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## Plantinga on Warrant

In Chapters 6 and 7 I argued that  $PT_{P1}'$  and hence  $PT_{P1}$  founder on the need for background beliefs in the generation and justification of theistic beliefs. The problem for Plantinga is generated by the kinds of examples he gives, examples in which the theistic believer and nonbeliever share the same experience but the former generates a belief about God whereas the latter does not. My discussion to this point has worked only with Plantinga's essays published before 1986. His research emphasis changes beginning with his essay "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," in which he for the first time considers at some length the notion of warrant or positive epistemic status as opposed to epistemic justification. Although in that essay he is still directly concerned about the evidentialist challenge and the proper basicity of theistic beliefs, later essays and two books deal less directly with those concerns but tackle the issue of positive epistemic status or warrant—that thing or quantity enough of which separates mere true belief from knowledge. What is his account of warrant, and can it help his case for epistemic parity between paradigm and theistic beliefs?

In this chapter I attempt to answer these questions. I first explain Plantinga's account of warrant and suggest a new parity thesis on

1. I use the terms "warrant" and "positive epistemic status" interchangeably.

the basis of his account. The new thesis is weighed and found wanting for reasons similar to those we have been considering all along.

### 1. Plantinga's Account of Warrant

Plantinga shifts to the language of warrant and positive epistemic status from the language of justification. He writes:

What is this quantity enough of which . . . epistemizes true belief? . . . Whatever exactly this further element or quantity may be, it is either epistemic justification or something intimately connected with it. So perhaps the natural procedure would be just to *baptize* this element, what ever it is, "epistemic justification." But this would be misleading. The term "justification" suggests duty, obligation, permission, and rights—the whole deontological stable. Furthermore, one of the main contending theories or pictures here . . . explicitly identifies the quantity in question with *aptness for epistemic duty fulfillment*; to use the term "justification," then, as a name for the quantity in question would be to give this theory a confusing and unwarranted (if merely verbal) initial edge over its rivals. I shall therefore borrow Chisholm's more neutral term "positive epistemic status" as my official name for the quantity in question.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere he uses the term "warrant" for this same item.<sup>3</sup>

What is positive epistemic status? Plantinga says, following Chisholm, that it is a term of epistemic appraisal. Furthermore, it comes in degrees. Finally, it is related to knowledge. Thus, "positive epistemic status . . . initially and to a first approximation, is a normative property that comes in degrees, enough of which is what epistemizes true belief."<sup>4</sup>

In various places Plantinga examines and finds wanting other accounts of warrant. He rejects Chisholmian internalism, non-Chis-

2. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," pp. 2–3.

3. See Plantinga, "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," p. 119, *Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warrant: The Current Debate*. These last two works give the fullest account of Plantinga's thinking on warrant. Unfortunately, at the time the present book went to press, Plantinga's books were not yet published. Unless otherwise noted, where I quote in this chapter from these works, the page numbers are those of Plantinga's final manuscripts.

4. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 3.

holmian internalism, coherentism, and reliabilism. I do not recount the details of his criticisms, but his basic point in many, if not all, cases is that the accounts "come to grief when we reflect on the variety of ways in which our noetic faculties can fail to function properly." In each case, the reason for the failure of the accounts "is *cognitive malfunction*, failure of the relevant cognitive faculties to function properly."<sup>5</sup> This observation results in a positive characterization of positive epistemic status. Following Plantinga's lead, let us consider this account one aspect at a time.

One necessary condition of positive epistemic status is that one's "cognitive equipment, one's belief forming and belief sustaining apparatus, be free of . . . cognitive malfunction. A belief has positive epistemic status for me only if my cognitive apparatus is functioning properly, working the way it ought to work in producing and sustaining it."<sup>6</sup> Plantinga notes that proper functioning is not to be identified with normal functioning. One's cognitive equipment might be functioning normally (in the statistical sense) when one forms the wishful belief that one is about to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Under such conditions, one's equipment is not functioning properly; it is not functioning the way it ought to, but it is functioning normally.

Furthermore, consider a case in which your cognitive equipment is functioning well in the environment for which it was meant but you are moved to an environment in which your equipment was not meant to function—Alpha Centauri, for example. Suppose there are subtle epistemic differences in the two worlds. Cats are invisible in Alpha Centauri, but whenever one is present to a human he or she forms the belief that a dog is barking. Suppose there is a cat present, and hence you hear a dog barking. Even if there is a dog barking (in a soundproof room) and thus one's belief that there is a dog barking is true, the belief has little by way of positive epistemic status. One's equipment may be functioning properly for its home environment, but it does not match the environment in

5. Quotation from Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 32. On these issues, see also Plantinga, "Chisholmian Internalism," in *Philosophical Analysis: A Defence by Example*, ed. David Austin (Boston: D. Reidel, 1987), "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," "Justification and Theism," *Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warrant: The Current Debate*.

6. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 32.

which it is operating. "So we must add another component to positive epistemic status; your faculties must be in good working order, and the environment must be appropriate for your particular repertoire of epistemic powers."<sup>7</sup>

The final aspect to warrant is the addition of a "firmness of belief" rider. Plantinga says that it is tempting simply to identify a belief's having positive epistemic status with its being produced by properly functioning equipment in the appropriate environment. This identification would be mistaken, however. Two beliefs could be thus formed and yet one have much more warrant than the other. Belief in the corresponding conditional of modus ponens has more warrant than a vague memory belief even though both are formed by properly functioning equipment in the correct environment. What is needed here is recognition that when one's epistemic equipment is working well one's beliefs are held with the appropriate level of firmness:

Obviously another element of positive epistemic status is the degree to which I do or am inclined to accept the belief in question; I can't be said to *know* *p*, for example, unless I believe it very firmly indeed. If my faculties are working properly, the more strongly I believe . . . *p* the more positive epistemic status *p* has for me. When our cognitive establishment is working properly, the strength of the impulse towards believing a given proposition . . . will be proportional to the degree it has of positive epistemic status—or if the relationship isn't one of straightforward proportionality, the appropriate functional relationship will hold between positive epistemic status and this impulse.<sup>8</sup>

So, at this stage Plantinga's account of warrant is this: "In the paradigm cases of warrant, belief *B* has warrant for *S* if and only if that belief is produced in *S* by his epistemic faculties working properly in an appropriate environment, and if both *B* and *B*\* have warrant for *S*, *B* has more warrant than *B*\* for *S* if *S* believes *B* more firmly than *B*\*."<sup>9</sup> This account, he says, needs further refinements, some of which he attempts. I do not, for the most part, consider these in detail, but only list several of his concerns. First,

7. Ibid., p. 33.

8. Ibid., p. 34.

9. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 8.

he notes that not all my cognitive faculties need to be working properly for a belief to have warrant for me. One's memory may play one tricks, but that is not a reason to reject introspective beliefs. Second, proper functioning also comes in degrees. A faculty does not have to be functioning perfectly in order to produce warranted beliefs. Third, that one's environment is misleading need not deprive one's belief of warrant. "What counts . . . are uncorrected and uncompensated malfunctionings."<sup>10</sup>

A more central issue is what Plantinga calls the "design plan." Comparing human beings by analogy to an automobile, he suggests that, just as there are specifications for an engine's operation, so there are specifications for the way a human being operates. He writes that there is

something like a set of specifications for a well-formed, properly functioning human being—an extraordinarily complicated and highly articulated set of specifications. . . . Suppose we call these specifications a "design plan," leaving open the question whether human beings and other creatures have in fact been designed. Then of course the design plan will include specifications for our cognitive faculties (as well as for the rest of our powers and faculties). They too can work well or badly; they can malfunction or function properly. They too work in a certain way when they are functioning properly—and work in a certain way to accomplish their purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Our design plan is such that our faculties are "highly responsive to circumstances." Intuition, sight, memory, and so forth do not all operate the same way. Experience—both sensuous experience and the sort of experience involved in feeling impelled or disposed to accept a given belief—is important in the responses of our epistemic faculties. And the design plan orders us such that the purpose of our epistemic faculties is the production of beliefs that are true rather than false. There may be aspects of the design plan that allow for other ends for faculties. It might be part of the design plan that a person with an illness that typically leads to death believes that she will be the exception to the statistics telling her that it is highly likely that she will die. This feature of the design plan

10. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 36.

11. Ibid., pp. 36–37.

may increase the chances of survival. Nevertheless, she is not warranted in such a belief. Or certain kinds of wishful thinking—that one's girlfriend still loves one, for example, when the evidence is against it—may reduce one's suffering and hence be a good thing—part of the design plan—and yet one is not thereby warranted in that belief. And so Plantinga wants to concentrate on that segment of the design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs.

He also argues that his picture of warrant can help us deal with Gettier problems:

We might generalize the idea of a design plan: there is a design plan not only for our cognitive faculties, but for the entire cognitive situation. Take the metaphor in this notion of design more seriously for the moment; then the designer of our cognitive powers will have designed those powers to produce mostly true beliefs in the sorts of situations their owners ordinarily encounter. The designer will be aiming at a kind of match between cognitive powers and cognitive environment; there will be, we might say, a sort of design plan not just for cognitive faculties but for cognitive-faculties-cum-cognitive-environment. In Gettier situations, however, there are relatively minor departures from the design plan for the cognitive situation in question; the cognitive environment [or the cognizer's equipment] then turns out to be misleading for someone with our cognitive powers. And the force of saying that in these cases the beliefs just happen to be true, are true *by accident* . . . [is that] the belief[s]'s being true [are] not a result of things working in accordance with the design plan.<sup>12</sup>

This account of warrant is, clearly enough, a kind of externalism. What are its relationships to internalism? Let me point out only a few highlights. In speaking of Alston's account of justification—an account that we have seen has both internalist and externalist components—Plantinga says that, once Alston (rightly) rejects the deontological notion of justification, he has to choose among many "epistemically valuable but non-deontological states of affairs" such as usually believing the truth, now believing the truth, having a belief formed by a reliable belief producing mechanism, and so forth. Plantinga suggests that Alston is guided in his choice by the received tradition in epistemology which "involves a marriage of the idea that deontological justification is central to

12. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

warrant . . . with the notion that . . . a fundamental intellectual duty is that of believing only on the basis of evidence." Hence we find Alston's emphasis on grounds and on the accessibility of those grounds. But Plantinga notes that the received tradition is incoherent: although it claims that deontological justification is sufficient for warrant, clearly it is not. One can have done all one's duties, be within one's epistemic rights, and so forth, and yet have little if any warrant for one's beliefs. Also, there is supposed to be a connection between evidence and warrant. But the deontologically justified belief need not rest on evidence. Plantinga's point is that, insofar as Alston's understanding of justification is constrained by the received tradition (even though Alston explicitly rejects a straightforwardly deontological account of justification), it founders on the fact that all we need for counterexamples to it are "cases where some phenomenon is in fact a reliable indicator of the truth of a proposition, but my believing the proposition in question on the basis of that phenomenon arises from cognitive malfunction." So even though Alston moves away from deontological notions of justification, he does not completely escape their influence, at least according to Plantinga.<sup>13</sup>

So, says Plantinga, epistemic duty fulfillment is not nearly sufficient for warrant. Since the internalist tradition is, by and large, deontologically understood, an internalist aspect to justification is not sufficient either. But is it necessary? In particular, is epistemic duty fulfillment necessary? Plantinga's answer is an initial no. But his answer here is not firm.<sup>14</sup> First he notes that one can conclude that *in general* the doing of one's intellectual duty is neither necessary nor sufficient for warrant. But then he goes on to wonder whether it sometimes is important. He specifically wonders how to state a question about this issue, for if duty fulfillment is not necessary, how can it be important, ever? He concludes by stating:

The deontological internalist ordinarily exaggerates our degree of control over our own beliefs; and she is certainly mistaken in thinking that epistemically dutiful behavior is sufficient for warrant. It

13. Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, pp. 246, 248, 252.

14. In, perhaps, more ways than one. What I say and quote in this paragraph is not derived from the version of the manuscript Plantinga sent to the publisher. The discussion does not, to my knowledge, appear in those final versions. I therefore do not wish to put too much weight on this point.

also seems that dutifulness isn't necessary for high degrees of warrant (although here there is more room for doubt). Still, there are indeed circumstances when a failure to be dutiful is all that stands between me and high warrant. And now the main point: when things are going properly, when I am behaving in accord with the design plan for human beings, I will not be violating my epistemic duty. Perhaps it is my duty not to take drugs that will prevent me from forming true beliefs or cause me to form wildly false ones; our design plan, you might say, *presupposes* that I won't do that; it makes no provision for my doing that, and if I do that my faculties will not produce the results they are supposed to. No doubt it is part of my epistemic duty not to try to alter my noetic inclinations and tendencies just for the fun of it, to try to become extremely skeptical, for example, so that I come to believe next to nothing—or, on the other hand, to become unduly gullible. . . . Our design plan includes our doing our epistemic duty, at least for the most part.<sup>15</sup>

So there is some kind of "epistemic duty fulfillment internalism" involved in warrant, but the relationship is not a clear one—except that this internalist aspect is neither necessary nor sufficient for warrant.

In another place Plantinga allows for an internalist aspect to warrant-conferring circumstances that is not obviously related to deontological considerations. Plantinga notes Alston's rejection of the demand that one must know or justifiably believe the epistemic principles on which one's beliefs rest. He grants that one may believe that  $2 + 1 = 3$  on the basis of its just seeming utterly obvious to one. Neither justification nor warrant requires that one have any views as to whether its seeming that way to one is a reliable indication of its actually being that way. But this is not true in all cases, says Plantinga. One may believe that a bear has passed by on the basis of the way the brush looks; and to have warrant for *this* belief, one must know or warrantably believe that the brush's having that particular crushed sort of look is indeed a reliable indicator that a bear has been by. In summary Plantinga writes:

So there isn't anything at all like a simple, single answer to the question whether warrant for grounded beliefs requires that the subject know that the ground is [a reliable] indicator of the belief; sometimes this is required and sometimes it is not. And the reason is not

15. Quoted from an early draft of Plantinga's work on warrant, the chapter on externalism, p. 22.

far to seek. In some cases it is perfectly in accord with proper cognitive function to believe A on the basis of B even if you have never had any views at all as to whether B is an indicator of A; in a wide variety of other cases a properly functioning human being will believe A on the basis of B only if she has first learned that B reliably indicates A; in certain cases where you are aware of partial malfunction, to have warrant you will have to believe of a ground that it is a reliable indicator, even though in the *absence* of such malfunction you would not have had to have any views at all on the subject. Of course there will be many other complications. And the point is that it is the complex, highly articulated nature of the human design plan that makes impossible simple generalizations of these sorts about rationality and warrant.<sup>16</sup>

One presumes that such an occasional requirement does not lead to an infinite regress of the type that motivates Alston to deny the requirement that one be justified in believing the justificatory principles that ground one's beliefs.

The central point in all this is just that the basic idea of Plantinga's account of warrant is externalist even though internalist features sometimes come into play. These cannot be specified ahead of time, for they are dependent on details of the epistemic situations. In sum, then, Plantinga says, there is a presupposition in thinking about warrant in the way he suggests. This presupposition is that

when our faculties function in accord with the design plan (in an appropriate environment) the beliefs they produce are for the most part true. . . . Further, we take it for granted that these faculties are *reliable*; they not only *do* produce true beliefs, but *would* produce true beliefs even if things were moderately different. . . . our presupposition is that in general (for a person S with properly functioning faculties in an appropriate environment, and given the above qualifications [not all of which have been discussed in this chapter]) the more firmly S believes p, the more likely it is that p is true.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Warrant, Knowledge, and the Parity Thesis

Recognizing that Plantinga's concerns just explained are not those of his earlier essays in which he directly argues for an epi-

16. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 56.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

stemic parity between paradigm and theistic beliefs, it is nevertheless worth while to ask how his account of warrant might apply to the issue of parity. Can it help  $PT_{PI}$ ? The first thing to note is the obvious role Plantinga's theism has played in the development of his account of warrant. This role is explicitly discussed in "Justification and Theism." To keep the point short, since Plantinga is a theist, it is natural for him to think of humans, made in the image of God, as cognitive creatures capable of knowing. Hence God is the designer, and the notion of a design plan is a natural outflowing of this view of the world. But Plantinga does not suggest that one has to be a theist in order to accept his account, or that his account obviously entails theism. It may, but he does not press the point.

Nevertheless, given that God is the maker of the design plan, and that he is loving, kind, and interested in us knowing him, it is natural to think that God would have included in the human design plan a way we could come to know God. Plantinga's occasional reference to Calvin's *sensus Divinitas* illustrates this. What is the relationship between these suggestions and the claim that beliefs about God can be properly basic? Plantinga himself asks this question and urges other theistic philosophers to consider it too.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, a belief's being properly basic is not the same thing as its being warranted; a belief's being properly basic is not sufficient for warrant. Since proper basicity, as I have been using the term, is a kind of justification, and warrant and justification are not the same thing, then warrant and proper basicity are not the same thing.<sup>19</sup>

But is a belief's being warranted (in a noninferential manner) sufficient for its being properly basic? This is not clearly the case; even though one is generally doing one's epistemic duty when one's epistemic equipment is functioning properly, Plantinga indicates that the connection is not a necessary one. So being properly basic, that is, being noninferentially normatively justified (being within one's rights in holding a belief without discursive evidence) is not straightforwardly analyzable in terms of proper function. Nevertheless, Plantinga's earlier work certainly relies on the supposition that there is one piece of our belief-forming equipment

18. Plantinga, "Justification and Theism," p. 425.

19. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga does make use of the notion of basicity in ways not necessarily connected to justification. See Chapters 3 and 5, for example.

that generates theistic beliefs. So perhaps to the extent that he would say that the generation of theistic beliefs is due to the proper functioning of our equipment it is fair to suggest that  $PT_{PI}$  receives some support from his latest analysis. Just as our equipment functions properly to generate and warrant paradigm beliefs, so it operates to generate and warrant theistic beliefs. To the extent that a belief's having warrant for us makes that belief justified for us, it is true to say that Plantinga's analysis of warrant supports  $PT_{PI}$ .

More direct yet is this suggestion. Although epistemic justification (and its internalism, deontologism, proper basicity, etc.) is an interesting and important notion, it does not provide us with an analysis of the feature that turns mere true belief into knowledge. Since we are interested in the strongest account of epistemic parity, what more could we ask than to say that propositions about physical objects, other minds, and the past, on the one hand, and God and his actions, on the other, can all be known? So, just as Mary can know that there is a tree in front of her, she can know that God exists, or perhaps that he wants her to concentrate on philosophical theology rather than the ontology of art. Such a parity thesis would certainly be interesting. And I believe Plantinga's work might allow him to make such a claim. But let us set knowledge aside for the moment and simply ask about a parity thesis making reference to warrant.

Plantinga might suggest that both paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs have warrant, but since there are levels of warrant, to make it a *parity* thesis he might propose the following:

Plantinga's Parity Thesis\* ( $PT_{PI}^*$ ): For person S, whose epistemic equipment is functioning properly in the appropriate environment, paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs have the same level of epistemic warrant.

A more narrowly construed parity thesis is

Plantinga's Parity Thesis\*' ( $PT_{PI}^{*'}$ ): For a person S, whose epistemic equipment is functioning properly in the appropriate environment, physical object beliefs and theistic beliefs have the same level of epistemic warrant.

If that level of warrant is strong enough for knowledge, and if one believes a true theistic proposition, then one can know the theistic

proposition, just as one can know the paradigm propositions, or, more particularly, physical object propositions.

Are  $PT_{pi}^*$  or  $PT_{pi}$  true? I suggest not, for something like the reasons we have considered all along. Let us suppose that, for the kinds of reasons discussed throughout this essay, even where one's equipment is functioning properly, the part that generates and warrants theistic belief must rely on background beliefs. Where it is justification, as opposed to warrant, that is at stake, the background beliefs themselves need justification. At least so I have argued. With warrant, however, this is not true. One's epistemic equipment may need background beliefs for the generation of certain kinds of beliefs, but warrant may derive simply from the proper function of the equipment in the appropriate environment (and so forth). The background beliefs appealed to may not themselves need to be warranted. Nevertheless, the reliance of our equipment on background beliefs worries us epistemically, even if no warrant is explicitly required for them. The basic reason for this is complexity. There is more room for slip-ups or mistakes. Epistemic practices involving background beliefs may function as well as those that do not, but the simple fact of their greater complexity warns us away from trusting them as much, even if they are functioning properly in their environment. Put another way, even if functioning properly, two practices may function differently and one may not function as well as the other. Memory, for example, may not be as reliable in producing true beliefs as perception. So, noninferential mediated practices may not be as reliable as conceptual-reading practices. This is true whether Plantinga understands the role of experience to be of the direct Alstonian type or the exaggerated Alstonian type considered in earlier chapters. In the case of  $PT_{pi}^*$ , physical object beliefs and theistic beliefs are always separate, epistemically, since the practice delivering one is a noninferential mediated practice and the practice delivering the other is a conceptual-reading practice. The appeal to background beliefs in identifying an experience as one of an epistemically unique individual simply puts epistemic practices that make such an appeal on a different epistemic level. This does not entail that one does not have warrant for theistic beliefs, or that one can not *know* them. It only says that there is some reason to think that the level of warrant is not the same. Furthermore, this does not mean that belief-

forming practices that are noninferential mediated practices are not practices capable of generating warranted beliefs. It may be part of the design plan that some practices are noninferential mediated practices, just as some practices, or at least some application of practices, need access to beliefs about the reliability of the practice, as Plantinga suggests.

What about memory beliefs and beliefs about other persons? The issue is less clear, at least to me, in the case of memory. It seems that memory is a conceptual-reading practice, or at least not a practice in which one uses background beliefs. Suppose one's memories are attended by the sensuous experience to which Plantinga refers in several places. Surely one simply forms the memory belief in the conceptual-reading manner noted above. At least it seems obvious that one generally does not bring in background beliefs. If, on the other hand, one's memories are not attended by the sensuous experience, as some apparently are not, then it seems quite clear that no background beliefs are needed for the formation of memory beliefs; they are simply present to one's consciousness. The practice or subpractice of generating beliefs about other persons needs further analysis, which I defer until the next chapter. Let me just say that, as with PP versus unique physical object practice, and religious practice versus CP, there seems to be a distinction between the practice of forming beliefs that categorize what is experienced into kinds of things (persons) and the practice of forming beliefs about epistemically unique persons. Insofar as Plantinga's concern is the former, then  $PT_{pi}^*$  (as well as  $PT_{pi}$ , for that matter) is not true with respect to other-mind paradigm beliefs.

Back to the main point. There is some reason to think  $PT_{pi}^*$  is not true, most obviously in the case of the parallel between the formation and warranting of theistic beliefs and physical object beliefs. But even though I suggest that there are different levels of warrant for theistic beliefs as opposed to physical object beliefs, this does not show that one could not know theistic propositions. There is, as Plantinga notes, a minimal level of warrant needed for knowledge. But nothing says that a proposition could not have more warrant for me than is needed for knowledge (and thus one could perhaps know one thing more strongly than another). So even though, as it seems to me,  $PT_{pi}^*$  is not true, a parity thesis



according to which one can know both paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs might be made out.

Plantinga's account of warrant does not help the parity thesis vis-à-vis justification. In the next chapter I consider a challenge to Plantinga's claim that belief in God can be properly basic. It is found unsuccessful, but the discussion leads to some further observations and the development of a new parity thesis that does not fall prey, I believe, to the background belief challenge.