

# DEFEATING THE CHRISTIAN'S CLAIM TO WARRANT

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**Abstract:** Alvin Plantinga notes that if what Christians believe is true, their beliefs are warranted. It follows, he argues, that the only decisive objection to Christian belief is a *de facto* one: an argument that shows that what Christians believe is false. We disagree. A critic could mount a direct attack on the Christian's claim to warrant by offering a more plausible account of the causal mechanism giving rise to belief, one that shows that mechanism to be unreliable. This would represent a powerful *de jure* argument against Christian belief.

## INTRODUCTION

Alvin Plantinga is perhaps best known for his “reformed epistemology,” a position first expressed in his paper “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” and fully developed in his *magnum opus*, *Warranted Christian Belief*. While his views are of immediate interest to philosophers of religion, they have implications for wider debates in epistemology, particularly those regarding internalist and externalist accounts of justified believing. Indeed Plantinga prepares the way for his conclusions by means of a series of other works—particularly his 1993 books *Warrant: the Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*—in which the broader issues are extensively discussed.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. PLANTINGA'S ARGUMENT

With regard to Christian faith, Plantinga presents his position in the form of an argument, whose conclusion is that Christian belief can be a form of

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*warranted, undefeated, basic belief.* It is not merely belief in God which may meet these standards, but what Plantinga calls “the full panoply of Christian belief, including trinity, incarnation, atonement, resurrection.”<sup>2</sup> Central to this claim is his idea of warrant. A belief is warranted, roughly speaking, if it is produced by a reliable, truth-conducive mechanism. More precisely,

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.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian can provide an account of warrant, which involves several distinctively Christian beliefs. Plantinga's favored version is what he calls the “extended Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model.”<sup>4</sup> This involves both an innate *sensus divinitatis* (sense of divinity) and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer.

One might object that these mechanisms exist *only if* what Christians believe is true. The existence of a warrant depends upon the truth of the Christian faith and, in particular, the truth of something like the Aquinas/Calvin account. But Plantinga turns this apparently banal observation to his advantage. His argument is that *if* what A/C-accepting Christians believe is true, *then* these mechanisms exist. And if the existence of such a mechanism constitutes warrant, it follows that “if Christian belief is true, then it is also warranted.”<sup>5</sup> This conditional claim lies at the heart of Plantinga's reformed epistemology.

Although we are critics of Plantinga's project, we are happy to grant this conclusion, for a moment's reflection will show it to be not only true, but evidently true. Plantinga is inclined to speak of “Christian belief” in the singular, but in fact what he is talking about is a conjunction, a set of beliefs.<sup>6</sup> One set of these is made up of beliefs about warrant. So what does it mean to say that if Christian belief is true, it is warranted? It is to make a claim of the form “if (*a & b & c & d & e*), then (*d & e*),” where (*a & b & c & d & e*) represent the full panoply of Christian beliefs and (*d & e*) represent Christian beliefs regarding warrant. This might appear to be no more illuminating than the claim that “if the sun is shining and it is Wednesday, then it is Wednesday.” However, Plantinga argues that even this practically trivial conclusion has important implications.

The first implication emerges from the combination of this conditional with a second claim: the idea that Christian beliefs are *basic* with regard to warrant. They neither arise from, nor are warranted as a result of, inferences from other beliefs. They arise spontaneously, given the right circumstances. Those circumstances may involve perceiving the majesty or delicate beauty of nature, or experiencing guilt, receiving forgiveness, or being in a state of grave danger. In the case of distinctively Christian beliefs, the conviction of their truth normally arises on the occasion of reading scripture or hearing these beliefs proclaimed.

We read Scripture, or something presenting scriptural teaching, or we hear

the gospel preached, or are told of it by parents, or encounter a scriptural teaching as the conclusion of an argument (or conceivably even as an object of ridicule), or in some other way encounter a proclamation of the Word. What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying, "Yes, that's right, that's the truth of the matter; that is indeed the word of the Lord."<sup>7</sup>

In this respect, the Christian's beliefs resemble beliefs that arise spontaneously from sense-perception, which are similarly non-inferential.

This idea allows Plantinga to claim that merely evidential arguments against Christian belief, such as Paul Draper's evidential argument from evil,<sup>8</sup> have little force. Draper's argument may well entail that Christian beliefs are "evidentially challenged," in the sense that if they were the result of arguments, the arguments would be unsound. What Christians believe, in other words, would be rendered improbable by facts that no one disputes. But Plantinga's point is that many beliefs that are basic with regard to warrant have this same feature. They, too, are evidentially challenged. Yet if they do have warrant—or even if we believe them to have warrant—in a non-inferential manner, we don't consider this to be a reason to reject them. To take one of Plantinga's examples,

my friend has a cat named Maynard; I believe that Maynard is a cat and also (as my friend reports) that Maynard likes cooked green beans; the latter, however, is much more likely on the serious (in Draper's sense) alternative hypothesis that Maynard is a Frisian, or possibly a Frenchman; so the belief that Maynard is a cat is evidentially challenged for me.<sup>9</sup>

Since my belief that Maynard is a cat is basic with regard to warrant—it may arise, for instance, from my having seen Maynard in conditions in which vision is normally reliable—the fact that I have other beliefs that would render it unlikely has little force.

It follows that if a Christian holds certain beliefs that are properly basic (i.e., basic with regard to warrant), those beliefs will play an important role in determining the evidential force of arguments against Christianity. The same argument may be very compelling to someone who lacks the Christian's properly basic religious beliefs, and yet be quite unconvincing to the Christian, whose existing "evidence base" differs from that of the non-believer.<sup>10</sup> As Plantinga puts it,

defeaters depend on and are relative to the rest of your noetic structure, the rest of what you know and believe. . . . As a result of this relativity to noetic structure, it can happen that both you and I learn a given proposition *p*, that it constitutes a defeater for another belief *q* for me, but does not do so for you.<sup>11</sup>

Let's try to put these ideas together and express them more formally. Plantinga suggests that a Christian who holds her beliefs to be warranted, in this properly basic manner, can reject any apparent defeater which has the form: "given everything else we know, the Christian faith is more probably false than true." To such an argument, the Christian can reply: "Yes, given *q*, *r*, and *s*, the truth of which I accept, my belief that *p* seems improbable. Or

given  $q$ , which I accept,  $r$  seems almost certainly true and if  $r$ , then *not-p*. But I hold  $p$  in a properly basic manner, not on the basis of an inference from  $q$  (or any other beliefs). For this reason, I reject the inference from  $q$ ,  $r$ , and  $s$  to the (probable) falsity of  $p$ , or (in the second case) I reject  $r$ . Such merely evidential considerations are outweighed by my properly basic belief." It follows that even if (as Draper argues) the distribution of pleasure and pain among sentient creatures renders it highly unlikely that the Christian god exists, this will not disturb a believer whose belief in God is properly basic.

A second implication that Plantinga draws from his conditional conclusion is that since Christian belief has warrant if it is true, those who raise objections to Christian belief are obliged to show that it is false. In making this point, Plantinga distinguishes *de facto* objections to Christian belief, which hold that what Christians believe is false, from *de jure* objections, which are

arguments 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, not up to snuff from an intellectual point of view.<sup>12</sup>

The *de jure* claim can be variously interpreted. If it is understood as having to do with deontological justification, then, Plantinga argues, it seems Christians can be deontologically justified in holding their beliefs. They should certainly take seriously the various objections that have been offered, but

if your belief is a result of the inward instigation of the Holy Spirit, it may seem obviously true, even after reflection on the various sorts of objections that have been offered. Clearly, one is then violating no intellectual obligations in accepting it. No doubt there are intellectual obligations and duties in the neighbourhood; when you note that others disagree with you, for example, perhaps there is a duty to pay attention to them and to their objections, a duty to think again, reflect more deeply, consult others, look for and consider other possible defeaters. If you have done these things and still find the belief utterly compelling, however, you are not violating duty or obligation.<sup>13</sup>

It follows that Christians can be within their epistemic rights, as it were, in continuing to hold their religious beliefs.

What if the *de jure* claim is interpreted as the claim that Christian belief is irrational? Once again, there are different senses in which a person can be said to be acting rationally in matters of belief. Plantinga pays particular attention to the idea of rationality as proper function, distinguishing between internal rationality and external rationality. *Internal* rationality has to do with the "proper function of all belief-producing processes" in *response* to experience, either sense-perceptual experience or the kind of "doxastic experience" involved in the formation of memory or *a priori* beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Can Christians be acting rationally in this sense? It seems that they can, if the beliefs they form in response to experience result from valid inferences and are consistent with one another.

There remains the question of *external* rationality, which has to do with the proper function of the mechanisms that *bring about* the relevant sense-perceptual or doxastic experience. Are the Christian's cognitive faculties functioning properly when they produce the kinds of experiences on the basis of which Christians form their beliefs? This does seem a legitimate question. But it leads us to a third kind of *de jure* objection.

This third kind of *de jure* objection claims that Christian beliefs are produced by cognitive mechanisms that are not functioning as they should, that is to say, in a truth-conducive manner. Marxist and Freudian critiques of religion are of this kind, and we shall come back to Plantinga's response to such critiques in a moment. By way of summary, what he argues is that these critiques appear to be effective only insofar as they take for granted the falsity of Christian belief.<sup>15</sup> So once again, it is the truth or falsity of Christian faith, rather than its rationality or justification, that it is at issue. It follows, he continues, that

there is no viable *de jure* (as opposed to *de facto*) challenge either to theistic or to Christian belief. There is no sensible challenge to the rationality or rational justification or warrant of Christian belief that is not also a challenge to its truth.<sup>16</sup>

Since Christian belief has warrant, if it is true, a critic must show that Christian faith is not true in order to show that it does not have warrant.

It is this last claim with which the present paper will take issue. There *are* arguments, with greater or lesser degrees of force, that seek to demonstrate that what Christians believe is false. The best known of these is the argument from evil, the "logical" form of which Plantinga has famously sought to refute. But what we shall argue is that the critic of Christian belief need not assume this burden. The only Christian beliefs that a critic need undermine are those regarding warrant. How could a critic do this? She could do so by arguing (a) that there exists a different and more plausible account of the mechanisms giving rise to Christian belief and (b) that on this alternative account the mechanisms giving rise to belief are unreliable. Such an argument is sometimes referred to as a "debunking" argument, but to avoid confusion with arguments that the Christian faith (as a whole) is false we shall refer to it as a "warrant-defeating" argument.

A warrant-defeating argument, we shall argue, would constitute an undercutting defeater for Christian faith. It would not show Christianity (as a whole) to be false, but it would undercut the Christian's grounds or reasons for thinking it true.<sup>17</sup> More precisely, it would give us reason to think that in the circumstances in which they are formed Christian beliefs would *appear* to be true, whether or not they *are* true. We are not claiming that there exists a successful warrant-defeating argument. To show that there is would involve a critical survey of existing theories of religion, a task that lies well beyond the scope of this paper. We are arguing merely that the offering of such an argument would constitute a legitimate *de jure* objection to Christian belief.

In *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga dismisses warrant-based *de jure* arguments with a quick survey of the Marxist and Freudian critiques. These are, of course, easy targets: Freud is hardly taken seriously among practitioners of a laboratory-based social and cognitive psychology, and Marx's work on the relation between ideas and their social context has been extensively criticized. So we are happy to accept his arguments against such theories: they are, in many cases, poorly grounded.

What about more recent theories of religion, such as those arising from cognitive science and evolutionary theory? Plantinga notes that according to some of these theories, religious belief arises from a mechanism that delivers many "false positives."<sup>18</sup> His response is that this does not show all the beliefs to which they give rise to be false. But this, too, is a point we can readily concede. What we are interested in is an argument that would show Christian beliefs to be unwarranted (a form of *de jure* argument), and a belief can (in general) be unwarranted even if it is true. Of course, if Christian beliefs *are* unwarranted, then it will follow that a Christian who holds to the Aquinas/Calvin account must hold at least one false belief, namely that regarding warrant. But it remains the case that her other religious beliefs—regarding God or original sin or redemption, for instance—could be true, even if they lack warrant.

In summary, Plantinga's response to allegedly warrant-defeating arguments is to show that they are either (in the case of Marxist and Freudian critiques) poor arguments or (in the case of more recent theories of religion) that they do not show that what Christians believe is false. But neither of these responses rules out the possibility of a successful warrant-defeating argument. It is this possibility that we wish to explore.

## 2. DEFEATING THE CLAIM TO WARRANT

So what would a successful warrant-defeating argument look like? In this part of our paper, we shall set out the conditions for a successful argument of this kind, as well as consider two responses that a follower of Plantinga might make. Let's start by considering the relation between warrant-defeating arguments and natural explanations of Christian belief.

In order to defeat the Christian's claim to warrant, it is not enough to offer a natural explanation of the formation of Christian beliefs. Not all natural explanations are warrant-defeating explanations. If they were, then most, if not all, of our true beliefs would lack warrant, for they, too, arise from processes that have a natural explanation. Indeed Kelly James Clark and Justin Barrett have suggested that natural explanations of religious belief could be consistent with Christian faith. They could, after all, be the means by which God brings about the beliefs that he wishes human beings to have.<sup>19</sup> On this view, the natural mechanism giving rise to belief are nothing less than the *sensus divinitatis* of the Aquinas/Calvin account. Plantinga makes a similar point with regard to Freud's "wish-fulfilment" view of religion.

Perhaps this is how God has arranged for us to come to know him. If so, then the particular bit of cognitive design plan governing the formation of theistic belief is indeed aimed at true belief, even if the belief in question arises from wish-fulfilment.<sup>20</sup>

This suggestion may seem implausible, but we cannot deny that it may be true. As God has arranged for us to evolve eyes so that we may see, so he may have arranged for us to evolve a mechanism giving rise to faith so that we may believe. It is true that such a mechanism may not be reliable when it comes to producing belief in the *Christian* god.<sup>21</sup> If so, it cannot, by itself, constitute an account of what makes Christian beliefs warranted. But it might reliably give rise to some general beliefs about divinity.<sup>22</sup>

It follows that it is not sufficient to offer a natural explanation of the origins of Christian belief. But neither is it necessary. After all, a successful explanation of Christian belief that held it to be a result of extraordinarily cunning demonic influence would also be a warrant-defeating argument. What must be demonstrated is that the mechanism that gives rise to Christian belief, be it natural or supernatural, is an *unreliable* mechanism. It may be a cognitive mechanism that is normally reliable—"successfully aimed at truth,"<sup>23</sup> in Plantinga's words—but operating under conditions that make it dysfunctional. Or it may be a cognitive mechanism that is not successfully aimed at truth at all.

The distinction is an important one. We normally assume that sense perception, for instance, is veridical, but only in the right circumstances. There are other circumstances in which our perceptions are systematically deceived, and *in these circumstances* (but not otherwise) sense perception is unreliable. Similarly, in order to undercut the Christian's claim to warrant, we do not need to show that the mechanism giving rise to her religious beliefs is never reliable. It would suffice to show that it is unreliable *in the circumstances in which it produces Christian beliefs*. It might be unreliable only in the circumstances in which it produces Christian beliefs, or it might be unreliable in the circumstances in which it produces a larger class of beliefs to which Christian beliefs belong.<sup>24</sup>

Take, for instance, one element of recent cognitive theories of religion: the idea that the human mind includes a "hyperactive agency detection device" (HADD), which makes us not merely inclined to detect agency but over-inclined to do so.<sup>25</sup> We perceive what we take to be agents when no agents are present. Evolutionarily, such a tendency is easily explained: we may assume that it evolved because a Type I error (a false positive) in this domain is less costly than a Type II error (a false negative). It is better, in other words, to mistake a rock for a bear than a bear for a rock. Plantinga points out that the same device produces what we take to be true beliefs, such as a belief in human agents.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, one might want to go further and argue that with regard to human beings and some other animals the HADD is a reliable mechanism: it reliably detects agency. But it does not necessarily follow that our HADD functions reliably *in the circumstances in which it gives rise to religious belief*. It is at least conceivable that there might be a the-

ory of religion that suggests it does not.

In fact, it is more than conceivable. Many evolutionary theories of religion hold that religious belief is a by-product of mechanisms that were “designed” (as it were) for other purposes. Our over-sensitive disposition to detect agency, for example, was not selected because it predisposed us to believe in gods. It was selected because it predisposed us to believe in human or animal agents. It would be consistent with this view to hold that HADD is a mechanism that functions reliably in the context in which it faced selection pressures—it gives more true positives than false positives when it comes to the kinds of agents that might attack or eat you—but does not function reliably when it comes to producing beliefs about gods.<sup>27</sup> Once again, we are not defending this view here, since it would involve a defence of the claim that evolution *could* produce reliable cognitive mechanisms, a claim Plantinga contests.<sup>28</sup> Our point is simply that this is an argument that could easily be made on the basis of current theories of religion.

What, however, does it mean for a cognitive mechanism to be unreliable, either in particular circumstances or in general? Rather than trying to answer this question in the abstract, with a definition of reliability, we shall identify two ways in which a cognitive mechanism could be said to be *unreliable*. We shall couple this with a general condition that a warrant-defeating explanation would have to meet.

A first kind of unreliability is that characteristic of mechanisms that are simply indifferent with regard to the truth or falsity of the beliefs to which they give rise. An example would be a malfunctioning temperature gauge that displays figures at random. Such a device would function in a way that bears no predictable relation, positive or negative, to the actual temperature. Another example would be the procedure of forming beliefs about future events by tossing a coin. As social psychologists have shown, our minds include belief-forming mechanisms whose functioning is orthogonal to truth-considerations in just this way. Our beliefs can, for instance, be influenced by such truth-irrelevant cues as the attractiveness of the person making a claim or even, in the case of printed material, the typeface in which the claim is presented.<sup>29</sup>

A second kind of unreliability is that of a mechanism producing beliefs that do stand in a predictable but negative relation to the truth of the matter. The device in question would be, in other words, systematically deceptive. It is more likely, in the circumstances in question, to produce false beliefs than true ones. Again, social psychologists have identified mechanisms of this kind. We are, for instance, inclined to believe falsehoods in the face of undesirable or threatening information. Perhaps the most poignant cases are those of people confronted with terminal illness or the death of loved ones who stubbornly deny the salient facts.<sup>30</sup> Less dramatic are the well-documented attempts to bolster one’s self-esteem in the light of negative information. In all these cases, the motivation to hold accurate beliefs is regularly defeated by competing motivations, such as our desire to maintain consistency between our beliefs and behaviors or to maintain positive beliefs

about ourselves.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, there are circumstances in which beliefs can be held more fervently after being disconfirmed.<sup>33</sup> This phenomenon has been studied extensively under the rubric of cognitive dissonance theory.<sup>34</sup>

So much for the two possibilities, to the details of which we shall return. The general condition that any warrant-defeating explanation would have to meet is a simple one. It is that the Christian must lack any independent grounds on which her belief would be warranted. It could be, for instance, that although there exists nothing resembling the Aquinas/Calvin mechanisms giving rise to belief, there are other reliable mechanisms that do so. It may be, for instance, that even if the mechanisms identified by cognitive scientists predispose one to religious belief, a Christian has formed her belief in the light of arguments that are independently convincing. Such arguments could, by themselves, confer warrant.<sup>35</sup> The critic's warrant-defeating argument will have force only if this is *not* the case, only if there are no other successful explanations of the Christian's belief that would confer warrant.

Joshua Thurow has recently argued that this condition is rarely, if ever, met. He notes that even those who hold their beliefs in a non-inferential or "basic" manner also have other grounds for their beliefs, such as the traditional arguments for theism.<sup>36</sup> This is surely correct. But even if we define warrant in such a way that successful arguments for the existence of God would confer warrant, there remain two problems. The first of these is that the traditional arguments for theism would confer warrant only on belief *in God*, that is to say, what William Rowe calls "restricted theism."<sup>37</sup> They would not confer warrant on any distinctively Christian beliefs, that is to say, Rowe's "expanded theism." Even if there are successful arguments for the existence of God, it is less clear that there are successful arguments in favor of the full panoply of distinctively Christian beliefs. Plantinga himself doubts that there are, rejecting the arguments of this kind that have been offered by Richard Swinburne.<sup>38</sup>

In any case, the traditional arguments for theism are vigorously contested. Here, too, Plantinga has, at times, offered a pessimistic diagnosis. In *God, Freedom, and Evil* he gives short shrift to both cosmological and teleological arguments, and, while defending his own version of the ontological argument, notes that it does not "in any useful sense" prove God's existence, since an atheist would be free to reject its first premise.<sup>39</sup> If this diagnosis is accurate, Christians do not have sufficient evidential grounds for even restricted theism. Of course, to say that the arguments for theism are contested is not to say they are unsound. Nor is this question one on which we wish to take sides. (While we agree on many issues, we are not confident we would agree on this one.) Our point is merely that if Christians *are* mistaken about the evidential force of their arguments, or about the existence of a warranting mechanism, their belief in God does not constitute knowledge, even if it is true.

There are at least two responses that a follower of Plantinga might offer to a proposed warrant-defeating argument. A defender of reformed epis-

temology might, first of all, invoke the idea that the Christian's belief is a form of properly basic belief: it does not arise, nor is it warranted, as a result of inference from other beliefs. In *Warranted Christian Belief* Plantinga strongly emphasizes this idea, pouring scorn on the idea that Christian faith could be justified as an explanatory hypothesis.

What is the best explanation for all that organized complexity in the natural world and the characteristic features of human life and all the rest of what we see about us? Well, let's see, perhaps there is an omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good being, who created the world. Yes, that's it; and perhaps this being is one of three persons, the other two being his divine son, and a third person proceeding from the first two (or maybe just the first), yet there are not three gods but one; the second person became incarnate, suffered, was crucified, and died, thus atoning for our sins and making it possible for us to have life and have it more abundantly. Right; that's got to be it; that's a dandy explanation of the facts.<sup>40</sup>

Fair enough. Plantinga's point is, after all, that if the Aquinas/Calvin account is true, then the Christian's beliefs are not held as an explanatory hypothesis but are basic with regard to warrant.

But does this mean that the Christian's claim to warrant could not be undercut by a warrant-defeating argument, one that suggests there is a more plausible explanation of how their beliefs are formed? No, it does not. The Aquinas/Calvin account may not be *offered* as an explanatory hypothesis, nor is it *warranted*, if it is warranted, by virtue of being an explanatory hypothesis. If it is warranted, it is warranted by being among those beliefs that are brought about by a properly functioning cognitive mechanism, indeed the very mechanism that it describes. It remains the case, nonetheless, that the Aquinas/Calvin account *is* an account of a causal mechanism that is thought to bring about the Christian's faith. It follows that the plausibility of the A/C account would be undermined by a different and more plausible account of the causal mechanism that brings about religious belief. Such an account would undercut, in one of the ways already described, the Christian's claim to warrant.

The situation here is not comparable to that found in Plantinga's example of Maynard's cat. Rather, its salient features can be grasped by offering a rather different example.

I am in a lecture room at my university. I believe that I see a whiteboard marker on the bench in front of me and a whiteboard behind me. But I am then alerted to the fact that the Physics Department are conducting experiments in selected lecture theatres using remarkably realistic holographic images of both whiteboards and whiteboard markers, without informing lecturers that they are part of a study. Given its size and technical facilities, there is a good chance that my lecture theatre is currently involved in such a study.

I do not hold my belief in the existence of the whiteboard marker as an explanatory hypothesis. Nor, if it is warranted, is it warranted as an explanatory hypothesis: it would be warranted by the fact that it is brought about by a cognitive mechanism, namely sense perception, that is normally

reliable in such circumstances. In this sense, it is basic with regard to warrant. But I have now been given an alternative account of the causal mechanism giving rise to my belief, one that suggests that *in these particular circumstances* my belief lacks warrant. It would seem odd to suggest that this new information should make no difference to my belief. At the very least, I will want to have independent evidence that there really is a whiteboard marker in front of me, rather than a cleverly contrived holographic image.

In making this argument, it is difficult to do more than appeal to the reader's intuitions. But a comment in Plantinga's latest book suggests that this is an intuition he shares. He takes the example of being accused of a crime, perhaps that of slashing someone's tires. There is evidence that I am guilty of this crime: a normally reliable witness claims to have seen me in the vicinity of the car at the time, I have a grudge against the person whose car it was, and I have been seen buying a box-cutter knife at the local hardware store.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, I have a clear memory of being away on a skiing trip at the time. Does the evidence of my guilt give me reason to abandon my belief that I did not commit the crime? No, it does not, since I *remember* not committing the crime.<sup>42</sup>

So far, this is merely consistent with Plantinga's general argument: the Christian's beliefs, if true, are properly basic with regard to warrant and unaffected by such evidential considerations. But a few pages later (and, quite literally, in fine print), Plantinga amends his example. "It isn't automatically the case," he writes, "that the intrinsic warrant . . . overcomes the evidence."<sup>43</sup> Given enough evidence, such as an accumulation of highly reliable witnesses claiming to have seen me commit the crime, "I may have to conclude that the source of the apparent warrant . . . is deceiving me" and that "my memory has let me down; perhaps I have repressed the whole unpleasant episode."<sup>44</sup>

The example is not precisely parallel to the kind of warrant-defeating argument we have outlined. In Plantinga's example it is *evidence directly against* the apparently warranted belief that overcomes the presumption of warrant. The statements of the witnesses constitute a "rebutting defeater": if they are true, then they are simply inconsistent with my innocence.<sup>45</sup> In our case it is *an alternative explanation of the origins of the belief* that overcomes the presumption of warrant. This constitutes, as we suggested earlier, an "undercutting defeater," which indicates that the Christian would hold this belief, whether or not it is true.

It is worth noting, however, that Plantinga's example includes an alternative explanation of the origins of my belief. Perhaps my later feelings of revulsion at what I did in a fit of anger have caused me to repress my memory of the crime and replace it with a false memory of having been elsewhere skiing. It may be, of course, that I can check my own alibi, perhaps by asking someone whom I recall meeting on the skiing trip. There may be, in other words, other evidence available to me that would provide a new warrant for my belief in my innocence. (Our general condition may not apply.) But what we are arguing is that, in the absence of such evidence, a

more plausible account of the mechanism giving rise to the belief would suffice to undermine its claim to warrant.

What about the idea that merely evidential arguments carry little weight against a Christian belief that is basic with regard to warrant? Such arguments, Plantinga argues, can be outweighed by the evidential force of properly basic beliefs. And if a Christian's properly basic beliefs are different from those of the nonbeliever, an argument that is quite convincing for a nonbeliever may lack evidential force for the Christian. Once again, given Plantinga's account of warrant this line of reasoning may have some force when it comes to arguments against certain key Christian beliefs, such as belief in a god who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect. But it has no force against a warrant-defeating argument. Christians cannot legitimately appeal to their beliefs regarding warrant in order to reject an argument that calls those beliefs into question.

In his most recent work, Plantinga comes close to accepting this conclusion.<sup>46</sup> He gives the case of a belief:

(B) Mother Teresa was perfectly rational in behaving in [an] altruistic manner.

He then gives another belief, which has to do with what he calls "Simonian science": "the body of theories incompatible with Christian belief," so called because of Herbert Simon's theory of altruism.<sup>47</sup>

(A) Simonian science is successful science and implies the denial of (B).

At any particular, moment I will have a body of existing beliefs, or "evidence base" ( $EB_{me}$ ). If I add (A) to that evidence base, does it follow that I have a defeater for (B)? Well, it depends on what other beliefs I have. I may have other beliefs that make it highly probable that Mother Teresa's altruism was rational. The Christian will presumably have beliefs of this kind. Plantinga notes, however, that it will not do simply to insist that my evidence base includes (B), for then "no member of the evidence base could ever be defeated by a new discovery."<sup>48</sup> For the sake of making the decision, (B) must be removed from my evidence base: the EB used to make the decision must be  $EB_{me}-(B)$ .

This seems entirely correct, but it is also applicable to a warrant-defeating argument. Let's say that I, as a Christian, have a belief:

(B<sub>i</sub>) Christian belief is warranted, i.e., produced by a reliable mechanism.

I am then faced with another belief, let's say:

(A<sub>i</sub>) Cognitive science is successful science and shows Christian belief to lack warrant.

Does (A<sub>i</sub>) constitute a defeater for (B<sub>i</sub>)? Well, it depends on what other beliefs are in my evidence base. I may have, for instance, other reasons to think my Christian belief warranted, which are independent of the claim to warrant that is being attacked. But it will not do simply to insist that I, as a Christian, already know my belief is warranted, for acting in this way would not allow any existing belief to be proven false. The EB in the light of which

my judgement is made must be  $EB_{me}-(B_1)$ .

We, however, want to go further and to argue that the EB in the light of which my judgement is made must be  $EB_{me}-(B_1 \& C \& D)$ , where (C & D) represent beliefs that depend for their epistemic status on the claim to warrant. They constitute knowledge *only if* they are warranted in the way described in  $(B_1)$ . Could the Christian argue, for instance, that she already believes in a god who seeks the happiness of humans and who sent his son to die to redeem them and that, given the existence of such a god, the allegedly warrant-defeating account is clearly false, or at least highly improbable? Well, she could do so if those existing beliefs have a source of warrant that is different from that which the warrant-defeating account is attacking. But if this condition is not fulfilled, she cannot appeal to beliefs whose warrant is under challenge in order to rebut this challenge.

To see why, let's return to our whiteboard marker example. In that example, the experiment being run by the Physics Department includes holographic images not merely of whiteboard markers but of whiteboards as well. I might be tempted to argue that given the presence of a whiteboard, it is very likely that there will also be a whiteboard marker present, or (if you prefer) that it is unlikely that this is a mere holographic image. But of course if the proposed warrant-defeating account is true, then my belief that there is a whiteboard present similarly lacks warrant and cannot be appealed to in an attempt to undercut the warrant-defeating objection.

### 3. BEGGING THE QUESTION?

As we have seen, Plantinga's general response to warrant-defeating arguments is to say that they beg the question, that they assume the falsity of Christian belief.<sup>49</sup> On other occasions, he argues, they rely on a methodological naturalism, which denies the legitimacy of proposed explanations that appeal to a supernatural agent.<sup>50</sup> But while this may be true of some such arguments, it is possible to put forward a warrant-defeating argument against which such accusations would have no force.

The first point to be underlined here is one we have made already, regarding warrant and truth. If you define warrant as Plantinga has, then a belief may lack warrant and still be true. After all, even an unreliable mechanism may occasionally give rise to a true belief. The temperature gauge that gives out temperature readings at random will, given sufficient time, at some point give the correct temperature. So even if Christian belief, as a whole, lacks warrant, it could still be the case that, by some extraordinary epistemic good luck, many of the things that Christians believe happen to be true.<sup>51</sup> A warrant-defeating argument is, in this sense, compatible with the truth of at least some Christian beliefs. The only Christian beliefs with which it is not compatible are those, such as the Aquinas/Calvin account, that claim Christian belief is warranted. It follows that a *de jure* argument against warrant is not equivalent to a *de facto* argument against Christian

belief as a whole, although it is equivalent to a *de facto* argument against one widely held Christian belief, namely the belief in warrant.

We mentioned earlier that the posited warrant-defeating mechanism need not be one that is always unreliable. It could be one that in normal circumstances reliably produces true beliefs, being unreliable only in those circumstances in which it gives rise to Christian beliefs (or some larger class of beliefs to which Christian beliefs belong). This raises the question of how we could know such a mechanism to be unreliable, particularly if it is thought to be dysfunctional only in the circumstances in which it gives rise to religious beliefs. Would the critic not need to have decided already that what Christians believe is false, in order to make the claim that the normally reliable mechanism does not function reliably in these circumstances?

No, she would not. Recall that we discussed two kinds of unreliability. The first consists of a mechanism that gives rise to a greater proportion of false beliefs than true ones. If that mechanism is thought to give rise, not merely to Christian beliefs but to religious beliefs in general, then—as we stressed a moment ago—its general unreliability is consistent with the truth of many of the things Christians believe. So the critic could accept that many, even most, of the things Christians believe could be true, while still arguing that their beliefs are unwarranted.

This does, incidentally, have one interesting implication. If the mechanism that produces religious beliefs happens to produce some true beliefs (such as the belief in a single, creator god), then all religious beliefs that are incompatible with those true beliefs must be considered false. If it could be shown that the majority of religious beliefs are of this kind (being, for instance, incompatible with monotheism), this would be a *prima facie* reason for regarding the mechanism giving rise to religious beliefs as unreliable. The Christian will, of course, have her own explanation for this apparent unreliability. She might argue, for instance, that it is not the God-given faith-producing mechanisms that are at fault, but the fact that they are operating in a context that has been corrupted by human sin. But in making this claim, the Christian would, ironically, be agreeing with her critic. She would be saying that the mechanisms giving rise to religious belief are, *in the circumstances in which they actually operate*, unreliable.<sup>52</sup>

In any case, and as we pointed out earlier, there is a second way in which a cognitive mechanism can be unreliable. It can function in a way that is simply indifferent to the truth or falsity of the beliefs produced. Some evolutionary adaptationist theories of religion are of this kind. They hold that the predisposition to religious belief have been selected for because it confers an advantage upon individuals or groups (rather than being a mere byproduct of mechanisms that evolved for other purposes). Johnson and Bering, for example, argue that individuals who believe in morally-concerned supernatural agents are less likely to engage in socially transgressive behaviors, and therefore reap the material and reproductive benefits of having good reputations: that is, “god-fearing individuals would outcompete non-believers.”<sup>53</sup> In a similar way, although writing from a group selec-

tion perspective, David Sloan Wilson argues that religious groups are especially effective are promoting and policing cooperative behaviors that benefit the group as a whole.<sup>54</sup>

If such theories are correct, then the effectiveness of religious beliefs in promoting adaptive behaviors is independent of the truth or falsity of those beliefs. It simply doesn't matter if they are true or false; they would be adaptive in either case. It follows that one might expect Christians to have the kinds of beliefs they do, whether or not they are true. It follows that to put forward an explanation of this kind is not to assume the falsity of religious beliefs, since it regards their truth or falsity is a matter of indifference. Perhaps some of the beliefs Christians hold are true, but if this is the mechanism by which they are produced, they lack warrant.

There remains the objection that any warrant-defeating account begs the question by assuming naturalism. It could assume a metaphysical naturalism, which denies the existence of any non-natural agent, or it could assume a methodological naturalism, which holds that we should frame explanations *as if* there were no non-natural agents (*etsi Deus non daretur*, if you like).<sup>55</sup> In his recent work, Plantinga is very critical of the methodological naturalism of the sciences.<sup>56</sup> Many of these criticisms seem justified: we agree with him in rejecting a naturalism that merely rules out the possibility of divine action *a priori*, as it were. Indeed one of us has made very similar remarks about a naturalism of this kind.<sup>57</sup> We do think there is a case to be made for a "presumption of naturalism," based on the comparative track record of natural and proposed theistic explanations.<sup>58</sup> But we agree with Plantinga that a critic of proposed theistic explanations cannot simply rule them out of court by definition, insisting that a proposed explanation is illegitimate simply because it posits a divine agent.

There is, however, no need for the critic of Christian belief to beg the question in this way. The critic's argument could set her warrant-defeating account of the mechanism that gives rise to religious belief alongside the Christian's preferred account, such as the Aquinas/Calvin model, and show the former to be preferable. The procedure that would be employed here would be what is generally known as "inference to the best explanation." There are different ways in which such an argument can be constructed. The warrant-defeating account could, for instance, be supported on Bayesian, probabilistic grounds. Or if the critic is not impressed by attempts to rank the comparative probability of hypotheses, she could appeal to general explanatory *desiderata*. She could argue, for instance, that her warrant-defeating account has greater explanatory power, is more ontologically parsimonious, more consistent with other beliefs we already hold, and more precise and informative. The Christian could, of course, disagree, but (as we have seen) she could not legitimately appeal to beliefs whose warrant is under question in order to do so. She cannot appeal to what Plantinga calls an "Augustinian science" to counter the proposed explanation,<sup>59</sup> if that Augustinian science rests on the very claim to warrant that is being attacked.

## CONCLUSION

If we are correct, there remains at least the possibility of a *de jure* argument that undermines the Christian's claims to warrant. Such an argument would take the form of the positing of an alternative causal mechanism giving rise to Christian beliefs, one that is either indifferent with regard to the truth and falsity of the beliefs that it produces or more likely to produce false beliefs than true ones. It need not be a mechanism that is always unreliable, but it would need to be a mechanism that is unreliable in the context in which it produces religious beliefs. If the alternative, warrant-defeating account of the origins of religious belief could be shown to be preferable to the Christian's account of warrant—in ways that did not beg the question either way—and if the Christian lacks an alternative account of warrant that was both convincing and immune to this criticism, this would constitute a powerful *de jure* objection to Christian belief.

## NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
2. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 357.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 204 et passim.
5. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
6. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
8. Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Noûs* 23 (1989): 331–350.
9. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 476.
10. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 167–178.
11. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 360.
12. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 252–253.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 110–111.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 359; Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 252.
18. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism*, p. 141.
19. Kelly James Clark and Justin L. Barrett, "Reformed Epistemology and the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Faith and Philosophy* 27 (2010): 174–189.
20. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 197.
21. Clark and Barrett, "Reformed Epistemology and the Cognitive Science of Religion," p. 187.
22. The same point is made by Clark and Barrett (*ibid.*). What they fail to reflect on, however, is the fact that if this is all the natural mechanism does—if it does not reliably bring about belief in the biblical god, but only "a set of common, core beliefs in, say, a superknower that exercises moral providence" (*ibid.*), then it cannot be regarded as identical with that which would warrant *Christian* belief.
23. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 156.
24. These may be either religious beliefs in general, of which Christian beliefs are a subset, or a still larger class of beliefs, of which religious beliefs are a subset.
25. Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek, Calif.:

AltaMira Press, 2004), p. 32.

26. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 141.

27. Charles R. Pigden, "Subversive Explanations" in *A New Science of Religion*, ed. Gregory W. Dawes and James Maclaurin (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 160.

28. See Plantinga's "evolutionary argument against naturalism," first found in Chap. 12 of *Warrant and Proper Function*.

29. Alice Eagly and Shelly Chaiken. "An Attribution Analysis of the Effect of Communicator Characteristics on Opinion Change: The Case of Communicator Attractiveness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32 (1975): 136–144; Rolf Reber and Nobert Schwarz, "Effects of Perceptual Fluency on Judgments of Truth," *Consciousness and Cognition* 8 (1999): 338–342.

30. Stephen R. Shuchter and Sidney Zisook, "The Course of Normal Grief" in *Handbook of Bereavement: Theory, Research, and Intervention* edited by Margaret S. Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 24. See also Wolfgang Stroebe and Margaret S. Stroebe, *Bereavement and Health: The Psychological and Physical Consequences of Partner Loss* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

31. For a review, see Jennifer Crocker and Lora E. Park, "The Costly Pursuit of Self Esteem" *Psychological Bulletin* 130 (2004): 392–414.

32. Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson and Company, 1957); Arie Kruglanski, "Motivation, Cognition, and Reality: Three Memos for the Next Generation of Research," *Psychological Inquiry* 10 (1999): 56.

33. Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

34. For a review, see Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: 50 Years of a Classic Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2007).

35. Plantinga, as we have seen, holds that any account of rationality is inseparable from that of proper function. Perhaps it is. But for the sake of this argument, we shall be assuming that sound arguments in support of the Christian faith would constitute a form of warrant.

36. Joshua C. Thurow, "Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to be Irrational? The Epistemic Consequences of the Cognitive Science of Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (published online 22 April 2011): 17.

37. William L. Rowe, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 95.

38. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 271; Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

39. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 112.

40. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 386–387.

41. We have taken the liberty of expanding Plantinga's example, so as to strengthen the evidence in support of the person's guilt.

42. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 177.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

44. *Ibid.*

45. For the idea of a rebutting defeater, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 359; *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 165.

46. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, pp. 186–187.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 186.

49. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 198.

50. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, pp. 168–174.

51. This possibility appears, at first sight, to give rise to paradox. We have noted that an unreliable mechanism could, by sheer chance, give rise to a true belief. But what if that true belief were a belief in its own reliability? It would follow, by virtue of the belief being true, that any beliefs to which it gives rise are warranted. Yet we have assumed the device to be unreliable, which would mean that beliefs to which it gives rise are not war-

ranted. But this way of describing the scenario is misleading. An unreliable mechanism may, by chance, produce true beliefs *and* it may, by chance, produce a belief in its own reliability, but if it is an unreliable mechanism, the belief in its own reliability can never be a true belief.

52. Even if the Christian's beliefs regarding what Plantinga calls "the noetic effects of sin" (*Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 213–240) were to be have some force in countering a warrant-defeating argument, insofar as they rest on the claim to warrant being attacked, they, too, would be inadmissible as evidence in this context.

53. Dominic Johnson and Jesse Bering, "Hand of God, Mind of Man: Punishment and Cognition in the Evolution of Cooperation," *Evolutionary Psychology* 4 (2006): 219.

54. David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 228.

55. The Latin phrase is generally attributed to Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), who argued in the Prolegomena to his *De jure belli ac pacis* (Section XI) that the existence of a natural law could be known *etiam daremus . . . non esse Deum* (even if we were to concede . . . that there is no God).

56. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, pp. 168–173.

57. Gregory W. Dawes, *Theism and Explanation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 8–9.

58. Gregory W. Dawes, "In Defense of Naturalism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 70 (2011): 12–16.

59. Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, p. 190 n.16; Alvin Plantinga, "Methodological Naturalism?" in *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics: Philosophical, Theological, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. R.T. Pennock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 339–361.