

Knowledge and Christian Belief

Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

In chapter 1 of Plantinga's book, he begins by considering the following argument that someone might give for the conclusion that *Christian belief in God does not exist*: (1) It is not possible to think about God, (2) Christian belief in God only exists if it is possible to think about God, (3) Therefore, Christian belief in God does not exist.

Now, why might someone think the above argument is a good argument? It will all depend on whether or not the acceptance of premise (1) can be plausibly motivated, either from philosophical considerations (*a la* Kant) or theological ones (*a la* Kaufman).

***QUESTION – *What is your initial reaction to this argument that there is no such thing as Christian belief?*

The first considerations in favor of accepting premise (1) – that is, the claim that it is not possible to think about God – derive from the epistemology of Immanuel Kant. Kant invites us to consider whether or not we ever see the world *as it is in itself* with the expectation that we'll eventually realize the answer: we *don't* see the world as it is in itself. Rather, we are merely acquainted with the world *of experience*; that is, the world *as it appears to us*. Consider looking at a wooden table at which you are sitting. You see the table as a single solid structure designed to hold food and various other items. However, as the physicists tell us, the table is actually made of mostly empty space between atoms that are constantly in motion. In other words, the way things appear to us (e.g. that there is a single object called a table) is misleading, and really better reflects our own impositions of order on the things in the world rather than the world's presenting itself *as it is* to us. But if our experiences of the world are constituted by our own impositions of order on the things in the world, then we never see the world as it is *in itself*. And consequently God, if God exists at all, is not captured by our concepts concerning the world of appearance. Yet our thoughts are structured all and only by the concepts we've acquired from the world of appearance. And therefore, we cannot think about a God, whose reality outstrips our concepts.

***QUESTION – *Perhaps this is a weird way to think about reality, but try to understand Kant's point. What are some examples of our experiences misleading us about the way the world really is?*

***QUESTION – *What should the upshot be about the fact that our experience sometimes misleads us? Is it really plausible to think that our experience systematically misleads us about the world as it is in itself?*

Consider a motivation for accepting premise (1) inspired by Christian theology. Gordon Kaufman emphasizes that God is ineffable (i.e. indescribable or incomprehensible) such that anything we say positively of God can at best be true in only an analogical sense (i.e. not literally). Thus, anytime we say that God is loving or a person, we do not say something *literally* true, but only true *in a way*.¹ And of course, the way in which it is true is beyond our comprehension. But if we cannot *say* anything positively of God, then surely we cannot *know* anything positively of God. That leaves us knowledge of what God is not – e.g. God is not temporal, not material, not spatial, etc. – but such knowledge is surely severely impoverished. And thus, in such a state, it is plausible to think that our concept of God systematically fails to correspond with God *as he is in himself*. Therefore, we cannot even think about God, but rather, only some fanciful substitute.

***QUESTION – *Is there anything right about this view of God? Is it such a strong thesis that we cannot even truly refer to God as a result of our impoverished concept of God?*

In the second chapter Plantinga, taking the question of the existence of Christian belief to be settled, turns his attention to the question of whether or not Christian belief suffers from some sort of defect (e.g. irrationality, foolishness, gaucheness, tackiness, puerility, etc.). Such an objection, he tells us, is called a *de jure* objection to Christian belief.

There is another sort of objection to Christian belief, a *de facto* one, that aims to show that Christian belief is mistaken; that is, that the content of Christian belief is false. Such objections might proceed by attempting to demonstrate the *incoherence* of the concept of God (e.g. perhaps someone might object that God's perfect freedom, which implies that he can create more than one world, is incompatible with his perfect goodness, which implies that he cannot create anything other than the best world). This strategy would be like a demonstration that Bethany's belief in the existence of *square-circles* is false because the very concepts of *square* and *circle* cannot be exemplified by one and the same object. Though interesting,

¹ Believe it or not, this is a venerable and traditional Christian conception of God from the early church fathers to the present, boasting proponents as notable as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, John Piper, and many more.

such arguments simply don't get much airtime in common discussions about God. So Plantinga focuses on the more central *de jure* questions. He returns to the *de facto* objection in later chapters.

There are three *de jure* objections in particular which Plantinga considers: the objection from (1) *intellectual arrogance*, (2) *evidence* & (3) *irrationality* (i.e. the *Freud/Marx Complaint*).

***QUESTION – *Have you encountered (or advanced yourself) any of these objections to Christian/theistic belief? What are your initial thoughts concerning such objections?*

Plantinga dismisses the *intellectual arrogance* objection fairly quickly since it hardly seems to be a serious objection implicating all, or even most, people with theistic belief. The question of *evidence*, however, turns out to be intimately tied up with the concept of *justification*. Without rehearsing the history, Plantinga takes the objection to be this: (i) *a belief, B, is justified only if there is sufficient evidence possessed by the believer in support of B*; (ii) *there is insufficient evidence in support of Christian belief*; (iii) *therefore, Christian belief is not justified*.

This argument emerges from the backdrop of *Classical Foundationalism* (CF), which is a theory about the structure of the justification of beliefs. According to this view, there is a foundation of beliefs that simply *have* justification in a basic way. Such *basic beliefs* will be **properly basic**, according to CF, only if they are either self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses. Since belief in God does not appear to be self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses, if CF is right, then belief in God will only be justified if support for theistic belief can be derived, ultimately, from other beliefs which are properly basic. But sadly, says the proponent of CF, no properly basic beliefs are sufficient, in conjunction with the evidence we gather in the world through our senses, to make belief in God justified. Therefore, belief in God is not justified.

***QUESTION – *What do you think? Is CF right? Is there no way to justify belief in God via the available evidence?*

There are obvious questions in need of answers for a full discussion (e.g. what counts as *evidence*?), but Plantinga ignores them. Rather than present a bunch of theistic evidence and argue that belief in God *really can* be supported sufficiently by evidence, he demonstrates that either CF is false or if true, then it cannot be justifiably believed by anyone. In the end, his point will be that theistic belief may be justified *without* evidence. Here's the argument:

(CF) proposition *p* is justified for *S* if, and only if, either (i) it is properly basic or (ii) held on the basis of other propositions which are themselves justified. But (CF) is itself a proposition. As a result, we can apply the test for justification described by (CF) to itself. So suppose (CF) is true. Can anyone be justified in believing it? Well, it's not going to be believed in a properly basic way, since it's surely not self-evident (or at least, it's not to me), it doesn't seem incorrigible (since it's not about any of my immediate sensory states and can be doubted; namely, by me), and it's not the sort of thing for which one can have sensory awareness. But there certainly don't seem to be any basic beliefs from which (CF) might be deduced. So if (CF) is true, then no one will be justified in believing it. Or what's more to the point, if (CF) is true, then no one will be able to justifiably rule out the justification of Christian belief in God by appeal to (CF).

The final objection lodged against Christian belief is that it is *unwarranted* because it results from dysfunctional (or not truth-directed) cognitive faculties. Marx, for instance, claims that religious belief arises out of a *perverted world-consciousness* derived from a disordered social environment. The more careful & subtler Freudian version of this objection, on the other hand, alleges that religious belief has arisen in evolutionary history through wishful-thinking. Belief in divine providence enables us to cope with anxiety and the crippling despair that would otherwise accompany a realization of life's meaninglessness. But what is *warrant*? As it turns out, Plantinga has a theory of *warrant*, which I will lay out here.

- a) A belief *B* is *warranted* sufficiently for *B* to constitute knowledge for person *S* only if...
 - i. It is produced by a *properly functioning* cognitive faculty
 - ii. In an environment for which it was designed
 - iii. It is *successfully* aimed at truth
 - iv. And there are no significant defeaters (e.g. problems of evil or religious pluralism) present within *S*'s cognitive system that prohibit *B* from acquiring sufficient warrant for *S*.

So Marx's complaint is that belief in God results from cognitive *dysfunction*, and thus, fails to satisfy (i), whereas Freud disagrees. Religious belief, on his account is understandable and perfectly natural. The problem, however, is that such belief is not *truth-oriented*, and so, fails to satisfy (iii). What do you think? Are these good complaints?

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Chapters 3 & 4 Summary

At the end of chapter 2, Plantinga left us on a cliffhanger of sorts. He told us what the *de jure* objection of Marx and Freud amounted to; namely, a charge that theistic belief is *unwarranted* because either it results from cognitive dysfunction (Marx) or from a cognitive faculty *not* aimed at truth, but rather, something like wish-fulfillment (Freud). Recall, then, Plantinga's definition of warrant

- a) A belief B is *warranted* for person S only if...
 - i. It is produced by a *properly functioning* cognitive faculty
 - ii. In an environment for which it was designed
 - iii. It is *successfully* aimed at truth
 - iv. And there are no significant defeaters (e.g. problems of evil or religious pluralism) present within S's cognitive system that render B unwarranted for S.

***QUESTION – Given this definition of warrant, can you provide a recipe (i.e. a step-by-step process) that someone could in principle follow to determine whether or not any given belief has warrant?

In essence, the goal of chapter 3 is to establish that *if theism is true, then it is very likely warranted*. Thus, it is an exercise in constructing a conceptual model of the way the world could be, for all we know, that includes with it an affirmation of the sort of theism that *most* Western religious persons affirm. That is, it includes an affirmation of a God which is all-powerful, all-knowing & all-loving (i.e. a *something* than which nothing greater could be conceived). Once we have that model, we can then ask whether or not theistic belief might be warranted by considering whether it might satisfy any or all of the above conditions which are required for a belief to have warrant. First, let's draw up the model.

In the writings of Calvin & Aquinas, Plantinga locates a very interesting reading of Romans 1 where both historical theologians argue as follows: (1) Knowledge of God is readily available to all people (i.e. as a teaching of Romans 1); (2) If arguments were the primary way of gaining knowledge of God, then it is not the case that knowledge of God would be readily available to all people (i.e. since such arguments require an intellectual sophistication beyond many people); (3) Therefore, there is some other primary way of gaining knowledge of God, which is not based on arguments.

The question is what would this other source of theistic knowledge be? Calvin and Aquinas both suggest that Paul is pointing, in Romans 1, to a sense of divinity; that is, a sort of sixth sense that under certain circumstances delivers beliefs about God to us in a way which is analogous to how perception delivers beliefs. For instance, when I *perceive* a table in the room, I immediately form the belief that there is a table in the room. And I *don't* form this belief on the basis of arguments. In fact, I don't form this belief reflectively at all. I just find myself with the belief, and by any normal non-skeptical standards of justification or warrant, my belief is justified and warranted in *the basic way*.

So now, the question we must answer is this: under what circumstances would the A/C model of human psychology, which includes an additional cognitive capacity known as the *sensus divinitatis*, have warrant? Plantinga's answer comes in two parts: (a) if theism is true, then theistic belief is probably warranted; (b) if theism is false, then theistic belief is probably *unwarranted*. Let's break down his answer a bit.

His reason for thinking theistic belief would be warranted were theism true is based on condition (iii) of his definition of warrant; that is, the requirement that such beliefs be *successfully aimed at truth*. 'Successfully' here means something more like 'reliably' aimed at truth since he doesn't mean to say such warranted beliefs are *infallible*. Now how do we determine if a cognitive capacity is *reliably* aimed at truth? Well, we take the set of nearby possible worlds where that cognitive capacity exists and is functioning normally and see whether the proportion of *true beliefs* to *false beliefs* resulting from that capacity is very close to 1. If so, then it is reliable. If the

proportion is somewhere between 0 and $\frac{1}{2}$, then it is presumably unreliable. Why? Because it would get the answer wrong *most of the time*. And surely we don't want to call a cognitive capacity reliable if it misses truth most of the time any more than we call a surgeon reliable who botches surgery most of the time.

So if theism is true, then *all* the nearby (as well as far off) possible worlds are worlds where God exists and loves his creatures. In that case, it would seem highly likely that God would provide some source of knowledge that was accessible to all people, and so, something very much like a *sensus divinitatis* would in fact exist. And given that God is omniscient, it would function properly and be truth aimed in such worlds. Thus, if theism is true, it is very likely actually warranted as well.

What about if theism is false? Well then, it seems that the *reliability (successfully) condition* on warrant runs into trouble, for then, whatever cognitive capacity is involved with theistic belief will not be *truth aimed*. Why? Because all such beliefs will presuppose the existence of a God. But then, it would be unsurprising, perhaps expected, that in most of the nearby possible worlds where that same cognitive capacity was producing beliefs, then it would deliver many more *false* beliefs than true ones. And if this is the case, then no beliefs which usher from that cognitive capacity will have warrant, for the cognitive capacity itself will fail to satisfy condition (iii).

***QUESTION – *Does this make sense? Do you understand, then, what Plantinga means when he says that epistemology depends on metaphysics? Explain.*

Of course, the above model is one that merely presupposes theism as endorsed by the major Western monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam & Christianity (even if the inspiration for this general model is found in the Christian Tradition). But a fully Christian model will include a story of how the *Fall* affects our cognitive capacities (as well as affections & desires) and how the work of the Holy Spirit repairs the damage done to our relationship with God in this *post-lapsarian* environment. Chapter 4 expands on this theme.

First, Plantinga tells us that according to the Christian story, the first humans deliberately and freely *chose* to pursue evil rather than good, and as a result, they became tainted. The image of God, which included the various capacities of rationality, was damaged within them (though not annihilated!) and as a result, they came to often *prefer what was wrong*, even when *seeing what was right*.

Second, the *Fall* is followed by a rescue operation of sorts on the part of God. This began by an attempt to communicate with his creation through prophets, apostles and the arranged production of Scripture, followed by an individualized spiritually reparative procedure by the Holy Spirit to deal with the ravages of sin (i.e. moral deficiencies & failings). Once the reparation is sufficient to enable a person to freely choose the gift of God's grace, a free choice, which is necessary for the loving relationship desired by God between himself and his creatures, is made to accept the gift of faith, which is a firm knowledge of God's work in the lives of his creation. The nature of this *gift* will be the topic of our next chapter.

***QUESTION – *Does the expanded Christian A/C model bolster the explanatory power of the original model? Or put another way, if this model were true, would it account for certain phenomena in the world (e.g. lack of the knowledge of God) that we find **better** than the more minimal model of chapter 3?*

This model brings to light a number of thorny theological issues, including the meaning of original sin, competing interpretations of the Fall, etc. Plantinga's model is consistent with a number of various interpretations of these theological points (e.g. variations on *original sin & interpretations of Genesis*). His underlying reason for this is, I think, to avoid making such questions a stumbling block for anyone considering Christian belief. What is more central for him are the religious experiences and testimonies of the many Christians who've expressed their faith through everything from mere conversations to willing martyrdoms. Of course, there are questions about people of *other* faiths that have similar religious experiences. Although we won't get into the details here, I think it is very much worth looking at the *evidence* in favor of Christian faith, as well as the competing religious traditions, and coming to your own personal verdict. We may not be able to get *certainty* concerning the truth of this model, but we can certainly gather and assess evidence in its support, which can help us come up with reasonable beliefs on the matter, as well as knowledge if the models are in fact true.

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Chapters 5 & 6 Summary

Recall that in the previous chapters, Plantinga argued that if God exists, then belief in God is very likely to be warranted (as well as justified and rational). The model he presented was developed from within the Christian story of the Fall and redemption of humanity, where we, as humans, were depicted as having a *sensus divinitatis* (i.e. a sort of sixth spiritual sense) by which we could acquire knowledge of God. However, the *sensus divinitatis* was damaged by the Fall, which made necessary an intervention by God to repair the damage done. Through this restorative process, the Holy Spirit was said to bring us to a point of faith. But what is faith? And what conception(s) of faith is (are) central to Plantinga's model? These chapters lay out the nature (chapter 5) & phenomenology, or what it's like from the inside (chapter 6), of faith. But first, let's ask a question about the coherence of the model so far:

***QUESTION – *Plantinga claims that there was a Fall. This is obviously part of the Christian story, but it's worth asking whether it is coherent. Could God have created perfectly free agents that never fell? If the answer is yes, then why didn't he do that? If the answer is no, then what explanation would we have for thinking God's inability to do this wouldn't impugn his omnipotence?*

Now let's turn our attention to the *nature* of faith (i.e. what it is in its essence). Popularly, the word 'faith' is often used to designate a source of beliefs that are opposed to reason in some way. Most often, that option is spelled out in terms of *irrationality*. This isn't the only option though. Beliefs which result from faith might also be *a-rational*; that is, they might fall entirely outside the domain of things which can be evaluated as rational or irrational in the first place. Thus, to attribute either rationality or irrationality to such beliefs would amount to a *category mistake* analogous to saying that a tree or rock is irrational. Trees and rocks *can't* be rational or irrational. So it's wrong to say they're either. Thus, if we understand faith in this popular way, it's by no means obvious that religious beliefs end up being truly *irrational*. Of course, if such beliefs aren't truth-oriented, they'd end up being *unwarranted*, even if rational.

***QUESTION – *Someone might say that the above sense of 'faith' is appealed to in the phrase, 'taking a blind leap of faith'. Is there anything correct in this usage? What about the word 'blind' here? To what is faith blind as it's used in this common phrase?*

But Plantinga doesn't take this route. He distinguishes a couple of ways of talking about faith. In one sense, 'faith' designates a *work* of the Holy Spirit. This is a gracious work, and the reparative part of this work is done for *all* people. And it is done to all people in such a way that they are able to freely reject, should we so choose, further reparation from the Holy Spirit (i.e. a continuation of this divine *work* of faith).

In a second sense, however, faith is not a *work* but a complex mental state. In particular, 'faith' in this sense denotes an amalgamation of knowledge, emotions and affections. Let us first focus on the *knowledge* part of that concept. The *contents* of the knowledge produced in us through faith are what Edwards calls "the great truths of the Gospel." These truths will include such propositions as "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" as well as teachings illuminated by the instigation of the Holy Spirit as we read scripture. But these propositions are accompanied as well by a phenomenology; that is, a particular feel for what it is like to *come to see* that they are true. This feel is similar to the feeling we get whenever a "lightbulb" goes on in our head while studying a particularly difficult subject matter or come to *understand* what someone else is attempting to communicate to us. We *see* that such things must be true and find ourselves drawn by this understanding.

***QUESTION – *Can you think of cases where you've had a lightbulb moment? Sometimes we experience these things when practicing skills (e.g. piano or baseball). Do you think this kind of lightbulb moment accurately describes your experience with religious truths? Why or why not?*

But this focus on the cognitive, on *knowledge*, isn't all that constitutes faith, for in addition faith includes a sense of longing, yearning and even love for its content (i.e. in this case, the great truths of the Gospel). That is, it engages with the *affections* of those who have paradigmatic faith, and this is appropriate since there are those who might believe the right things but nevertheless stand *opposed* to the teachings of Scripture (cf. "even the demons [who are not saved] believe" in James). But then, what might rightly-ordered affections look like on this picture? Plantinga calls a person for whom the work of rightly-ordered affections has come to completion a person with truths *sealed upon their heart*. Concerning this state, he writes:

The person with faith...not only believes the central claims of the Christian faith; she also (paradigmatically) finds the whole scheme of salvation enormously attractive, delightful, moving, a source of amazed wonderment. She is deeply grateful to the Lord for his great goodness and responds to his sacrificial love with love of her own (71).

What sort of love does Plantinga have in mind? We learn in chapter 6 that he thinks the nature of the affections which accompany faith in God involves *eros*. The Greek term 'eros' refers to a type of love that longs for union of some sort; that is, a union appropriate to the relationship between the two in love. We find expressions of *eros* throughout Scripture (cf. Ps. 63:1 – "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you"), and these expressions bring to mind the desire for unity expressed by Christ in the Gospel of John (cf. Jn 17:21 – "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me"). Consider C. S. Lewis' analogy between beauty-oriented & divinely-oriented *eros* from *The Weight of Glory*:

We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it (8; quoted in Plantinga 76).

*****QUESTION** – *Is this an apt description of, for instance, a longing to lose oneself in the rhythm of some music or the sound and rush of ocean waves as they bat against the shore? Can such a desire, as Lewis describes, ever be fully satisfied? And why do we have such desires in the first place? Is there an naturalistic evolutionary explanation available to account for them?*

So paradigmatic faith, as Plantinga sees it, is characterized by a knowledge of Christian truths accompanied by an ordering of the affections which produces and longing and love for God. This *eros*, says Plantinga, does not merely characterize our love of God, but also characterizes *God's* love for us (cf. Isa. 62:5 – "As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you"). And this is a significant claim, especially since, historically-speaking, many Christian theologians, heavily influenced by Neo-Platonism, have explicitly denied it. But why would they deny that God loves his creation in this way? There are two arguments Plantinga considers, which I'll condense into one.

The Impassibility or Incomplete-Life Argument

1. God is impassible and lacks nothing (i.e. God does not *undergo* anything; nothing *happens to* God; God is *active*, not *passive*)
2. If something is impassible, then it cannot express *eros*.
 - a. Because this involves *longing* which is supposedly provoked in the agent by the object of longing; that is, e.g. as the sight of cake *causes* longing *in me*.
3. If something lacks nothing, then it cannot express *eros*.
4. Therefore, God cannot express *eros* (by either 1 & 2 or 1 & 3).

In response to this argument, Plantinga denies both the first disjunct of premise (1) & premise (3). His reason for denying the first conjunct of premise (1) is that divine impassibility is simply not to be found in Scripture, he thinks, and is possibly irreconcilable with the Incarnation. His reason for rejecting premise (3) is a bit more complicated. Those theologians who traditionally claim that God cannot express *eros* say that God instead loves only through *agape*. Now, whatever *we* think when we hear the term 'agape', these theologians thought it was this: "a completely other-regarding, magnanimous love in which there is mercy but no element of desire" (77). From this it follows that God has no desire for *us*. But this doesn't seem right given the many Scriptures that indicate otherwise, not to mention the whole bit about Atonement. Further still, consider the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. This relationship cannot be that of *agape* as described above since no member of the Trinity is in need of mercy, surely. Rather, the love characteristically holding between the persons of the Trinity is surely one of delight and happiness in each other, which is to say, it is an expression of *eros*. Thus, lack is not essential to *eros*, as premise (3) assumes, and so, it must be false.

Plantinga ends, then with this bit of reflection:

This love is a matter of perceiving and desiring and enjoying union with something valuable, in this case, Someone of supreme value. And God's love for us is manifested in his generously inviting us into this charmed circle (though not, of course, to ontological equality), thus satisfying the deepest longings of our souls (78).

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Chapters 7 & 8 Summary

Up to this point in the book, Plantinga has simply been developing a model of how belief in God would probably obtain warrant on the assumption that God exists. He developed this model, which he dubs the Extended A/C Model, as a response to the *de jure* objection to Christian (or more broadly, theistic) belief. According to the most formidable construal of that objection, Christian (and/or theistic) belief is unwarranted. Or to put it another way, the objection is that Christian belief *either* results from cognitive dysfunction *or* results from a cognitive mechanism that is not truth aimed. In the first half of the book, Plantinga repeatedly emphasized that such an objection (i.e. a *de jure* objection to theistic belief) only succeeded on the assumption that theism was false. Thus, anyone who advances such objections against theistic belief is guilty of *begging the question*. That is, they are guilty of assuming the truth of the conclusion they are purporting to demonstrate (or put more carefully, they are guilty of assuming the truth of a proposition which *must be true* in order for their conclusion, in this case the irrationality of belief in God, to be true). Consequently, such arguments in fact demonstrate next to nothing concerning the actual *epistemic* status of theistic belief (i.e. whether or not it is rational or warranted).

***EXERCISE – Can you state Plantinga’s argument in chapters 1-6 in outline form? Take a couple of minutes and summarize it as best you can in your own words (feel free to use the foregoing paragraph as a guide).

In chapter 7, Plantinga turns his attention to the following objection: *religious experience cannot, in principle, serve as a ground of warranted belief in the existence of God*. In other words, such objections purport to demonstrate that the sort of model Plantinga develops in the first six chapters of his book cannot possibly exist. And of course, that would be a big problem for Plantinga.

However, Plantinga immediately responds to such an objection in a fascinating way. His model is not a model of religious *experience*. Or at least, it’s not *only* a model of religious experience. It’s also a model involving religious *testimony* from an agent; namely, the Holy Spirit.

***QUESTION – How is an agent’s *testimony* different from *experience*? Is one source of knowledge, testimony or direct experience, a better source of knowledge? If you answer yes, in what way is that source better?

But in order to go ahead and deal with these objections, Plantinga grants, *for the sake of argument*, that theistic belief comes by way of religious of experience. He then considers J. L. Mackie’s claim that religious experience can only ground theistic belief if there is a good argument which connects such experiences with the probable truth of their *contents*. Here’s what Mackie means. To understand this better, consider a normal perceptual experience as of a horse. You perceive a horse. The *content* of that experience is this: *that there is a horse*. Why is this perceptual experience a good ground for believing that there is a horse? Well, we have a lot of past experiences as of horses, and we have determined that those experiences were veridical; that is, they revealed a *fact* about the world. Thus, we can provide an inductive argument from our many perceptual experiences of the world to the *reliability* of perception. Thus, we have a good argument that sense perception is reliable, and so, the beliefs we form on the basis of perception are proper grounds for perceptual beliefs. *Religious experience*, claims Mackie, cannot avail itself of any similar inductive argument, for the truth of the content of a paradigmatic religious experience has never been verified.

But why think that an experience of any sort can only justify its contents if there is a good argument establishing the reliability of that sort of experience? This seems clearly false to me, even for perceptual experience. For if this is required, then until we had a sufficient inductive basis for a perceptual argument (i.e. until humanity had historically had enough perceptual experiences), no perceptual experience could justify beliefs formed on a perceptual basis. But if anything like Plantinga’s proper function model is correct, then this requirement by Mackie is clearly false (cf. Plantinga 82-83). Thus, I think it is reasonable to say we should reject this version of Mackie’s argument.

***QUESTION – Can you think of any other reasons to reject this requirement of Mackie?

Another objection to religious experience as a ground for warranted theistic belief is this: religious experience could never reveal such specific information as *that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself*. What’s interesting about this, however, is that it is simply asserted without much by way of argument. As a result, we are fully within our rights to simply ask ourselves, “Is this true?” First though, notice that if Plantinga’s *sensus divinitatis* model is coherent, then this objection must be mistaken. For on that model, such detailed experiential contents *are* possible. Second, however, it’s worth noting how strong (or broadly-sweeping) this objection is. It claims that *it is not possible* for experience to deliver beliefs with such specific contents. To show decisively that this claim is true would require ruling out all possible models of theistic belief that purport to deliver such specific beliefs as *God exists as a trinity of person*. This is a demanding task of brobdingnagian proportions. As a result, I think it is safe to assume that this objection has not been sufficiently developed...nor is it likely to ever be. Consequently, Mackie does not provide us with a plausible argument against the possibility of religious experience as described by Plantinga, and so, his arguments do not give us a reason to doubt the coherence of Plantinga’s model.

In chapter 8, Plantinga begins briefly by explaining the notion of a *defeater* in brief:

“Defeaters, therefore, are reasons for giving up a belief *B* you hold. If they are also reasons for believing *B* false, they are rebutting defeaters; if they *aren't* reasons for believing *B* false, they are undercutting defeaters. Acquiring a defeater for a belief puts you in a position in which you can't rationally continue to hold the belief” (90).

To explain this distinction, suppose you believe *there is a sheep in the field nearby* because you think you see one. Now consider two different scenarios. In the first scenario, you approach the apparent sheep and see that it is actually a rock that has been carved and painted as to appear as a sheep. This new information gives you both reason to withhold belief that *there is a sheep in the field* and to believe that *there's not a sheep in the field*. Thus, this new evidence serves as a **rebutting defeater**. However, consider a different scenario in which you learn that when you saw the apparent sheep, you were driving through stone-sheep country, where about half of the apparent sheep in the fields are *real* sheep while the other half are statues. This new information undermines your belief that *there was a sheep in the field* (since you wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between a sheep and sheep-statue from far off), but it does *not* give you a reason to think it *false* that there was a sheep in the field. Thus, this is merely an **undercutting defeater**.

The rest of chapter eight focuses on one putative *undercutting* defeater for the warrant of theistic belief; namely, *higher biblical criticism* (HBC). This sort of biblical scholarship can be understood well against *traditional biblical criticism* (TBC), which affirms 3 methodological principles denied by HBC: TBC assumes that (1) Scripture is authoritative for the lives of its readers and trustworthy in its teachings, (2) God is the *principle* author of Scripture, & (3) the human author's intent isn't the same thing as the teaching of the passage (e.g. there's little reason to think many of the prophets in the Old Testament had *Jesus* particularly in mind when predicting, say, that he would be a suffering servant). HBC, in both of its forms which will be introduced momentarily, rejects all three of these methodological assumptions.

There are two forms of HBC, Troeltschian and Duhemian (HBC-T & HBC-D). Both forms affirm that we should study scriptures merely by the light of empirical (scientific) reason. According to HBC-T, if we are to succeed in this Enlightenment-esque aim, we should adopt a *principle of analogy* according to which all historical events are treated as analogous to the present with respect to the laws of nature. As a result, since divine action is not *currently* being witnessed (by which Troeltsch meant miracles), we should interpret Scripture in wholly naturalistic (i.e. non-supernaturalistic ways).

***QUESTION - Does such an approach to Biblical criticism beg the question against Christians? If so, explain why. If not, explain why not.

Plantinga dismisses Troeltschian HBC because he cannot see any good reason to think such a methodology is proper, for two reasons. First, Troeltsch didn't offer any such reasons, and second, presupposing that miracles are *impossible* is not a neutral standpoint. If methodology required a neutral standpoint, then it would require that we were open to the *possibility* of miracles upon considering the evidence, as well as we were open to learning that there really weren't any miracles in the first place. But perhaps the Duhemian can offer us something better.

According to HBC-D, we should only engage in biblical criticism *with metaphysical or theological assumptions accepted by our community*. In other words, we should follow the lead of Notre Dame scholar Jon Meier, who imagined “‘an unapal conclave’ of Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, and agnostic scholars, locked in the basement of the Harvard Divinity School library until they [came] to consensus on what historical methods [could] show about the life and mission of Jesus” (101). Once the conclave (e.g. the Jesus Seminar) had arrived at a consensus regarding acceptable theological and metaphysical assumptions, *then* the Duhemian could get whatever truth was possible out of the scriptures as historical texts.

***QUESTION - Do you think this method of determining acceptable assumptions would be appropriate in any context?

I have to wonder whether there was a group meeting of meta-methodologists (i.e. people who study which methods of research are appropriate for different academic disciplines) that agreed that this Duhemian principle was in general reasonable for social sciences. After all, meta-methodology seems as much a social science as biblical studies, in which case, a meeting of meta-methodologists would be held hostage by the Duhemian principle (assuming that principle is true) unless they all agreed on its truth. Plantinga's complaint, however, is this: “we can imagine a renegade group of whimsical physicists proposing to reconstruct physics by refusing to use any beliefs that come from *memory*, say, or perhaps memory of anything more than one minute ago. Perhaps something could be done along these lines, but it would be a poor, paltry truncated, trifling thing” (105). Similarly with HBC-D. Thus, we have no reason to think either form of HBC constitutes a reasonable way to study Scripture. Therefore, no Christian belief derived from Scripture suffers defeat from HBC.

Knowledge and Christian Belief

Chapters 9 & 10 Summary

In the final two chapters of *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, Plantinga presents two of the most common objections to the rationality or warrantedness of Christian belief: (1) the fact of religious diversity & (2) the problem of evil.

***EXERCISE – Briefly state each of these objections in your own words, if you can. Better yet, state each of these objections as a formal argument of the following form: (a) *if p, then q* (b) $\neg q$, therefore (c) $\neg p$.

As Plantinga understands the argument from religious diversity against the warrantedness of Christian belief, there are two different objections in play. First, he points out that relatively informed people in our world today are aware of the following fact (call it 'RD'): *there are very many religions to which reasonable people belong, yet these different religions are alethically incompatible (i.e. they can't all be true)*. Assume you believe RD, as I think you should. Then, you might face the following *moral* objection:

No one can rationally believe both RD and that their own religious beliefs are correct without simultaneously being guilty of some moral failing (e.g. pride).

Plantinga's response to this claim is to switch the domain of inquiry from *religious belief diversity* to other domains of inquiry (e.g. moral beliefs and scientific beliefs). His reasoning is fairly straightforward. Suppose David has a thing for Bathsheba but also realizes that Bathsheba is married to someone else. Since David is the king, he is able to arrange for Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, to be placed on the front lines of a battle from which none will return, consequently freeing Bathsheba from her marital commitment to her husband. Suppose further that after Uriah's death has been arranged, Nathan, a prophet of God and friend of David's, tells David that this whole thing was wrong. Suppose David responds with, "No it wasn't!" What, then, ought Nathan to believe? If what lies behind the objection above is that defending a position in the midst of disagreement over some domain is morally objectionable, then Nathan (morally) should withhold his belief that David's act was wrong. It seems to me that there's nothing wrong, however, with Nathan retaining his original belief.

***QUESTION – You might respond to this line of thought by pointing out that religious disagreement is very widespread in a way moral disagreement concerning David's actions are not. Can you think of how applying a principle like the one above to scientific disagreement might deal with this objection?

The epistemic rendition of the religious diversity objection goes as follows:

No one can rationally believe both RD and that their own religious beliefs are correct *because* such a person would need to have a reason to think their own beliefs are epistemically superior to the beliefs of those with whom they disagree, *but there are no such reasons available*.

Plantinga's response to this principle is similarly straightforward. He thinks that *there are such reasons available* in many cases. But not only this. He also thinks that in the case of religious disagreement, such reasons will very likely be available to practitioners of the particular *true* religion if theism is itself true. Of course, if theism is false, then theistic belief will not enjoy such a privileged status. But of course, these two points just demonstrate what Plantinga has averred throughout his book; namely, that the fact of the matter concerning theism will determine whether or not the *de jure* objection to the rationality of theistic from religious diversity can hold water. Consequently, without a plausible *de facto* objection on which to stand, the objection from religious diversity loses interest.

***QUESTION - What do you think? Is this too easy? Can you try to think carefully about how you might state the objection from religious diversity more ably or charitably than Plantinga has here?

Let us turn now to the *problem of evil*. As Plantinga frames the objection thusly: "given that theistic and Christian belief can have warrant in the ways I have suggested, does knowledge of the facts of evil provide a defeater for this belief? Does it threaten to make such belief irrational or unwarranted?" (117).

Well, as construed in the contemporary world, the question is whether evil can constitute *powerful evidence* against God's existence, rather than the question of whether evil is compatible with God's existence. And it's not just evil in general, but the whole panoply of evils witnessed even in the last century: Pol Pot, the Russian Gulags, the Holocaust, horrendous actions from religious extremists, the political rise of the Donald, etc. So keeping these sorts of evils in mind, do they seem initially to be evidence against God's existence?

Plantinga makes a cool move here, and says, "sure!" Why not think these evils might be evidence for some people? But even then, they need not undermine *my* beliefs. Suppose you learn that *Peter is three months-old*. This information is evidence, even good evidence by itself, that *Peter does not weigh 19 lbs.* Why? Well, take the number of three month-old babies that weigh 19 lbs., and see what fraction of the total population of three month-old babies that gives you. When you do this, you realize that if all you know is that *Peter is three months-old*, and you're forced to bet on whether Peter weighs 19 lbs. or some other weight, you'd be crazy to bet that Peter weighs 19 lbs. But, suppose your knowledge that *Peter is three months-old* only constitutes **part** of your **total evidence**. Then you could simply admit that, when isolated from your total evidence, the facts of evil in the world constitute evidence against God's existence, but nevertheless against your *total* evidence fail to budge your theistic belief in the slightest.

The above evidential form of the argument from evil, however, is not, to Plantinga's mind, the best form of the argument from evil. Instead, a sort of inverse *sensus divinitatis* argument boasts such a status:

Properly Basic Atheistic Belief No one who is properly functioning cognitively and emotionally can reasonably maintain theistic belief when confronted with evils such as those listed above.

Plantinga thinks this is the best form of the objection. Why? Because there is only one way to respond to such an argument on his view; namely, by pointing out, as Plantinga characteristically does, that such an objection will *only* be correct if theism is false, and is extremely likely to fail if theism is true. Consequently, his point is that, once again, whether or not a Christian individual has a *defeater of this sort* for her Christian theistic belief when considering the facts of evil will depend on the fact of the matter concerning Christian theism.

***QUESTION - Plantinga's response perhaps provides committed Christians with a way to justify their own Christian beliefs. But how might this chain of thought show non-Christians that the *defeater* of evil is not really a significant defeater in the first place?