, through perception, through inductive repetition, and the like; and it is mere epistemic

chauvinism (to use Alston's phrase) to insist that all rational belief-formation must follow one or two patterns. Here, of course, what Reid says, or is read as saying, is very like what we have heard in our own day from Moore and from the Wittgenstein of *On Certainty*. On this view, the rational being is not someone who follows the Procrustean path of attempting to force all belief-formation into one pattern, but someone whose beliefs are determined by the doxastic practices that are built into our natures. The consequence of this (which, historically, it does not seem that Reid himself drew) is that religious beliefs too are formed by rational beings as the result of the kinds of religious experiences of God's actions and God's presence to which Christians down the centuries have pointed. The basic beliefs of the Christian are not a challenge or an offense to reason, but one more manifestation of reasonableness.

On the whole I accept this thesis, though I will note that there is one interesting difference here between Alston and Plantinga. Alston's book argues that what he calls Christian Mystical Practice, or CMP, is a wholly rational mode of belief-formation, and that in all relevant respects (not all respects whatever) it resembles our habitual doxastic practice of forming and sustaining beliefs about the physical world through sensory experience. In arguing this he unsurprisingly stresses the distinctive phenomenology of Christian mystical experience, which he says can be rendered as experience of God appearing to us. He concedes, indeed he emphasises, that when philosophers have attempted, in the Cartesian tradition, to provide external justification of our reliance on sense perception, their arguments have always been circular, but he maintains that this does not show reliance on sense-perception is irrational, since this reliance is a socially established doxastic practice that offers rewards that at least meet the standards of practical rationality. If this is true, philosophers who have denied the same to be true for Christian Mystical Practice have been guilty of applying a double standard.

In the first two books of his ongoing trilogy, Plantinga, following the arguments in his earlier essays, has emphasised a much wider set of analogies between Christian beliefs about God and secular beliefs. On the one hand, he has offered as examples of properly basic beliefs about God, beliefs such as a Christian's conviction that God is wrathful at his wrongdoing, or her conviction as she repents that God has forgiven her sins; and it is striking that these may well not have any distinctively religious phenomenology about them. And on the other hand, in *Warrant and Proper Function*, he follows Reid in listing a large number of rational doxastic practices, of which only some, such as sense-perception and memory, could be said by anyone to have a distinctive phenomenology.

It is too early to say how far this difference represents a different apologetic argument-form. But if there is no primacy to be given to the forms of religious experience that have a distinctive phenomenology, it seems that many of the occasions of the formation of basic religious beliefs have nothing distinctive about them to the believer but the fact that on these occasions believers come to have the convictions whose rationality is being defended.

Those familiar with Plantinga's two recent volumes will of course want to emphasise that I have left out what he makes central there, namely the concept of warrant. I will conclude my very inadequate exposition of what he says by commenting on this. He distinguishes now between two aspects of the rationality of beliefs, namely justification and warrant. A belief is justified if those who have it have come by it in ways that fulfil their doxastic obligations: if they have not neglected to look or listen or read, and have not been bigoted or biased. But we can fulfil all such obligations and still not have warrant for what we believe. Warrant is that "elusive quality or quantity enough of which, together with truth and belief, is sufficient for knowledge." A believer has warrant for a true belief if the belief, in addition to being true, is the product of some cognitive faculty or mechanism that is functioning as it should in its proper environment, and is a mechanism that is aimed at truth. Briefly and informally, Plantinga accepts from "reliabilist" theories of knowledge that we may well know things without having privileged access to the nature of the processes that yield our knowledge; what counts is that we have reliable faculties (such as senses or memory) that are functioning in a way that is up to standard; and they have to be faculties whose aim is truth. Some belief-generating mechanisms are not aimed at truth but at survival or comfort: an example is the unwarranted but often beneficial conviction of patients with life-threatening diseases that they are certain to recover.

If this complex of conditions is satisfied, in Plantinga's view, a true belief is warranted. The key to the argument is the claim that there are many belief-generating mechanisms that yield warrant, in addition to those approved by classical foundationalism.

I begin my responses to this Apologetic by returning again, briefly, to the apparent lack of unanimity about the importance of a distinctive religious phenomenology. If we see the task of the apologist as that of bridging the divide between believers and doubters who already share a large number of secular common sense convictions, the presence or absence of a distinctive religious phenomenology can be very important. For that phenomenology can be used to reinforce the analogy between the religious practice where it is central, and the secular doxastic practices where there is a distinctive phenomenology also, such as sense perception. If doubters do not have the relevant religious experiences, not only is that their loss, but they incur the special duty of explaining away their occurrence in the life of believers -- a duty which generates, thus far (one thinks of Freud, for example) some rather strained and fanciful theorising. But if religious experience does not include a distinctive phenomenology, and the apologetic that centres on it offers us merely a doxastic machinery that generates convictions, then doubters can simply say that the religious doxastic machinery is absent (or does not work) for them. In saying this they are doing nothing that is inconsistent with their prior acceptance of secular common sense convictions. Plantinga is right that this does not impugn the believer's doxastic practices; but it is equally true that there is nothing in the doubter's refusal to endorse them that represents a violation of the *doubter's* doxastic obligations either.

I will try to put this point in terms of Plantinga's later language of warrant. He explains what warrant is in a way that implies that only true beliefs can have it. One is tempted to think that a false belief could have it: for if warrant is that which, when added to true belief, yields knowledge, it seems that whatever fulfills this role might be something that could be added to false beliefs too, although of course it would not yield knowledge in their case. But Plantinga defines warrant in detail as something we have when a doxastic mechanism functions as it should, and is one that is aimed at truth. So to ascribe warrant, thus understood, to religious beliefs, is to presuppose there is religious truth. The believer is in violation of no doxastic obligation in supposing this. But the doubter is in violation of no doxastic obligation by declining to.

I think this suggests that the Basic Belief Apologetic serves, even in a post-foundationalist context, only as a negative or defensive apologetic, not a positive one. As a positive one it relies on a mere presupposition that there is religious truth, and does not embody any argument to show that there is any.

But let us put this difficulty aside. I think there is a point of much greater importance to be made. It is a point that, in the literature to date, only Alston has seen fit to attend to. The very parity that makes it needful to classify faith as rational if we are not to deny the title to sensory or memory or inductive beliefs, makes it equally needful to classify other, competing, belief-systems as rational also. They too are the result of socially established doxastic practices; they too are capable of discriminating justified from unjustified constituent beliefs; and they too are capable of responding to external criticisms and of explaining the psychological appeal of the competition. To say that the doxastic mechanisms that yield them are not aimed at truth is to speak from within your own doxastic system, but not to refute theirs.

Examples are easy to come by, and hard to cut off once one begins. The first set of examples are other religions. There are the other theistic religions. More seriously, there are the other religions that are not clearly theistic, and which have radically different religious phenomenologies at the core of their spirituality. The second set of examples are non-religious soteriological systems like Freudianism and Marxism, that offer liberation from deep spiritual disorders, diagnostic explanations of resistance to their prescriptions and modes of doxastic practice that conform to these diagnoses. And a third set of examples (and I think this will do to make the point) are non-soteriological secularising systems of thought like the philosophies of Lucretius or Hume or Bertrand Russell that judge religion itself to be a source of spiritual and doxastic disorder from which they think we should be relieved to be emancipated.

These classes overlap; and they are all capable of justification, as far as I can see, by arguments of the form that Reformed Epistemologists use to defend Christianity. Which is not in the least to argue that

these arguments are unsound. If classical foundationalism is a spent force, they are sound arguments; but they leave us with a doxastically crowded field. And each competitor in the field is an open option to a great many people.

One way of describing this perplexing situation is that we live in a multiply ambiguous world. This is a world in which Christianity competes, it seems, with other doxastically rational religious traditions which are increasingly well-understood by it, and it by them, and them by each other; and in which each such tradition competes with many forms of secularised naturalism of which the same can be said.

This situation is one that is tailor-made for someone who thinks like the pre-Cartesian sceptic, who saw a large variety of competing ideologies and belief-systems, and saw that each could sustain itself by philosophical argument, and judged this very fact to be a reason to suspend judgment about all of them. This is a rational response, and readily understandable after a few courses in philosophy and comparative religion. But it is not the only rational response. What is one to say if one recognises that this is our intellectual situation, but does so while remaining in one of the competing belief-systems, such as Christianity-- or Buddhism, or whatever?

I submit that the doxastic obligation of the rational being faced with this ambiguity is to try to resolve it; to try to dis-ambiguate our world. If it is doxastically proper to retain a set of convictions in such a world, it is nevertheless obligatory to find some arguments to sustain them. This, after all, is what traditional natural theology sought to do. It predates Enlightenment foundationalism, and I submit that Christianity has more need of it than ever. The arguments of Reformed epistemology do not show it is not needed. All they show is that Christians have not been irrational to come by their beliefs without doing it first. This is not enough, once one comes to see how readily the same point can be made about so many other world views. One does not defeat one's opponents by beating one's own chest. Reformed epistemology does not show us we do not need natural theology. It helps reveal a situation in which we can see we need it more than ever.

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