Daniel Owings – Theology Workshop – October 7, 2014

In this paper, I will examine the A/C model of Alvin Plantinga, and his claim that the model opens the possibility that Christian belief could be knowledge, insofar as it is true belief that has warrant. I will argue that, given the fact of widespread religious pluralism and the A/C model’s reliance on the noetic effects of sin as an explanation for non-Christian beliefs, the model itself presents the believer with a warrant-defeater for the possibility of knowledge of God. While this defeater does not preclude the possibility that we can produce true beliefs about God within the confines outlined by the A/C model, these beliefs cannot constitute knowledge due to the presence of the warrant-defeater.

1. Account of the A/C model

In his *Warranted Christian Belief*[[1]](#footnote-1), Alvin Plantinga gives an account of how it is that Christian belief could be justified. Plantinga makes two principal claims. First, he argues that the Christian is well within her epistemic rights to hold Christian belief as true. He further argues that, if those beliefs are in fact true, then those beliefs would have warrant sufficient for knowledge. The definition of warrant which he proposes is as follows:

A belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive processes or faculties that are functioning properly, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for that exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief (*WCB*, xi).

All Plantinga means by this is that in order to say that I *know* something, I must hold a belief that is true; that belief must be produced by a properly functioning belief-producing apparatus (I’m not drunk, insane, or otherwise impaired when I form the belief); the circumstances in which I produce my belief must not be such that they would impede the production of true beliefs (no one has put up very convincing facades to trick me); and the design plan guiding those processes must be successfully aimed at truth (rather than, e.g., aimed at providing an evolutionarily advantageous psychological comfort).

Plantinga argues that, on this definition of warrant, belief in God could be not merely true but also warranted. He does so by way of two iterations of what he dubs the A/C (Aquinas/Calvin) model: *simpliciter* and extended. In the A/C model *simpliciter*, Plantinga deals only with the bare existence of God. He suggests that sensations, perceptions, or experiences cause us to have a feeling of God’s majesty and lead us to believe in a basic manner (that is, in a manner similar to our beliefs in sensory experience and memory) that God exists; following Calvin, he dubs the faculty that produces these beliefs the *sensus divinitatis*.Plantinga argues that, if the A/C model is true – meaning if God in fact does exist – then we would have good reason to suppose that the belief formed by the *sensus divinitatis* does conform to his definition of warranted belief, and would thus be knowledge. But to explain why not everyone’s *sensus divinitatis* creates warranted belief as to God’s existence (since clearly the model must account for the fact that some people do not believe God exists), Plantinga again follows Calvin in positing noetic effects of sin; these effects are present in all humans from birth as a result of original sin, and essentially cause our *sensus divinitatis* to malfuction, producing false beliefs about God (such as that God doesn’t exist). In the extended A/C model, Plantinga suggests that the warrant enjoyed by bare theistic belief in the A/C model *simpliciter* can be extended to specifically Christian belief in the following way. As a response to this cognitive malfunction, God sent the Holy Spirit to guide us into the truth. The Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit within our minds and hearts corrects the faulty beliefs of our broken *sensus divinitatis* by leading us to find God’s revealed word in Scripture to be singularly compelling in a basic way. Thus, he argues, not only theistic belief but full-blooded Christian belief also would, if true, satisfy the definition of warranted knowledge on the model.

In the extended A/C model, non-Christian beliefs about God would be produced by the still-malfunctioning *sensus divinitatis*, and would thus often miss the mark. This would explain the massive preponderance of religious beliefs in the world. The model does allow the possibility that non-Christians can form some knowledge about God; the *sensus divinitatis* is corrupt, but may sometimes form a fuzzy and indistinct belief about God that is true and was formed properly, similar to a near-sighted person without glasses seeing that someone is coming, but believing it is Peter when it’s actually Paul. Nevertheless, the model claims, there is a strong epistemic difference between the Christian’s beliefs about God and the non-Christian’s; the former are generated by a restored *sensus divinitatis* and are therefore warranted in a way that the latter are not. In sum, Plantinga argues that if Christian belief is true, then it would also enjoy warrant because God’s grace has restored our faculty for perceiving truths about God.

1. Potential problem with the model

Gary Gutting and John Hick, among others, charge Plantinga with a moral arbitrariness in holding Christian belief to be true. Plantinga repsonds that there cannot be any moral indiscretion in simply holding Christian belief to be true, in spite of the existence of other beliefs. Plantinga’s objection (*WCB* 442ff) is quite well stated: if simply holding an opinion about a disputed matter is arrogant because it presumes a privileged access to the truth, then a pluralist will come under the fire of this charge at least as much as the Christian, insofar as the two disagree. It doesn’t make sense to accuse the Christian of arrogance simply for the fact that she holds her religious beliefs to be right and those of others to be wrong; no doubt, her beliefs would not be her beliefs unless she bore them in precisely this way, and if this of itself were arrogant, then any act of holding a belief to be true would be arrogant.

But I don’t think this explanation matches the worry that Hick and Gutting point to. The arrogance to which the A/C model is liable is not simply holding a belief to be true where disagreement pertains. Let us see whether we can give the charge of arrogance a stronger showing than Plantinga allows. First, we can imagine what would certainly constitute objectionable arrogance. I think Plantinga could be reasonably accused of arrogance if his A/C model was shown to somehow require the following reasoning:

My beliefs are correct because they are Christian, and *I know this because* the Christian beliefs are the ones I hold.

Note the salient difference from the presentation Plantinga gives of Gutting’s critique. Here the problem is not that I “prefer my intuition simply because it is mine” (*WCB* 449); that is, not that I believe my beliefs are true simply because I believe them. As Plantinga shows, such a critique would generalize to any belief held by anybody. Rather, the problem would be that I hold myself as a standard by which to judge truth and from which to claim knowledge. In the former, unproblematic case, I consider the matter carefully, determining which of the available options have greatest epistemic weight for me; after such due consideration, and knowing full well that others disagree with me, I nevertheless cannot help but hold my own belief true based on everything I know and see. In the second, more problematic case, I do not bother to examine the alternative possibilities, but discard them as invalid or unimportant *on the basis that* they differ from beliefs I already hold. The problem would be deepened if I also assumed that anyone who held an idea different from my own on a given topic was somehow epistemically flawed *in virtue of that fact alone*; that is to say, it would be very arrogant indeed to encounter another person that did not agree with me, and to come to believe on the basis of that disagreement alone that that person’s cognitive processes were malfunctioning, such that she could not so much as form a properly warranted belief about the subject in question. Again, this is not the same as simply disagreeing; I can hold that someone’s belief is unwarranted in all humility if I think I have a better warrant, so long as I am comparing the two warrants to a common standard, and find that one warrant just doesn’t stand up to the other. But I would be arrogant if I preferred my warrant *solely* on the basis of the fact that it is my warrant, without so much as considering my disputant’s potential warrant and its ability to undermine my own putative warrant.

This kind of reasoning would constitute arrogance, and I think Gutting and Hick mean to accuse Plantinga of doing something like this. Now, it is *obvious* that Plantinga does *not* envision the A/C model as requiring the believer to reason this way. His description of the believer’s relation to Christian belief indicates that the Christian can reasonably be expected to consider these weighty problems and their implications; after careful reflection, however, Plantinga’s model gives the Christian the ability and the right to state that she is simply not convinced by the competing arguments, and that, while the Muslim’s beliefs about God may *feel* right to the Muslim, they do not *feel* right to her; if this is not valid, then no disagreement is valid. So we cannot accuse Plantinga of asking believers to ignore arguments or evidence that would seem to push against their religious beliefs.

However, I would suggest that Plantinga unintentionally does require arrogance in claiming that the beliefs formed by the restored *sensus divinitatis* constitute knowledge. The problem with Hick and Gutting’s arguments, at least as presented by Plantinga, is that they overstate their case; they seem to argue that *so much as holding true* a belief about God is somehow arrogant. Plantinga unquestionably demonstrates that this is not a cogent claim. However, what about Plantinga’s claim that these beliefs might constitute knowledge? This is a much stronger claim than simply that Christians are within their epistemic rights to hold such beliefs as true. Would a claim to knowledge about God, in the form provided by the A/C model, require the knower to commit herself the kind of arrogance outlined above? I think it does.

The reason is as follows. The A/C model contains a defeater for non-Christian beliefs’ claim to warrant, viz., the noetic effects of sin. This defeater explains to the Christian why non-Christians hold non-Christian beliefs. The model suggests that the Christian is relieved of this defeater (at least regarding Christian doctrine) and so she need not worry that the Christian beliefs produced by her restored *sensus divinitatis* are false; that is, she can be confident that these beliefs are produced by a properly functioning cognitive mechanism, that they therefore have warrant sufficient for knowledge, and that she therefore knows them. The problem here is that, on the model, the only way she can form the belief that her *sensus divinitatis* has been restored beyond a reasonable doubt is by the deliverance of the *sensus divinitatis*. Why? The only path by which the *sensus divinitatis* might be restored is the gracious intervention of God (*WCB* 249). But the *sensus divnitatis* is the only faculty by which we can perceive God’s grace. Thus, if the *sensus divinitatis* has not been restored, then its deliverances regarding the God’s activity would not be reliable; I might *think* I’ve been restored, but in fact still be producing false beliefs. That is to say, in order to consider Christian belief to be knowledge on the A/C model, we must trust our corrupt *sensus divinitatis* to reliably tell us that our *sensus divinitatis* has been restored.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is a problem because the model *assumes* that the *sensus divinitatis* is by default unreliable, and uses that assumption to explain the presence of non-Christian beliefs.

Perhaps the Christian could argue that I am misusing the controversial “KK principle,” which states that knowing p entails knowing that one knows p. Why, she could ask, should uncertainty about the processes giving rise to a Christian’s knowledge undermine the fact that it is knowledge? After all, we know all sorts of things without so much as having an opinion about how we came to know them. I think I know that it’s Tuesday; do I need to worry that my belief-forming mechanisms could well be malfunctioning? I suppose it’s possible that, when I went to bed on Monday, I slept for 32 hours rather than 8, and so what I believe I know about yesterday is in fact true of two days ago. But if we logically require worries of that sort, we’re back to Descartes’s demon and will have to start looking for foundations for every belief, and we all know how that story ends.[[3]](#footnote-3) Better, she would say, to assume that the “KK principle” is not valid, than to impose such strenuous requirements on knowledge.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This is true, and duly noted. The problem is that knowledge surely must entail a lack of defeaters for the claim that my belief-producing mechanisms are functioning properly. Even if I can’t derive the fact that I know I know *p* from the fact that I know *p*, that’s different from having a very good reason to suspect I *don’t* in fact know *p.* For example, if I believe my friend is at home today because he told me he would be, but I also know he’s quite spontaneous and prone to changing plans on a whim, then I don’t know he’s at home even if he does happen to be home; this is because I have good reason to suspect my belief may not have been properly formed. In the same way, if my *sensus divinitatis* tells me that God has graciously restored my cognitive faculties, but I also know that my *sensus divinitatis* is corrupt by the noetic effects of sin and prone to lead me to believe magnificent lies about the deity, then I should not call this belief knowledge.

Thus, to be clear, my suggestion that the noetic effects of sin undermine any warrant Christian belief might have is not comparable to the suggestion that I can’t *anything* because I can’t prove I’m not a brain in a jar on Mars. In that scenario, I have come up with a potential defeater for the warrant of my sense experience and basic beliefs, but I have no immediate reason to accept that defeater. I may have no way of proving that it is not true, but nothing in my noetic structure suggests that it might pertain, so I needn’t worry myself. But the Christian believer, on the A/C model, should have very good reason to worry about the noetic effects of sin because – by the model’s own stipulation[[5]](#footnote-5) – these noetic effects can and do happen to everybody by default. The only safeguard keeping me from falling into blindness so thorough that I cannot even recognize my own blindnessis God’s grace. And the only mechanism I have for forming beliefs about God’s grace is the *sensus divinitatis*, whose deliverances I have every reason to doubt. Furthermore, on the model, the Christian – whom Plantinga assumes to have done her homework and made herself aware of the presence and claims of conflicting religious traditions – is expected to explain those traditions by referring to that same widespread cognitive malfunction. To state that that she *knows* her own cognitive functioning has been restored so she can hold basic Christian beliefs with warrant sufficient for knowledge would be highly problematic when the only source of the belief that she knows is the cognitive function in question,.

To recap: on the A/C model, I, a Christian, am able to claim that I have knowledge of the gospel truths. But in order to make that claim, I must have a defeater for the claim that my *sensus divinitatis* is malfunctioning. But in order to do that, I must rely on the deliverance of my *sensus divinitatis*. Supposing someone else who disagrees with me makes the same claims: that that her own *sensus divinitatis* has been restored, and mine is still malfunctioning. The only way I could state that a malfunctioning *sensus divinitatis* was a defeater for her belief, but not for my belief, would be to arbitrarily prefer the deliverances of my own *sensus divinitatis* over hers. But I showed above that this would be both arrogant and poor reasoning. Thus, even if it turns out that my beliefs were true and formed by a fully restored *sensus divinitatis*, and those of my interlocutor were not, I would be arrogant and reasoning poorly to claim that these beliefs were *knowledge*. (Obviously, the same holds true for my interlocutor.) The reason is that there is a huge defeater staring me in the face, and I have no good defeater to that defeater. I can hold the beliefs true in spite of the defeater I see; I can trust that God, in God’s infinite goodness, has lead me to intellectual ground which is sturdy enough to walk on, even if I will never know this in the same way that I know my home address; but I must recognize the defeater as such, and as soon as I have done that then the my belief cannot be knowledge – even if it is true and produced by a properly functioning cognitive mechanism. If this is the case, then Plantinga’s formulation “if true, then warranted and therefore knowledge” cannot stand.

An example might pose the problem a little more clearly. Let’s suppose (plausibly enough) that a Priest, a Rabbi, and a Reformed Minister walk into a bar – the Cove, over on 55th street, say – and order their drinks. As they begin imbibing, the bartender tells all of them “I have put a powerful hallucinogen in each of your drinks. This hallucinogen will cause you to produce beliefs that are not true but thatwill seem perfectly true. In fact, the hallucinations will be so strong as to seem to stand up to all evidence.” The bartender then gives each one of them a pill, and says, “One of you has received an antidote to the hallucinogen, and your belief-forming mechanisms will be spared from the drug’s effects. The other two have received duds, which will do nothing to abate the hallucinations. I’m not going to tell you who got the antidote.” All three shrug, take the pill, finish their drinks, and walk outside. Suddenly, the Rabbi screams: “All the buildings around us are on fire! We have to run and jump into Lake Michigan, it’s the only place we’ll be safe!” The priest says: “Are you kidding? There’s no fire, but there is a giant tidal wave rising up in Lake Michigan, and it’s headed toward us now – we have to run away from the lake as quickly as possible!” And the minister says: “You’re both wrong! There’s no fire, and there’s no tidal wave. But there are armed militants approaching from all directions, and they’re threatening to shoot us if we move. We shouldn’t go anywhere, we should stay put.” Now, assuming the bartender wasn’t lying and really gave one of them the antidote, one of these three is not hallucinating and the other two are. Certainly, insofar as they are contradicting each other, they can’t all be right. There is no one around who was not affected by the hallucinogen (the bartender has mysteriously disappeared, and it’s late at night so there are no pedestrians), so they can’t find a clearly reliable witness. How will they decide what to do?

Let’s suppose the Rabbi were to say, “Obviously you guys are hallucinating and I got the antidote, because I can see the fire and smell the smoke, clear as anything.” When the other two pressed him as to how he could claim this, let’s suppose he replied, “You scurrilous foundationalists! I don’t need an argument to say that I know that everything is burning, because my belief to that effect is warrant-basic.” We could plausibly accuse him of arrogance, and we certainly would say he wasn’t reasoning clearly (though we could hardly fault him for that, given the situation). That’s because the Rabbi isn’t considering the implications of having received a hallucinogen.

Now let’s suppose that morning comes, the effects of the drug wear off, and all three reconvene at the smoking pile of rubble that was the Cove. It has now become clear that the Rabbi was in fact correct, and that somehow the three of them by the grace of God have managed to survive the second Great Chicago Fire. Can we now say that the Rabbi *knew* there was a fire? Certainly he believed it very strongly, the belief turned out to be true, and, as it happens, the belief was also formed by properly functioning cognitive mechanisms in a suitable environment. But he also had a plausible defeater for the assumption that his cognitive mechanisms were functioning properly. The fact that his belief did turn out to be true was, in a sense, just lucky. Had he not been given a hallucinogen, or had he been given something he could reliably identify as an antidote, then we could safely say the belief in question was knowledge; but in the circumstances, all he had was a prayer and a lucky guess that it was he, and not the priest or the minister, who had gotten the antidote. Or, perhaps instead of “lucky guess,” we could say that he was lead by the gracious hand of God to bet on his sense of how things really were. While God’s grace moved in other ways to preserve the other two – sheltering them from falling rubble, say, as they wandered through the burning streets – God’s grace moved the Rabbi to believe, correctly as it happened, that he had received the antidote. Of course, the Rabbi was doing nothing morally wrong or presumptuous or even unreasonable in provisionally holding true that Chicago was on fire, and he did nothing wrong in acting as though that belief were true.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is only in crossing the boundary marker between belief and knowledge that we run up against the problem of the warrant-defeater and its implications.

There is one last way in which the Rabbi could have possessed knowledge, after a fashion. Perhaps the bartender, could have credited the Rabbi with knowledge, even though the Rabbi himself was not in a position to do so.[[7]](#footnote-7) If the bartender had watched from afar, knowing that the Rabbi had received the antitode (and seeing the flames and smoke), he could have recognized the Rabbi as having knowledge. Even though the Rabbi himself was in no position to recognize this, is that not simply to say that the Rabbi knew, but couldn’t know that he knew – such that we’re back at the KK problem? In the same way, couldn’t God credit the believer with knowledge, even if the believer herself were unable to do so? And if this is the case, can’t we salvage Plantinga’s idea that if Christian belief is true, then it is warranted? Granting this to be possible, we would at the very least have to admit that this ‘knowledge’ differs substantially from the knowledge we are accustomed to speaking of. In the literature on Reformed Epistemology, one gets the sense from some authors that, now that Plantinga has successfully shown “if true, then warranted,” all that remains to finish his work is to demonstrate that Christianity *is* in fact true, and therefore warranted.[[8]](#footnote-8) Such a project does not appreciate how high, how holy, and how terrifying an object it broaches, and how unworthy the human intellect is to attempt it; I doubt very much that John Calvin would trust any human heart to tread this path without falling into the deepest idolatry. I cannot argue that God will not credit the devout Christian with knowledge, but by the same token I cannot argue God will not do the same for the devout Muslim or Hindu. I only contend that *we* may never credit ourselves with knowledge of the Most High; any discussion of warranted Christian belief must constantly reiterate this warning, or we will quickly find ourselves worshipping a god of our own devising.

1. Plantinga, Alvin. *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000. Henceforth cited parenthetically as *WCB*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note the difference here between my critique and the one offered by Laurence Bonjour, (“Plantinga on Knowledge and Proper Function,” in Kvanvig, ed., *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga’s Theory of Knowledge*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996.) Bonjour posits a believer, Boris, who holds that the world is going to end next week; as it so happens, the belief is true and formed in accordance with the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. Laurence says that this couldn’t possibly be warranted belief. Colin Ruloff (“Some remarks on Bonjour on Warrant, Proper Function, and Defeasibility,” *Principia* 4:2 [2000]: 215-28) admirably argues the case that the assumption of a system of defeaters is “deeply embedded” in Plantinga’s account of warrant; such would prevent Boris’s belief from claiming warrant, thereby neutralizing the problem. But Ruloff’s response does nothing to prevent me from claiming the A/C model’s own defeaters undermines its claim to carry warrant. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If you don’t, you should read Plantinga’s devastating attack on Foundationalism in his “Reason and Belief in God,” in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Perhaps the strongest voice in supporting her would be Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002). Better yet, she could argue with Samir Okasha (“On a Flawed Argument against the KK principle.” *Analysis* 73:1 [Jan 2003]: 80-86) that I base my objection on an intensional fallacy: Okasha argues that Williamson’s externalist argument against the KK principle – that it would require us to know all our belief-forming mechanisms are working, which is impossible and therefore leads to a *reductio ad absurdum* – fails to appreciate the distinction having a properly formed belief that you know, and knowing that this belief was properly formed. Likewise, the Christian need not know her belief that she knows was properly formed in order for that belief to have, in fact, been properly formed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It should be noted that the model’s stipulation is not the *only* source of warrant we have this defeater; Plantinga notes that, if this were the case, then the model would still be reliable (*WCB* 282 ff.). But there are lots of reasons other than the noetic effects of sin to suppose that the vast majority of humans are not reliable true-belief-producers in matters religious. I merely intend here to point out the weight this defeater carries within the model itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. To prevent Slakter (2004) of accusing me of endorsing any kind of coercive evangelization by this statement, I suppose I should clarify that it would (at least arguably) be morally repugnant to for the Rabbi to have picked up the other two and dragged them by force into the lake; similarly, we can say that missionary efforts which effectively put a gun to the head of converts would be likewise repugnant. (However, it is not by any means clear that all missionary efforts necessarily put a gun to the head of converts.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I owe this objection to Prof. Kevin Hector. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See, e.g., Deane-Peter Baker, “Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology: What’s the Question?” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 57 (2005): 77-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)