

WARRANT AND EPISTEMIC VIRTUES:  
TOWARD AN AGENT-RELIABILIST ACCOUNT OF  
PLANTINGA'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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## PREFACE

This project was born out of a desire to reconcile Alvin Plantinga's theory of knowledge with what I perceived to be the better elements of virtue epistemology. After wading through the somewhat disorienting field of literature on the latter topic, I quickly came to realize the irreconcilable differences between externalist models and pure virtue models. I was pleased to find, however, that the recent work of writers such as W. Jay Wood, Robert C. Roberts, John Greco, and others had begun to pave the way for such a union, although the result has found virtue epistemology more significantly altered than its externalist counterpart. Nonetheless, I decided to capitalize on this progress and explore how Plantinga's proper function might incorporate a more developed account of the intellectual virtues, and this essay is the result of my research. I suspect that it will primarily be of interest to those already somewhat familiar with Plantinga's epistemology, but also for those interested in the emerging field of virtue epistemology.

There are many areas in this study that I have left untouched or underdeveloped for the sake of focus. For example, I have not mentioned Plantinga's now famous evolutionary argument against naturalism, nor have I gone into the merits of Plantinga's theory when compared to rival epistemological models. I have not argued the viability of Reformed epistemology or its applicability to theistic belief, and I have put

aside the numerous topics related to Plantinga's religious epistemology. My hope is that a more clear and lucid work has resulted because of it. I have hardly begun to say all there is to say about my own topic, but rather have pointed a way in which this new framework might be conceived. If that has been accomplished, then I will be satisfied.

I would like to thank my committee, Lawrence Pasternack, Doren Recker, Eric Reitan, and particularly James Cain, for their willingness to undertake this thesis as I gradually worked through draft after draft. I am especially grateful to Dr. Reitan for the Reformed epistemology seminar where these thoughts first began to develop and to Dr. Cain for fostering my interest in the philosophy of religion through several seminars and independent studies. And many thanks to Murry Duevel, an ever-present source of help and guidance through the wilderness of university politics. I humbly thank my parents, Tim and Debbie, who have been nothing but supportive throughout all my educational endeavors. And finally, I cannot thank my wife, Molly, enough for her longsuffering spirit through my many late nights and frayed nerves during my time as a graduate student at OSU. Many heartfelt thanks to all of you.

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## NOMENCLATURE

A/C	Aquinas / Calvin model
AR	Agent Reliabilism
IDD	intrinsic defeater-defeater
RO	the Reformed objection to natural theology
S	cognitive subject
SD	<i>sensus divinitatis</i>
WCB	<i>Warranted Christian Belief</i>
WCD	<i>Warrant: The Current Debate</i>
WPF	<i>Warrant and Proper Function</i>

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Alvin Plantinga's theory of knowledge, as developed in his *Warrant* trilogy<sup>1</sup>, has shaped the debates surrounding many areas in epistemology in profound ways. Plantinga has received his share of criticism, however, particularly in his treatment of belief in God as being "properly basic"<sup>2</sup>. There has also been much confusion surrounding his notions of *warrant* and *proper function*, to which Plantinga has responded numerous times. Many critics remain unsatisfied, while others have developed alternative understandings of warrant in order to sufficiently broaden Plantinga's theory and guard it against common objections. The most promising of such attempts fall under the broad category of what has come to be known as "virtue epistemology" or a "virtue-theoretic" approach. The work being done in virtue epistemology is still in its early stages and a consensus on what actually constitutes virtue epistemology has yet to be reached. While some have attempted to structure an entire theory of knowledge based on the virtues possessed by the knower, others have focused more on the role of epistemic virtues as an attempt to supplement existing theories. In this work, I will offer an analysis of Plantinga's theory of knowledge in light of developments in epistemology involving the intellectual virtues.

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<sup>1</sup> Plantinga 1993a, 1993b, and 1999.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest, complete treatment of this theory is developed in Plantinga 1983.



My research in this area has been guided by three primary questions: 1) Can Plantinga's theory of knowledge be considered a kind of "virtue epistemology", and if so, in what sense? 2) Does a virtue-theoretic understanding of Plantinga's model enhance the original in any way? 3) Is a virtue-theoretic understanding of Plantinga's model beneficial when dealing with questions pertaining to religious belief? My proposal is that certain features of a virtue-theoretic approach (also referred to as "agent-reliabilism"<sup>3</sup>) can improve Plantinga's model in significant ways. Not only would such a newly adapted approach be better equipped to handle common objections, but it would also be better suited to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the task of epistemology, one that seeks to discover multiple epistemic goods other than what has been traditionally confined to the realm of knowledge. I conclude by applying this approach to Plantinga's treatment of theistic belief in *Warranted Christian Belief* (Plantinga 1999) and by articulating a few of the ways in which epistemic virtues can increase the degree of warrant enjoyed by such belief.

## OVERVIEW

I will begin in Chapter II with an analysis of some recent work in epistemology, with a special emphasis on virtue epistemology and the notion of justification after Plantinga's introduction of the term 'warrant' into the field. Justification, as the third criterion for knowledge in addition to true belief, has come under fire in past few decades, largely due to the fact that a consensus has yet to be reached on its definition and its relation to knowledge. In addition to Plantinga's attempt to replace the term with one that is more comprehensive, others have called for a modification, a replacement, or

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<sup>3</sup> This term was introduced into the literature by John Greco in Greco 1999.

even an entire abandonment of the term. The battle over justification has seemingly polarized epistemologist into either externalists or internalists, with no apparent hope of reconciliation. William Alston has argued that rather than splitting the field into those who believe that justification can be obtained through an external process versus an internal process, this debate actually reveals two entirely different conceptions of justification altogether; he proposes a significantly revised approach (one he calls the “desiderata” approach) to understanding both justification and the natures of externalism and internalism. Linda Zagzebski, in her seminal work, *Virtues of the Mind* (1996), has declared that the debate simply reveals why the concept of justification in traditional epistemology is bankrupt and that this is why the internalism-externalism debate has reached an impasse. According to her proposal, this results in redefining knowledge, not as justified (or warranted) true belief, but rather as true belief that is brought about by intellectual virtue, which is a property of the epistemic agent herself as opposed to a property of the belief in question. This is what she calls a “pure” virtue theory, one that gives place to the intellectual virtues as the fundamental criteria for explaining virtually every instance of evaluating knowledge. I will examine Zagzebski’s and other versions of virtue epistemology later in Chapter III.

In the following section I will provide a brief summary and evaluation of what has come to be known as “Reformed epistemology”. This project was initiated in 1983 with Plantinga and Wolterstorff’s *Faith & Rationality*, in which the editors and other authors explored the rationality of religious belief (and specifically belief in the Christian God) while likewise declaring the death of what they termed “classical foundationalism”.

Plantinga's essay (Plantinga 1983) argued that one could be entirely within their epistemic rights to believe in God even in the absence of argument or evidence, and that such a belief should be understood as "properly basic" (i.e., it is not accepted based on the evidence of other propositions) in the same way that belief in other minds or belief in the past is properly basic. The framework Plantinga develops to argue this point includes other important concepts such as the "noetic effects of sin" and the *sensus divinitatis*, which are used to explain both how religious belief can be properly basic and why, unlike other properly basic beliefs, they are not universally accepted.<sup>4</sup> The former offers an explanation of why belief in God is not immediately perceived by everyone; the latter is used to explain why (and how) some do acquire it. I will exposit Plantinga's account of these concepts here and revisit them in Chapter IV.

Realizing that his recently developed account of religious belief was operating on some assumptions not shared by the current selection of epistemological models, Plantinga set out to articulate an all-encompassing framework addressing traditional questions raised in the general study of epistemology. The three books (the "Warrant trilogy") expounded what is known as his *proper function* model, and introduced the concept of *warrant* as a superior substitute for the contentious third criteria of knowledge. Although it most closely resembled a form of reliabilism, there were enough differences to set it apart from other available models. In this section, I will trace the development of this model and evaluate its status as it currently stands in the field. After writing the first two books in the series (*Warrant: the Current Debate* [1993a], hereafter WCD, and

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<sup>4</sup> I use "universal" here to mean virtually accepted by all rational persons; I am ignoring skeptical arguments against belief in the past, other minds, etc. I am taking for granted the fact that even the most ardent of philosophical skeptics at one time maintained (properly basic) beliefs in such things.

*Warrant and Proper Function* [1993b], hereafter WPF), Plantinga nuanced and refined the notion of warrant in light of the many criticisms and responses<sup>5</sup> that had been worked out before completing the third and final volume, *Warranted Christian Belief* (1999; hereafter WCB). Building on what was developed in *Faith and Rationality* (1983) and the previous books in the *Warrant* trilogy, Plantinga revisited the question of belief in God and put forward his most articulated and nuanced argument for the rationality of religious belief. My focus in this work will primarily be on Plantinga's theory of knowledge in the broad sense, in light of the recent work being done in virtue epistemology; I will withhold discussion of his treatment of theistic belief until the final chapter.

Although not my primary concern, it is important to address the question of what is meant by the phrase "virtue epistemology". In light of its various descriptions, I will critique those versions which seem to be the most problematic and least likely to fit with a proper function account. I will also examine the other options available and explain why they still have merit and can serve a beneficial role in our the task of doing epistemology, against Zagzebski's claim that these versions misunderstand and misuse the concept of virtue.

Next, I examine the landscape of contemporary epistemology and note a few examples of some who believe that the current focus of this field needs to be significantly broadened in order to have any continuing relevance to other areas of philosophy or to everyday life. In addition to the abandonment of justification, many have called for a

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<sup>5</sup> For the best single resource on criticisms and responses to the concept of warrant, see Kvanvig 1996.

renewed focus on other epistemic desiderata such as wisdom, understanding, and truth-conduciveness. I believe Zagzebski is right to place the emphasis on persons rather than particular beliefs, but I also believe that this can be done in Plantinga's model. That is, the proper function model can describe both the proper functioning of faculties (which is Plantinga's focus) as well as the proper functioning of persons (which would include the will and the person's disposition to acquire and maintain beliefs in a certain way). While recognizing that this does shift the entire task of epistemology from what it is normally conceived to be, I will be less concerned with the task of providing a strict definition of knowledge, or establishing anything like epistemic certainty in the Cartesian sense, or narrowing down the notion of justification (or any other missing component to true belief) as I am with evaluating the prospect of a normative approach to epistemology (with a special emphasis on religious epistemology), in addition to exploring the broad spectrum of epistemic goods in addition to knowledge. William Alston has also listed several different directions in which epistemology has yet to go which could lead to a more fruitful understanding of human knowledge. Whereas traditional epistemology has tended to focus on propositional knowledge, these and other writers have argued that other components of what we normally mean by "knowledge" in the ordinary sense, such as understanding and wisdom, must also be explored. Plantinga has suggested that his model is open to such new directions, but he has yet to develop any of these in his own work.

Chapter III is where I will examine the potential for a realigned proper function model that incorporates the intellectual virtues. I will begin by comparing Plantinga's

concept of warrant with the concept of intellectual virtue, and I will argue that warrant is an encompassing enough concept to include a certain understanding of intellectual virtue (what Zagzebski might consider a “weak” virtue epistemology), and I will try to provide enough evidence as to why Plantinga’s model is open to this without the fear of completely deconstructing the current framework. I will follow this section with the necessary examination of the internalism / externalism question, demonstrating why a proper function model that incorporates the intellectual virtues is still nonetheless an externalist model, and why this is more successful than internalist or “hybrid” models.

I will also be addressing the question of whether there is a real or helpful distinction between belief-based and agent-based theories, and while I answer in the affirmative, I will explain what I understand to be the most fruitful way to understand a person-based evaluation of knowledge that is not too far from the usual questions asked about propositional beliefs. Related to this question is the voluntariness of belief, which is often convoluted and difficult to sort out. I will not attempt to solve this problem, but merely to clarify as much as possible the real differences between doxastic voluntarism and involuntarism. While Plantinga’s model does focus on the proper functioning of faculties in regard to the immediacy of belief, by incorporating the role of the will and of emotions, I believe that that problems raised about the voluntariness become less troublesome than they might first appear. I will follow with a brief section on the social aspects of justification, including the role of testimony, and how this relates to the current model being considered.

In section 6, I will explain how the proposed model falls under the somewhat broad category of what John Greco has called “Agent-Reliabilism”. This describes any epistemological model that incorporates elements of reliabilism and subjective justification. Greco has argued that an agent-reliabilist model can be “properly conceived as a kind of virtue epistemology” (Greco 1999), and thus the revised proper function model would be considered a kind of virtue epistemology. I will develop this line of thought by examining further how specific epistemic virtues and emotions can provide a better understanding of warrant, and thus a better model in general.

In the fourth chapter, I will attempt to apply any additional insights into Plantinga’s model to the original question that initiated his project: the question of religious belief. In the final chapter, I will provide a summary of my work and defend the compatibility of Plantinga’s model and virtue epistemology when defined in certain terms. While not the primary concern of my project, I am confident that Plantinga would not have any major objections to the revisions in his model in light of his comments that there is still plenty of room to “fill in” the concept of warrant.

Additionally, I have included an appendix on the subject of natural theology and its relation to religious belief. I offer a simple argument for natural theology’s potential to increase the degree of warrant enjoyed by religious belief, thereby increasing faith. Although I believe it is helpful for further explaining the concept of warrant, I did not include it in the main body of the text since it does not include any considerations of intellectual virtue or revisions to Plantinga’s original model.

## CHAPTER II

### RECENT TRENDS IN EPISTEMOLOGY

#### JUSTIFICATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

An in-depth survey of contemporary epistemology is not required to realize that ‘justified true belief’ no longer stands as a satisfactory definition of knowledge according to most epistemologists. Or at least, the concept of ‘justification’ has proven to be so problematic as to lead many to question its usefulness altogether. Traditionally, what makes a belief justified has depended on whether the belief is based on some sort of evidence or reasons. While the first major blow to the concept came in the form of the famous Gettier problems, numerous other difficulties have arisen and been addressed since then. The debate over whether a person must have cognitive access to all of the factors that make a belief justified has led to the separation of externalists and internalists; the debate over whether a nonbasic belief’s justification requires that it is inferred from other basic, noninferential beliefs has led to a divide between foundationalists and coherentists. Thus, the concept of ‘justification’ has become more and more convoluted. In cases where the term is still used, its meaning is often no less vague than “that property of a true belief which converts it into knowledge”.

Such vagueness has led many to abandon the term altogether. William Alston, in



Chapter 1 of his *Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (2005), announces,

I will go on the offensive and argue that the widespread supposition that ‘justified’ picks out an objective feature of belief that is of central epistemic importance is a thoroughly misguided one. I shall argue that the perennial quest for what it is for a belief to be justified, and what are the necessary and/or sufficient conditions for such a status, is quixotic, of the same order as the search for the Fountain of Youth.<sup>6</sup>

Linda Zagzebski, while not going quite so far as Alston, cites problems with a strictly belief-based approach to epistemology and acknowledges that, “since justification is a property of a belief, it is very difficult to adjudicate disputes over this concept if the belief is treated as the bottom-level object of evaluation” (1996, p. 2). Similar reasons have led Alvin Plantinga to use the term ‘warrant’ in favor of ‘justification’, and I will likewise be using the former for the remainder of this essay. At times this will simply refer to whatever property of a true belief it is that converts it into knowledge (i.e., ‘positive epistemic status’, ‘rationality’, ‘reasonableness’, etc.), in the broadest sense, while at other times I will use the term more narrowly as Plantinga utilizes it within the context of his proper function model.<sup>7</sup>

## REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

In 1983, Plantinga, along with Nicholas Wolterstorff and William Alston initiated what became known as “Reformed epistemology” in *Faith and Rationality*, which primarily served as a response to the evidentialist challenge against theistic belief. The

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<sup>6</sup> p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> In WCB, Plantinga summarizes the concept by stating, “Put in a nutshell, then, a belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. We must add, furthermore, that when a belief meets these conditions and does enjoy warrant, the *degree* of warrant it enjoys depends on the strength of the belief, the firmness with which *S* holds it (p. 156).”

central theme of the essays in the book was the idea that a person could maintain a belief in God, even in the absence of argument or evidence, and still be entirely within his epistemic rights. The reason for this, as Plantinga argued, is that theistic belief belongs to a special category of beliefs that are ‘properly basic’, which includes belief in other minds, the past, and other basic perceptual beliefs. A natural response to such a claim is that theistic belief is not nearly as widespread as the other beliefs in this category, and therefore cannot be considered properly basic. Plantinga, relying on John Calvin’s idea of the *sensus divinitatis* (SD), explained that it is a result of sin entering the world that our natural knowledge of God (and our faculty or reasoning as a whole) has been corrupted: “Were it not for the existence of sin in the world, human beings would believe in God to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past” (Plantinga 1983, p. 66). The primary purpose of such an argument was not to offer an argument for the existence of God (although the author acknowledges that theistic arguments may be helpful in certain circumstances), but rather to defend the rationality of theistic belief, particularly that of the common believer. If the basic Christian teachings about God and the world are true, and if it is possible for one’s natural knowledge of God to be restored through the SD, then there is no reason to demand evidence as a requirement for rational belief in God’s existence.

In addition to offering an account for the rationality of religious belief, *Faith and Rationality* served as an attack on classical foundationalist epistemology.<sup>8</sup> In

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<sup>8</sup> James Beilby points out that Plantinga does not rule out all forms of foundationalism: “What Plantinga rejects is the classical foundationalist’s narrow criteria for proper basicity (Beilby 2005, p. 47).”

Wolterstorff's introduction to the book, he explains that a classical foundationalist is one who divides beliefs into those which are held on the basis of other beliefs and those which are held immediately and non-inferentially; the former are supported by the latter, which serve as the foundation of a person's noetic structure. Basic, non-inferential beliefs include those which are either self evident ("2 + 2 = 4") or those concerning the state of one's own consciousness ("I see a bright light"). In order for a belief to be rational or justified, it must either fall into this category or be supported by, at least inferentially, beliefs in this category (p. 2-3). The evidentialist, more specifically, demands that demonstration or argument is able to be given for any belief claiming to be rational, proving that it can be inferentially traced back to some basic belief. Or more specifically, the degree of firmness to which *S* assents to proposition *P* should correspond to the amount of evidence for *P* that is available to *S*. Otherwise, *S*'s belief cannot be considered rational. The critical assessment of foundationalism and evidentialism begun in this work led Plantinga to develop a new epistemological model to serve as an alternative to existing theories of rationality.

#### PLANTINGA'S PROPER FUNCTION MODEL

In Chapter 1 of *Warrant and Proper Function*<sup>9</sup>, Plantinga provides a preliminary definition of warrant:

“We may say that a belief *B* has warrant for *S* if and only if the relevant segments (the segments involved in the production of *B*) are functioning properly in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which *S*'s faculties are designed; and the modules of the design plan governing the production of *B* are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those

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<sup>9</sup> Oxford University Press (1993).

modules (in that sort of cognitive environment) is true; and the more firmly *S* believes *B* the more warrant *B* has for *S*.”<sup>10</sup>

This definition demonstrates why Plantinga denies that the traditional notion of justification is a necessary (and sometimes even sufficient) criterion for knowledge. As Kvanvig has stated, “The heart of the theory is [...] found in the claim that warrant requires properly functioning cognitive equipment.”<sup>11</sup> It is often assumed in current writings that in order for belief *P* to be justified, one must be able to provide reasons or evidence for holding that belief. Otherwise, the belief cannot be considered rational and thus cannot constitute knowledge. Or put less strongly, the internalist will argue that the agent must have at least some degree of cognitive access to the factors leading to belief *P* in order for that belief to be justified. It is often objected, however, that in either case this raises the bar too high for what can actually be considered knowledge, particularly in regard to basic perceptual beliefs (belief in the external world, other minds, etc.). Plantinga instead asks whether the belief in question was formed by a reliable cognitive process, where one’s faculties are functioning properly in the environment for which they were designed.<sup>12</sup> If yes, then that belief is warranted and may suffice for knowledge. If no, then the belief is not warranted and cannot amount to knowledge.

It is important to remember that warranted beliefs *may* suffice for knowledge, but it does not necessarily follow in every case. A false belief may possess warrant, in a situation where the agent came to hold the belief by a reliable mechanism, yet the criterion of ‘true belief’ is missing and therefore cannot constitute knowledge. Also, a person may have a true belief that is warranted but still does not count as knowledge. In

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<sup>10</sup> p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Kvanvig 1996, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>12</sup> Plantinga denies that this requires a commitment to any theistic or metaphysical belief in conscious design; one could just as easily understand this statement as “designed by evolution”. See p. 21 of *WPF*.

this case it is said that the belief does not possess a sufficient degree of warrant. This is another area where the concept of warrant offers a more nuanced understanding than the traditional doctrine of justification: any given belief can enjoy varying degrees of warrant, and yet it is not until the necessary “threshold” of warrant has been crossed that a belief can be considered a candidate for knowledge. Plantinga leaves open the possibilities as to what kinds of things might increase the degree of warrant that a belief enjoys, but he himself includes things like new argumentation or reasoning processes that might strengthen the degree of conviction with which the belief is held. So a person’s true belief may possess warrant, yet not to the degree sufficient for knowledge.

In order to have knowledge, a person’s true belief must have a sufficient degree of warrant. In order to have a sufficient degree of warrant, the faculty which produced the belief must be aiming at truth and must be reliable in the kinds of environments for which it was designed. In other words, it must be functioning properly. Plantinga acknowledges that apparently less-than-precise nature of this concept: “The idea of proper function is one we all have; we all grasp it in at least a preliminary rough-and-ready way; we all constantly employ it.”<sup>13</sup> What it means for a faculty to be ‘aiming at truth’, or ‘reliable’, or exactly what kinds of environments are conducive to the production of true beliefs, he also acknowledges to be open for discussion.<sup>14</sup> Other criteria, including the firmness of the belief on the agent’s part<sup>15</sup>, may be included when evaluating what is necessary for a belief to become sufficiently warranted. Additionally, Plantinga claims that it is *undefeated* warrant that is required in order to convert true

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<sup>13</sup> WPF, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> See Plantinga’s *Respondeo* in Kvanvig 1996.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 13 of WCB.

belief into knowledge, an idea he further develops in Chapter 11 of WCB. Again, Kvanvig surmises, “Plantinga thereby commits himself to the view that the nature of knowledge can be explicated without any need to develop an account of what it is to have a belief that is undefeated by information one does not possess: the crucial work in understanding the nature of knowledge is only that of clarifying what it is for cognition to be functioning properly.”<sup>16</sup> James Beilby, summarizing Plantinga’s development of proper functionalism, observes that five conditions must be met regarding belief *B* for person *S*<sup>17</sup>:

- (1) *B* is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction). [The ‘proper function’ condition]
- (2) *B* is formed in an appropriate cognitive maxi-environment (one sufficiently similar to that for which *S*’s cognitive faculties were designed), and in an epistemically favorable cognitive mini-environment. [The ‘environmental’ condition.]
- (3) The segments of *S*’s noetic structure relevant to the production of *B* are reliably aimed at truth (rather than some other cognitive goal). [The ‘alethic’ condition.]
- (4) *S* has no defeaters for *B*. [The ‘no-defeater’ condition.]
- (5) *S* holds *B* with sufficient firmness to yield a degree of warrant sufficient for knowledge. [The ‘degree of belief’ condition.]

Further refinements to the above conditions have been made by Plantinga and others, but my interest lies only in providing an adequate overview of Plantinga’s model. Some of these I will address in greater detail below. However, I will now turn to the question of what constitutes “virtue epistemology”.

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<sup>16</sup> Kvanvig 1996, pp. viii-ix.

<sup>17</sup> Beilby 2005, p. 86.

## VIRTUE EPISTEMOLOGY

Virtue epistemology is a relatively new and currently developing approach to the study of human knowledge. The underdeveloped nature of virtue epistemology is highlighted by the fact that it is nearly impossible to find a consistent definition of it. Although Sosa was the first to utilize the concept of “intellectual virtue” in the realm of contemporary epistemology in Sosa 1980, the phrase has since taken on a variety of meanings. In addition to Zagzebski’s “pure” version mentioned above, Sosa and others have developed concepts of intellectual virtue that imported into existing models as a supplement and a way to better understand what makes true belief knowledge (sometimes referred to as a “virtue-theoretic” approach). More specifically, some have sought to reconstruct Plantinga’s proper function model along virtue-theoretic lines.<sup>18</sup>

I believe that it can be safely said that virtually all versions of virtue epistemology share in common, as a minimum, the claim that an agent’s intellectual virtues which bring about the agent’s beliefs should be placed at the forefront of epistemic evaluation, whether dealing with traditional questions of epistemic analysis or reframing the questions themselves. A survey of the literature, however, reveals that any of the following have been attributed to virtue epistemology: (1) the claim that epistemology is a normative discipline, similar to ethics<sup>19</sup>, (2) virtue epistemology is ‘person-based’ (i.e., the virtues in question are predicated of *agents*), whereas traditional theories are ‘belief-

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<sup>18</sup> See Axtell 2006, Pritchard 2003, Roberts and Wood 2004 and 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Zagzebski argues the radical claim in Zagzebski 1996 and elsewhere that the discipline of epistemology should be approached as a sub-discipline of moral philosophy. This idea has not seemed to carry much momentum outside proponents of Zagzebski’s particular version of virtue epistemology.

based' (the virtues are predicated of *faculties* involved in formulating beliefs)<sup>20</sup>, and similarly, (3) the exercise of virtue should replace a belief's property of being 'justified' as the third criteria for knowledge in addition to true belief. One can also find the following claims, however: (4) intellectual virtues refer to the excellence or ability of one's faculties in regard to acquire and maintain true beliefs, and (5) the intellectual virtues are relevant to epistemic evaluation insofar as they are reliable, truth-conducive traits that aid in the overall aim of producing knowledge.

Depending on which of the above are adopted when describing virtue epistemology, one could arrive at the conclusion that Plantinga's proper function model is, at face value, a virtue theory because it is concerned explicitly with (4) and implicitly with (5). On the other hand, one could conversely conclude that it does not qualify as a virtue theory since has virtually nothing to do with (1) - (3). And entering into such confusion is a likely possibility for the reader. Zagzebski emphatically differentiates her neo-Aristotelian virtue theory from Plantinga's or any other reliabilist theory. Ernest Sosa and Jaegwon Kim's anthology on epistemology, though, claims that "Virtue epistemology and proper functionalism may be fairly regarded as descendants of reliabilism," since "both views require, for knowledge, that one's belief be produced by a reliable process, but both deny this is sufficient."<sup>21</sup> Conflicts like these make the lack of consensus concerning virtue epistemology readily apparent. Since my purpose is not to provide a survey of the varieties of virtue epistemology, however, I will turn my attention to explaining how I use the term and my reasons for doing so.

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<sup>20</sup> This aspect is discussed in the first section of Chapter III.

<sup>21</sup> Sosa and Kim 2000, p. 435.



## DEFINING “VIRTUE” AND “EPISTEMOLOGY”

I am less concerned here with defining virtue as I am with establishing what it pertains to. Nonetheless, this will shed light on how it might be possible for Plantinga’s proper function model to be reconsidered as a kind of virtue epistemology. If we adopt John Greco’s basic definition of an intellectual virtue as “a power or ability or competence to arrive at truths in a particular field, and to avoid believing falsehoods in that field,”<sup>22</sup> then we can begin to examine how exactly this might fit within a proper function model. According to Greco, a criterion for justified belief (assuming a generic virtue model) would be: “S is justified in believing that *p* if and only if S’s believing that *p* is the result of S’s intellectual virtues or faculties functioning in an appropriate environment.”<sup>23</sup> The question is whether, in evaluating knowledge this way, we are concerned with the faculties of the agent or the agent as a person; which is also to ask whether faculties can exhibit virtues.

In short, I want to affirm that faculties *can* exhibit virtues, but we can also not separate the use and functioning of one’s faculties from the overall evaluation of a person as an epistemic agent. That is, to affirm that faculties can exhibit virtues is not necessarily to deny that epistemic evaluation is agent-based (as opposed to merely belief-based). I will explore this issue in the next chapter, but it is worth noting that how one approaches this issue will largely be determined by one’s understanding of the nature of *beliefs*. While there is a seeming minority who want to claim that beliefs are *acts*, I

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<sup>22</sup> Dancy and Sosa 1993, p. 521.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

affirm the more traditional stance that beliefs are *states*. If one is convinced of the former, however, my overall analysis (or Plantinga's) will most likely not seem very persuasive. Regardless, I am keeping in mind the possibility of evaluating, to some degree, belief formation processes, which are more akin to acts than states. And this is where the normative aspect of epistemic evaluation comes in, which any virtue model will necessarily include. Belief formation processes and belief states are tricky and complex things, and I do not claim to provide an exhaustive account or even assume any particular understanding of their psychological underpinnings. All I hope to do is consider a way in which epistemic responsibility can be maintained alongside a proper function model, and more specifically providing a virtue-theoretic account of Plantinga's model.

## CHAPTER III

### WARRANT, AGENT-RELIABILISM, AND EPISTEMIC VIRTUES

#### BELIEF-BASED AND AGENT-BASED MODELS

In Zagzebski's *Virtues of the Mind*, she distinguishes her virtue-theoretic approach to epistemology from other approaches by emphasizing that her theory focuses on *persons* rather than *propositions* believed by persons, therefore making her theory agent-based where other theories are belief-based. Similarly, she observes that much of the vocabulary used in epistemology is borrowed from ethical theory (fulfilling epistemic "duty", being within one's epistemic "rights", etc.); and while most epistemological theories borrow from consequentialism, her theory uses the language of virtue ethics (being intellectually virtuous, intellectual humility, etc.). And while consequentialism is act-based, virtue ethics is person-based. While on one hand recognizing that Plantinga's proper function model avoids a consequentialist framework, she nonetheless designates it as a deontological theory and argues that it should not be labeled as a form of virtue epistemology. This, she says, is because, "Plantinga focuses on faculties, not virtues (p. 10)." A pure virtue theory, according to Zagzebski, is one that "treats act evaluation as derivative from the character of an agent. Roughly, an act is right *because* it is what a virtuous person might do. In such theories aretaic concepts are conceptually more fundamental than deontic concepts" (p. 16).

While I am sympathetic to much of what Zagzebski sets out to accomplish, I find a few areas to be problematic. The first is that her claim of dispensing with the traditional belief-based approach is undermined by the fact that the majority of her book is devoted to addressing traditional problems in epistemology such as the concept of justification, rather than providing a viable alternative that does not rely so heavily on concepts rooted in belief-based models. She argues that “intellectual virtue is the primary normative component of both justified belief and knowledge,” and states, “I define knowledge as cognitive contact with reality arising from what I call ‘acts of intellectual virtue’ (p. xv).” While this limitation may likely be unavoidable, it seems to me that Zagzebski’s approach may be less radical than she suggests.

Secondly, I am not convinced that Plantinga’s focus on faculties necessarily rules out any role for intellectual virtue. Zagzebski argues that virtues have traditionally applied to the excellence of faculties, not faculties themselves; and since Plantinga talks about properly functioning faculties, these cannot be considered virtues. I believe this is a misunderstanding of Plantinga’s theory, which he has also elaborated on much since these criticisms were raised. While it is true that Plantinga refers to faculties like sight or hearing, often analogically, he also describes cognitive faculties such as reason and memory. One can easily see how a person might be virtuous in the use of such cognitive faculties, as well as how this use might correspond with the improvement of their functioning. Plantinga does briefly address the role of the will and emotions toward the end of WCB, but I do believe that there is room for significant improvement in this area of Plantinga’s theory. However, it is clear to me that in examining the proper functioning

(or excellence) of a cognitive agent's faculties prior to and in order to establish whether the agent's belief(s) count as knowledge, we are asking a question as much about the agent as we are the proposition at stake. Therefore, I believe that Plantinga's model, as it stands, can properly be understood as an agent-based epistemological model. It is with this assumption that I seek to incorporate a more fine-tuned understanding of intellectual virtue into Plantinga's account of warrant.

Finally, as Wolterstorff has pointed out, in spite of the apparent similarities between virtue ethics and virtue epistemology,

Beliefs are states, not acts; and the state of believing something is not brought about by deciding to believe that. Accordingly, the difference between the ethics of action and doxastic epistemology is not that the former is the ethic of moral actions, and the latter, the ethic of doxastic actions; there are no doxastic actions. So, too, the difference between the ethics of virtue and virtue epistemology is not that the former treats those virtues that get expressed in moral actions while the latter treats those that get expressed in doxastic actions.<sup>24</sup>

If this point has any significance, and I believe that it does, then much of what Zagzebski simply assumes can be carried over from virtue ethics (particularly Aristotle's virtue ethics) will not be beneficial in answering epistemological problems.<sup>25</sup> While these reasons have made me unable to accept Zagzebski's version of virtue epistemology wholesale, I do think that her work in the field has raised some important questions and called attention to neglected areas of what we often consider knowledge. I will point out these influences where they are relevant. What I want to maintain, though, is that

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<sup>24</sup> Wolterstorff 2002, pp. 876-77.

<sup>25</sup> It has also been argued that, in spite of Zagzebski's reliance on Aristotle for her understanding of virtue, she has applied his moral theory to problems in contemporary epistemology in ways that are quite foreign to the spirit of Aristotle's work. While such criticism could lead to an interesting exploration of Zagzebski's theory, it falls outside the scope of this essay.

Plantinga's proper functional model can accurately be described as an agent-based model, although I believe that more emphasis should be placed on this aspect of the theory. I believe that this can be accomplished by incorporating into the concept of warrant an account of intellectual virtues as characteristics of the agent.

## AGENT-RELIABILISM

Since I am arguing that Plantinga's model does, in fact, qualify as an agent-based model<sup>26</sup>, it will be helpful to clarify the dissimilarities between Plantinga's theory and what Zagzebski considers a pure virtue theory, as well as traditional reliabilist theories, both of which Plantinga has distanced himself from. One of the reasons why Plantinga's model cannot be considered a pure virtue theory is that it takes an externalist stance toward warranted belief, whereas as a pure virtue theory must be essentially internalist.<sup>27</sup> While the externalist element in Plantinga's model might at first glance seem to fall in accordance with traditional reliabilist models, there are some important differences that force it into an alternative category apart from the prevailing theories in contemporary epistemology.<sup>28</sup> I do not have the space to go into great detail on these differences, but I will highlight a few of them for the sake of clarification.

One of the common objections to traditional reliabilism is the 'generality problem', which argues that the reliabilist account of knowledge is too vague to assess

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<sup>26</sup> By 'agent-based' model, I mean simply a model that places the agent (as a person) at the center of epistemic evaluation as opposed to a faculty or faculties of that agent.

<sup>27</sup> I will address this issue directly in section 5 of this chapter.

<sup>28</sup> By this I have in mind foundationalism, coherentism, and reliabilism, since virtually every existing model can be (at least roughly) classified as one of these three. I admit however, as I believe Plantinga would, that the proper function model shares more in common with reliabilism than with the other two options.

specific instances of a person's belief forming process. This is because reliabilism claims that a belief is justified when it is the result of a reliable belief-forming cognitive process (it tends to produce more true beliefs than false ones). Such processes, notes Plantinga, "are to be thought of as *types*, not tokens. Clearly enough, however, a given concrete process culminating in the production of a belief will be a token of many different types: which type is the one determining its degree of justification?" (1993b, p. 28). The types involved will have varying truth ratios. And Plantinga explains that a belief's degree of warrant is not rigidly determined by the degree of reliability of the faculty involved. What is missing from reliabilist theories is a proper function constraint, one that insures that in any specific belief forming process (token), the faculty or faculties involved are functioning properly according to the design plan.<sup>29</sup> "A belief may be the product of a reliable belief producing mechanism, but if the mechanism in question malfunctions (the agent is drunk, or ill, or under attack by a shark) the resulting belief has little or no warrant, despite its respectable source" (1993b, p. viii). This is because traditional reliabilism does not have the proper function constraint that Plantinga's model does; the general reliabilist constraint could be satisfied without satisfying the proper function constraint. It is clear according to Plantinga's model that, even if the belief forming *process* is generally reliable, a belief will not have warrant if one of the faculties involved in the process is not functioning properly.

Another key difference is the incorporation of an environmental condition in Plantinga's model, which was not incorporated into his theory of warrant until certain

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<sup>29</sup> Plantinga also criticizes reliabilism for this reason: "from one point of view the problem with reliabilism is that it fails to distinguish between design plan and max plan (1993b, p. 29)." For other criticisms of traditional reliabilism, see Plantinga 1995b.

Gettier-type objections were raised against it.<sup>30</sup> Reliabilists such as Alvin Goldman have noted, “Reliabilists often agree that some kind of strengthening of the simple reliability requirement is needed” (Dancy and Sosa 1993, p. 434). Plantinga addresses a handful of such cases, including, for example, one borrowed from Bertrand Russell concerning a stopped clock. If at noon Jones sees a clock that has stopped at midnight while he was sleeping and then forms the belief that it is noon, it would seem that his true belief is warranted but does not constitute knowledge. In this case there is neither deception nor inference from other false beliefs involved. Likewise, Jones’ looking at the clock to find out what time it is would normally qualify as a reliable process, and there is no malfunction of Jones’ faculties. Plantinga observes, however, that “Gettier examples involve something like mild cognitive environmental pollution; in each of these cases the cognitive environment [...] diverges in some small or subtle way from the paradigm or standard sort of environment for which our faculties are designed” (Kvanvig 1996, p. 310). So in cases like this, it not the person’s faculties that are to blame, but rather certain conditions in the person’s environment (i.e., it is not the specific environment that our faculties were designed for). In WPF we learn that “a belief has warrant for you only if the segment of the design plan governing its production is *directly* rather than indirectly aimed at the production of true beliefs (and an addition to that effect must be made to the official account of warrant)” (p. 40). In order to explain why the seemingly justified Jones does *not*, in fact have warrant for his belief that it is noon, Plantinga articulates the distinction between maxi- and mini-environments. While it is true that Jones is in that appropriate maxi-environment, which is basically the earth we live on, his specific mini-environment is not one that is directly aimed at the production of true beliefs (evidenced

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<sup>30</sup> See Kvanvig 1996, pp. 308-317, 325-329 and Plantinga 2000, pp. 156-161.



by the fact that the clock has stopped functioning). In most mini-environments, the belief that it is noon which derives from looking at a clock on the wall that indicates that it is noon would be warranted. Plantinga states: “An exercise of my cognitive powers, therefore, even when those powers are functioning properly (perfectly in accord with my design plan) in the maxi-environment for which they are designed, can be counted on to produce a true belief with respect to *some* cognitive mini-environments but not with respect to others” (Kvanvig 1996, p. 316). Thus, the mini-environment must be a *favorable* one in addition the agent’s cognitive faculties functioning properly. When a mini-environment contains elements that are deceptive to one’s cognitive faculties, a true belief will still only be the result of epistemic luck. In such cases, it is clear in the mini-environment that the circumstances are not conducive to cognitive processes aimed at obtaining true beliefs.

In Gettier cases, the person’s belief remains justified so long as the agent has not violated his epistemic duties. The internalist solution involves adding the qualification that whatever constitutes warrant must be internally accessible by the agent. But Plantinga is critical of this move as well, arguing, “even if everything is going as it ought to with respect to what is internal (in the internalist sense), warrant may still be absent.”<sup>31</sup> He goes on to state: “a belief has warrant for you only if the segment of the design plan governing its production is *directly* rather than indirectly aimed at the production of true beliefs (and an addition to that effect must be made to the official account of warrant).”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> WPF, p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

Plantinga has much more to say about various forms of the Gettier problem in WPF, but I will let this treatment suffice as a summary of his overall strategy.

The externalism inherent in this model is most evident in cases like these. Where traditional reliabilism, which shares the externalism of Plantinga's model, would be unable to resolve counterexamples like this in which the same cognitive process is taking place (and the same faculties are functioning properly), Plantinga is able to account for specific environmental conditions to determine whether one's belief possesses any degree of warrant. In order to articulate this environmental condition more fully, the *resolution condition* was added to the criteria for warrant in WCB. The resolution condition states that:

A belief *B* produced by an exercise *E* of cognitive powers has warrant sufficient for knowledge only if *MBE* (the minienvironment with respect to *B* and *E*) is favorable to *E*.<sup>33</sup>

This is not to say that beliefs formed in less-than-favorable minienvironments do not possess any warrant, but they will not have a high enough degree of warrant to turn an otherwise true belief into knowledge.

So far, this only demonstrates how Plantinga's proper function model differs from traditional reliabilism. While I hope what I have written demonstrates why Plantinga's model possesses an advantage over traditional reliabilism, I will now explore ways in which the proper function model might be re-classified and amended in order to incorporate a more robust account of human knowledge. In short, I believe that Plantinga's current theory does indeed provide a sufficient account of basic perceptual

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<sup>33</sup> Plantinga 2000, p. 159.

knowledge as well as many other cases of propositional knowledge, but I believe that it is also ripe for a more articulated account of warrant when it comes to higher-level or theoretical knowledge. I mean specifically to describe an account of intellectual virtue that is compatible with Plantinga's definition of warrant, and one that will not significantly alter what has already been developed in his account. Several others have developed broad epistemic models that could include the proper function model, including "foundherentism" (Susan Haack), "responsibilism" (Lorraine Code), and "responsibilist externalism" (Guy Axtell). All of these models have overlapping similarities, but in my opinion the most promising account of this variety lies in what John Greco has labeled "agent reliabilism" (AR).

The basis of Greco's agent reliabilism is that: 1) "in order to avoid skepticism about empirical knowledge, we must adopt an epistemology that allows empirical knowledge to be based on evidence that is merely contingently reliable. In other words, we must adopt some form of reliabilism" (Greco 1999, p. 1), and 2) AR is able to avoid problems typically associated with simple reliabilism. Since I have already argued that Plantinga's model accomplished (2), I will focus on Greco's claim that AR is "properly conceived as a kind of virtue epistemology" (p. 2), which Plantinga has not claimed for his model. Since the purpose of this essay is not to argue for reliabilism (or Plantinga's version of it) over and against other epistemic models, I will not deal with Greco's argument for (1). I am interested in Greco's use of "virtue language" in his description of AR, however, which unlike pure virtue models, accepts that the excellence of a person's faculties can count as a "virtuous". He cites Ernest Sosa in claiming that "there is a

broader sense of ‘virtue’, still Greek, in which anything with a function – natural or artificial – does have virtues. The eye does, after all, have its virtues, and so does a knife” (p.18). Greco goes on to explain:

In the present view, knowledge and justified belief are grounded in stable and reliable cognitive character. Such character may include both a person’s natural cognitive faculties as well as her acquired habits of thought. Accordingly, innate vision gives rise to knowledge if it is reliably accurate. But so can acquired skills of perception and acquired methods of inquiry, including those involving highly specialized training or even advanced technology. So long as such habits are both stable and successful, they make up the kind of character that gives rise to knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

Greco then summarizes the position of agent reliabilism as follows:

A belief *p* has positive epistemic status for a person *S* just in case *S*’s believing that *p* results from stable and reliable dispositions that make up *S*’s cognitive character.<sup>35</sup>

My reading of Greco suggests that there is an important connection between the reliable process used in an agent to produce a true belief and the agent’s disposition to form beliefs via such processes. My guess is that Plantinga would be sympathetic toward this stance, but there is nothing explicit in his writing that suggests this. How this relationship might work has yet to be fully explained. I believe that AR is fully capable of encompassing a proper function model along with an account of intellectual virtue, as Greco recognizes that “agent reliabilism is sufficiently general to admit many versions, depending on how one fills in the details regarding the nature or reliable agent character (p. 20).”

Greco is also suspicious, though, that perhaps the many existing theories<sup>36</sup> that could be classified as AR add *too* much to the basic framework, thereby making the

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<sup>34</sup> Greco 1999, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

requirements for knowledge too strong. It is unclear to me how this concern applies to Plantinga's model; it seems rather that AR adds *another* dimension to Plantinga's model instead of the other way around. I will maintain this stance and argue that a proper function model that accounts for the virtue theory included in Greco's AR is an improvement over Plantinga's existing model.

#### THE VOLUNTARINESS OF BELIEF

One of the issues that often arises in discussions of virtue epistemology is the voluntariness of belief. While nearly everyone agrees that we have some degree of control over the stances we take toward how we adopt certain beliefs, there is still argument over what kinds of beliefs (if any) we have control over and to what degree we have control over them. As far as individual beliefs are concerned, however, the natural stance seems to be that we form beliefs immediately. To use an example similar to one offered by Plantinga: if someone offers you one million dollars if you can genuinely form the belief that you are 20ft. tall, or that you are currently standing on the moon, there is simply no way you can force yourself to form such a belief. This is often referred to as doxastic involuntarism. Against this notion, Descartes in his Fourth Meditation states that "when the intellect puts something forward for affirmation or denial or for pursuit or avoidance, our inclinations are such that we do not feel we are determined by any external force" (Descartes 1984, p. 40); we are free to either affirm or deny it as an act of the will. While it is unclear exactly how far Descartes would be willing to take that idea (or if he would not make the same claim in regard to *believing*), it does seem that there is

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<sup>36</sup> Greco mentions that Alston's social practice theory, Plantinga's proper functionalism, Sosa's perspectivism, and Zagzebski's neo-Aristotelian approach all qualify as AR theories (p. 24).

at least *some* sense in which we have control over what we affirm or deny. If it were not the case, we would never be justified in blaming someone for being gullible or maintaining a large amount of false beliefs.

Plantinga does acknowledge that we have indirect control over some of our beliefs, similar to the way in which we have indirect control over our weight, for example: “I can train myself not to assume automatically that people in white coats know what they are talking about; I can train myself to pay more attention to the evidence, to be less credulous and gullible (or less cynical and skeptical), and so on” (Plantinga 2000, p. 96). Still, he maintains that beliefs are formed ‘in us’ as opposed to ‘by us’, although there may be conditions prior to the belief formation that we have some degree of control over. The necessary distinction to be made here, as James Beilby points out, is between *attitude* voluntarism and *doxastic* voluntarism (p. 154). That is to say, one can accept the former while rejecting the latter. Nonetheless, Plantinga leans more toward an involuntarist position than Zagzebski, for example. According to Robert Audi, “The less voluntarist we are, the more likely we are to be aretaic externalists, holding that epistemic virtue is a matter of having suitably deep tendencies to form beliefs on a reliable basis” (in Fairweather and Zagzebski 2001, p. 87).

It is interesting to note, however, that even Plantinga sometimes uses examples of less-than-virtuous character to demonstrate how we might affect our own ability to form or not form certain beliefs. For instance: “Out of vanity and pride, I may form the belief that my work is unduly neglected when the fact is it gets more attention than it deserves”

(Plantinga 2000, pp. 96-97). He does not develop this line of thought much further, but I believe that his theory could offer a much richer account of human knowledge if he were to do so. Christopher Hookway, in his essay “Affective States and Epistemic Immediacy”, observes that,

While everyone would agree that anger or envy can have a role in explaining our epistemic failings, few theorists insist that appropriate patterns of affective response may be *required* for inquiring or believing well. And even fewer would insist that taking the role of emotions, or other affective states, seriously is necessary if we are to deal in a satisfactory way with what we can think of as the *central* problems of epistemology – for example, the diffusing of scepticism or the study of how ‘internalists’ and ‘externalist’ demands in the theory of justification can be integrated. It is rare to find the argument that affective states or emotions can have a role in explaining how epistemic evaluation is possible.<sup>37</sup>

The question that looms here is whether one must be an internalist to be a true virtue epistemologist. If not, then it still remains to be seen how externalism, specifically AR, can make room for the role of an agent’s dispositions and attitudes toward beliefs.

## INTERNALISM AND EXTERNALISM

In this section, I want to offer a brief explanation of how, within an AR framework, one can be both an externalist and a virtue epistemologist; I hope to do this without getting into the fine details of the internalist-externalist debate. My reason for this is simply that I am not attempting to determine which stance is the correct one, but rather to evaluate whether Plantinga’s proper function model, which happens to be externalist, is compatible with certain core features of virtue epistemology. The debate over internalism and externalism is about the conditions that are necessary for warrant, and whether those conditions must be internally accessible to the agent. As I have

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<sup>37</sup> In Brady and Pritchard 2003, pp. 75-76.

already explained, Plantinga denies this and argues that rather than the cognitive accessibility of the agent's warranting conditions, the questions we must ask are those concerning the agent's environment, the process used to form the belief, and the function of the faculties involved in the belief-forming process. I must mention here that this description suffers from over-simplification. There are many underlying presuppositions brought into the debate, some of which may include differing metaphysical assumptions, or as William Alston has argued, differing understandings of justification (or warrant).<sup>38</sup> One of the most insightful observations about this debate, in my estimation, is discussed in Beilby 2005 (pp. 145-158), which surmises that the primary task of epistemology for internalists is judging whether an agent is fulfilling her epistemic responsibilities in forming belief *p*, whereas for the externalist it is determining whether her cognitive processes have a high truth-conductivity. In the latter case, such processes are often external to the agent's awareness. Of course, an epistemologist can be concerned with both of these tasks, but the assessment seems accurate as far as it goes.

But how can an externalist be concerned with whether or not an agent is within her epistemic rights when the processes that form beliefs are often outside of her awareness and/or control? Plantinga has granted the obvious point that certain attitudes can have an indirect effect on which beliefs we will adopt, but I believe that more can be said here. Nearly every case that Plantinga deals with is concerned only with individual beliefs. This is understandable, considering the confinements of contemporary epistemology. But if what we are aiming for is a broadened scope of epistemological enquiry as I suggested

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<sup>38</sup> See Alston's chapter "Internalism and Externalism on Justification and on the Epistemic Desiderata Approach", pp. 53-57 in Alston 2005.



in Chapter II, then a correspondingly broadened framework must be sketched that accounts for the epistemic agent as just that: an agent. In addition to questions such as, “Is *S* justified in believing *P*?” we might also ask, “What sorts of virtues are displayed in *S*’s cognitive processes that make him praiseworthy or ‘wise’?” And in order to do that, we must have some concept of how an agent’s dispositions and emotional stances determine the kinds of belief-forming processes he will utilize and how his faculties will function. It is possible to maintain that the basic operations of belief formation occur along an externalist understanding of warrant while still evaluating the cognizer as an agent.<sup>39</sup> In other words, a person might exhibit certain intellectual virtues in how they control their attitude toward certain beliefs (thereby influencing which beliefs they will actually adopt down the road), all the while being unaware of the specific features that would make a belief warranted.

Paul Helm, in his earlier work, *Belief Policies*, develops an account of the will and its role in determining what sort of practices we will embrace in choosing one belief over another. Each person may possess multiple belief policies, whether conscious of them or not, each depending on the context and relative importance of the beliefs in question. The types of policies range from purely tacit to the most intentional and explicit (or some combination of both).<sup>40</sup> Some belief policies, such as those pertaining to perceptual beliefs are common to virtually all human agents, with the possible exception of a mental

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<sup>39</sup> For an internalist take on epistemic agenthood, see Zagzebski’s “Must Knowers Be Agents?” in Fairweather and Zagzebski 2001.

<sup>40</sup> For an in depth investigation into the concept of tacit knowledge, particularly in the sciences, see Polanyi 1962.

impairment<sup>41</sup>; others are formulated by deep seated commitments and presuppositions about the world. Regardless, they provide the standards by which we will adopt, maintain, or discard certain beliefs. These standards are not directly determined by evidence, but they themselves determine what counts as evidence *for the agent*. And while individual beliefs may be outside of my immediate control, Helm argues that belief policies are directly subject to the will. “It is possible to think of beliefs as engagements in an epistemic diary. We may not only enter or delete such engagements, but also conduct a review of the sort of engagements we permit ourselves to make, the standards for accepting or turning down prospective arguments” (Helm 1994, p. 178). Such reasoning seems to fit with the common ethical intuition that *S* can be held responsible for doing *A*, even if he did not have the power to do  $\sim A$ , provided that: 1) the prior, voluntary choice to do *B* would result (or at least likely result) in the inability to perform  $\sim A$ , and 2) *S* was aware that doing *B* would result in the inability to do  $\sim A$ . If we can apply the same principle to belief formation, we can see how intellectual virtue might come to play a more prominent role in epistemic evaluation.

The most important thing to note here is that incorporating an account of intellectual virtue into our epistemological evaluations and considering the cognitive subject as an agent does not require us to become internalists regarding warrant. There is even a way to speak of ‘subjective justification’ without resorting to internalist standards for warranted belief. According to Greco’s AR framework,

A belief *p* is subjectively justified for a person *S* (in the sense relevant for having knowledge) if and only if *S*’s believing *p* is grounded in the

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<sup>41</sup> This seems to be consistent with Plantinga, who would explain that errors in forming perceptual beliefs can be accounted for by malfunctioning cognitive faculties or a non-optimal minienvironment.

cognitive dispositions that S manifests when S is thinking conscientiously.<sup>42</sup>

By accounting for subjective justification this way, we have the resources to evaluate “the relevant sense in which knowledge must be subjectively appropriate as well as objectively reliable” (ibid). This echoes the distinction Helm makes between what we might consider ‘ideal justification’, involving paradigm cases where the agent is omniscient and has access to all available evidence, versus ‘personal justification’, in which an agent’s grounds for believing *p* are judged according to whether or not a rational person would adopt *p* on the same grounds (provided there is no weakness of will involved). Since the paradigm cases never actually occur, we must take into account an agent’s disposition toward the evidence that is actually available: “Ideal justification indicates that all the possible evidence regarding *p* would conclusively establish the truth-value of *p*, whereas in personal justification all the evidence is never available” (Helm 1994, p. 60). What this means, in short, is that part of any epistemic evaluation of a cognitive agent will include the agent’s sensitivity to the reliability of one’s evidence. And once we begin looking at an agent’s sensitivity to the reliability of evidence, we are also looking at “the dispositions a person manifests when she is sincerely trying to believe what is true, i.e. when she is properly motivated to believe what is true” (Greco 1999, p. 21). And, unlike some virtue epistemologists, Greco is wise to avoid collapsing all instances of belief formation into a single category:

In cases of empirical reasoning knowers are disposed to form beliefs about unobserved matters of fact on the basis of inferences from prior observations. In cases of perceptual knowledge they are disposed to form perceptual beliefs directly on the basis of sensory appearances. The fact

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<sup>42</sup> Greco 1999, p. 21.

that they do this in some ways and not others constitutes a kind of sensitivity to the reliability of their evidence.<sup>43</sup>

In making this distinction, we are able to maintain an externalists approach to warrant (of which Plantinga's proper function model can account for most cases of perceptual knowledge) while still accommodating various types of belief formation, including those that must account for the attitudes and dispositions of the agent, i.e. intellectual virtues.

## WARRANT AND VIRTUE

Thus far I have said little about the actual relationship between the intellectual virtues and the warrant of beliefs. My focus here is more on the nature of warrant than on the nature of intellectual virtue, and I do not wish to enter the debate on the exact nature of intellectual virtue and other related questions. For my purposes it will suffice to say that the intellectual virtues may include (but may not be limited to) any of the following: courage, caution, firmness, love of knowledge, humility, autonomy, generosity, practical wisdom<sup>44</sup>, intellectual carefulness, perseverance, vigor, flexibility, courage, thoroughness, open-mindedness, fairness, insightfulness, intellectual integrity<sup>45</sup>, etc. Those who tend to conflate faculties with intellectual virtues will often include sight, hearing, introspection, memory, deduction and induction, etc.<sup>46</sup> Regardless of whether those of the latter sort properly qualify as intellectual virtues, my interest lies with those in the former. Since the concept of warrant, in Plantinga's conception, is open to a variety of sources, it seems only natural to include these reflective, intellectual virtues among the criteria of warranting properties. The benefits of this are twofold: 1) the

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<sup>43</sup> Greco 1999, pp. 22-23.

<sup>44</sup> As listed in Roberts and Wood 2007 (table of contents)

<sup>45</sup> As listed in Zagzebski 1996, p. 155.

<sup>46</sup> Greco lists these in his entry on 'Virtue Epistemology' in Darcy and Sosa 1993, p. 520.

modified proper function model is more clearly able to describe and evaluate epistemic practices that are both subjectively responsible and objectively reliable, and 2) open the doors for less-explored avenues of epistemic evaluation such as understanding and wisdom. Nothing in the current definition of warrant is being replaced, but something of value is being added. We are thus allowed to say that beliefs formed out of intellectual virtue possess warrant, while not being required to make the claim that all warranted beliefs are necessarily virtuous.<sup>47</sup> In making the latter claim, we avoid one of the major problems of a pure virtue theory, namely that the stakes for everyday knowledge are set too high. It seems perfectly normal to assess basic perceptual beliefs without bringing intellectual virtues into the equation. When it comes to evaluating higher-level knowledge claims, however, we have an added dimension of epistemic evaluation that considers the whole person rather than the mere belief in question. For example, in addition to asking whether a belief was formed via a reliable process in the appropriate environment by an agent whose faculties are functioning properly (suppose it is the belief that I deserve a 95 on my exam instead of the 75 I received), we can ask whether, perhaps, some intellectual virtue(s) was lacking (for example, objectivity or humility) that hindered my ability to formulate a correct belief about the situation. Such a belief would lack, we could say in the fully Plantingian sense, warrant. Or for another example, a scientist might subconsciously ignore evidence that could potentially disprove the theory she is currently working on and has spent years developing. If she had possessed the virtues of flexibility, intellectual integrity, and the love of knowledge over and against the concern for her own reputation, she likely would have been more sensitive to the

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<sup>47</sup> As I mentioned earlier, intellectual virtue requires sensitivity to the available evidence and/or the processes involved in belief formation, although, sometimes an agent may exhibit intellectual virtue yet fail to have warrant for her belief if there is some sort of failure in the environmental condition.

sources she attended to and the belief formation processes that come with them. Thus, intellectual vice led to the malfunction of her faculty of reason, which means her belief that the theory is scientifically sound is actually lacking warrant.

Whether intentional or not, I believe that Plantinga's theory is already structured in such a way to support the intellectual virtues as an additional criteria for warrant. One of the advantages of the concept of warrant, as opposed to traditional evaluations of justification, is that it comes in degrees. In other words, a belief is not simply warranted or unwarranted; there are indicators as to how much warrant a belief enjoys. Plantinga makes it clear that there is of course a *threshold* of warrant that must be crossed before a true belief can be considered knowledge, but the degree of warrant can ascend beyond the bare minimum. The degree of warrant depends in part on the degree of belief<sup>48</sup>, or the amount of firmness to which the belief is held. Other factors can affect the degree of warrant (such as defeaters), but it is interesting that Plantinga singles out firmness. As noted above, firmness can be counted among the intellectual virtues, and here we have a clear example of intellectual virtue having a direct effect on a belief's warrant. Plantinga does not state this clearly, but it seems most accurate to say that it is a characteristic of the *person* that she holds a particular belief firmly, rather than of the belief itself. He has suggested that there is still room for development of this idea: "I am prepared to concede that possibility that one can't do a really proper job on warrant without exploring the analogically related properties of these other propositional attitudes' (Kvanvig 1996, p. 371). He goes on to say, "Indeed, the fact is work of this kind is very much need" (ibid). I see no reason why other epistemic virtues cannot have the same effect on warrant as

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<sup>48</sup> Plantinga 2000, p. 456.

firmness. While not every intellectual virtue will apply in every case, if a certain disposition or state of character in an agent can determine the degree of warrant, then why should we not utilize the whole range of epistemic virtues in evaluating the degree of warrant that a belief possesses?

## CHAPTER IV

### WARRANT AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

#### THE PROPER BASICITY OF THEISTIC BELIEF

My goal in this chapter is a modest one; I will not attempt to defend Plantinga's argument for the rationality of religious belief, but rather I will be looking at whether or not the model described in Chapter 3 is better equipped to answer certain objections than the original model. I want re-examine Plantinga's notion of proper basicity and how this relates to the maintenance of religious belief.

The idea that the belief 'God exists' could be held in a basic, non-inferential manner is one the Plantinga began developing in *God and Other Minds*<sup>49</sup>. His argument is that it is possible for belief in God to be rational in the same way that belief in the external world, or in the past, or in the existence of other minds is rational<sup>50</sup>. The obvious problem that arises here is that while virtually everyone maintains the latter beliefs, theistic belief remains highly controversial. Utilizing concepts originally developed by John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*<sup>51</sup>, Plantinga explains that all human beings are endowed with a faculty known as the *sensus divinitatis* (SD), by which the

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<sup>49</sup> Plantinga 1967.

<sup>50</sup> It is important to note that Plantinga does not argue that belief in God cannot be arrived at by way of argument or other ways that are not 'properly basic'. See the Appendix for a treatment of this topic.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin 1960.



existence of God and our relationship to him is immediately perceived. Because of the Fall of humankind, according to the Christian tradition, this faculty has been severely corrupted along with our wills and the rest of our nature. Thus, our awareness of God, via the *sensus divinitatis*, is all but destroyed by what Plantinga calls the ‘noetic effects of sin’. It is possible for the SD to be restored, however, by the activity of the Holy Spirit - what Aquinas termed the ‘internal instigation of the Holy Spirit’ (IIHS) – although it is not applied universally. It is a complex process involving the work of God and the response of the believer, but it essentially results in a restored (at least partially) SD by which God is immediately perceived to be real. Since, according to the Christian faith, the SD is a part of the original design plan, a corrupted SD will result in cognitive malfunction. Plantinga’s own articulation of this model is lengthy and highly nuanced, and I cannot cover it in great detail here.<sup>52</sup> Instead, I wish to highlight a central aspect of the theory, known as the extended Aquinas/Calvin model.

#### THE EXTENDED A/C MODEL

In WCB, Plantinga further developed his model for the basicity of theistic belief, rooted in the idea of St. Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, to address specifically the questions of *Christian* belief. This is why it is termed the ‘extended’ A/C model.

According to Plantinga, “The central themes of this extended model are the Bible, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, and faith.”<sup>53</sup> The latter element, faith, is of interest here in light of the discussion on intellectual virtues. While not usually addressed in the literature of virtue ethics, it is one of the three Pauline virtues (faith, hope, and love) that

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<sup>52</sup> The interested reader should consult Plantinga 1983 for a fairly brief introduction, or Plantinga 2000 for a thoroughly developed explanation of the theory.

<sup>53</sup> WCB, p. 242.

are placed alongside the four cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, courage, and justice) in the Christian tradition. While Plantinga considers faith to be a gift from God, he also acknowledges that it “involves the *executive* function of the will; believers accept the proffered gift and commit themselves to the Lord, to conforming their lives to his will, to living lives of gratitude.”<sup>54</sup> It is the inter-working of these three elements that shape the typical way in which human beings come to know God, and it involves both a certain kind of proper cognitive functioning as well as the exercise of a certain intellectual virtue on the part of the agent. “Perhaps what moral and intellectual virtues make possible,” according to W. Jay Wood, “is not simply a capacity to detect and appraise evidence for God but a capacity to experience God more directly.”<sup>55</sup>

On the question of this assessment’s place in study of epistemology, it is worth quoting Plantinga at length:

How does this model, with its excursion into theology, provide an answer to an epistemological question? How can it be a model for a way in which Christian belief has or could have justification, rationality, warrant? The answer is simplicity itself. These beliefs do not come to the Christian just by way of memory, perception, reason, testimony, the *sensus divinitatis*, or any of the cognitive faculties with which we human beings were originally created; they come instead by way of the work of the Holy Spirit, who gets us to accept, causes us to believe, these great truths of the gospel. These beliefs don’t just come by way of the normal operation of our natural faculties; they are a supernatural gift. Still, the Christian who has received this gift of faith will of course be *justified* (in the basic sense of the term) in believing as he does; there will be nothing contrary to epistemic or other duty in so believing (indeed, once he has accepted the gift, it may not be within his power to withhold belief).<sup>56</sup>

But even by Plantinga’s formulation this supernatural gift, resulting in belief in God and the “great truths of the gospel”, involves a three-tiered cognitive

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 244.

<sup>55</sup> Wood 1998, p. 191.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 245.

process. There is first the environmental condition, namely that Scripture or some other form of direct revelation from God is present in the agent's environment; secondly, the cognitive process which is the IHS (which, even though Plantinga claims is more than a cognitive process, it is *at least* a cognitive process); and finally, the exercise of an intellectual virtue (or perhaps a disposition), which is faith. Notice that it is not merely the status of the *beliefs* in question; the disposition of the agent is central in evaluating the formation of religious belief on Plantinga's model, which is a necessary component of agent-reliabilism.

#### *DE JURE VS. DE FACTO* OBJECTIONS

At this point one might understandably object that the model being discussed and all of its explanatory power rely on the presumption that the Christian faith is, in fact, true. One of the central claims of Plantinga's argument in WCB is concerned with the *de jure* vs. *de facto* problem, in which a distinction is made between the *truth* of religious beliefs and the *rationality* of accepting religious beliefs (respectively). *De facto* objections are simply objections to the truth of religious belief (e.g., the problem of evil). *De jure* objections, on the other hand, are "arguments or claims to the effect that Christian belief, whether or not true, is at any rate unjustifiable, or rationally unjustified, or irrational, or not intellectually respectable, or contrary to sound morality, or without sufficient evidence, or in some other way rationally unacceptable [...]"<sup>57</sup> Plantinga has argued that the *de jure* objection is necessarily connected to the *de facto* objection, such that one cannot attack person *S*'s belief in God without attacking the actual existence of God. If the attacker is unable to successfully disprove the existence of God, then he is

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<sup>57</sup> Plantinga 2000, p. ix.

not within his epistemic rights to criticize the rationality of one's belief in God. Yet it is often objected that belief in God should be subjected to the same scrutiny as any other belief. In other words, most would agree that a person who believed in unicorns would not be entitled to that belief without any evidence (even if there was no way to *disprove* the existence of unicorns).

Plantinga has addressed this objection<sup>58</sup>, but I want to add that his thesis 'if the Christian faith is true, then the model is very likely close to the sober truth'<sup>59</sup> (and therefore a person's belief in God may be rational in the absence of evidence) does not entail that *anyone* who holds the belief 'God exists' is holding that belief rationally. Plantinga's description is that of the paradigm believer; not everyone who arrives at belief in God will follow the exact path that Plantinga has outlined. It is likely that there are many people who hold religious beliefs for reasons other than those that arise out of intellectual virtue. For example, there may be some who believe in God because it is existentially impossible for them to believe otherwise. That is, for such a person, when the proposition that God may not exist enters their mind, the immediate reaction is to suppress it for the simple reason that life would be too difficult without having that belief as part their noetic structure. It would seem, in cases like these, that such a person would be intellectually culpable; the reason for holding that particular belief arises from intellectual cowardice as opposed to the love of truth. Clearly, the character and disposition of the agent toward truth will affect the degree of warrant that the agent's religious beliefs possess. But Plantinga's argument that *de jure* and *de facto* objections

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<sup>58</sup> WCB, pp.190-198.

<sup>59</sup> This is a paraphrase of a point that Plantinga makes in several of his writings.

are connected still carries substantial weight, since it illustrates that one may not challenge the rationality of Christian theism *prima facie* without attacking the *truth claims* of Christianity.

## THE FIDEISM OBJECTION

The *de jure* and *de facto* objections are objections against Christian theism, but I will now turn to an objection specifically against Plantinga's religious epistemology. The charge of fideism has been leveled by theists and atheists alike, but the accusation usually comes from those concerned that Plantinga is endorsing a 'blind faith' which can often lead to various forms of fanaticism. Perhaps some challenges of fideism are grounded in a misunderstanding of what Plantinga is aiming to accomplish. He reminds us in WCB that what he is arguing, in large part, is that

Christian belief can be justified, rational, and warranted not just for ignorant fundamentalists or benighted medievals but for informed and educated twenty-first-century Christians who are entirely aware of all the artillery that has been rolled up against Christian belief since the Enlightenment. I shall argue that if Christian belief is true, then it is *rational* and *warranted* for most of those who accept it.<sup>60</sup>

The worst 'most' is of no small importance here, for it reminds us that Plantinga's model does not make the claim: "If Christian theism is true, then anyone and everyone who holds to it is fully rational and within her epistemic rights." In examining how it is the case that Plantinga can still make the claim that Christian belief *can* be rational, I believe it to be crucial that the intellectual virtues and emotional disposition of the agent are brought into the picture.

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<sup>60</sup> WCB, p. 242.

Plantinga writes at length about the concept of ‘defeaters’ for religious belief. These are beliefs which present themselves to the believer as evidence that contradicts or undermines belief in God or some other religious belief, which if adopted, will result in an incoherent belief structure. Assuming that the agent is not suffering from cognitive malfunction or intellectual vice, he will have to resolve the tension by either abandoning the previously held belief or by discovering a ‘defeater-defeater’ which will dispel the challenge brought about by the defeater. At this point it becomes clear why a more thoroughly agent-realist account results in a better explanation of this concept and thus a more detailed understanding of warrant. This is demonstrated by addressing Plantinga’s notion of the intrinsic defeater-defeater. Since one of the factors leading to warrant for belief *A* includes the degree of conviction held by the person who believes *A*, a potential (atheological) defeater to theistic (or Christian) belief can be countered merely by the degree with which one holds to the belief. This is what Plantinga refers to as an “intrinsic defeater-defeater” (IDD), which does not involve the use of argument.

However, two questions arise here: 1) Do IDs apply to any belief or only theistic belief? If they can apply to any belief (say, my belief and conviction that it is November 2<sup>nd</sup>, or that unicorns exist), then why should the degree of conviction have any bearing on warrant? 2) Is it possible for the cognizer to increase his own degree of conviction in belief *A* simply through his own exertion? If so, then couldn’t some examples of this be considered mere ignorance, or worse yet, the result of some intellectual vice such as pride, selfishness, or laziness? However, if it is not possible to raise one’s own degree of conviction in this way, then it seems that further investigation and introspection would be needed in order to have warrant. And this requires certain intellectual virtues on the

agent's part, namely intellectual honesty, perseverance, and love of truth. Granted, Plantinga emphasizes that he is describing the paradigmatic believer, but experience informs us that there are many cases where the level of doubt raised by a defeater can cause a serious dilemma for the believer, in which intellectual virtues become factors in epistemic evaluation as further exploration and reflection upon the matter are utilized to restore the degree of warrant to an acceptable level (crossing the "threshold" of warrant, in Plantinga's terms). This would result in a defeater-defeater, but one that most likely will involve the use of argument or some other element contributing to knowledge, unlike Plantinga's IDD.

The problem with the notion of IDD as it stands is that it leaves the exact role of intellectual virtue in question. Certainly one must display a certain disposition toward the truth if one's firmness in their belief is to be regarded as something praiseworthy. Blind adherence would in fact be fideism, but this is clearly not what Plantinga is after: "Faith, according to the model, is far indeed from being a blind leap; it isn't even remotely like a leap in the dark. [...] What makes something a leap in the dark is that the leaper doesn't know and has no firm beliefs about what there is out there in the dark."<sup>61</sup> But if Plantinga wants to maintain that firmness in itself can function as an IDD against defeaters, he must explain what it is that prevents this firmness from crossing over into irrationality as the number and strength of defeaters surmounts against his religious beliefs. Surely it is irrational to maintain a belief when one encounters sustained, persuasive evidence to the contrary. This is why an agent-reliabilist account of Plantinga's model provides the necessary explanatory tools to support such claims.

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<sup>61</sup> WCB, p. 263.

Of course, one can err in the opposite direction by displaying a lack of firmness, resulting in a set of beliefs that displays some degree of coherence, yet is in a constant state of flux. This would be an example of intellectual vice, wherein the agent's character results in the abandonment of religious belief. But this should not be problematic for Plantinga's model, as it would be no different than the freshman philosophy student who completely abandons his belief in the external world after an introduction to philosophical skepticism. Surely none would praise such a move for being intellectually virtuous; this would not be an example of epistemic humility, but rather intellectual laziness. Still, within this range there is room for variation in regards to firmness. Statement *X* might count as a defeater in regard to belief *p* for agent *A*, while not for agent *B*. The variable is the intellectual character of the respective agents.

#### EPISTEMIC VIRTUE AND THE MAINTENANCE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

While for Plantinga the only intellectual virtue specifically given a role in the acquiring of religious beliefs is faith, I have argued that the intellectual virtues can and should play a more central role in Plantinga's model of epistemic evaluation. This is perhaps more clear in cases of beliefs being *maintained* rather than *acquired*. The analysis of the former benefits the most from an agent-reliabilist model, while still being rooted in Plantinga's proper function model. W. Jay Wood writes:

We can supplement Plantinga's idea that whether or not the experience of the world prompts us to take belief in God in the basic manner will depend on whether our noetic equipment is functioning properly. We now see that our affective nature, our emotions and moral nature, are not independent



of our functioning properly but part and parcel of it. To function cognitively in a proper way is to function in a virtuous way.<sup>62</sup>

While Plantinga's model may account for the acquisition of many religious beliefs, it has less to say about how one may continue to hold those beliefs in a respectable way. Also, the category of religious beliefs is not static; surely an epistemically virtuous Christian theist will develop the firmness to which she holds her religious beliefs while also adding to and modifying the relevant areas of her noetic structure. As Alston has pointed out<sup>63</sup>, coherence is amongst the epistemic desiderata, and the presence of intellectual virtue, as part of an agent's character, would make her inclined to pursue this epistemic good (among others).

By understanding the proper function theory in agent-reliabilist terms, it becomes a more explicitly agent-based model of epistemic evaluation, one that takes into account more than just the state of individual beliefs or the operation of faculties. We are therefore better equipped to explore some of the questions of epistemological enquiry, while also breaking away from the narrowness of much contemporary epistemology.

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<sup>62</sup> Wood 1998, p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> Alston 2005, pp. 234-35.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that Plantinga's proper function model can be classified as a form of virtue epistemology. This claim must be understood, however, within the context of agent-reliabilism, which is agent-based insofar as it gives the stable character and emotions of the agent a central role in epistemic evaluation. While Plantinga's existing model seems to provide an adequate account of many kinds of belief formation, especially at the basic, perceptual level, certain questions of epistemic responsibility remain unanswered when the role of the intellectual virtues is ignored.

Plantinga has not adopted the term 'virtue epistemology' to describe his theory, which is understandable considering the lack of clarity surrounding the concept. However, I have demonstrated how a particular understanding of the concept cannot only be used to describe the theory, but can also provide a more beneficial way to approach epistemological questions along proper function lines. This is important because, in order to avoid severely deconstructing the original model, the intellectual virtues must be incorporated in such a way as to avoid threatening the externalism that is so crucial to Plantinga's theory of knowledge. see no contradiction with this theory in Greco's claim

that “knowledge and justified belief are grounded in stable and reliable cognitive character,”<sup>64</sup> or with the idea the epistemic virtues can play a key role in increasing a belief’s degree of warrant.

I began this study with an analysis of the concept of justification in contemporary epistemology, leading up to Plantinga’s version of reliabilism as developed in his *Warrant* trilogy. After explaining the basic components of this model, including the requirements for proper cognitive function, I attempted to sketch a framework along these lines that could make room for a more significant role of the intellectual virtues. After distinguishing the broad categories of belief-based and agent-based theories, I argued that while Plantinga’s model *appears* to fall under the former category, it can be interpreted in such away that opens the possibility of being ascribed to the latter. I have done this by highlighting elements of the model that already display agent-reliabilist traits. By emphasizing these aspects of a proper function model and making the intellectual virtues criteria for warrant, the result is a more nuanced and exhaustive model that can properly be understood as a kind of virtue epistemology.

I then turned to the topic of religious belief, examining how this emerging model might affect Plantinga’s approach, known as Reformed epistemology, to the nature of belief in God and other religious questions. I specifically dealt with Plantinga’s concept of an intrinsic defeater-defeater (IDD), arguing that it requires a virtue-theoretic basis in order to provide a coherent response to defeaters of religious belief. I also addressed Plantinga’s “extended A/C model”, the distinction of *de jure* and *de facto* objections and

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<sup>64</sup> Greco 1999, p. 19.

their significance to theistic belief, and the fideism objection more generally. I then addressed the need for epistemic virtue in maintaining religious beliefs.

My aim has been to demonstrate that to function *properly* as an epistemic agent is also to function *virtuously*. Further development needs to be made in this area, but I believe that Plantinga's proper function account is ripe for such exploration.

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## APPENDIX:

### THE ROLE OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

The natural theology of St. Thomas Aquinas has been considered by many to be the finest model for natural theology ever constructed. However, the practice of natural theology in general has experienced its share of criticism throughout history, including criticism from within the realm of theistic belief. This can take a variety of different forms, but I wish to focus on one particular objection which has come to be known as “the Reformed objection to natural theology” (hereafter RO).<sup>65</sup> This objection finds its source in the claim that belief in God is ‘properly basic’ and not based upon philosophical demonstration. Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and to a lesser degree, William Alston, have all argued for something resembling this position. The question at stake here, in broad terms, is concerned with the relationship between faith and reason; more specifically, whether or not one must be able to provide evidence or reasons for belief in God in order for that belief to be justified. RO, as commonly understood, is not to be confused with the objection that the existence of God cannot be demonstrated, and should therefore be rejected as a foundation for theistic belief.<sup>66</sup> While it is true that some who hold RO may share this objection as well, RO is unique in claiming that belief in God does not require any evidence at all in order to be justified or

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<sup>65</sup> The use of this phrase is largely due to Alvin Plantinga’s work in “The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 54, *Philosophical Knowledge*, ed. John B. Brough, et al., pp. 49-62, and “Reason and Belief in God”, *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: 1983), ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, pp. 16-93.

<sup>66</sup> Aquinas deals with this objection in *Summa contra gentiles* I, 10-12 (Notre Dame: 1955), trans. Anton C. Pegis.

warranted. I want to argue, however, that this understanding of RO is misguided in its attack on natural theology. While there is much that could be said along these lines, I want to focus on one particular passage in Aquinas's *Summa contra gentiles* I, 6 under the heading "That to give assent to the truths of faith is not foolishness even though they are above reason". I will argue against the claim, based on this passage, that Aquinas was an evidentialist in regard to theistic belief, while likewise arguing in favor of the proposition that the underlying motivations driving RO are not inherently opposed to the practice of natural theology when understood in the appropriate way. After attempting to reconcile these two approaches (as much as possible in a limited amount of space), I will evaluate the differences, if any, that still remain between them.

Aquinas begins chapter 6 of *SCG* I with these words:

Those who place their faith in this truth, however, "for which the human reason offers no experimental evidence," do not believe foolishly, as though "following artificial fables" (II Peter 1:16). For these "secrets of divine Wisdom" (Job 11:16) the divine wisdom itself, which knows all things to the full, has deigned to reveal to men. It reveals its own presence, as well as the truth of its teaching and inspiration, by fitting arguments; and in order to confirm those truths that exceed natural knowledge, it gives visible manifestation to works that surpass the ability of all nature.<sup>67</sup>

He then goes on to mention various miracles as examples of this visible manifestation, followed by:

and what is more wonderful, there is the inspiration given to human minds, so that the simple and untutored persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom and the readiest eloquence.<sup>68</sup>

While the first part of the passage is not explicit as to whether Aquinas believes that evidence is required for religious belief, it seems clear from the latter part that he believes

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<sup>67</sup> *SCG* I, 6.1.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

that evidence does *exist* for religious belief (“It reveals its own presence [...] by fitting arguments.”). But, in light of this latter portion, it seems that we can infer from chapter 6 that Aquinas affirms both a) that evidence in the form of demonstrable arguments for theistic belief apart from divine revelation do exist, and b) one may still take the truths which are demonstrated by these arguments on faith and still have knowledge of them (and thereby being justified in believing them). Support for b) can also be found in *SCG* I 4.6, where Aquinas states, “Beneficially, therefore, did the divine Mercy provide that it should instruct us to hold by faith even those truths that the human reason is able to investigate. In this way, all men would easily be able to have a share in the knowledge of God, and this is without uncertainty and error.”

What role, then, does natural theology play in process of acquiring theistic belief if faith alone is sufficient for its justification? There are at least two ways in which natural theology can aid in this process, the first being that it can help to remove barriers one might experience in struggling with theistic belief. One may, for whatever reason, find such a belief appealing or desirable, but also feel held back by the assumption that the belief is not rational, justified, or supported by evidence. The theistic arguments often employed in natural theology may help to remove this barrier by demonstrating that theistic belief can at least be supported by inductively strong arguments.<sup>69</sup> This aligns best with the way the theistic arguments are used in experience, since very few people, if any, form theistic beliefs on the *basis* of rational arguments.

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<sup>69</sup> Aquinas would probably prefer something stronger (such as “sound arguments”), considering that he believed his arguments to be valid inferences from premises that were self-evident. Nonetheless, it is safer to not attach such stringent requirements on theistic arguments, since many arguments that are merely cogent or inductively strong suffice for justification of many commonly held basic beliefs. The same purpose may be served even if one does not find the arguments to be 100% conclusive.

Secondly, natural theology can serve the purpose of turning faith into knowledge. For Aquinas, faith is a kind of knowledge (*cognito*), no less certain than other kinds of knowledge. What is meant here is that natural theology is able to initiate the process of transmutation from previously held knowledge into demonstrative knowledge (*scientia*). This is similar to the famous phrase attributed to St. Augustine, “faith seeking understanding.” Possessing *scientia*, while not required for belief in God, is certainly desirable, notably in the presenting of arguments for and defending of the Christian faith, which was Aquinas’s primary task in *Summa contra gentiles*.

Plantinga has offered an alternative interpretation of the passage discussed above, citing it as evidence for Aquinas’s evidentialist approach to belief in God:

What he means to say, I think, is that to believe in the mysteries of the faith is not to be foolish or to believe with undue levity, because we have *evidence for* the conclusion that God has proposed them for our belief. [...]

I think he means to suggest, furthermore, that if we did *not* have this evidence, or some other evidence, we would be foolish or irrational in accepting the mysteries of the faith. It is just because we have evidence for these things that we are not irrational in accepting them.<sup>70</sup>

This may be an accurate assessment as far as it goes, but it is interesting that Plantinga appears to infer from this use of ‘we’ that an individual, according to Aquinas, must also be able to provide evidence in order for her belief in God to be rational. As I argued earlier, it appears to me that Aquinas is not so much arguing that *I* must be able to *provide* evidence in order for my belief in God to be rational, but rather that such belief is rational (whether I can provide evidence for it or not) because evidence *does exist* for the truths that are believed.<sup>71</sup> If this is correct, then it is not accurate to interpret Aquinas as

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<sup>70</sup> “Reason and Belief in God,” p. 46.

<sup>71</sup> Aquinas also suggests in chapter 6 and elsewhere that it is rational for the believer (who knows by way of faith) to accept these truths since they “come from God” on “his authority”.

an evidentialist.<sup>72</sup> John Zeis argues, in light of Aquinas's acknowledgement that some accept God's existence without the support of natural theology, and that this counts as knowledge, that, "I take this to imply that for Aquinas faith is warranted or justified belief, even in the absence of evidence."<sup>73</sup>

It would seem, then, that Aquinas' model shares some similarities with the 'proper basicity' position of RO. There is, in fact, a good amount of evidence that the Reformed tradition has not universally held a negative stance toward natural theology.<sup>74</sup> Paul Helm has argued that Calvin's supposed lack of interest in natural theology is likely due to the fact that he took the validity of its arguments for granted, and never felt compelled to address them since they were widely accepted in his religious cultural context.<sup>75</sup> The Reformed tradition has recognized that the *sensus divinitatis* (SD), Calvin's "internal sense of the divine", is not the only route to knowledge of God, although it may be sufficient. Natural theology, by removing possible barriers to belief, may allow the SD to function properly, and could even itself be the means by which the SD operates in some cases.

I find that this framework fits especially well with Plantinga's warrant model, which has developed as a general approach to epistemology that arose out of his work on "Reformed Epistemology". In short, Plantinga believes that 'warrant' is a better way to understand that which turns true belief into knowledge (as opposed to the muddled notion

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<sup>72</sup> John Zeis argues this point in "Natural Theology: Reformed?" *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame: 1993), pp. 48-78.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Helm offers the position that John Calvin was sympathetic to natural theology and utilized it himself to some degree in his writings. See *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: 2004). Michael Sudduth has argued that the Reformed tradition in general has maintained a positive stance toward natural theology until recently, and that current suspicions of it are based on a misunderstanding of the task of natural theology. See *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Ashgate: 2007), forthcoming.

<sup>75</sup> "Natural Theology and the *Sensus Divinitatis*," *John Calvin's Ideas*, p. 209-245.

of 'justification'). And if the SD is part of the design plan for how am I to acquire knowledge, then belief in God as a result of the instigation of the SD counts as knowledge. And one unique feature of warrant, unlike justification, is that it can come in *degrees*; for my belief to count as knowledge, it must cross the "threshold" of warrant, but it can also be strengthened through various means.<sup>76</sup> And natural theology seems like a likely candidate for increasing warrant. Plantinga also states that the degree of warrant enjoyed by a belief can be increased by the level of conviction with which it is held.<sup>77</sup> For example, if a believer is suffering from doubt about the rationality of the existence of God, natural theology rightly used may help the believer see the rationality of such belief, thereby increasing the degree of warrant it experiences. James Beilby puts it well: "a minimal degree of psychological certainty is necessary for warrant and a significant degree is necessary for knowledge. If so, there is an important role for natural theology – even within the confines of Plantinga's own religious epistemology – that of increasing the warrant of Christian beliefs."<sup>78</sup> Plantinga acknowledges this himself in his essay "The Prospects for Natural Theology": "And even if such arguments are not needed for theistic belief to have warrant (even if they are not the sole source of warrant for theistic belief), it doesn't follow that they cannot play the role of *increasing* warrant, and *significantly* increasing warrant."<sup>79</sup> I see no reason why this cannot be held alongside of Aquinas' transmutation principle of faith seeking knowledge. Plantinga himself seems to acknowledge this in his more recent writings by the use of the term "Extended Aquinas / Calvin Model" to denote his description of the workings of the SD.

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<sup>76</sup> Although there might also be degrees of justification of beliefs, traditional epistemology has typically concerned itself with the question of whether a belief is 'justified' or 'not justified'.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 456, 477-78.

<sup>78</sup> Beilby 2005, p. 130.

<sup>79</sup> *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 5, Philosophy of Religion. (1991), p. 311.

My conclusion is that both schemes are in fact operating along very similar lines, and are perfectly compatible with one another. Neither can be accurately labeled as evidentialist; and while both maintain that belief in God may be properly basic, they also maintain that demonstrative knowledge is still desirable. Zeis asserts, “As such, theological foundationalism [i.e. models akin to Plantinga’s] does not seem to necessitate a reformation of traditional natural theology, but, rather, to re-affirm it.”<sup>80</sup> Norman Kretzmann expresses a similar sentiment in his analysis of *SCG I*, *The Metaphysics of Theism*:

As far as I can see, then, ‘the Reformed objection to natural theology’ is a religious objection directed not against natural theology but against only one possible application of it, a religious objection that does not support any formidable philosophical objections, a religious objection that therefore provides a dubious basis for Reformed Epistemology.<sup>81</sup>

Even if these models really are more similar than they appear upon a surface reading, there still remains the question of where they differ. It appears to me that there is a subtle distinction in emphasis and purpose placed on the evidential aspect of theistic belief. Aquinas sees “faith seeking understanding” as the transmutation of faith into *scientia*, in order to have a more certain knowledge of the truths of God. Plantinga, however, in some places wants to argue that the purpose of theistic arguments is to lead a person to proper basicity in regards to belief in God. In *Reason and Belief in God*, he suggests that natural theology may be useful in some respects, one being that it could be useful in helping someone move from unbelief to belief. But in this section he peculiarly claims that “for these people theistic arguments can be useful as a means of moving toward what

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<sup>80</sup> “Natural Theology: Reformed?” p. 73.

<sup>81</sup> (Oxford: 1997), p. 20.

Calvin sees as the best way to believe in God: as basic.”<sup>82</sup> This strikes me as being counterintuitive, and I am not quite sure how belief which is based on evidence is supposed to lead to that same belief being held as properly basic. Perhaps Plantinga is merely suggesting that the arguments are used as “stepping stones” to belief in God, and are then ignored and forgotten once the proper object of knowledge has been perceived. But again, if this is the case, it does not sound very far from something Aquinas would claim.

I have argued that RO is a misguided critique of natural theology, if it is understood as an attack on natural theology *per se*. One can still make use of natural theology while maintaining the intuitions underlying RO, including proper basicity, although the Reformed philosopher and the Thomist may disagree on the amount of weight given to the evidence provided by natural theology. While the differences in emphasis of these approaches are real, they nonetheless share many of the same features.

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<sup>82</sup> p. 73.



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Scope and Method of Study: Alvin Plantinga's theory of knowledge, as developed in his *Warrant* trilogy, has shaped the debates surrounding many areas in epistemology in profound ways. Plantinga has received his share of criticism, however, particularly in his treatment of belief in God as being "properly basic". There has also been much confusion surrounding his notions of *warrant* and *proper function*, to which Plantinga has responded numerous times. Many critics remain unsatisfied, while others have developed alternative understandings of warrant in order to rescue Plantinga's theory from certain objections. The most promising of such attempts fall under the broad category of "virtue epistemology" or a "virtue-theoretic" approach. The work being done in virtue epistemology is still in its early stages and a consensus on what actually constitutes virtue epistemology has yet to be reached. While some have attempted to structure an entire theory of knowledge based on the virtues possessed by the knower, others have focused more on the role of epistemic virtues as an attempt to supplement existing theories, including Plantinga's. In this paper, I will offer an analysis of what such an attempt might look like and evaluate the potential success of broadening Plantinga's original model.

Findings and Conclusions: My proposal is that certain features of a virtue-theoretic approach (also referred to as "agent-reliabilism") could improve Plantinga's model in significant ways. Not only would such a broadened approach be better equipped to handle common objections, but it would also be better suited to contribute an enhanced understanding of the task of epistemology, one that seeks to discover multiple epistemic goods other than what has been traditionally confined to the realm of knowledge. I conclude by applying this approach to Plantinga's treatment of theistic belief in *Warranted Christian Belief* and by articulating a few of the ways in which epistemic virtues can increase the degree of warrant enjoyed by such belief.

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