

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALVIN PLANTINGA

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Joshua Blanchard: Given that to have warrant a belief must be produced by cognitive faculties in an epistemically friendly environment with a design plan aimed at truth, how do you account for the old problem of knowing that we know? It seems to me that to apply the criterion of warrant, we would have to have some awareness that our faculties are functioning properly.

Alvin Plantinga: That seems right. But I don't know of any general way to tell, for example, when your cognitive faculties are functioning properly. You could be mistaken about that. Still you could be mistaken about most anything, and you still know lots of things. So I'd be inclined to say, right now, that my vision is functioning properly. I can't really give an argument that would satisfy a skeptic, but I don't know if that's necessary in order to know that my vision is functioning properly. And I guess I also think I know that I'm in a friendly cognitive environment. I'm not a brain in a vat, I'm not on some foreign planet where everything goes wrong with cognitive function. And I guess I take it for granted that when I'm functioning properly then for the most part my beliefs would be true. I guess I assume this, just as everyone else does. And I'd also be inclined to think I know it, although that's not something one can sensibly give an argument for. To give an argument for this conclusion, you'd have to be taking for granted that it was true. You'd be taking the conclusion for granted at each step along the way—for example,

in proposing a given premise and in seeing the connection between premises and conclusion. So I don't think there's any special problem in knowing that you know, but there isn't any sort of general requirement either – there's no requirement that in order to know, you have to know that you know. Nor is there any general recipe you could give, which is such that if you followed it, you'll know with respect to a given proposition whether you do or don't know it.

JB: So it obviously functions as a definition. Would you then say that you know these things in a more "basic" way?

AP: I'm inclined to say you do. You could have specific kinds of defeaters where the defeater-defeaters were propositions you don't know in the basic way, but ordinarily I think you know in the basic way that your faculties are functioning properly and that for the most part they give you true beliefs. I say this because, if you take it perfectly generally, that's the only way you can possibly know it. You can't know it on the basis of arguments, because these arguments would be epistemically circular. And it seems to me that it's part of our design plan to make these assumptions. If we didn't make them, we'd be in really deep epistemic trouble.

JB: I have a more theological question regarding the Calvin/Aquinas model and the IIHS ("Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit"), which you modify and utilize in *Warranted Christian Belief*. As far as I understand Karl Barth, he thought at least in part that any knowledge of God can only be yielded by a kind of top-down revelation. And it seems like there's some affinity between that and the Holy Spirit requirement of the Calvin/Aquinas model. Or do you think that Natural Theology provides other avenues to gain significant knowledge of God?

AP: We should distinguish two things here. Natural knowledge of God would include natural theology, of course, but there are also other natural ways to know God—ways that don't involve anything supernatural. So Calvin speaks of the *sensus divinitatis*—that would produce natural knowledge of God, although it wouldn't be natural theology. Natural theology would be a matter of providing arguments and so on. If Barth thought that any knowledge of God has to come by something supernatural, that any knowledge of God has to come that way, I wouldn't agree with that. I would think, with Calvin, that you can have knowledge of God via the *sensus divinitatis*, and that this is an inbuilt part of human nature. Now when it comes to natural theology and arguments for the existence of God, although I think there are some pretty good arguments—

JB: "Two dozen or so"?

AP: Right, two dozen or so. But I don't think any one of them is or the whole bunch of them together are strong enough to support the sort of belief in God that, say, a serious Christian or Jew or Muslim actually has.

JB: I'm curious, actually—out of the two dozen or so arguments that you summarized in that piece, which is the strongest, if you had to say?

AP: I think the Ontological argument is one of the weaker ones, because the premise and conclusion are so close together. I would say the "Fine Tuning" arguments are quite good arguments. Also, I happen to like the argument from set theory, which goes something like this. There are all these sets. At the bottom level there are nonsets; at the next level, sets of nonsets; at the next level, sets of items at the first two levels, and so on. No set is a

member of itself. And sets have their members essentially; if a given member of set S had not existed, S would not have existed either. Now the way of thinking about sets that fits best with these characteristics is Cantor's: a set is really a matter of particulars being *collected*, that is, *thought together* by some mind. That's how I would think of sets. But then if there are all these sets—for example, if there's a set of natural numbers—the mind in question can't be a human mind, or even, I would say a finite mind. No such mind could collect and think together all the natural numbers. So the mind would have to be that of a being of enormously greater intellectual powers than human beings. And the best candidate, I would think, would be God. I think this is a pretty good argument. I also think the moral argument is a good argument. This is the argument that a certain act's being right or wrong essentially involves reference to God in one way or another; and some acts are right or wrong. I think it's a pretty good argument too. But with these and all the other arguments, you can sensibly dispute and reject all of them. For example, you can say that's not the way it is with morality at all. Even in a naturalistic universe, you say, there might very well be right and wrong, good and bad. And with respect to set theoretical arguments, you could just propose some other account of sets, although I don't know what it would be. In the same way, the fine tuning arguments can be opposed. So I think these arguments are pretty good arguments as far as philosophical arguments go, but they don't suffice to support genuine conviction that there is such a person as God.

JB: So do you think that, say, the project of Richard Swinburne is not quite on the mark? He's quite confident in probabilifying first the existence of God, and second the Resurrection. As you know, he recently said the resurrection

was... 94% probable?

AP: I think it was 97%.

JB: 97% probable. That's a pretty strong claim.

AP: Very strong. In his book *The Existence of God*, I think at the end what he claims to have shown is that given our evidence the existence of God is more likely than not.

JB: Right, more than 0.5

AP: More than 0.5. But again, that's pretty slender to actually build a conviction on.

JB: But the Resurrection is 0.97!

AP: That's a little hard to believe. It shouldn't turn out that way, that the probability of the Resurrection is so much higher than the probability of the existence of God. But I greatly respect his work; it's really excellent work. Still, taking the arguments the way he takes them, again I would say that the way in which I believe in God, or most people I know believe in God, wouldn't be supported or made justified or rational by virtue of an argument where the probability of God is about 0.5. It would have to be much greater than that.

JB: One thing a student brought up at the UM Socratic Club was in reaction to your article "Intellectual Sophistication and Basic Belief in God." You wrote that if the argument from evil has some degree of warrant for a person, but it's of less strength than belief in God, not even an attempt at a defeater-defeater is needed. Somebody suggested – and I don't know if this is a valid conception – that if you added together the warrants of all the atheological arguments, if that would provide a reason for the theist to develop defeater-defeaters or to

strengthen her belief in God. So if certain arguments individually have less warrant than the single belief in theism, can the host of them together still constitute an objection?

AP: The only argument that has any real bite or any real promise, it seems to me, is the argument from evil. I don't know what the other ones would be. There's Anthony Kenny who, following Wittgenstein, thinks that only something that has a body could have a mind. But is there any reason to believe that? Why couldn't there be a disembodied mind? I can easily conceive or imagine of myself as disembodied. Richard Dawkins has another argument: The existence of God, he says, is *extremely improbable* because God would have to be incredibly complex in order to have been able to create the world. I don't see the strength to that either. In fact, on the account of complexity Dawkins proposes—having many parts in an arrangement that would be very improbable on chance alone-- God, as theists think of him, would not be complex, because He is not material and hence doesn't literally have parts. Maybe there is some sense in which God is complex—He knows a lot, for example—but why think something complex in *that* sense would have to be improbable? Dawkins mentions another argument that goes like this: God has to be omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good; but if he's omniscient he can't change his mind; and if he can't change his mind, there's something he can't do, so he's not omnipotent after all. Again, not much of an argument. So you can add these anthitheistic arguments together, but I don't think you're going to get much more – maybe nothing more – than the problem of evil.

JB: But do you think warrants could be added together? Is that a sensible conception?

AP: I don't know if you can add warrants together, but you might have several arguments for the same conclusion where, taking them all together is one big argument with several parts – that's a stronger argument than any of the arguments taken individually. In fact, I'd say that's the way it is with the "Two Dozen or so Good theistic arguments."

JB: That's similar to Swinburne's approach.

AP: Right; it's the *cumulative case argument*, as they call it. The same could theoretically go for atheism, except that (as far as I can see) there is only one promising argument.

JB: On basic belief, one of the most common objections, which you do address, is that if belief in God can be basic, then any crazy belief can be basic. There's the a version of the "Great Pumpkin Objection" that I think Michael Martin proposes. And you do address this in *Warranted Christian Belief*. But could you just run through how you respond to this? Specifically, there is the suggestion that the Voodoo epistemologists could come out with a story like the Christian story, etc.

AP: Well the "Great Pumpkin Objection" put as you just put it, is obviously a non-starter. Suppose I think that elementary arithmetic beliefs can be taken as basic. Can't I say the same thing there: "If you can take those as basic, why can't you take *anything* as basic?" But clearly that doesn't make much sense. The mere fact that you say about certain beliefs that they are properly basic obviously doesn't in any way commit you to think that *all* beliefs are properly basic. That objection doesn't go anywhere.

Michael Martin's argument we can call "Son of Great Pumpkin." And it goes like this:

Couldn't the Voodoo epistemologists say the same thing? Couldn't she give the same argument about Voodoo that I give about Christian belief? And couldn't the naturalist also say the same thing? And doesn't this show that my argument is mistaken?

But that depends on what you think I was arguing for in that book. My conclusion was that there aren't any *de jure* objections that aren't based in *de facto* objections; there aren't any decent *de jure* objections that don't depend on *de facto* objections to theistic belief. My particular way of arguing for this is such that you might be able to say the same, not just for Christian belief, but for other kinds of theistic belief – Jewish belief, Muslim belief, as well. Maybe so. But you can't say the same for a Voodoo belief, or for a naturalistic belief, because the central part of my argument involved the thought that if Christianity is true, then very likely it is warranted. And a central premise here involves what God would want to do; it involves taking God as an agent who would want us to know about him. None of that's going to work out in the case of naturalism or Voodoo. But it might work out in these other cases I was mentioning. So the consequence would be that the same thing would go for these other theistic belief systems: if they are true they are probably warranted, and you won't be able to find any good *de jure* objections that aren't based in a *de facto* objection. But that's not a problem, as far as I can see. That's not a reason to turn up your nose at my argument. If what I was concluding was that Christian belief is *true* or that it has warrant sufficient for knowledge, then if you could give the same argument for beliefs incompatible with it, that would be a problem. But we don't have that situation at all.

JB: One possible frustration is that with some basic beliefs – like my basic belief that the

tree is there – not only do I have a convincing experience, but I also have the experience of other people corroborating that belief and so on. On the other hand, with basic belief in God, even given a very compelling religious experience, there are quite a few dissenters who are additionally epistemic peers in many ways. So imagine only schizophrenics didn't believe in God or something, it wouldn't be a concern. But there is widespread enough disbelief where it seems there's at least something different about belief in God than belief in, say, my mother. So if I believed in my imaginary friend and nobody else believed in it, I would have good reason to doubt my cognitive faculties. Admittedly belief in God is not in quite as dire a situation (since there is a large epistemic community of theists), but it's not as widespread a community that believes in trees.

AP: No, but it's pretty widespread. I would guess nine out of ten people in the world believe in God or something very much like God. It's the atheists and agnostics who are in a small minority and the atheists are in a *tiny* minority. So the theistic community is pretty substantial. And if you include not just the present but go back over history it would be at least that high overall. But there still is that difference, that's right. However, this is not enough to give me a defeater. Consider my philosophical beliefs. For any philosophical belief I hold, there are a lot of people who apparently are my epistemic peers, who disagree with me about that belief. Does that give me a defeater for any philosophical view I've got? If, let's say, 10% of the relevant community disagreeing with me is sufficient for my having a defeater, I wouldn't be able to hold any interesting philosophical beliefs at all!

JB: But it would be *remarkable* if there were as many tree-deniers as there are atheists,

wouldn't it? That would be remarkable.

AP: Yes, that would be remarkable. So perhaps 5% of the population of the world are atheists, and not nearly 5% are tree-deniers. There are very few tree-deniers.

JB: So there's some difference. Is belief in God therefore weaker in some sense?

AP: Well the Christian answer, of course, has to do with sin. There are what they used to call the "noetic effects of sin." That was the old Princeton phrase.

JB: That's a chapter in your book.

AP: Right.

JB: "Sin and its Cognitive Consequences."

AP: Right, that's what I'd be inclined to say. We human beings – our minds have been darkened in certain ways as a result of sin. Not only that but our wills have been warped so that many of us don't *want* it to be the case that there is some person as God. I have friends like that. A main obstacle for their being theists is that they didn't want it to be that there is this great being who is privy to your every thought and such that you owe him allegiance and obedience. They think it was a kind of insult to human autonomy that there be such a being. From a Christian perspective that's a result of pride, of sin, and that's one way in which there are cognitive consequences of sin, or noetic effects. And it need not be only in that way. So Christians have always thought that the noetic effects of sin are centered in our knowledge of God and our knowledge and reactions to other people. I would say that this accounts for the difference between the number of tree-deniers and the number of God-deniers.

JB: My last set of questions is on the evolutionary argument against naturalism. First of all, on the scholarly community, how do you find the reception of the argument in general?

AP: It's all over the place. I'm inclined to think that people either like it quite a bit or they really hate it. It's not as if most people are sort of semi-indifferent to it. Naturalists all tend to hate it, and lots of Christians really like it.

JB: Do you think it's convinced anyone against naturalism? Seems doubtful.

AP: I don't think it's convinced any mature naturalist philosophers. But it doesn't have to, in order to be a good argument. In order to be a useful argument, it might convince students. I remember giving this argument at the University of Wisconsin. Later on I heard one student say, "That was the best argument for the existence of God I've ever heard!" And another student I know who was sort of inclined toward being a theist at the time, became a theist and later on a Christian. So to be useful, even with respect to moving people, an argument doesn't have to be such that it moves a full-grown mature naturalist who has been established in naturalism for the last 30 years. But even if it didn't actually move anybody, it could still be a really good argument. First of all it could just be right, and that would be all by itself really good. And it also could encourage theistic and Christian thinkers, it could be a source of encouragement and fit in with other ways of supporting Christian belief and the like.

JB: I was reading one critical review of the argument, by Fitelson and Sober, and they asked some questions about the probability of R [the reliability of our cognitive faculties], and how it gets its warrant. How do you address the objection that R can get its support elsewhere,

rather than from E and N [the conjunction of evolution and naturalism]. Say, through some kind of basic belief in R, or through one's experience in the world.

AP: Well, I think we all do believe R in the basic way, and that it has warrant in that way, but that doesn't mean you can't get a defeater for it. I believe R in the basic way, but if I come to think I'm a brain in a vat, I'm going to have a defeater for it. If I come to think I have mad cow disease, or that I'm taking some drug that destroys reliability in four out of five cases, then I get defeaters for it.

JB: But if, as you suggest, it's merely inscrutable on E and N, and R has a great degree of warrant for a person, couldn't they simply believe that something improbable happened on E and N?

AP: Sometimes that works out. But this is a different case. Suppose there's a drug that destroys reliability, suppose I think I've taken it, and suppose I think the probability that somebody's cognitive faculties are reliable given that they've taken the drug is 0.1. The fact that ordinarily R has a great deal of warrant for me doesn't mean that it's perfectly sensible to think, "Well in my case something really unusual happened." That's not a reasonable reaction. It's not as if I have any contrary evidence. As a matter of fact, I couldn't really have evidence for "R" in this case. You have to think about your own case the way you'd think about somebody else's. So suppose I've learned about you, that you've taken this drug and the chances are nine out of ten that you're not reliable. I would not for a moment continue to believe you were reliable. I would certainly have a defeater for that belief, and I don't see how things would be any different in my own case.

JB: Maybe this is not properly analogous, but

if I have a belief that a friend of mine is doing well in school and then I find out several facts about his childhood that probablify that he would not do well in school, I'm not going to abandon my belief that he does well in school.

AP: No, certainly not. So I guess your point would be that there are plenty of things I might believe, on which R is unlikely, that don't constitute a defeater for R. And that will hold in general. It's not the case that if I come to believe X, which is such that the probability of some Y I believe is low on X, that X is automatically a defeater for Y. No, you have to look at these things one at a time. So again take the case where I know that you've taken this drug. I think that is a defeater, even though there might be other things I know with respect to which it's very likely that you *are* reliable. I mean, maybe you're a professor of physics. Maybe you've won the Nobel Prize, as far as that goes. Still, the fact that you've taken this drug trumps these other things. And I think it's the same thing with respect to N and E. These beliefs of yours about how it is that your cognitive faculties got to be the way they are – these are crucially relevant beliefs with respect to whether or not you properly think R is true.

JB: I've noticed that there are two strands, I would say, of what we might call "Christian Philosophy." There's a kind of popular literature written by people like Ravi Zacharias, maybe some by J.P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, etc. These guys publish a lot of literature, whereas there's a more analytic side including Alston, Quinn, Swinburne, yourself, and others, which we might call more "rigorous" work. Do you think this is a positive demarcation? Certainly when you publish a lot of popular literature, it's not necessarily as rigorous, and it also can inspire critics like Dawkins to respond to arguments at their

weakest and not at their strongest.

AP: Well, I think it's really important that philosophers not just do the more rigorous kind of thing, extremely important. If you had to choose between the two, I'm not sure which you should choose. It's very important that both be done. And I think too many philosophers – like myself in my early days anyway – value the one kind too much over the other, value the rigorous kind too highly. Partly it's just really fun to work on hard arguments and analyses and the like. Also, it gives you this big feeling of accomplishment when you get something right. You also get this prestige among your peers, whereas if you write popular stuff your peers may look their noses down upon you. But the fact is that for the Christian community, theologians, scientists, and others as well should do what they can to help support and encourage the whole Christian community – not just other philosophers or scientists or historians. So, my hats off to those guys, I'm delighted they do it. People like Bill Craig are perfectly capable of doing both. I've tried to do more of the other kind myself but I'm not all that successful at it. But I do try.

JB: That recent article on Dawkins was pretty good.

AP: Oh, did you like that one?

JB: Yeah. Speaking of popular philosophy, had you read C.S. Lewis' brief critique of Naturalism in his book *Miracles*? People have pointed out that it's very similar to your argument against the theory.

AP: No, I hadn't actually read his argument, and yes, people have pointed that out to me too. But it's not quite all that similar. He's talking about determinism there. And he says if

determinism is true, then I can't be confident in any of my beliefs. Or, putting it my way, my believing determinism is true would be a defeater for the idea that my cognitive faculties are reliable. But I don't think that's right. Suppose I thought they were determined, but determined by God. In fact, I think they *are* to a large degree determined. Or at least, if not determined, there certainly is a lot of strong inclination to accept them. It would be *really hard* for me to not believe that there's a book here or that I'm talking to a person. I don't know if it's quite determinism but it's in the neighborhood. With respect to determinism, then, what matters is what you think the ultimate causes of your belief are. If the ultimate cause is a God who has designed us in a certain way to resemble Him, other things in having knowledge, that's not a defeater at all. So I don't think Lewis is quite right on that point. He's right that Naturalism offers a defeater, but it's not via determinism.

JB: You gave an address at the turn of the millennium on the state of Christian philosophy. There has certainly been an increase in the latter half of the 20th century. Do you think the situation looks good? One thing I've noticed is that, at least in the English-speaking world, there is certainly division between secular and religious philosophy, although I don't know what the situation is in the European academy.

AP: Right; there is a clear and obvious division between secular and non-secular, secular and Christian, or secular and more broadly theistic approaches. This division is more obvious and more vigorous than it was, say, 50 years ago. That's in part, I think, because there are far more theistically-inclined philosophers now in the US than there were then. Fifty years ago there were surely some Christian philosophers

around, though not nearly as many as now. And the ones that were around were for the most part rather close-mouthed about it. It wasn't part of the public philosophical community; and many philosophers thought that being a Christian and being a philosopher were mutually exclusive. It wasn't a major stream in the community the way it is now. That's one big difference and a very important one.

JB: So you think it's gained respectability?

AP: Respectability? Respectability is very much in the eye of the beholder. There is a recent spate of books by atheist philosophers, who don't think Christian philosophy is respectable; but many others do think it is. In any event, it certainly is part of the mainstream now. There are journals devoted to it like *Philosophia Christi* and *Faith and Philosophy*; and several others. Articles which presuppose Christian belief or at any rate take it seriously are published in other journals as well. In fact Quentin Smith, himself no friend of Christian philosophy, laments, in a recent issue of *Philo* that philosophy has become desecularized. This is clearly a significant change from fifty years ago.