

Reforming Reformed Epistemology

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ABSTRACT: Perhaps the most influential proposal in the recent literature on the epistemology of religious belief has been Alvin Plantinga's anti-evidentialist contention that we should treat certain religious beliefs as properly basic. In order to support this anti-skeptical maneuver, Plantinga (along with other "reformed" epistemologists such as William Alston) has looked to the kind of anti-evidentialist model that is standardly offered as regards the epistemology of perceptual belief and has claimed that there are sufficient analogies between perceptual experience and religious experience to motivate the use of such a model in religious epistemology. It is argued here, however, that while Plantinga et al. are right to draw our attention to these analogies, in doing so they have failed to pay due attention to important *disanalogies* that exist between religious and perceptual experience. Moreover, I contend that these disanalogies have epistemological ramifications that require subtle modifications to the reformed epistemology thesis. In particular, following a suggestion made by Keith DeRose, I argue that reformed epistemology would be better modelled along explicitly virtue-theoretic lines.

INTRODUCTION

THERE HAS BEEN A renaissance of interest in the epistemology of religious belief over the last twenty years that has been largely inspired by the work conducted by Alvin Plantinga, William Alston, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and others on the so-called "reformed" defense of the rationality of religious belief. The starting-point for this reformed conception of religious epistemology is a rejection of the supposedly evidentialist assumptions that drive standard skeptical arguments regarding religious belief.¹ I think that in its bare essentials this general negative claim is correct, but canvassing support for an argument for this contention will not be my primary concern here. Instead, I will be outlining one way in which the reformed epistemological stance can be modified to make it resistant to a certain sort of attack. I suggest that the manner in which the reformed conception of the epistemology of religious belief is often motivated with respect to a supposed analogy with perceptual belief has tended to overemphasize certain features of religious belief and that recognizing this fact enables one to offer a more fine-grained account of the epistemic status of religious belief. In particular, I argue that making this point clear draws out the sense in which reformed epistemology, properly understood, should be allied to a specific form of virtue epistemology.

¹For an excellent overview of the debate, see Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

In section one I give an overview of the standard skeptical attack on the rationality of religious belief and briefly outline the sense in which such skepticism is held to rest upon an evidentialist thesis. In section two I elucidate the manner in which the theses of evidentialism, classical foundationalism, and epistemological internalism are intertwined within the debate between the reformed epistemologist and the skeptic about religious belief. In sections three and four I explain how reformed epistemology is typically motivated with respect to a “parity” argument concerning certain relevant analogies between religious and perceptual belief, and I go on to consider some problems that this parity argument faces. In section five I consider Keith DeRose’s intriguing suggestion that one can resolve some of these problems by reconfiguring reformed epistemology in terms of the sort of “foundherentist” epistemological model advocated by Susan Haack. I argue that this proposal should be endorsed, *provided* that it is understood at a very general schematic level. So construed, however, it fails to offer us the fuller account that we are after. Accordingly, in section six, I argue that the best way of adding content to this foundherentist structural model of religious epistemology is by conceiving of reformed epistemology in terms of a specific type of virtue epistemology. Finally, in section seven, I offer some concluding remarks.

I. SKEPTICISM ABOUT RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Perhaps the most common form of skepticism about religious belief has an *ontological* rather than (at least directly) an *epistemological* form. That is, the focus of the attack is not directly on the epistemic status of the belief in question but rather concerns the ontology that is thought to underlie that belief. One might naturally think that any dispute over ontology would always spill-over into a dispute about epistemic status. If I think that you are wrong to commit yourself to a certain ontology, then do I not thereby regard your beliefs in such an ontology as lacking the requisite epistemic status? Interestingly, the answer to this question is, despite first appearances, “no.” Think, for example, of two eminent scientists who, while sharing many beliefs, have differing beliefs regarding the ontological status of a certain “entity” that is sometimes postulated by scientists working within a particular area of scientific inquiry, the one thinking that it exists and the other thinking that it does not. Although each is committed to regarding the other as being in error in some way, both of them could recognize that the other’s belief had some substantial degree of positive epistemic status. Why, then, is it the case that when it comes to disputes between religious believers and their detractors, the latter tends to formulate the ontological challenge such that it has direct, and devastating, epistemological ramifications for the epistemic status of the religious beliefs in question? The standard answer is that the difference between the scientists in our imagined example and the religious believer is that the scientists can, in principle, offer appropriate evidence to support their belief whereas the religious believer cannot.

Consider the contrast between the two cases. In the case of the scientists, each of them could, conceivably, offer the other evidence that they both accept as being good evidence for the belief in question (even though, of course, they are both obliged, as long as they maintain their positions, to disagree about the extent of the

relative evidential support in each case). The situation facing the religious believer is very different. The only “evidence” that he could propose that might potentially be adequate for the task will be contentious in this context. He might base his religious beliefs upon certain sorts of religious experiences (revelation, for example), but this sort of evidence will only be apt in this context provided that one is already willing to grant the ontology that is presupposed by counting these experiences as “religious” in the relevant sense.² Indeed, the only sort of evidence that would seem to be appropriate for this purpose would be an *a priori* argument of some description, or at least some sort of incorrigible empirical evidence, and few people would now hold that there are grounds of this sort available to license religious belief. There is thus a sense in which the religious believer is unable to adduce non-question-begging evidence in support of his religious belief.³

In both cases the dispute is being characterized in terms of an *evidentialist* requirement to the effect that one should proportion one’s belief to the evidence available to support that belief, but the thought is that whereas certain sorts of beliefs can, in principle, meet this requirement, there is an *a priori* difficulty with religious belief, which means that it can never adequately fulfil it. We shall explore the thesis of evidentialism more fully below, but it is worth noting that, at first glance at any rate, the evidentialist requirement seems an entirely uncontentious hurdle for religious belief to clear.

II. EVIDENTIALISM, CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONALISM, AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTERNALISM

One common response to this sort of skeptical argument has been to try to supply the very sort of *a priori* grounds that are being demanded.⁴ In contrast, another

²At least in the standard case. Of course, there may be certain sorts of events that everyone might be willing to recognize as providing corrigible empirical evidence in support of religious belief that is non-question-begging (the sky opens up across the world and a being comes down proclaiming certain verses from a key religious text, and so on). But even if one is willing to grant that such cases might be able to offer the requisite non-question-begging evidence, this concession will offer little comfort to the apologist for religious belief. After all, the epistemic status of one’s religious belief would then just be a hostage to the occurrence of such events and, in the meantime, completely lacking.

³In this respect skepticism about religious belief mirrors more general forms of skepticism. Consider external world skepticism, for example, where the claim is that one is unable to adduce the kind of non-question-begging evidence required that would support the belief without already assuming (as do most empirical beliefs) the existence of an external world in the first place. Accordingly, any anti-evidentialist strategy as regards religious belief will have application to skepticism in general. For more discussion of this question-begging aspect of radical skeptical arguments, see Crispin Wright, “Facts and Certainty,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 71 (1985) 429–72 and “Cogency and Question-Begging: Some Reflections on McKinsey’s Paradox and Putnam’s Proof,” *Philosophical Issues* 10 (2000) 140–63; and Duncan Pritchard, “McKinsey Paradoxes, Radical Scepticism, and the Transmission of Knowledge across Known Entailments,” *Synthese* 130 (2002) 1–24. For a discussion of the general relationship between skepticism about religious belief and radical skepticism, see Pritchard, “Is ‘God Exists’ a ‘Hinge’ Proposition of Religious Belief?” in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47 (2000) 129–40.

⁴See, in particular, B. Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1973), and Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979) and *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).

type of response has been to embrace the skeptical conclusion of that argument by claiming that religious belief is not the sort of belief that requires epistemic support.⁵ What both of these approaches to skepticism about religious belief share is an implicit acceptance of the nature of the skeptical argument such that any response to that argument must consist in either some sort of *rapprochement* with the conclusion or a rejection of the key premise that religious beliefs lack the evidence in question. In contrast, the reformed epistemological stance under discussion here adopts the completely different approach of calling into question the very evidentialist doctrine that drives the skeptical argument.⁶

In many of the key accounts of reformed epistemology, the locus for evidentialism has been W. K. Clifford's provocative claim that "[I]t is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."⁷ There are, however, eminent proponents of the evidentialist thesis in more recent epistemological debate, so it is perhaps better to focus on one of these contemporary accounts. For example, in two recent papers (one of them co-authored with Earl Conee) Richard Feldman has offered a spirited defense of the evidentialist position. He defines the thesis as follows:

For any person S, time t, and proposition p, if S has any doxastic attitude at all toward p at t and S's evidence at t supports p, then S epistemically ought to have the attitude towards p supported by S's evidence at t.⁸

Although this formulation may meet some of the objections that are most naturally leveled at the much less precise rendering of the doctrine due to Clifford, it still faces several seemingly insuperable difficulties.

To begin with, we need to look a little closer at how we are to understand the notion of evidence in play here. Presumably, we cannot just understand an agent's evidence to be whatever grounds are available to the agent to support his belief regardless of whether or not he attends to (or even *can* attend to) that evidence. There are many reasons for this, but the most pressing is that we want the evidence to play the required supporting role, and unless that evidence is attended to, then it need not perform this function. Consider, for example, the case of a man who has excellent evidence to support his belief that a certain person is guilty but who does not attend to this evidence when forming the belief. Instead, he forms his belief as

⁵This style of response has, of course, found a great deal of support among those guided by what they consider to be certain insights in Wittgenstein's later remarks on religious belief, especially as they appear in *Wittgenstein's Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966). See, for example, Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism," *Philosophy* 42 (1967) 237–54, and D. Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976).

⁶Note that these three alternative defenses of religious belief are not all in competition. One could, for instance, argue that there are *a priori* grounds available in support of religious belief while also contending that evidentialism is an erroneous doctrine.

⁷W. K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, ed. F. Pollock (London: Macmillan, 1879) p. 186.

⁸Richard Feldman, "The Ethics of Belief," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (2000) 667–96, here 679. See also Feldman and Earl Conee, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985) 15–34.

a result of a bigoted ill-feeling toward the person in question. Clearly, this would not be a case of someone meeting the kind of epistemic requirement that is meant to be imposed by evidentialism because this person's belief would not enjoy any substantial measure of positive epistemic status, despite the existence of evidence in support of that belief that is available to the subject. As Feldman's characterization of evidentialism stands, however, it makes no distinction between an agent who believes what he epistemically ought to believe because of bigoted ill-feeling and an agent who believes what he epistemically ought to believe because he is sensitive to the evidence that is available to him in support of that belief.⁹

It appears, then, that we must restrict the evidentialist thesis so that it is understood as requiring that an agent proportion his belief to the evidence that he has for that belief and to which he is presently attending.¹⁰ Even under this construal, however, problems remain. For unless we offer some restriction on what can count as evidence in this respect, then it is far from clear that evidentialism, so understood, could plausibly drive a skeptical argument regarding religious belief. After all, as it stands, this characterization of evidentialism would seem to permit one to adduce such evidence as revelation in support of one's religious belief, and, as noted above, the religious believer has (by his own lights) plenty of evidence of *this* sort. How, then, do we form the connection between a general evidentialist thesis and skepticism about religious belief?

The standard answer to this question is to argue, whether explicitly or implicitly, that it is not evidentialism alone that is the motivation behind skepticism about religious belief, but rather the combination of evidentialism and what Plantinga refers to as "classical foundationalism." He characterizes the classical foundationalist account in terms of a certain conception of the criteria that a belief needs to meet if it is to be "properly basic":

For any proposition *A* and person *S*, *A* is properly basic for *S* if and only if *A* is incorrigible for *S* or self-evident to *S*.¹¹

It is certainly true that, historically, classical foundationalism and evidentialism have been closely intertwined. Although there is some debate about the historical roots of the evidentialist requirement on religious belief, it is certainly present in the work of Locke, and, significantly, Locke combines such a thesis with a version of classical foundationalism.

Locke famously wrote in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that "reason must be our last judge and guide in everything." Accordingly, he maintained

⁹This example is adapted from one used by Keith DeRose, "Ought We to Follow Our Evidence?" in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (2000) 697–706, here 697–98, in his astute response to Feldman, "The Ethics of Belief." For some of the other (to my mind, decisive) criticisms that can be leveled against evidentialism, one should consult DeRose's paper.

¹⁰Of course, a more detailed characterization of the evidentialist account would involve an elucidation of this notion of "attending to." Since I am not defending the evidentialist position, however, and since I do not think that anything consequential hangs upon our understanding of this notion, I will not be undertaking a detailed discussion of it here.

¹¹Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" in *Noûs* 15 (1981) 41–51, here 49.

that religious beliefs should be put before the tribunal of reason just like any other.¹² This line of thinking did not lead to skepticism about religious belief as far as Locke was concerned, however, because he held that *a priori* grounds were available to support religious belief. The conclusion was thus that we must distinguish between those believers whose religious beliefs were grounded in reason and those believers (whom Locke called the “enthusiasts”) whose religious beliefs were grounded only in revelation. He describes those who fall into this latter camp as follows, arguing that if they regard what they believe as being true solely

because it is a revelation, and have no other reason for its being a revelation but because they are fully persuaded, without any other reason, that it is true, they believe it to be a revelation only because they strongly believe it to be a revelation; which is a very unsafe ground to proceed on, either in our tenets or actions.¹³

What we find with Locke is the claim that evidence must be available to support the religious belief in question and that the only evidence suited to the purpose, given his prior commitment to classical foundationalism, is of an *a priori* nature. Although this line of thought is, of course, distinct from skepticism, one need only remove the conviction that there are sufficient *a priori* grounds available to support religious belief for the skeptical challenge to emerge.¹⁴

Likewise, in contemporary discussion, the thought is that the legitimation of religious belief requires not just evidence but evidence of a certain kind, *a priori* evidence (or at least incorrigible evidence). So construed, the connection between evidentialism and skepticism about religious belief becomes transparent.

Nevertheless, one should be careful about identifying evidentialism too closely with classical foundationalism because this can tend to obscure the underlying nature of the dialectic in play here. In particular, too close an identification can lead to the impression that merely denying classical foundationalism would suffice to meet this skeptical challenge. This conception of the debate is certainly wrong, however, because one could state the evidentialist challenge without making any mention of classical foundationalism.

In order to see this point, it is worthwhile returning to the contrast drawn earlier between the two scientists who were arguing about the ontological status of a certain “entity” and the debate between the religious believer and the skeptic about religious belief. Significantly, in both cases one can characterize these debates in terms of an evidentialism that does not incorporate a commitment to classical foundationalism. Take the scientific case first, which was meant to be a situation in which one could,

¹²John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979) IV, xix, p. 14.

¹³*Ibid.*, IV, xix, p. 11.

¹⁴There are, of course, subtleties to Locke’s view in this respect to which this brief overview cannot do justice (for example, Locke famously appeals to a version of the cosmological argument in his defense of religious belief, and this is not a fully *a priori* defense). Nevertheless, this short account should suffice for our purposes here. For an excellent discussion of Locke’s view in this regard that is sympathetic to the line taken here, see Wolterstorff, *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

in contrast to the religious case, respond to the evidentialist challenge with the requisite evidence. It seems perfectly acceptable in such a scenario to regard one of the disputants as possessing the greater degree of evidential support for his belief, and thus as being able to convince the other scientist that he should weaken, if not completely change, his opposing belief. Moreover, there need be no assumption in play here that the evidence adduced should be *a priori* or incorrigible. Indeed, one would expect it to be ordinary, corrigible, empirical evidence. Of course, one might further demand that, at some point, this chain of support must lead to incorrigible or *a priori* evidence, but there need be no mention of this claim directly and it is far from obvious that such a further move is entailed by the mere evidentialist thesis alone.

Similarly, one can characterize the debate about religious belief without mention of classical foundationalism. For on at least one plausible construal of evidentialism, which demands not just evidence but *non-question-begging* evidence, it will be true that the religious believer will be unable to offer the requisite grounds. Moreover, we can put this point in terms of evidentialism alone without making any direct recourse to classical foundationalism because there is no obvious sense in which this “non-question-begging” demand must entail a demand for *a priori* or incorrigible evidence.

Of course, as we saw above, the thought that the reformed epistemologist has is that this “non-question-begging” form of evidentialism is simply the result of conjoining a more neutral form of evidentialism with the classical foundationalist thesis, and thus that classical foundationalism *is* implicit within this purely evidentialist account of religious skepticism after all. The reformed epistemologist will typically claim, for example, that when it comes to religious belief the only way to offer such non-question-begging evidence is to adduce *a priori* or incorrigible grounds, and thus that this variety of evidentialism presupposes classical foundationalism. On this understanding of the debate, it is merely a matter of taste whether one characterizes the skeptical argument in terms of a beefed-up evidentialism or in terms of a neutral rendering of the evidentialist doctrine that one then supplements with classical foundationalism.

Such a conception of the debate can tend to mislead, however, since what ultimately underlies the move from the neutral form of evidentialism to the “non-question-begging” version is not classical foundationalism at all but rather epistemological *internalism*.

Epistemological internalism is, roughly, the thesis that positive epistemic status demands reflective access on the part of the subject to those facts that determine that epistemic status.¹⁵ In the case of evidentialism, for example, an internalist variant of this thesis would not just demand the availability of evidence to the subject but also that the subject is actually in a position not only to access that

¹⁵Although an extremely rough characterization of this doctrine, it should suffice for our purposes here. The *locus classicus* for epistemologically internalist approaches is, of course, Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989). For more on the epistemic externalism/internalism contrast, see the papers contained in the excellent anthology on this subject edited by Hilary Kornblith, *Epistemology: Internalism and Externalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

evidence reflectively but also reflectively to determine that it is evidence. This is the kind of demand that is being made in the more restricted version of evidentialism just considered where the agent actually has to vouch for the evidence as being evidence that is suited to the purpose (rather than question-begging evidence).

Evidentialism and epistemological internalism tend to go together because any natural rendering of the evidentialist thesis invokes the internalist doctrine.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is best to keep the two theses apart as much as possible in order to bring out the role that epistemological internalism plays in the skeptical argument regarding religious belief. In particular, by being clear about the role played by epistemological internalism in this respect, we avoid the temptation of thinking that a simple denial of classical foundationalism would suffice to meet the skeptical problem about religious belief. For even if one were to grant that corrigible empirical non-question-begging evidence could support legitimate belief (as we granted above in the case of the two scientists), it would still remain that we have a skeptical problem regarding religious belief because of the inherently question-begging nature of the evidence involved.

Note that this is not to deny that the role that classical foundationalism plays in the skeptical argument about religious belief is very much intertwined with that played by epistemological internalism. After all, the most obvious way of meeting this “non-question-begging” demand is by adducing *a priori* or incorrigible empirical evidence in the manner that classical foundationalism demands. But this merely reflects the fact that classical foundationalism tends to be a natural *consequence* of epistemological internalism, and thus that it is epistemological internalism that is the underlying force behind skepticism about religious belief.

That skepticism about religious belief should ultimately find its source in epistemological internalism should not surprise us since, as is well-known, epistemological internalism drives a number of other skeptical arguments as well.¹⁷ Moreover, I think that we gain a better understanding of the core elements of the reformed epistemology response to skepticism about religious belief by understanding it primarily as an epistemologically *externalist* response to such skepticism rather than as an anti-evidentialist or anti-classical-foundationalist thesis. Accordingly, henceforth when I refer to evidentialism, it will be the explicitly internalist variant of this thesis that I have in mind.

III. THE PARITY ARGUMENT

One of the great benefits of being clear about the nature of the evidentialist demand as regards religious belief is that it highlights just how austere that demand

¹⁶One reason for this is that evidentialism tends to be closely associated with a certain deontological thesis regarding justification that has explicitly internalist overtones. Indeed, Feldman, *ibid.*, is a good example of someone who holds both an epistemologically internalist thesis characterized along deontic lines and, for related reasons, also endorses a form of evidentialism.

¹⁷Plantinga certainly would not be surprised by this observation, of course, because it informs a great deal of his discussion of warrant in *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993). Nevertheless, as I will be arguing below, Plantinga has not adequately recognized the nuanced manner in which the externalism/internalism distinction has an impact on this debate.

is. The reformed epistemologist can use this observation to his advantage. In particular, reformed epistemologists have pointed out that such a requirement on positive epistemic status would seem to rule out a great deal of belief as being epistemically lacking. The standard example employed here is that of perception since, if we know anything much about the world at all, then it would seem that we must have some perceptual knowledge. Consider how perceptual knowledge fares with respect to the evidentialist thesis, however. Is it really true that we are able to offer evidence that we can vouch for that is sufficient to support the level of conviction present in our standard perceptual beliefs?

In order to make the parallel between the religious case and the perceptual case more direct, consider someone who is skeptical about perceptual belief in general on the grounds that he is skeptical about the external world ontology that it commits one to. How would one convince such a skeptic? Clearly, as with the religious case, it would not do to cite empirical grounds that are gained by perception since this would be question-begging. This evidence is only apt for the purpose if the beliefs at issue are genuine perceptual beliefs (rather than merely beliefs about how things seem); but insofar as they are assumed to be genuine perceptual beliefs, then the ontology in question is being illicitly taken for granted. As with the religious case, then, the only way around this requirement would appear to be to offer either *a priori* or incorrigible support for our perceptual beliefs, but such support is not obviously forthcoming. Allowing evidentialism in the case of religious belief would thus seem to license, by parity of reasoning, radical skepticism as regards perceptual belief. Provided that we grant that if we know anything much at all then we must have some perceptual knowledge, we thus have independent grounds to be skeptical about the evidentialist requirement itself.¹⁸

Reformed epistemologists have been keen to exploit this parallel between religious belief and perceptual belief as a means of putting religious belief on the same sort of secure footing that is typically granted to perceptual belief. This line of reasoning has been characterized by Alston and others as a “parity argument.” Alston argues that the point of such an argument is to show that what he calls “Christian Practice” has “basically the same epistemic status as [*Perceptual Practice*] and that no-one who subscribes to the latter is in any position to cavil at the former.”¹⁹ In order to achieve this end, the possibility that Alston explores is that “religious experience is basic to religious belief in somewhat the way in which

¹⁸Of course, the religious skeptic could at this point retreat into a general skepticism that was not solely confined to religious belief. The trouble with this maneuver, however, is that it only serves to undermine the original skeptical argument about religious belief. After all, that argument contends that there was something *peculiarly* defective about religious belief, not that belief in general was problematic. Indeed, if belief in general is problematic, then the religious believer is no worse off than the agnostic or the atheist. John Henry Newman is sensitive to this point. See *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief, Preached before the University of Oxford* (London, 1844) and *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870), ed. I. T. Ker (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press 1985).

¹⁹William Alston, “Religious Experience and Religious Belief,” *Noûs* 16 (1982) 3–12, here 12. The original quotation has the “former” and “latter” in the reverse order but, as DeRose notes in his “Are Christian Beliefs Properly Basic?” (unpublished manuscript), this is surely a mistake on Alston’s part.

sense experience is basic to our beliefs about the physical world. In both cases . . . we form certain beliefs about the subject matter (God, the physical environment) on the basis of experience.”²⁰ In particular, reformed epistemologists tend to concentrate on two parallels between religious and perceptual belief.

The first parallel, which we have already noted, is that both religious beliefs and perceptual beliefs are prone to an evidentialism-based skeptical argument. Insofar as one regards perceptual belief as legitimate, one is obliged to regard religious belief as being, at least *prima facie*, legitimate as well. That is, if evidentialism is inapplicable as regards perceptual belief, then it cannot simply be assumed to play a role as regards religious belief. This is the “negative” element of the parity argument since it merely contends that there are *prima facie* grounds for thinking that religious belief is no worse off, epistemically speaking, than perceptual belief.²¹

The second parallel is more positive in that it draws upon relevant similarities between the nature of perceptual experience and the nature of religious experience that would appear to license the same sort of non-evidentialist epistemology that is often applied in the perceptual case to the religious case.²² More specifically, the thought is that religious belief can sometimes enjoy the very sort of “directness” that is often found in perceptual belief and that, in the perceptual case, licences the adoption of a non-evidentialist epistemology. As Laurence Bonjour has put it, ordinary perceptual beliefs tend to arise “spontaneously” out of certain perceptual experiences, and the same might be said regarding how certain religious beliefs arise in response to particular religious experiences.²³ By exploiting this positive analogy between religious and perceptual belief, reformed epistemologists (such as Alston and Plantinga) have argued that the kind of non-evidentialist epistemological model that is applied in the perceptual case ought to be just as apt in the religious case.²⁴

²⁰Alston, “Is Religious Belief Rational?” in *The Life of Religion*, S. M. Harrison and R. C. Taylor, eds. (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 1986), pp. 1–15, here p. 2.

²¹Another “negative” claim that Plantinga (“Reason and Belief in God,” in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, pp. 16–93) makes in this respect is that classical foundationalism is self-refuting because an agent’s belief in the classical foundationalist doctrine will not itself be grounded in either incorrigible or *a priori* evidence.

²²What is meant here by “religious experience”? The best account that I know of is that of Alston, whose “Is Religious Belief Rational?” argues that it is those experiences that give rise to the “M-beliefs” (or manifestation beliefs) that are the focus for a great deal of his discussion on this matter. He writes (p. 6) that religious experience concerns “experiences that would naturally lead the experiencer to formulate that he has experienced something about God’s current relation to himself; that God said ‘___’ to him, that God was enlightening him, comforting him, guiding him, sustaining him in being, or just being present to him.” One of the advantages of this characterization is that the beliefs that it gives rise to will tend to have a clear propositional content.

²³See Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1985), *passim*.

²⁴See Alston, “Is Religious Belief Rational?” and *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991); and see Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate, Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993) and *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000). As I discuss below with respect to Alston, however, different reformed epistemologists have differing conceptions of what can be concluded from this “positive” element of the parity argument.

In particular, the failure of evidentialism as regards perceptual belief points toward the need for a form of *externalist* epistemology that characterizes perceptual knowledge in terms of an appropriate reliable relationship between one's beliefs and the physical environment that those beliefs are supposed to track. Such an account is externalist in the sense that it does not require that the agent who has epistemically supported perceptual beliefs should be able to reflectively recover the grounds that support such belief—his “evidence”—in the way that evidentialism demands. This kind of approach to perceptual belief takes its cue from a certain construal of the writings of Thomas Reid and in effect maintains that perceptual belief enjoys a kind of “default” epistemic support such that, in the absence of countervailing evidence and provided that the belief-forming mechanisms in question are as a matter of fact reliable, an agent's perceptual belief can enjoy sufficient positive epistemic status even when the agent is unable to adduce adequate evidential grounds to support that belief.

Prima facie, an externalist epistemology understood along these lines ought to be equally applicable to religious belief. Just so long as the belief-forming mechanisms in question (however they are to be characterized) are appropriately reliable, and just so long as there is no countervailing evidence to take into account that would imply that those mechanisms are not functioning adequately, then such beliefs seem to enjoy a default positive epistemic status. Of course, anyone who does not share the religious belief in question will be skeptical about the putative reliability of the belief-forming mechanisms just as they will be skeptical about the ontology presupposed by such beliefs, but this situation is no different in relevantly similar cases, such as with perceptual belief. Saying that perceptual belief gives us knowledge so long as it is indeed reliable in the appropriate way will not persuade someone—the radical skeptic, say—who does not already accept the ontology that is being presupposed here. Nevertheless, such a maneuver would support the claim that perceptual knowledge is at least conditionally possible given that certain conditions actually do obtain. Similarly, the religious believer can respond to an evidentialism-based skepticism about religious belief by arguing that religious knowledge is indeed possible after all, just so long as certain factual conditions obtain.

In effect, what the religious believer is doing here is distinguishing the *epistemological* question of whether it is ever possible for one's religious beliefs to enjoy a sufficient degree of positive epistemic status from the *metaphysical* question of whether there really does exist the kind of ontology to which the religious believer is committed. Although a negative answer to the metaphysical question would, of course, prejudice the possibility of a positive answer in the epistemological case, in the absence of such a negative metaphysical conclusion, the epistemological question can be met. The burden is thus placed back on the skeptic about religious belief to offer the relevant negative metaphysical argument, and it is hard to see how such an argument could be supported. Moreover, since the epistemological model in question is independently plausible in the case of perceptual belief and since there are relevant similarities between the perceptual and the religious case, it seems that the defender of religious belief has made significant headway against

the skeptic. The legitimacy of perceptual belief is rescued from the threat posed by an evidentialism-based skepticism and thus, by parity of reasoning, so is religious belief.²⁵

IV. PROBLEMS WITH THE PARITY ARGUMENT

I think that this general externalist defense of religious belief on these grounds of parity is persuasive. As so often in philosophy, however, the devil is in the detail since problems arise once one opts for a specific externalist construal of the epistemology of religious belief. In particular, I want to focus upon the most common account that runs along these lines. Plantinga claims that we should treat religious belief as being “properly basic” in just the same way that perceptual belief is treated as properly basic on the externalist account just considered. This claim of proper basicity comes down to the contention that, although one might have evidence in support of one’s religious or perceptual beliefs, such beliefs (at least in favorable cases) do not stand in need of an evidential grounding in order to be properly held. Provided that certain external conditions are met, a perceptual or religious belief can enjoy an *immediate* warrant that arises directly out of the agent having an experience of a certain sort rather than being a *transferred* warrant, or *partly transferred* warrant, which is dependent upon an evidential grounding.²⁶

This line does more than merely rescue religious belief from an evidentialism-based skepticism, however. It actually allows, as with perceptual belief, that evidence need not play a substantive warranting role when it comes to certain religious beliefs. It is this claim that religious beliefs can be properly basic in this way that I think is questionable.

The problem with this construal of the epistemology of the religious belief is that it *overstates*, in relevant respects, the parallels between religious experience and perceptual experience. In particular, there is a worry about the putatively analogous “spontaneity” of religious and perceptual beliefs. It was noted above that religious beliefs, like perceptual beliefs, can sometimes seem to have the same sort of “directness” that one might find in the perceptual case, as if one were directly responding to a religious being in the way that one directly responds to objects in the physical world through perception. It was this spontaneity of perceptual belief

²⁵For two interesting discussions, and overviews, of the kind of parity arguments employed by reformed epistemologists, see Terence Penelhum, “Do Religious Beliefs Need Grounds?” in *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 40 (1986) 227–37, *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), and “Reflections on Reformed Epistemology” (unpublished manuscript, 2000); and M. S. McLeod, *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology*, (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993). In the 1986 essay Penelhum also points out that Plantinga’s early characterizations of the reformed epistemological position (such as “Reason and Belief in God”) were misleading since they tended to imply that grounds were being offered to support religious belief over other sorts of non-religious belief. This is not the case, however, since all that is achieved is a kind of advantageous *impasse* with the religious skeptic (even though this is achievement enough). I think that in later work Plantinga is more explicit about this point, but see DeRose, “Voodoo Epistemology” (unpublished manuscript, 1993) for more discussion of this worry in the light of Plantinga’s more recent work, in particular, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

²⁶Following Plantinga’s *Warrant: The Current Debate*, I will understand “warrant” to be that epistemic notion that is sufficient, with true belief, for knowledge.

that made it apt for a radically non-evidentialist construal since evidence seemed to play no essential warranting role as regards standard perceptual belief. The problem, however, is that whereas this sort of “directness” is the norm in the perceptual case, it is more naturally thought of as the *exception* to the norm in the religious case. Indeed, whereas perceptual beliefs seem to be, in the main, “forced” upon us, religious beliefs often seem to be formed in a far less immediate and compelling fashion. As Keith DeRose has put it, normal religious belief is rarely understood in terms of being “zapped” by a divinity, as Plantinga seems to understand it; instead, the more common way of conceiving of such belief is in terms of being “nudged” or “invited” towards a certain sort of doxastic commitment.²⁷

In general, there does seem to be a certain “voluntary” element in religious belief that is absent in most forms of perceptual belief.²⁸ Relatedly, whereas an agent might gain a warrant for his perceptual belief without engaging his reflective capacities at all, religious beliefs seem to implicate such capacities directly. For example, whereas we are happy to attribute perceptual knowledge to small children, we are unwilling, I think (except in rare cases), to ascribe anything but the most basic of religious knowledge to persons who lack reasonably developed reflective capacities. This hints towards the fact that well-formed religious beliefs seem to demand more of the subject than well-formed perceptual beliefs.

Of course, for the parity argument to go through, all that is needed is for *some* religious beliefs to be basic in the same way that *some* perceptual beliefs are; it is not essential that religious belief be in general analogous to perceptual belief. Indeed, Plantinga’s own discussion of the role that defeaters can play regarding basic religious beliefs would appear to indicate that the religious beliefs held by most reasonably sophisticated religious believers are, for the most part at least, non-basic.²⁹ Nevertheless, the concern about the disanalogies between religious belief and perceptual belief is important because it directs us to look again at the idea that, on grounds of parity, we should consider religious beliefs to be basic. After all, if we concede that properly formed religious belief may be constrained by more imposing demands than properly formed perceptual belief, then it becomes far from clear that it follows from the fact that certain perceptual beliefs are basic that any (or hardly any) religious beliefs are basic as well.

It is open to reformed epistemologists to query these putative intuitions, of course, or at least question the epistemological ramifications that they are meant to hold. Rather than engaging in such dialectical warfare, however, a better approach might

²⁷See his “Are Christian Beliefs Properly Basic?”

²⁸Note that by these remarks I am not committing myself to some sort of “doxastic voluntarism” thesis. Rather, I am merely highlighting the fact that, *insofar* as we have control over our beliefs at all, then it is part of our ordinary conception of our doxastic capacities that we have more control over the formation of the standard religious belief than we do regarding the formation of the standard perceptual belief. Moreover, it may seem as if I am also endorsing some sort of *general* thesis to the effect that belief control is a direct result of the belief being formed in a “non-spontaneous” way. This is not the case. My remarks here are solely confined to the cases of religious and perceptual belief.

²⁹For an excellent discussion and overview of the issue of the relationship between basicity and defeaters, see Christian Miller, “Defeaters and the Basicity of Theistic Belief” (unpublished manuscript, 2001).

first be to see whether the general reformed epistemology framework could not simply be modified, in non-essential respects, so as to enable it to accommodate these disanalogies. For, if it can, then the dialectical warfare is unnecessary and the claim that there are these disanalogies has constructive, rather than destructive, consequences for the view.

One motivation for pursuing the irenic goal of integrating this concern into the reformed epistemology thesis rather than attempting to argue it down, is that the “intuitions” that drive this concern find expression in the work of one of the most prominent reformed epistemologists, Alston. Not only has Alston noted these disparities between perceptual and religious experience but, as a result, he has advocated a far more cautious non-evidentialist epistemology as regards religious belief than one finds in Plantinga. In particular, he argues that religious experience alone cannot suffice to warrant one’s religious beliefs, arguing that further transferable epistemic support must be sought from other sources, such as salient historical evidence and other relevant evidence that is socially transmitted from other members of the agent’s religious community.³⁰ That Alston is even willing to consider such a move offers *prima facie* grounds for thinking that perhaps the basicity thesis does not play quite such a central role in the reformed epistemology stance as is often thought.

I think that this is right and that, properly understood, the driving motivation for reformed epistemology—and that which enables it to evade skepticism about religious belief—is its commitment to epistemological externalism. This point is in keeping with a claim made earlier—that, at root, it is internalism rather than evidentialism that drives skepticism about religious belief. Accordingly, the rejection of evidentialism contained within reformed epistemology is not nearly so important as the move away from epistemological internalism and towards epistemological externalism. As a result, I will be arguing that, provided that this externalist element of the view is retained, one can forge a version of the thesis that can accommodate these disanalogies. Note that in what follows I will allow that there may be some religious beliefs that are basic in the appropriate sense. What I will be claiming is that the reformed epistemological stance is not a hostage to the existence of these beliefs since, even if no religious belief ever, in fact, meets the basicity rubric, the general elements of the view can still be regarded as secure and capable of evading the skeptical attack.³¹

³⁰See, in particular, Alston, “Religious Experience and Religious Belief” and “Is Religious Belief Rational?”

³¹In “Are Christian Beliefs Properly Basic?” DeRose suggests that the reason why Plantinga is not as sensitive to the disanalogies between religious and perceptual belief is that he has a very specific model of religious experience in mind that is much more akin to perceptual experience, standardly understood. If this is so, then the dialectical moral to be drawn from the modified version of reformed epistemology offered here is not that this model should replace Plantinga’s own (since he is welcome to model *his* conception of religious belief in any way he pleases), but rather that this model generalizes the core insights within Plantinga’s account to make that view applicable to a broader range of religious experience.

V. DEROSE'S FOUNDERENTIST PROPOSAL

Before we consider how this modified reformed view is to work, it is worthwhile looking at a suggestion made by DeRose that runs along similar lines. DeRose argues that we can respond to these disanalogies between perceptual and religious belief by understanding religious belief in terms of the sort of *foundherentist* model advocated by Susan Haack.³² One effect of adopting this line of response is that it leads to the rejection of the kind of foundationalism that is implicit within Plantinga's version of reformed epistemology as it currently stands. In particular, the foundherentist idea as it applies to Plantinga's account is precisely *not* to treat religious beliefs as properly basic at all, except perhaps in rare cases. This may not be quite such a dramatic change as it might at first appear, however, for two reasons. First, because foundherentism does incorporate some key foundationalist insights and therefore can allow a key sense in which religious beliefs enjoy direct epistemic support. Second, because foundherentism can allow that perhaps some religious beliefs are properly basic in unusual circumstances. Accordingly, one could plausibly view this foundherentist proposal as merely restricting the class of religious beliefs that the parity argument has application to without thereby discounting this maneuver altogether.

First, however, we need to get an idea of what is involved in foundherentism. In essence, it is meant to be an epistemological model that can capture insights from both foundationalist and coherentist schools of thought in epistemology. Consider the following passage from Haack:

Foundherentism is an intermediate theory which (unlike coherentism) allows the relevance of experience but (unlike experientialist foundationalism) requires neither privileged beliefs justified exclusively by experience nor an essentially one-directional notion of evidential support.³³

The thought is thus that foundherentism retains a core thesis from both foundationalism and coherence theory. On the one hand, it retains the foundationalist idea that some beliefs could enjoy sufficient positive epistemic status without that status resting on the epistemic status of any other beliefs (such that they are properly basic). On the other hand, it retains the coherentist idea that the positive epistemic status of some beliefs can be the result solely of the coherence of this belief within an appropriate set of other beliefs. The way this is achieved is by arguing that while some beliefs enjoy a "direct" epistemic support that is not based on other beliefs, other beliefs enjoy a completely indirect "transferred" epistemic support that is the result of its relation to other beliefs, and that still other beliefs gain some of their epistemic support in the direct fashion and some of it in the indirect fashion.

³²See DeRose, "Are Christian Beliefs Properly Basic?" For Haack's foundherentism, see "Double-Aspect Foundherentism: A New Theory of Empirical Justification," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993) 113–28, and *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

³³Haack, "Double-Aspect Foundherentism," p. 113.

Haack often describes this position in terms of the metaphor of a crossword puzzle, where the clues stand for experience. It could well be that certain clues directly point to a certain answer (epistemically supported belief), and thus that the gaining of this answer is not dependent upon any other answers that one might already have. This would thus represent the standard perceptual case where our perceptual beliefs directly gain a sufficient positive epistemic status without that status being dependent upon the epistemic status of any other beliefs we hold.

In contrast, other clues will not suggest any particular answer, but one could determine an answer by looking at the way that certain possible answers “cohere” with the answers already gained. A “real-world” example of such a case might be a trial where the jury must form an opinion on the basis of the evidence in front of them. An epistemically supported judgement in this case may be entirely the result of some reflective process whereby one comes to recognize that a certain alternative—the not-guilty verdict, say—coheres with the evidence presented in a far more adequate way than the opposing guilty verdict.

These are two extreme cases, however, and, more usually, our belief formation falls between these two poles. Employing the crossword metaphor again, we can say that often a clue directs us towards a small selection of answers and that our final determination of the correct answer is dependent upon our forming a judgment about which of these possible answers best coheres with the other answers that we already have. This thus corresponds to cases where we form beliefs that enjoy some degree of direct positive epistemic support but where this support does not take one to the threshold necessary for warrant. In such cases the epistemic support in question needs to be augmented with further epistemic support from one’s other beliefs if it is to meet this threshold. An example of this might be a case where there is some ambiguity present in experience, as when one is unsure whether the person that one sees in the distance is one’s brother or one’s father. Here we might call on further beliefs that we hold (that he’s too tall to be one’s father, for example) in order to form our final (warranted) judgment. Foundherentism thus offers a spectrum of possibilities, from completely direct non-inferential warrant at one extreme to completely indirect transferred warrant at the other extreme, with various degrees of combination of these two alternatives in between.³⁴

The advantage of employing this model is that it can accommodate the thought that religious belief enjoys some measure of direct epistemic support (perhaps even a sufficient measure in certain rare cases) while also allowing that, in general, this support is insufficient by itself to warrant the religious beliefs in question. What must be added is thus further epistemic support from other beliefs in order to bring the positive epistemic status up to the required threshold for warrant. This account thus allows us to mark the contrast with perceptual belief (which tends to generally enjoy sufficient direct epistemic support) in a way that accords with the

³⁴The other advantage of this crossword metaphor is that it can offer a vivid description of belief-change, even where those beliefs were previously taken as being very secure. As any crossword enthusiast will tell you, even the most compelling of “answers” to a particular clue can start to look shaky if evidence against it begins to build in the form of several not so compelling answers that will not fit with it.

intuition that religious belief is formed in some ways that are analogous with perceptual belief.³⁵ In particular, it allows that one's religious beliefs do enjoy some measure of positive epistemic status that is direct and therefore not dependent upon the epistemic status of any other beliefs that one holds. In this sense the foundherentist modification of the reformed epistemology thesis is just as resistant to the skeptical challenge we witnessed earlier on. For, so long as the religious belief is indeed formed in the right kind of circumstances, then, even though the agent might lack good reflectively accessible grounds for his belief, it can still have, *contra* the skeptic, a significant degree of positive epistemic status. Again we find an externalist thesis emerging, and it is this externalism that is doing the work of undermining the skeptical challenge.

Furthermore, this proposal can account for why it is that certain sorts of religious belief seem to be preferable to others. After all, if coherence in one's religious beliefs can contribute to the epistemic status of those beliefs, then it is little wonder that an inchoate set of religious beliefs would seem to be lacking in rationality. This approach therefore enables us to distinguish between properly held religious belief and the religious belief held by the "enthusiasts" that Locke talked of. Thus evidence does have a central role to play in religious epistemology after all; it is just not quite as central as the evidentialist contends. That is, the account sketched here attempts to offer a compromise view between evidentialism and the radical anti-evidentialism espoused by Plantinga. Whereas the evidentialist sees epistemic support as being entirely concerned with evidential considerations and Plantinga views evidential considerations as only relevant once we have moved away from basic religious beliefs (as happens, for example, when the believer is exposed to a defeater for his basic belief), this modified reformed account contends that evidential considerations are nearly always relevant but usually only in concert with other epistemic support that is direct and non-evidential. In this way evidential considerations can be accorded a role in the determination of a religious belief's epistemic support without this role thereby inviting the usual evidentialism-based skeptical challenge.

Finally, this account explains why it is that we rarely ascribe religious knowledge to small children, even though we are often happy to ascribe to them perceptual knowledge. The reason is that the former sort of knowledge requires the agent to reflect on the relevant evidential considerations and therefore implicates certain reflective capacities in a way that perceptual knowledge does not.

I think that this is an intriguing proposal, but as it stands it does not offer us quite what we are looking for. The reason for this is that the very schematic foundherentist account under consideration merely presents us with an appealing description of the *structural* nature of the epistemology that we want rather than going further to

³⁵As DeRose has pointed out to me (in correspondence), his point is actually slightly different from this in that his emphasis is on how religious belief is lacking in *indirect* warrant relative to perceptual belief. The key point about there being a disanalogy here between religious and perceptual belief stands either way, of course, but I retain this particular reading of the foundherentist claim because I think that this understanding of the difference between perceptual and religious belief best captures the disanalogies noted earlier in §4. I am grateful to DeRose for helping me to be clear on this point.

distinguish between the various sorts of epistemological analyses that might fit this template and adjudicating between them.³⁶ Accordingly, in the next section I will try to show how a very specific sort of epistemological position—a form of virtue epistemology—can be put into service to account for the epistemology of religious belief. This account will fit the framework offered by foundherentism while also being contiguous with the core formulation of reformed epistemology due to Plantinga that is also conceived along (broadly speaking) virtue-theoretic lines.

VI. A VIRTUE-THEORETIC PROPOSAL

The suggestion that reformed epistemology is best understood along virtue-theoretic lines may not at first seem particularly novel because, at least in the case of Plantinga, reformed epistemology is already regarded by some as being a form of virtue epistemology. I want to argue, however, that reformed epistemology, where it is understood as a virtue-theoretic account, is not conceived of in terms of the *right* virtue-theoretic account. Moreover, the account that I propose will fit the foundherentist template outlined above.

What makes an epistemological account *virtue*-theoretic is that it is *agent*-based rather than *belief*-based. In particular, a belief counts as knowledge only if it is the result of, as John Greco puts it, “an agent’s cognitively virtuous character.” We can, I think, get a better handle on this distinction between belief-based and agent-based epistemology by considering some of the earliest forms of virtue-theoretic proposals in epistemology that were expressed in terms of *agent reliabilism*. This kind of proposal has been put forward by, among others, Ernest Sosa and Alvin Goldman. Moreover, it is the sort of account that Plantinga himself offers and that he explicitly applies to religious belief.³⁷

³⁶Indeed, it is important to remember that the type of foundherentism that we are dealing with here is just Haack’s basic schematic account of the position rather than the particular variant of that position that she goes on to outline. Note that this is no criticism of DeRose since his suggestion was only meant to be structural in the first place.

³⁷For the main accounts of virtue epistemology, see Ernest Sosa “Knowledge and Intellectual Virtue,” *The Monist* 68 (1985) 224–45, “Intellectual Virtue in Perspective” in his *Knowledge in Perspective: Selected Essays in Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), and “Proper Functionalism and Virtue Epistemology,” *Noûs* 27 (1993) 51–65; James Montmarquet, “Epistemic Virtue,” *Mind* 96 (1987) 487–97, and *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993); Plantinga, “Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988) 1–50; *Warrant and Proper Function*, “Why We Need Proper Function,” *Noûs* 27 (1993) 66–82, and *Warranted Christian Belief*; John Kvanvig, *The Intellectual Virtues and the Life of the Mind* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); Alvin Goldman, “Epistemic Folkways and Scientific Epistemology,” *Philosophical Issues* 3 (1993) 271–84; John Greco, “Virtues and Vices of Virtue Epistemology,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 23 (1993) 413–32, “Agent Reliabilism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999) 273–96, and *Putting Sceptics in Their Place: The Nature of Sceptical Arguments and Their Role in Philosophical Inquiry* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000); Christopher Hookway, “Cognitive Virtues and Epistemic Evaluations,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2 (1994) 211–27; and Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1996). See also the survey article by Guy Axtell, “Recent Work on Virtue Epistemology,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997) 1–26.

The basic idea behind agent reliabilism is that we need to amend the key process reliabilist account—as expressed by, for example, (an earlier) Goldman³⁸—along virtue-theoretic lines in order to meet some of the standard challenges to the view. For example, one of the problems that reliabilism faces is that it seems to count certain beliefs as being warranted even when they are formed through processes that, while reliable, are clearly not knowledge-conducive. There are three main examples of this ilk. For now I will concentrate on two of them.³⁹

The first type of counter-example to reliabilism is concerned with those reliable processes where the success of the process does not seem to reflect any cognitive achievement on the part of the agent. One could imagine, for example, that an agent reliably forms true beliefs about a certain subject matter solely because some benevolent demon makes it the case that his beliefs in this regard are reliable. In this case we have strong intuitions that knowledge does not result because the agent is not tracking the world in the relevant sense (instead “the world” appears to be tracking the agent’s beliefs). And given that there is no cognitive achievement on the part of the agent, it does not seem right to say that his reliable true beliefs can count as knowledge.

The second type of counter-example concerns certain “malfunctions” on the part of the agent that, nonetheless, actually *enable* the agent reliably to form true beliefs about a certain subject matter.⁴⁰ Because the reliability is due to a malfunction, however, we have a strong intuition that it cannot count as being knowledge-conducive.

Of course, committed reliabilists could respond to both of these examples by modifying the view in subtle respects, but such a move would fail to pay due attention to the heart of the difficulty here. This is that reliabilism goes wrong in only considering certain properties of the belief rather than focusing instead upon properties of the *agent* who formed that belief. In particular, the agent reliabilist thought is that not just any reliable belief-forming process can produce knowledge but only those processes that perform certain appropriate roles within the cognitive character of the agent. Agent reliabilists therefore argue that instead of defining knowledge purely in terms of properties of the belief in question, one should instead focus upon the stable natural cognitive traits, or faculties, of the agent. Paradigm examples of such traits are our senses—if they are working correctly and in a stable manner relative to the appropriate environmental conditions, they will lead us to true beliefs. Plantinga, for example, characterizes his version of this kind of thesis in terms of a “cognitive design plan” as follows:

³⁸See Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986).

³⁹All three of these examples are discussed, in one form or another, in Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*. For a general discussion of Agent Reliabilism, see Greco, “Agent Reliabilism.” It is important to note that there are a number of other advantages to adopting a virtue-theoretic epistemology that I do not have the space to expand upon here. For example, such proposals seem to be able adequately to respond to both Gettier-type scenarios and skeptical arguments. Moreover, a virtue-theoretic epistemology may also be able to meet the so-called “generality” problem that has bedeviled reliabilist accounts of knowledge.

⁴⁰The example that Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, *passim*, offers of a reliable cognitive malfunction is an epistemically “lucky” brain lesion that enables the agent to form true beliefs about his condition in this respect.

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 modules (in that sort of cognitive environment) is true; and the more firmly *S* believes *B* the more warrant *B* has for *S*.⁴¹

What is important about such cognitive faculties is that they are more than just (in the ideal case) reliable. In Plantinga's account just cited, for example, the reliability of these faculties is merely a necessary condition for knowledge gained through them. What is needed to make such reliability knowledge-conducive is the further claim that this reliability arises out of a kind of stable cognitive excellence, or virtue, that the agent exhibits and that he can therefore take credit for.⁴²

This conception of knowledge in terms of natural stable cognitive faculties meets the two objections outlined above by explaining why the agent lacks knowledge despite exhibiting a reliable belief-forming process. In the first example, the agent cannot take any credit for his true beliefs, and thus has beliefs that count as knowledge, because they are not due to any trait of his, let alone a stable natural belief-forming process that exhibits a kind of cognitive excellence. As regards the second example, the agent reliabilist account explains why cognitive malfunctions can never give us knowledge. For not only are such processes usually lacking in the required stability, but they are not natural *cognitive* faculties either. No wonder, then, that they are unable to provide us with knowledge.

An agent reliabilist thesis—a thesis that employs an understanding of the notion of a cognitive virtue in terms of natural cognitive faculties—is thus able to meet certain objections to basic process reliabilism by restricting the conception of what is to count as a knowledge-producing reliable process in ways that focus upon attributes of the agent.

Henceforth, I will refer to such early virtue epistemological accounts as *faculty* virtue theories. In essence, where they differ from reliabilist accounts is merely in their stress on the agent's cognitive character and their focus on natural cognitive faculties of the agent. Such faculty virtue accounts are ideally suited to capturing perceptual knowledge because it seems entirely uncontentious in the perceptual case to view knowledge as being purely the result of cognitive faculties functioning correctly in the right circumstances. Note that to conceive of perceptual knowledge in this way is to adopt the kind of "pure" externalist epistemology that was discussed above. There is no demand here that the agent need bring his reflective capacities to bear in order to exhibit knowledge; instead, he need only meet purely external conditions in order to know.

⁴¹Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 19.

⁴²It is important to note that not everyone agrees that Plantinga's account is a virtue-theoretic one, including Plantinga himself (who prefers to call his position a "proper function" thesis). I think, however, that Plantinga's account has enough in common with the views expressed by the key virtue theorists to fall into this camp. For more discussion on this point, see the exchange between Sosa, "Proper Functionalism and Virtue Epistemology" and Plantinga, "Why We Need Proper Function," along with the commentary by Axtell, "Recent Work on Virtue Epistemology," 3–4.

As one might expect, given his use of the parity argument, Plantinga directly employs the kind of faculty virtue account he offers for perceptual belief—what he calls a “proper function” account—to religious belief. In line with the Calvinist tradition to which he belongs, Plantinga argues that we have an innate natural cognitive faculty—what he calls a *sensus divinitatis*—that enables us to form reliable religious beliefs and that, so long as this cognitive faculty is functioning correctly (so long, for example, as it is not adversely affected by the agent’s sin), then one can gain religious knowledge in the same unmediated fashion that one gains perceptual knowledge. Perceptual beliefs and religious beliefs can thus both be thought of, at least in the standard case, as properly basic.

We have already seen, however, that the nature of religious experience, in contrast to perceptual experience, is such that the application of a “pure” externalist epistemology to religious belief is suspect. Accordingly, Plantinga’s agent reliabilist account of knowledge, when applied to religious belief, will have the unfortunate consequence that an agent could come to know certain religious propositions through the exercise of a particular sort of cognitive faculty even though he does not bring any of his reflective capacities to bear upon the formation of his belief in these propositions. As we noted above, however, for the vast majority of religious beliefs (if not for all of them) this seems entirely unintuitive. Properly formed religious beliefs are not usually simply formed as a direct response to certain stimuli, as one might naturally think in the case of properly formed perceptual beliefs, but instead standardly seem to invoke certain reflective capacities on the part of the subject.⁴³

Of course, this observation alone does not entail that the virtue-theoretic approach in general is suspect. Instead, all it shows is that those versions of the virtue-theoretic account that cannot leave room for our reflective capacities to play an essential role in the acquisition of certain sorts of knowledge are problematic. If there are other virtue-theoretic accounts configured along similar lines that can allow these capacities to play the required role, then the virtue-theoretic model will be back in business. I think that there are such models available.

The kind of accounts that I have in mind are those virtue theories that do not concentrate solely on the faculty virtues but also incorporate a role for *reflective* virtues. Such virtues may include such cognitive traits as the ability to weigh-up evidence impartially, or the ability to integrate one’s beliefs so as to gain, for example, a greater degree of doxastic consistency. This general line of thought has its roots in the distinction that Sosa makes between “brute” or “animalistic” knowledge and “reflective” knowledge,⁴⁴ although it expands upon this basic distinction by allowing that between these two extremes there can be various types of knowledge that demand different combinations of “brute” and “reflective” cognitive virtues. The thought here is that by combining both faculty and reflective cognitive virtues one attains a more fine-grained account of what is involved in knowledge possession in different cases. That is, certain sorts of knowledge, such as perceptual knowledge, might just require properly functioning cognitive faculties, whereas

⁴³For an insightful, and more general, critique of Plantinga’s agent reliabilism, see Zagzebski, §3.5.

⁴⁴See, in particular, Sosa, “Intellectual Virtue in Perspective.”

other sorts of knowledge, such as that which can result from abstract reasoning, for example, might solely depend upon the reflective virtues. In between one will find the vast majority of knowledge that requires a mixture of both properly functioning faculty virtues and reflective virtues.⁴⁵

Such an account has a number of attractive features. For example, one could use such a theory to explain why certain types of knowledge are regarded as being more “refined” than others. It may be, for example, that two knowers both meet the threshold for knowledge but that one of them surpasses that threshold in important epistemically relevant respects, perhaps because he exhibits a certain sort of understanding of what he knows is lacking in the case of the other agent (and that is not simply the result of knowing more truths than the other agent). This would thus be a case where the “refinement” in question was due to the activation of a reflective capacity on the part of the subject.

A further advantage of this sort of virtue-theoretic approach is that it can meet the third type of counter-example that is often made against process reliabilism that I alluded to earlier. This counter-example concerns situations where one reliably gains true beliefs by forming beliefs in ways that seem, antecedently at least, to be undesirable. For example, one could imagine a scenario in which one forms beliefs about a certain subject matter on the basis of bias and yet, because of some stipulated feature of the circumstances in which the beliefs are acquired, beliefs formed on this basis turn out to be reliable. Seemingly, however, one cannot gain knowledge through bias, no matter how reliable one’s beliefs are.

This example should sound familiar because it is a variation of the example offered earlier in our critique of evidentialism. There it was noted that evidentialism (in at least some of its forms at any rate) is unable to make any adequate distinction between those agents who believe what they epistemically ought to believe for all the wrong reasons (such as because of bias) and those who believe what they epistemically ought to believe for all the right reasons (because of a sensitivity to the weight and extent of their evidence, for example). Again, then, we have a situation in which an agent has met the relevant epistemic rubric that has been set but has nevertheless met it in a way that seems to preclude that agent from possessing knowledge.

Agent reliabilism lacks the resources to respond to examples of this sort because there does not seem to be any way in which one can trace the cognitive shortcoming in question back to the agent’s cognitive faculties where these are understood in non-reflective terms. The more developed form of virtue epistemology under consideration here has no such difficulties, however, because it can explain the

⁴⁵One finds virtue-theoretic accounts that emphasize the importance of reflective virtues in recent work by Greco (“Virtues and Vices of Virtue Epistemology,” “Agent Reliabilism,” and *Putting Skeptics in Their Place*) and by Zagzebski, although the stress in Greco’s account is more on what he terms “subjective justification” than on reflective virtues as such. Moreover, although the accounts offered by Greco and Zagzebski are in this respect similar to that sketched here, they do tend to go further to make the activation of such reflective capacities necessary for knowledge. In contrast, my claim is much weaker in that I allow that in certain cases—such as in the perpetual case—an agent might have knowledge without exhibiting any reflective capacities at all.

agent's lack of knowledge in terms of a failure to exhibit the appropriate reflective virtue. In this case, for example, the agent forms his beliefs in terms of bias (a reflective vice) rather than in response to the weight and extent of his evidence (as reflective virtue would dictate). The same goes for the evidentialist variant of this example. If one characterizes knowledge in terms of true belief that arises out of a cognitive virtue, then those agents who believe what they epistemically ought to believe for all the wrong reasons lack knowledge precisely because that true belief (if it is true) does not arise out of a reflective virtue.

The attraction of applying such a thesis to religious knowledge should be clear. For example, a reflective virtue epistemology of this type can allow that, while it might be true in the perceptual case that one can gain knowledge without exhibiting any developed reflective capacities, the same need not also be true in the case of religious knowledge. This view can thus do justice to our intuition that, at least in the standard case, the role of the faculty virtues alone, as regards religious belief, is insufficient to afford us religious knowledge. Instead, a precondition of acquiring religious knowledge (at least in the standard case) will be that the agent has (and brings to bear) the appropriate reflective virtues as well. An account of this sort is therefore able to capture the reformed intuition that religious knowledge is similar to perceptual knowledge in certain respects, in that both forms of knowledge presuppose that the agent has certain properly functioning faculty virtues, while also allowing that this analogy is not complete and thus that some epistemological explanation of the disanalogies present here should also be given. These disanalogies are accounted for in terms of the role played by the reflective virtues in the acquisition of religious knowledge.⁴⁶

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In effect, what we have done here is to show how knowledge in general can be adequately understood in terms of a virtue-theoretic account that employs both faculty and reflective virtues, and then further show that such an account can accommodate the nature of religious belief, especially as regards the respects in which it differs from perceptual belief. Moreover, since we are retaining the key externalist thought that knowledge need not be dependent upon the agent being able to adduce sufficient non-question-begging evidence, we are no longer troubled by an evidentialism-based skeptical argument concerning religious belief. It is still true that the legitimacy of an agent's religious belief is not solely dependent upon that agent being able to adduce evidence appropriate and proportionate to the belief in question. All that is different about this account, as opposed to Plantinga's "properly basic" account, is that if an agent's religious belief is to enjoy a warrant, then that agent must exhibit the relevant reflective virtues as well, and this will typically involve the ability to adduce some appropriate degree of evidence. Far

⁴⁶Indeed, it may be that we need to incorporate not only reflective virtues into this account but moral ones as well, in that religious knowledge is the sort of knowledge that might directly implicate certain virtuous moral traits. For more on this point, see Zagzebski.

from being a *skeptical* hurdle for religious belief to clear, however, this condition can actually serve to distinguish responsible religious belief from the undisciplined religious belief of Locke's "enthusiast." Provided that this reflective condition is met, then (ultimately) whether or not an agent's belief is actually warranted will depend upon whether the appropriate "external" facts obtain, just as in the perceptual case.

Note also that this suggestion is entirely in the spirit of the foundherentist proposal made by DeRose since a natural way of modeling the different types of knowledge here, whether faculty-virtue-based, reflective-virtue-based, or a mixture of the two, is in terms of a foundherentist structure. What we have done is merely to add specific content to the basic foundherentist structure by offering a particular epistemological proposal that is structured along these lines that is both independently plausible and that can accommodate important features of religious experience and the belief to which it gives rise. Moreover, since the virtue-theoretic proposal offered here is merely an extension of the sort of earlier virtue-theoretic account offered by Plantinga, it ought to be in the spirit of the general reformed epistemological approach. Adapting our understanding of the parity argument thus gives rise to a reformed conception of reformed epistemology that is able to meet at least one of the key problems that the unreformed version faces.⁴⁷

⁴⁷An earlier (and very different) version of this paper was presented at "The Epistemology of Basic Belief" conference, Free University, Amsterdam, Holland, in June 2001. Thanks to the audience that day and, in particular, to Andrew McGonigal, Christian Miller, Alvin Plantinga, and to the chair, Hunter Davies. Thanks also to Michael Brady and Keith DeRose who read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper.