

## 1 Religious Epistemology

### 1.1 Religious Epistemology

If epistemology is roughly the study of knowledge, though more broadly understood also as the study of justification, warrant, and rationality, religious epistemology is the study of how these epistemic concepts relate to religious belief and practice. Broadly speaking, this Element is about religious epistemology. More specifically, though, in this Element I argue for a specific religious epistemology. Roughly, I argue for the plausibility of Plantingian religious epistemology. I take Plantingian religious epistemology to be made up of two specific tenets. The first tenet is proper functionalism. At the heart of proper functionalism is the thesis that a belief can be warranted if it is the product of properly functioning faculties. The second tenet is Reformed epistemology. Reformed epistemology is the thesis that religious belief can be justified or warranted apart from argument. There are some epistemological views that are compatible with the thesis of Reformed epistemology but are not within the family of proper functionalism. In fact, I take it that almost all mainstream epistemological theories are compatible with the thesis of Reformed epistemology<sup>1</sup>. I will mention such theories in this section. Before I do this, however, I will entertain one specific epistemological theory that is not compatible with either of Plantinga's tenets. This theory is best known as classical foundationalism. After giving arguments against this view, I will move on to discussing the epistemological theories that are compatible with the thesis of Reformed epistemology. This will set up Section 2. There I will argue specifically for the thesis of proper functionalism and discuss how Plantinga utilizes it to argue for the thesis of Reformed epistemology. This will give the reader reasons to prefer Plantinga's articulation of Reformed epistemology over the articulations previously mentioned. In Section 3, I will engage objections from cognitive science that attempt to show that religious knowledge is impossible, even from a proper functionalist perspective. Finally, I will then utilize the work that has been developed in this Element to develop an epistemic argument for God's existence. In doing this, I will attempt to bridge the gap between epistemology and natural theology.

### 1.2 Classical Foundationalism

When one asks a subject, S, why she believes that P, S will offer a reason, r1, which she thinks justifies her belief that P. Of course, one could continue to

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<sup>1</sup> I am not alone in thinking this. See also Andrew Moon, "Recent Work in Reformed Epistemology," *Philosophy Compass*, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12361>.

ask S why she believes  $r_1$ , and S might feel compelled to give another reason, say  $r_2$ . This questioning will need to either end with a final reason, assume a reason that was already given, or S could continue to give reasons *ad infinitum*. This trilemma is known as Agrippa's Trilemma (Wright, 2013, p. 1114).

In Western analytic epistemology, the mainstream response to Agrippa's Trilemma is to endorse the final reason option. This is the position of the foundationalists. Foundationalism is the view that our noetic structure can be systematically bifurcated into basic beliefs and based beliefs. Basic beliefs are a subject's foundational beliefs; they are the beliefs on which the rest of our beliefs are based. The idea is that properly basic beliefs are such that they are held rationally apart from argumentation.

But not all basic beliefs can be considered properly basic. Classical foundationalists argue that basic beliefs are the beliefs that are incorrigible.

DePoe succinctly describes what is meant by incorrigibility:

To say that a belief is incorrigible means that the subject stands in an uncorrectable position with respect to the truth of that belief. For instance, if someone is having an excruciating headache, nobody (not even a neuroscientist who has run a series of diagnostic tests on this person) is in a better epistemic position to correct this person and inform him that he is not experiencing a headache. Perhaps the simplest and most readily available form of incorrigible belief takes place when the subject is pointing to the qualities of his own experience in believing, "I am being appeared to *thusly*." Incorrigible beliefs are impervious to falsehood, which guarantees a connection to truth at the most basic level of belief in classical foundationalism (DePoe, forthcoming).

Classical foundationalists are epistemic internalists. Roughly, epistemic internalists endorse that there is a required access condition that a subject needs to meet in order for her belief to be considered justified. This is contrasted with epistemic externalist theories. Epistemic externalism is roughly just the denial of the internalist access thesis. Externalist theories endorse that there is something outside of a subject's access, such as a reliable cognitive faculty, that is responsible, at least in part, for the belief's justification.

It should now be very clear that this view is not compatible with the thesis of Reformed epistemology. Belief that God exists, for example, is simply not a good candidate for being considered an incorrigible belief. While people might have supreme confidence that God exists, few people, I think, would be willing to say that it's impossible to be wrong about God's existence. Rather, instead of appealing to the possibility that religious belief can be properly basic, classical foundationalists, who are also theists, advance technical arguments for God's

existence. So, it is not that knowledge of God is impossible, but rather, if humans are to possess knowledge that God exists, it will come from the success of arguments.

However, few people are classical foundationalists anymore. So, there might not be any good reason to accept the strenuous view that in order for S to know that God exists, S must have access to sufficiently good arguments that support God's existence. I now turn my attention to advancing four Plantingian responses to classical foundationalism.

### 1.3 Classical Foundationalism Rejected

First, Plantinga argues that classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent (Plantinga, 2000, p. 94). As we have seen above, the thesis of classical foundationalism is that, in order for a belief to be justified it must be incorrigible, or it must be properly based on another belief that is incorrigible. Plantinga argues that, if this is so, belief that classical foundationalism is true must itself either be incorrigible or be based on a belief that is incorrigible. However, the belief that classical foundationalism is true does not appear to be incorrigible or based on a belief that is incorrigible. Classical foundationalism then is self-defeating, as it fails to meet its own criteria.

It is worth noting that DePoe argues that classical foundationalism is not necessarily self-defeating. In "In Defense of Classical Foundationalism: A Critical Evaluation of Plantinga's Argument that Classical Foundationalism is Self-Refuting," DePoe argues that Plantinga has not shown that there are no good arguments that support the thesis of classical foundationalism; rather, he merely asserts it (DePoe, 2013, p. 249). DePoe thinks that Plantinga should articulate different arguments for classical foundationalism and judge each argument independently (DePoe, 2013, p. 250).

What would such an argument look like? Elsewhere, DePoe argues that we should endorse classical foundationalism, as classic foundationalism is the only theory that can capture a tight connection to truth (given that the foundation of our knowledge rests upon incorrigible beliefs), and make it such that internal rationality is a requirement for a subject's belief to be justified (DePoe, forthcoming). DePoe tries to prove this last point by way of Laurence Bonjour's Norman the Clairvoyant case. It goes as follows:

Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New

York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact, the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable (BonJour, 1985, p. 41).

Here, while Norman has a reliable faculty, Norman still seems irrational in holding to his belief. Reliability is not sufficient for justification. Rationality, at least according to BonJour, demands that Norman possess evidence for his belief. So, while DePoe seems sympathetic to externalist theories being able to account for a belief having the right connection to truth, DePoe does not think that externalist theories will fare well in accounting for a subject being internally rational.

There have been, however, various responses to BonJour's clairvoyant case. For example, Andrew Moon argues for an age of accountability principle, where any mature subject who utilizes an unknown faculty will need to have evidence of that faculty's reliability (Moon, 2018, p. 265). This is completely compatible with externalist theories. And given this is the case, I see no reason why the externalist could not employ this principle (or something like it) and be able to account for both the connection to truth and the internal rationality requirements that DePoe lays out. If that is the case, then we again have lost motivation for thinking that classical foundationalism is true. While we might not be able to say that it is self-defeating, it still seems right to say that minimally, it is not clear that there are good arguments for it. This suggests that classical foundationalism may still be vulnerable to self-defeat charges.

Second, Plantinga argues that, given classical foundationalism, most of our beliefs would not be justified. He points out that there are certain central beliefs that we all appear to hold, and yet there are no good arguments for them. Plantinga has in mind such beliefs as belief in other minds, belief in the uniformity of nature, and belief that the past was not created five minutes ago with the appearance of age. Since he holds it to be obvious that the beliefs in question are justified, he takes this to show that classical foundationalism must be false.

It is worth noting that attempts have been made to show that there are good arguments for the aforementioned beliefs (McGrew and McGrew, 2006), but such arguments have yet to convince most epistemologists. This, of course, does not show that the proposed arguments are bad; however, I think it is evidence that there is still a lot of work ahead for the classical foundationalist in addressing Plantinga's concerns.

Third, we should reject classical foundationalism because humans do not actually possess incorrigible beliefs. A belief being incorrigible is often glossed in truth-maker terminology. For example, it can be said that S cannot be wrong about her belief that P, given that she sees the relationship between the truth-maker

and the truth-bearer. But we could be wrong about “seeing” the truth. What makes one think that they see the relationship between the truth-maker and truth-bearer is an experience or a certain phenomenology. This experience leads us to think that P is such that it could not be false. This experience, however, can be misleading. Plantinga makes this point when he states, “Before Russell showed him the error of his ways, Frege believed that for every property there is the set of just those things that display the property; and he believed that *a priori*. But he didn’t see that it is true; it isn’t true” (Plantinga, 1993, p. 106).

Finally, I’m not at all convinced that the requirements endorsed by classical foundationalists are actually necessary for a subject’s belief to be justified. I have an intuition that justification, or even stronger epistemic states, such as warrant (to be defined at the end of the section), can be obtained without incorrigibility or sufficiently good arguments. However, in order to really make this case, I need to defend my preferred epistemology. Before I do this, I will first go through other contemporary epistemological theories that deviate significantly from classical foundationalism. First, I will engage two internalist epistemic theories,<sup>2</sup> and then I will engage two externalist epistemic theories. I will make clear that the following theories are compatible with the second tenet in Plantinga’s religious epistemology, namely the tenet of Reformed epistemology. This will set up the next section, where I will argue for the tenet of proper functionalism.

#### 1.4 Internalism: Phenomenal Conservatism

According to Martin Smith, phenomenal conservatism (PC) is a prominent view in epistemology that says “if it seems to one that P is true then, in the absence of defeaters, one has justification for believing that P is true.” At the heart of this theory are seemings. Seemings are supposed to be a particular type of mental state that bears propositional content and a distinct sort of phenomenology (Smith, 2014, p. 141). Upon having a certain seeming(s), one is justified in making a natural doxastic response to affirm a belief related to that seeming.

If this is the case, then it is easy to imagine a scenario where it seems to S that God exists, and, in the absence of defeaters, S would be justified in believing that God exists. Logan Gage and Blake McAllister put this well:

There are numerous people to whom it seems God exists when they are out in nature, when they pray, in their moments of joy and sorrow. Indeed, it is not uncommon for believers to undergo periods of time in which God’s existence

<sup>2</sup> Epistemic disjunctivism is a hybrid theory of sorts. I categorize it below as an internalist theory given that it endorses an access condition. See Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemological Disjunctivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2–3.

appears woven into the very fabric of existence – they see his fingerprints everywhere. In these moments, God’s existence can seem nearly as apparent as the existence of other human beings. The very idea of a world without God feels absurd. In accordance with PC, these theistic seemings provide non-inferential justification for believing that God exists. Defeaters (discussed more in the next section) can arise which remove this justification. But until they do, such believers appear well within their epistemic rights to believe that God exists, even if they are mistaken. (Gage and McAllister, forthcoming)

Gage and McAllister however, are inclined to think that when believers encounter sophisticated objections, they will need to deal with such objections by employing other types of evidence (Gage and McAllister, forthcoming). In this sense, the phenomenal conservative would be endorsing the thesis of Reformed epistemology, but also maintaining that arguments have an important role in the believer’s doxastic process. Specifically, arguments are needed to continue to rationally affirm her religious convictions in light of attempted defeaters.

One concern that the phenomenal conservative often hears is that while a subject’s seeming could show why she is within her right (i.e., justified) to believe the proposition in question, seemings are not tied to truth, and thus PC does not help us understand what is needed for a subject to possess knowledge. This is something that a phenomenal conservative will usually acknowledge (including Gage and McAllister). Something more is needed.

### 1.5 Epistemic Disjunctivism

Unlike PC, which is a theory of justification, epistemic disjunctivism (ED) is proposed as a paradigm epistemic theory of perceptual knowledge. That is to say, ED is proposed as an ideal case of perceptual knowledge; it is not an account of necessary and sufficient conditions. Roughly, the thesis of ED is that a perceptual belief constitutes knowledge if Subject S has reflective access to the property that confers justification, and the reason she has for believing that P, also entails that P is true (cf. Pritchard, 2012, p. 13).

Take the case of a subject believing that there is a tree in front of her as an example. S has paradigmatic knowledge that P if she has access to what rationally supports her belief, and what rationally supports her belief is factive. In this case, S’s reason is a seeming that there is a tree in front of her. Since she has reflective access to this seeming and because, in this case, the seeming entails that there is a tree in front of her, S has paradigmatic knowledge. Kegan Shaw has recently proposed that we call seemings that entail the truth of S’s

belief *pneumings* (Shaw, 2016, p. 265). With that in mind, it is not hard to see how this can apply to religious belief.

God becomes present in the room with subject S. As a result, due to possessing a pneuming that God is present in the room, S believes that God is present in the room. S in this case would have paradigmatic knowledge. She has reflective access to this pneuming, and the pneuming entails the truth about God existing in the room.

There are questions, of course, about epistemic peer disagreement. How does S know that what she has access to is a pneuming and not a mere seeming? What should S do if S\* believes -P and she also claims to have access to a pneuming? There are standard responses to these questions that the advocate of ED can utilize (Kelly, 2005). However, I'm not sure if her epistemological theory, in itself, can provide resources to handle these questions. As the reader will see in Sections 2 and 3, I think the theory that this Element will defend has better resources to address the questions of social epistemology. Moreover, and more importantly, this theory does not tell us what the jointly necessary and sufficient conditions are for justification or warrant. We need to look elsewhere for these. I now turn to engaging externalist theories of justification.

### 1.6 Reliabilism and Virtue Reliabilism

Probably the most well-known externalist account is reliabilism. For the purposes of this section, I will call the reliabilism that I have in mind *general reliabilism*. This will help distinguish it from virtue reliabilism, which will be addressed shortly after.

General reliabilism can be glossed in at least two different ways. First, it can be glossed to emphasize a reliable process such that it states, "S is justified in believing that P, iff S has a reliable process which is responsible for S believing that P." Second, it could also be glossed in such a way as to emphasize the evidence that S has, such that S's belief P is reliable insofar as S's evidence reliably leads S to produce P. It seems relatively easy to see how these theories are compatible with Reformed epistemology. Without too much controversy, one could make the following formulation for the first type of reliabilism:

It is epistemically possible that S has a reliable faculty that produces in S the belief that God exists; and if such a faculty did produce the belief that God exists, S's belief that God exists would be justified.

With respect to the other type of general reliabilism, one could make the following formulation:

S possesses evidence that God exists, and, if the evidence is such that it reliably leads S to the truth that God exists, S's belief that God exists is justified.

In the first case, the faculty could naturally produce the belief that God exists in the same way that it would naturally produce the belief that the universe is uniform or that there are other minds around us. The faculty could also produce the belief that God exists by way of utilizing an argument that supports the belief. In the second case, S could utilize seemings or arguments for God's existence to reliably get her to the truth that God exists. It seems clear that with respect to reliabilism, religious beliefs could be non-inferentially justified.

However, with reliabilism there is a concern that is known as the generality problem. Roughly, for process reliabilism, the problem is how to demarcate the token process that leads to reliability between those other processes that S might also possess, which are either not as reliable or not reliable at all. If we cannot demarcate what is actually doing the justifying, we fail to have a substantive theory. Feldman makes this point clear:

For example, the process token leading to my current belief that it is sunny today is an instance of all the following types: the perceptual process, the visual process, processes that occur on Wednesday, processes that lead to true beliefs, etc. Note that these process types are not equally reliable. Obviously, then, one of these types must be the one whose reliability is relevant to the assessment of my belief. (Feldman, 1985, pp. 159–60)

There is another type of reliabilism that attempts to get around the generality problem. The relevant reliable processes are cognitive virtues. According to Sosa, "One has an intellectual virtue or faculty relative to an environment E if and only if one has an inner nature I in virtue of which one would mostly attain the truth and avoid error in a certain field of propositions F, when in certain conditions C" (Sosa, 1991, p. 284). The idea is that cognitive virtues include inductive, deductive, perceptual, and memory faculties.<sup>3</sup> Again, religious beliefs can easily be non-inferentially justified on this model.

It is epistemically possible that S has a cognitive virtue 'm' that produces in S the belief that God exists; and if this was the case, S's belief that God exists would be justified.

It seems like what was repeated for general reliabilism can also be said for virtue reliabilism. The fact of the matter is that on these externalist accounts,

<sup>3</sup> Jason Baehr, Virtue Epistemology, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [www.iep.utm.edu/virtueep/](http://www.iep.utm.edu/virtueep/).



religious belief can be justified, even apart from argument. There is another question, however, and that is a question about warrant. Take warrant to be the ingredient that separates mere true belief from knowledge. The idea is more closely related to S knowing that P, than S being within her epistemic right to believe that P. If epistemologists care about whether a subject can know that a proposition is true, she will need to give an account of warrant. But what is the correct view of warrant? Perhaps, one is inclined to think that justification equals warrant. On this view, the questions about justification and warrant are one in the same. However, if justification is roughly understood deontologically, I think something much stronger is needed for warrant. I do not take it, for example, that merely having a seeming or a cognitive virtue will be sufficient for warrant. I now turn to arguing for a proper functionalist theory of warrant.

## 2 The Plausibility of Proper Functionalism and Reformed Epistemology

### 2.1 Proper Functionalism

In order to demonstrate the plausibility of Plantinga's theory of warrant, I will first need to articulate it. After doing this, I will argue for each condition of his theory and explain why each condition is necessary for warrant. Having established as much, I will describe how beliefs, which historically have been targeted by skepticism, can be warranted once the proper function conditions are in place. This will help show the sufficient nature of Plantinga's theory and set up how Plantinga applies his theory to religious belief. Finally, after I articulate Plantinga's religious epistemology, I will briefly engage two objections to Plantinga's religious epistemology.

Plantinga's theory of warrant is as follows:

S's belief that P is warranted iff at the time S forms the belief that P,

- (1) S's cognitive faculties are functioning properly,
- (2) S's cognitive environment is sufficiently similar to the one for which S's cognitive faculties are designed,
- (3) The design plan that governs the production of beliefs is aimed at producing true belief, and
- (4) The design plan is a good one such that there is a high statistical (or objective) probability that a belief produced under these conditions will be true.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This is a paraphrase from Joseph Kim, *Reformed Epistemology and the Problem of Religious Diversity: Proper Function, Epistemic Disagreement, and Christian Exclusivism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 19. I chose Kim's layout of Plantinga's theory over Plantinga's own,

I will refer to (1) as the proper function condition, (2) as the epistemic environment condition, and (3) and (4) together as the truth-aimed condition. Presently, I will argue that condition (1) is a necessary condition for warrant. In order to argue for (1), I will first articulate Ernest Sosa's Swampman counterexample that is directed toward Plantinga's theory of warrant. I will then argue, contra Sosa, that the Swampman counterexample actually gives us good reason to affirm that proper function is a necessary condition for warrant. This is because without proper function, Swampman's beliefs should be seen as too lucky to constitute knowledge.

## 2.2 Sosa's Swampman and Swampman's Luck

Ernest Sosa develops his Swampman counterexample by first quoting Donald Davidson:

Suppose lightning strikes a dead tree in a swamp; I am standing nearby. My body is reduced to its elements, while entirely by coincidence (and out of different molecules) the tree is turned into my physical replica. My replica, The Swampman, moves exactly as I did; according to its nature it departs the swamp, encounters and seems to recognize my friends, and appears to return their greetings in English. It moves into my houses and seems to write articles on radical interpretation. No one can tell the difference. But there *is* a difference. (Sosa, 1996, pp. 258–259; cf. Davidson, 1987)

Swampman was not created by God, nor did he come about through the process of millions of years of natural selection. Therefore, Swampman lacks a design plan.<sup>5</sup> And yet, if Swampman is going around doing basic addition or teaching children basic history, Sosa's intuition is such that Swampman still possesses knowledge. If Swampman possesses knowledge without proper function, then we would have a genuine counterexample to proper functionalism. I now turn to two responses to this counterexample.

## 2.3 Cognitive Science Takes on Swampman

Following Kenneth Boyce and Alvin Plantinga's (Boyce and Plantinga, 2012) lead, I argue elsewhere (McNabb, 2015) that the Swampman scenario actually

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as Kim's layout is in schematic form. For the way Plantinga originally laid out his theory, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps one thinks that one can advocate for an Aristotelian/Thomistic conception of human nature and endorse that Swampman can come about from these random conditions with cognitive faculties that have design plans. This of course would avoid the problem for the proper functionalist altogether. It would not be such that Swampman is a counterexample to proper function at all. A person who advocates for this view should in fact endorse that in order for a subject to know that P, the subject's faculties need to achieve their ends. For evidence that Thomas Aquinas affirmed this view, see Eleanore Stump, "Aquinas on the Foundations of Knowledge," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy 21 Supplement Volume 17* (1991): 148–9.