What Grandma Can't Know

It has long been an attraction of Reformed apologetics that it validates the beliefs of Christians with no special philosophical or historical training. Surely, it seems, it should not be necessary for the little child, the kindly old lady, or the hard-working farmer, not called to abstract argument, to have explicit evidences for Christian belief in order to be epistemically justified in it. In this context, the evidentialist is easily cast as the grumpy uncle of the Christian family, setting impossibly high standards for ordinary people and perhaps even for himself, and implying that God is not pleased by a childlike act of faith.[1] By arguing for the instigation of the Holy Spirit or some other spiritual faculty available to the unlearned, Reformed apologists champion the intuitively plausible position that one need not be a philosopher to hold legitimately to Christian belief.

It would have been relatively simple for anti-evidentialists to confine themselves to ridiculing the demand for evidence as unbiblical and asserting that Grandma has the Holy Spirit to guide her and no need for the arguments of mere men. Indeed, this is the form in which one encounters the position at some Bible colleges and among the laymen in many a church. But *in this form* the position wears its anti-intellectual nature proudly, and it is hardly likely to commend itself to, say, a Christian graduate student in philosophy.

And in fact, there seems *prima facie* no reason for non-evidentialists to deny a valuable role to philosophy. There are many intellectuals all too eager to attack Christianity, and bad philosophy requires good philosophy to answer it. This may be especially important to strengthen the faith of Christians who come to have doubts. Johnny's mother and father hold their own faith

---

[1]See, e.g., Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), pp. 157-8.

in a simple manner, but they will be happy if, when Johnny goes to college and is ridiculed by an atheist professor, he encounters a Christian professor who helps him find the answers to his questions that will bolster his faith. This is a very moderate way of taking Reformed apologetics; perhaps it is merely a recognition of the division of labor implicit in St. Paul's metaphor of the different parts of the body.

But in this case, appearances are misleading, as one discovers by examining the philosophically careful and detailed Reformed epistemology of William Alston and Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga argues that for mundane beliefs about tables, chairs, and lunch, we simply need to "trust our faculties," that our faculties can produce warranted beliefs in these areas in the absence of any evidence, and that Christian belief is in very much the same situation. *If* a benevolent God has designed us well to be truth-directed beings, and *if* His truth-directed design plan for us includes our believing in him by way of the "internal instigation of the Holy Spirit" or the *sensus divinitatis* without argument, and *if* these belief-forming mechanisms are functioning properly in the environment for which they were designed, then, says Plantinga, they will produce warranted properly basic beliefs. And the same is all that can be said for many of our other belief-producing mechanisms, such as trusting our senses. Even those mechanisms that operate inferentially, such as arguing inductively, must simply be trusted. They will produce warranted beliefs if and only if they are well-designed, functioning properly in their intended environment, and so forth.

The epistemic externalism central to this position makes it very radical indeed. It entails that what I shall call traditional rationality is irrelevant to belief in God (and to other beliefs as well), and hence it relegates philosophy to the role merely of informing all of us that we do not

need evidence and that evidence would not give us what we want even if we found it.

Traditional rationality and externalist epistemology

A commitment to traditional rationality, as I am using the term, co-joined with a foundationalist structure, is roughly the following position: Beliefs can be rationally held either inferentially or non-inferentially. But the classification of a belief as non-inferentially justified is not an arbitrary one. Nor is a belief justified without inference merely as a function of extrinsic facts about the means of belief formation (for example, the fact that a belief was produced by a mechanism designed to produce true beliefs without argument). The class of non-inferentially justified beliefs is a small one, and it can be told whether a belief belongs in that class by an examination of the type of content the belief has and, especially, the type of access the subject has to the truth conditions for the belief. Beliefs that require inference must be inferred from those that do not. Furthermore, they can be inferred fallaciously; there are correct and incorrect forms of inference, and it is possible for someone sufficiently philosophically trained and astute to tell decisively the difference between them simply by an examination of the inference form, without knowing empirical information about, for example, how successful this sort of inference is in the real world or about how the beings who use the inference form were designed to operate. Finally, traditional rationality is rationality for all possible worlds. It is not the case that humans might be rational (in this sense) when they reason in accordance with induction while some alien race of beings might, because of contingent facts of which they are unaware, be rational always to expect the opposite of what has happened heretofore.

It is this sort of rationality that externalist epistemology challenges. Externalism places enormous weight upon the nature of the belief-forming mechanism, requiring *at least* that this

mechanism be in some sense externally reliable, that is, that it produce a satisfactory proportion of true beliefs in this world or in some relevant set of possible worlds, but in any event, in the world outside of the subject's mind. Plantinga requires further that the belief be produced by a truth-aimed module of a design plan functioning properly in its intended environment, but these are extrinsic characteristics unrelated to traditional rationality.[2] A belief could have all the traditional rationality one could wish for but not have positive epistemic status in Plantinga's system if it were produced by the wrong sort of mechanism. Traditional rationality, therefore, is not a sufficient condition for externalist justification or what Plantinga calls "warrant"--what we might call P-rationality.

Moreover, beliefs with all sorts of content might be "properly basic" in Plantinga's system; it is not the intrinsically discernible nature of the belief that insures that it does not require argument but rather the nature of the module of the design plan that produced it. And even inference forms that appear fallacious on any internal examination might produce warrant; Plantinga explicitly argues that anti-inductive reasoning might be "rational" in his sense for the inhabitants of a planet circling Alpha Centauri, although it is not "rational" for us.[3] So traditional rationality is not necessary for P-rationality.

William Alston and the unfolding of externalism

William Alston develops a system that, while not identical to Plantinga's, is very similar, and Alston also provides an interesting example of a philosopher whose initial ambitions are rather

---

[2]Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 19.

[3]Ibid., pp. 172-3.

modest but who ends up in a radical position as a result of accepting externalism.

One of Alston's most influential essays is his 1980 piece, "Level Confusions in Epistemology."[4] Alston believes that a confusion between, for example, "S is justified in believing that p" and "S is justified in believing that S is justified in believing that p" lies behind much resistance to externalist epistemology. Significantly, he also says that such a confusion lies behind the stringent limitations many philosophers place upon the class of foundational beliefs.[5]

Alston is especially interested in a general version of "the Grandma problem" (the problem of the unreflective knowledge of unsophisticated subjects), and he considers externalism to be attractive precisely because he thinks that it goes some distance toward solving it. He casts internalists as overly restrictive and ungenerous, ignoring the possibility that the ordinary man has knowledge; in short, he makes against internalists exactly the accusations leveled against evidentialists in apologetics. He himself is merely asking us to take an "experimental look" at externalism, thereby, among other things, freeing ourselves from these unnecessary restrictions.

In his 1986 article "Epistemic Circularity," Alston draws out one of the more apparently problematic consequences of externalism--its commitment to permitting a certain type of circular reasoning--while remaining relatively untroubled by this aspect of the position.[6] With great care, Alston argues that a reliability constraint on justification guarantees that one can never answer

---

[4]William Alston, “Level Confusions in Epistemology,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5 (1980), 135-50. Reprinted in *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 153-171. Page references are to the reprinted version.

[5]Ibid., pp. 159-62.

[6]William Alston, “Epistemic Circularity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1986). Reprinted in *Epistemic Justification*, pp. 319-49. Page references are to the reprinted version.

decisively all the questions that might legitimately arise about a belief's justification. As Alston points out, if you accept a reliability constraint, you will always have to ask (perhaps among other things) if a belief is reliably produced if you investigate the question of whether the belief is justified.[7]

Suppose a subject is trying to defend the proposition that sense perception is reliable. From an externalist perspective, he *can* use as premises instances in which he has seemed to perceive a tree and (here's the rub) "there was really a tree there"--yielding the conclusion that sense experience is indeed a reliable source of beliefs. But he is only justified (on this model) in believing that a tree was really there if the source of that belief (sense perception) is reliable, and so the question of the reliability of sense perception arises yet again. The reliability of sense perception is tacitly assumed in this attempt to argue for it.

Alston argues that this epistemic circularity is inevitable. But, he insists, this does not prevent arguments exhibiting it from being justificatory.[8] In his claim that epistemic circularity (or an infinite epistemic regress) is unavoidable, he demonstrates his commitment to the first part of the definition of externalism given above: Because traditional rationality is not in general *sufficient* for externalist positive epistemic status, the epistemic status of one's belief about, say, the external world will be open to a reasonable empirical question regarding whether that belief was properly produced. And if one attempts to answer this question, to argue that the belief was indeed properly produced, that conclusion will in turn be open to the same question: Was *it* produced by a reliable belief-forming mechanism? And so on, infinitely.

---

[7]Ibid., pp. 322-6.

[8]Ibid., pp. 332-4.

The externally reliable production of beliefs just isn't the sort of thing one can perceive infallibly, so a new empirical question, and an entirely reasonable one, can arise any time one makes the empirical claim that a particular belief was reliably produced, or that a belief that a belief was reliably produced was *itself* reliably produced, and so forth. Hence, on an externalist model, our modes of belief formation about the world around us cannot be decisively shown to be epistemically good.

The impossibility of such decisive showing (which Alston dubs "fully reflective justification") leaves him for the time being unfazed. In "Epistemic Circularity," he takes its chief consequence to be the humbling of a particular (perhaps hubristic) philosophical ambition.[9] But by the time he writes *The Reliability of Sense Perception* in 1993, Alston admits that the consequences of his defense of epistemic circularity are a little more serious.

Alston's defense of epistemic circularity implicitly allows track record arguments that rely for their premises on the very source they purport to defend. But if such circular arguments can justify, they must in the name of consistency be allowed for very dubious practices indeed. Suppose, for example, that one is trying to argue that crystal ball gazing is a reliable source of beliefs. And suppose that one uses as premises the claims that 1) the crystal ball predicted a particular event and 2) the event really happened. But suppose that one's only evidence for 2 is the fact that one has seen the event again in the crystal ball! This is exactly analogous to the argument for the reliability of sense perception from sensorily produced premises, and hence Alston has no principled reason to disallow it.

The problem here arises from the second part of externalism: Traditional rationality is not

---

[9]Ibid., pp. 346-7.

necessary for positive epistemic status. It is quite obvious from the perspective of traditional rationality that the mere appearance of events in a crystal ball does not provide a *rationally* adequate ground for believing that the event has taken place. There is no "crystal ball inference form" that moves from premises about appearances in a crystal ball to conclusions about the real world and that is certifiable as rationally legitimate by careful, philosophically informed inspection. But from an externalist perspective this does not matter. If crystal ball gazing were *in fact* reliable, then the appearance of events in a crystal ball would provide an *externally* "adequate ground" for beliefs about the events; hence the premises of the track record argument for the reliability of crystal ball gazing would have externalist positive epistemic status.

But when it comes to defending crystal ball gazing by a crystal ball argument, Alston finds himself a bit uncomfortable:

> What I pointed out in the previous paragraph is that *if sense perception is reliable*, a track record argument will suffice to show that it is. Epistemic circularity does not in and of itself disqualify the argument. But even granting that point, the argument will not do its job unless we *are* justified in accepting its premises; and that is the case only if sense perception is in fact reliable. This is to offer a stone instead of bread. We can say the same of any belief-forming practice whatever, no matter how disreputable. We can just as well say of crystal ball gazing that if it *is* reliable, we can use a track record argument to show that it is reliable. But when we ask whether one or another source of belief is reliable, we are interested in *discriminating* those that can reasonably be trusted from those that cannot. Hence merely showing that *if* a given source is reliable it can be shown by its record to be reliable does nothing to indicate that the source belongs with the sheep rather than with the goats.[10]

Exactly. Or, to put the point rather differently, if traditional rationality is not necessary for positive epistemic status, then many *seemingly* disreputable practices might nevertheless be such as to confer externalist justification or warrant on their outputs, and the fact that they can only be

---

[10]William Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 17.

defended in an epistemically circular fashion does not allow a good externalist to place them with the goats rather than with the sheep.

Externalism and Apologetics

The implications of all of this for apologetics are straightforward. If traditional rationality is neither necessary nor sufficient for positive epistemic status, then it is irrelevant, and this is true for religious beliefs as for any others.

Imagine a young man who comes to doubt the existence of God but eventually assembles a set of arguments--both metaphysical (such as the cosmological argument) and empirical (such as the argument from the resurrection of Jesus Christ). And suppose, for the sake of the argument, that these are impeccable from the perspective of traditional rationality. Is this particularly helpful to him from an externalist perspective? Can we say even now, in any decisive way, that his belief in God has externalist positive epistemic status? No. For the rational cogency of his inference forms, the infallibility of his foundational premises, even the conjunction of such conditions is not enough in itself to make his beliefs "rational" when this is understood externalistically (P-rational, as I used the term above). If he uses inference to the best explanation or induction, and if these do not meet the extrinsic requirements, such as being reliably truth-conducive, being designed to operate in the environment in which he is using them, and the like, then his belief is still not P-rational. And if he moves up a level and investigates *whether* his belief-forming practices have those properties, he will gather more evidence and make inferences from it, and the same question will arise about the belief-forming mechanisms he uses there. So for all he can tell decisively, he might be P-irrational.

On the other hand, imagine Linus in the pumpkin patch, believing year after year that the

Great Pumpkin will arrive, praying to the Great Pumpkin, holding fast to his faith in the Great Pumpkin even when he is repeatedly let down. Does the fact that his religious belief is obviously irrational from a traditional perspective *in and of itself* mean that, on an externalist model, his belief is irrational? Of course not. For it is possible that the Great Pumpkin really does exist and has designed people to believe in him despite an exceptionless record of failed predictions--to believe anti-inductively. And it might be that, in the grand scheme of things, taking into account all of time and space or some relevant set of possible worlds, this means of belief formation is reliable. The fact that in Linus's case and thus far the Internal Instigation of the Great Pumpkin (if the Great Pumpkin exists) has produced a string of false beliefs isn't a devastating criticism from an externalist perspective. As Linus shouts when Lucy urges him to curse the Great Pumpkin and give up, "Just wait until next year!" So for all we can tell decisively, Linus *might* be P-rational.

So maybe gathering evidence for the existence of the Christian God can lead to justified/warranted belief, and maybe it can't. Maybe there is some other deity who has designed us, and we are malfunctioning when we believe in the Christian God and ignore the claims of UFO worshipers. Once the issue has moved entirely to the *de facto* question of what our design plan is, how well it works, whether our belief-forming mechanisms are actually successful in the long run, and so forth, all bets are off.

But in that case, it is hard to see what the vocation of a Christian philosopher amounts to. It can't be the role of answering poor anti-Christian arguments, because we can't tell decisively if those arguments are poor. Nor can it be providing good evidence to shore up the wavering faith of the Christian under attack, because we can't tell decisively if the evidence we come up with is good. So why bother? And *if* a spontaneous fideistic belief in God, "based" at most upon an

emotion, is prompted by the right kind of mechanism, then that's good enough anyway. So we might as well make a leap of faith and hope we're right as go to all the trouble to answer objections and investigate arguments and in the end just hope we're right.

Plantinga's responses

Alvin Plantinga is well aware of this type of objection to his position. To the claim that properly basic beliefs are not responsible to evidence, Plantinga responds that many beliefs can be properly basic and yet nonetheless be called into doubt by counter-evidence acting as a defeater. He gives an example of a man who believes (supposedly "in the basic way") that his friend has been to the Grand Tetons but then comes to doubt this on the basis of the friend's wife's testimony to the contrary.[11]

It is true that Plantinga's view can accommodate this example. It *might* be that the wife's testimony is the kind of thing by which a well-functioning individual would be moved to doubt. But as Richard Fumerton has pointed out, the incorporation of defeaters in Plantinga's epistemology actually does nothing to answer accusations of insensitivity to evidence. For the notion of counter-evidence as a defeater is not *internalistically* defined.[12] It *seems* right to say that the man in the story should (assuming the wife has always been trustworthy) take her testimony into account, but if evidential weight and rationality are all defined in external terms, this is by no means so obvious. Perhaps, given the actual design plan, etc., it represents a cognitive defect, a hyper-scrupulousness, to be moved by anything she says that contradicts the

---

[11]Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 343-4.

[12]Richard Fumerton, "Plantinga, Warrant, and Christian Belief," *Philosophia Christi* (2001), pp. 346ff.

friend's initial claim.

Similarly for belief in God, there is no way to tell simply by the nature of the objection brought and its logical or probabilistic relevance to Christian theism that we are P-rational in being moved by it or even in bothering to answer it. Perhaps all objections to Christianity are snares of the devil or the rebellious sophistries of fallen mankind, and we will be functioning properly and be led to more true beliefs in the long run if we resolutely ignore them. Certainly someone who takes this stance is not open to any particular Plantingian criticism. There is, again, nothing about the intrinsic epistemic situation that allows us to find the P-rational response to putative counter-evidence.

In response to various versions of the Great Pumpkin objection, Plantinga has sometimes expressed difficulty even in construing the objection in a plausible way. He considers casting it as the claim that, if belief in God is properly basic, anything is; he points out, quite rightly, that nothing in his system entails this. Some beliefs might have the properties required for being properly basic while others do not. He wonders if the objection involves the claim that it is *impossible* that one should be internalistically justified in holding to Great Pumpkinism, and to this he makes the obvious response that we can conceive of situations in which one became, as a result of additional evidence, internalistically justified in believing in the Great Pumpkin or in other things that presently seem bizarre.[13]

But elsewhere, he shows a fairly clear understanding of the internalist objection.

> What, precisely, is it that the internalist doesn't like about the externalist approach to these matters? ... Well, perhaps one thing is this. The internalist believes that if you know some proposition p, then you must have something like a good reason or basis for believing that

[13]Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 343, 346.

> p is indeed true. Further, this good reason must be available to *you*...You must be able to tell, just from your own resources and without relying on any mere assumptions...that p is really true....The externalist, however, proposes an account of knowledge...that doesn't satisfy this requirement. He says you might know something, but have no way to be assured that it is true; alternatively, you can be assured only by assuming that your cognitive faculties are in fact reliable....[14]

Plantinga is painting with a broad brush here; he acknowledges that internalists can be foundationalists, so not everything has to be defended by a *reason* on an internalist account. But even there, as he discusses elsewhere, internalists want some principled distinction between the types of things that belong in the foundations and those that do not.

Whether we are talking about basic or inferred beliefs, the trouble is this: If even someone who can see probabilistic relations and epistemic principles with perfect clarity cannot in principle tell decisively which beliefs are rational and which are not, then it is quite arbitrary to treat some as rational and others as irrational. And this is where the ludicrous consequences come in. After all, why do we call UFO worship or Great Pumpkin worship or crystal ball reading "disreputable" or "crazy"? Clearly, it is because we are convinced that the people who engage in such practices are *not in fact* meeting, nor even coming close to meeting, standards of traditional rationality. The problem raised by the Great Pumpkin objection is that this fact, in itself, *does not matter* to the Plantingian, who might without blushing boast that his belief also fails utterly to meet such standards. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga does attack the argument for Christianity from the resurrection as probabilistically poor.[15] Moreover, he states explicitly that he does not

---

[14]Plantinga, "Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief," *Philosophia Christi* (2001), pp. 389-90.

[15]Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 268ff.

know of *any* good arguments for Christian belief.[16] This does not faze him at all, given his claim that belief in Christianity is properly basic. But should not a serious failure to meet any discernible standards of traditional rationality be a problem? If Christian belief is wildly irrational *in traditional terms*, we can only hold to Christian belief by means of something suspiciously like dogmatic foot-stomping. And if this is not a problem to the Plantingian, then the Plantingian is an advocate of dogmatic foot-stomping, a conclusion borne out by such passages as this:

> The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational. ... Followers of Bertrand Russell ... may disagree; but how is that relevant? ... The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples [of properly basic beliefs], not to theirs. ... [T]he Reformed epistemologist can properly hold that belief in the Great Pumpkin is not properly basic, even though he holds that belief in God is properly basic and even if he has no full fledged criterion of proper basicality. ... Thus the Reformed epistemologist may concur with Calvin in holding that God has implanted in us a natural tendency to see his hand in the world around us; the same cannot be said for the Great Pumpkin, there being no Great Pumpkin and no natural tendency to accept beliefs about the Great Pumpkin.[17]

So there.

Conclusion

Dyed-in-the-wool Reformed epistemologists may object to my terminology and to my obvious dislike of their project. As for terminology, you *can* define "rational" to mean "believed merely because it was stated by a person in striped socks" if you wish. Words are docile creatures and must do what they are told, even if you don't pay them extra. But this Humpty Dumpty move will hardly satisfy someone who, quite understandably, thinks such beliefs clearly irrational. Aside from terminological issues, though, Reformed epistemologists are likely to admit cheerfully that

---

[16]Plantinga, "Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief," p. 398.

[17]Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in Michael Peterson, et. al., eds., *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 320.

my characterization of the *content* of their position is fair and to argue that we all just have to get used to the situation. They frequently bring forward a *tu quoque* against internalists (which it is beyond the scope of this paper to answer), insisting that the sort of justification they offer is "as good as it gets."[18]

I would suggest that, if the "I'm right and you're wrong" of the last quotation is the best we can get on an externalist model, then we should work hard to find something better. But my main goal here has been to draw out the radical consequences of Reformed epistemology. Reformed epistemology entails that there are many highly controversial claims, claims that do not fall into any definite and circumscribed categories such as "self-evident" or "incorrigible" or even the more generous "evident to the senses," to which anyone can nevertheless help himself without so much as a shred of relevant evidence that favors them, in any old-fashioned sense of "relevant" and "evidence" and "favors." And this is epistemically okay, *if* it is epistemically okay, because of external circumstances of belief-formation that the subject need know nothing about and that can be investigated only by making other, equally questionable, assumptions. So *if* belief in Christianity is epistemically good and belief in incompatible religious claims epistemically bad, this is because Christians are right and others are wrong, and Christians can and should take their stand on the insistence that, after all, they are right.

I submit that this is by no means the modest division of labor between layman and specialist that may have initially attracted some to Reformed apologetics. What Grandma needs to know in order to have a rational belief in God and whether she does know it are very interesting

---

[18]See, e.g., Plantinga, "Internalism, Externalism, Defeaters and Arguments for Christian Belief," p. 390.

questions. They are likely to be asked by people who have a philosophical curiosity about standards of rationality and a philosopher's notion that there *are* such standards, even if they are hard to hammer out. We will hardly answer them satisfactorily merely by saying that Grandma *can't* know about God in any philosophically interesting sense, but that this is all right, because we are all fideists now.