

## Plantinga's Christian epistemology

Christians as well as Muslims and Jews are often criticized for (allegedly) lacking real evidence, good arguments, for their religious beliefs in general and for their belief that God exists in particular. The idea seems to be that these believers *ought* to have these sorts of grounds – backing – for such beliefs – that they are blameworthy for not holding their religious beliefs in this way. Alvin Plantinga has produced a mass of material purporting to show that theists in general, and more particularly Christian theists, are invulnerable to this line of attack.

How so? Well, the answer is buried in a fairly dense, and very impressive, thicket of reasoning. I will do my best to spell out a very small part of it; but I cannot guarantee that I understand his view correctly.

A belief is **basic** if, and only if, it is accepted, but not on the basis of any other beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Plantinga “Is Belief in God Properly Basic? P. 41. If Descartes’ belief in God was really based upon the arguments given in his *Meditations* then, in his case, the belief was not basic.) I take it *our* question is

Here is a ‘first approximation’ account of warrant.

A belief *b* held by person *P* is *warranted* for *P* only if:

- (1) *b* has been produced in *P* by cognitive faculties that are working properly (functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *P*’s kinds of cognitive faculties.
- (2) The segment of the design plan governing the production of *b* is aimed at the production of true beliefs.
- (3) There is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true.
- (4) *P*’s cognitive faculties are operating according to a design plan reliably aimed at truth.<sup>2</sup>

There are at least two different ways (or senses) in which a basic belief can be *properly* basic:

- (1) A belief is properly basic for a person “if it is indeed basic for him (he doesn’t accept it on the evidential basis of other propositions) and, furthermore, he is *justified* in holding it in the basic way: he is within

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whether or not, *for some people*, the belief in God is properly basic – whether or not the belief *can* be properly basic.

<sup>2</sup> See *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 19.

his epistemic rights, is not irresponsible, is violating no epistemic or other duties in holding that belief in that way.”<sup>3</sup>

(2) A belief *p* is properly basic for a person, S, (in the second sense) “...if and only if S accepts *p* in the basic way, and furthermore *p* has *warrant* for S, accepted in that way.”<sup>4</sup>

I assume that we will be using ‘properly basic’ in the second sense.

Plantinga holds that, generally speaking, the belief that a personal God exists is both (1) warranted, and (2) basic. In this way the belief is like the belief that the world around us is not some sort of illusion, the belief that the people we meet are conscious beings, and the belief that we have existed for more than a few seconds. According to Plantinga, we don’t really need arguments in support of these beliefs in order to be justified in holding them.

Plantinga also holds that if a personal God exists then his (Plantinga’s) belief that such a God exists is warranted; but if a personal God does *not* exist then, probably, his belief is *not* warranted.

If there is no such person as God, of course, then there is no such thing as a *sensus divinitatis*; and what truth-aimed faculty would be such that it is working at the limit of its ability in producing the belief that there is

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<sup>3</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

such a person as God, if that latter belief is false? It is exceedingly hard to think of decent candidates.<sup>5</sup>

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These considerations suggest that if theistic belief is false, it is not produced by cognitive processes successfully aimed at the truth, and hence does not have warrant.<sup>6</sup>

I think he is plainly right about this. Given this view, it is clear that atheists should say that Plantinga's belief in a personal God is probably *not* properly basic.

Suppose that we are brains in a vat. And suppose that, in spite of this fact, when we 'talk', or think, about 'brains' and 'vats' we mean brains and vats.

In these circumstances, could our belief that we are *not* brains in a vat be properly basic? The answer seems obvious. If that is our situation then we are not in an 'appropriate epistemic environment' for forming beliefs about our real situation.

But then, if we are discussing the alleged possibility that we are brains in a vat with someone who claims not to know for certain whether or not she is a brain in a vat, it is not helpful to tell her that our belief that we are not brains in a vat is properly basic. Clearly she should reply that she doesn't know

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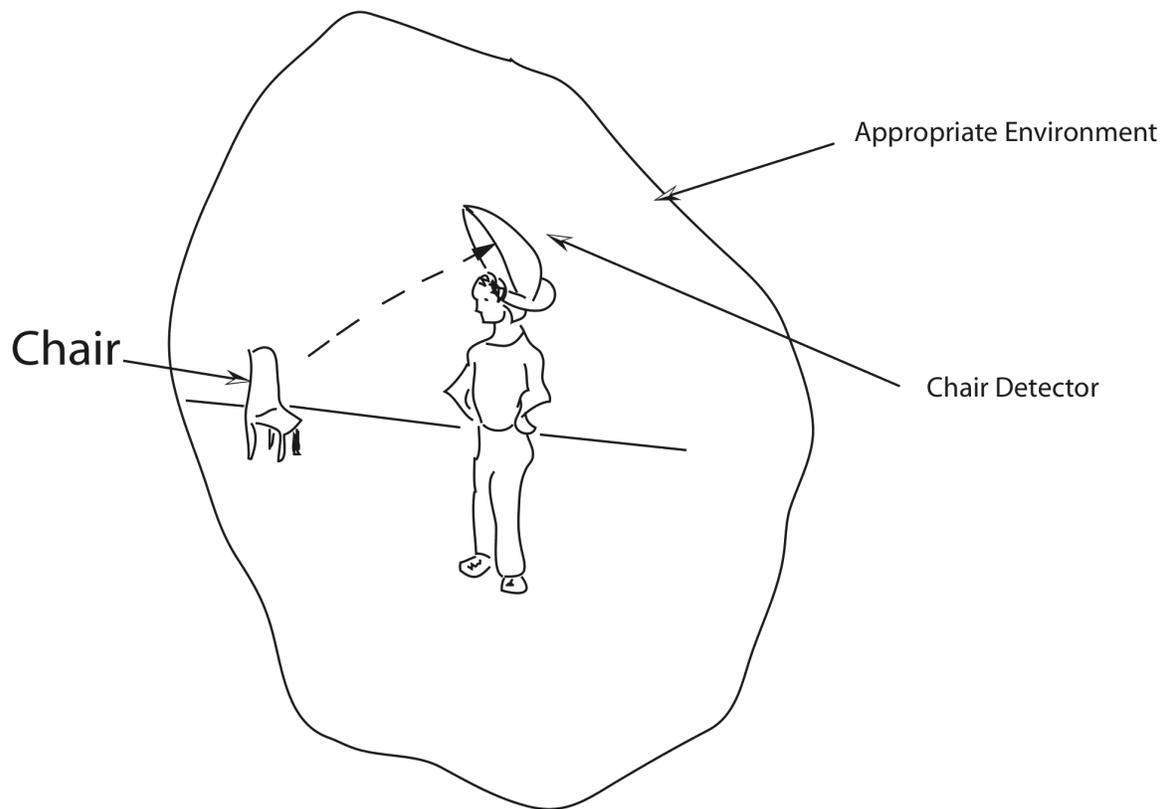
<sup>5</sup> A *sensus divinitatis* is, so to speak, a God detecting apparatus.

<sup>6</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief* p.187.

whether or not our belief is properly basic. The claim that our belief is properly basic looks unhelpful and question begging. In fact, I think, she might well ask us how we can possibly *know* that our belief is properly basic. What could we say in reply? Is our belief that our belief about brains in a vat is properly basic itself properly basic?

Let's assume that a 'Chair Detector ' is a 'properly functioning cognitive faculty' and that it is well designed as a detector of chairs. Obviously, this device is *ipso facto* also a detector of the *absence* of chairs. (Turn it on and scan the room. If it is working properly and it doesn't signal the presence of a chair, then it is, in effect, telling you that there aren't any chairs in this room.)

Suppose there are two people in the room and they both have Chair Detectors. These people form beliefs in regard to chairs on the basis of the reports of their own Chair Detector. Now one of the detectors reports the presence of a chair and the other reports the absence of chairs.. Clearly, one of the detectors is not functioning properly. Hence, at least one of the people in the room has an *unwarranted* belief in regards to the chair situation. In fact, since they do not know which Chair Detector is defective and do know that one is, it looks as though both beliefs are unwarranted.



Plantinga believes in a personal God. He also believes that his belief in God is properly basic, or, more precisely, that various situations (for instance seeing “the blazing glory of the heavens from a mountainside at 13,000 feet”) stir up his *sensus divinitatis*<sup>7</sup> (i.e. God detector) and he finds himself thinking something like: “God must be great to have created this magnificent heavenly host.”<sup>8</sup> The thought is not the conclusion of some reasoning. It is (allegedly) properly basic, and it entails that (a personal?) God actually exists.

<sup>7</sup> “The *sensus divinitatis* is a disposition or set of dispositions to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity. Calvin thinks in particular of some of nature’s grand spectacles.” *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 173-174.

To put it crudely, the sight of that vast array of stars, and other similar occurrences, trigger Plantinga's alleged *sensus divinitatis*. It doesn't follow that there really is a God. If there is no God, then Plantinga's alleged '*sensus divinitatis*' is defective – it is triggered when it shouldn't be. That is to say, it isn't really a *sensus divinitatis*. Hence the thought induced by the stars etc. is not properly basic. If there is a God, and the *sensus divinitatis* is working properly, and the surroundings are appropriate, the thought is properly basic.

What sort of device would we need in order to detect the *non-existence* of God? Suppose that one possible creator and sustainer of the universe is a sadistic really nasty entity.<sup>9</sup> Let's make it a rule that such an entity should not be called 'God.' A well-designed device for the detection of this entity (the *sensus monstrositatus*) is antithetical to the *sensus divinitatis*. (It is implanted in us by the Monster. Nevertheless it is reliable. He wants us to realize, occasionally, that we are in his clutches.)

I would like to learn that *sensus monstrositatus* experiences are *not* properly basic; but why couldn't they be? Is it, so to speak, a matter of voting? There are far more firings of our alleged *sensus divinitatis* than of our alleged *sensus monstrositatus* – so theism is properly basic and Monsterism isn't?

One upshot of all this is that people who think there is no God should simply reject any claim that someone's belief in God is properly basic. They can do

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<sup>9</sup> Here I have in mind the 'Cosmic Sadist' C. S. Lewis worried about in the misery that followed the death of his wife. See John Beversluis *C.S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion, Revised and Updated*, Chapter 10.

this on the grounds that, as they see it, our alleged *sensus divinitatis* regularly generates false belief, that is to say there is no such thing.

What about people who don't know whether or not God exists? I suppose they should say that they can neither accept nor reject the claim that belief in God is (at least in some cases) properly basic. They just don't know.

Here is another upshot. On the supposition that some people have an alleged *sensus divinitatus* and others have an alleged *sensus monstrositatus* how could we legitimately come to the conclusion that the alleged *sensus divinitatus* is the real thing while the alleged *sensus monstrositatus* only generates illusions? It looks as though here we would have to resort to plain old arguments – reasoning and evidence, or just throw up our hands in despair.