

THEISTIC BELIEF AND POSITIVE EPISTEMIC STATUS: A COMPARISON OF ALVIN PLANTINGS AND WILLIAM JAMES

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Belief in God is often characterized as antiquated and thoroughly disreputable in the eyes of modern science and post-Enlightenment philosophy. Kai Nielsen considers rational efforts to disprove God's existence mere "mopping up operations in the wake of the philosophical and scientific developments since the Enlightenment."¹ Nielsen flatly states that

There is not the slightest reason to believe that the Christian is living according to "the reality principle" while the non-Christian, and the secularist in particular, is deluded about man's true estate. Christianity is myth-eaten. The very intelligibility of the key concepts of the religion is seriously in question; there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of God; and when we keep an anthropological perspective in mind, we will come to recognize that the revelation and authority of Christianity are but one revelation and one authority among thousands of conflicting revelations and authorities. Given this state of affairs, it is the epitome of self-delusion to believe that Jesus reveals what the true structure of reality is.²

In no uncertain terms Nielsen denies the facticity of religious truth claims, most fundamentally the existence of God. It is of course understandable why the atheologian has focused so much effort at attacking belief in God, for such belief is the "heart and soul of Christian belief as well of the other theistic religions. This is a sensible strategy: if...this belief is relevantly objectionable, he won't have to deal piecemeal with all those more specific beliefs."³ He can simply do away with them all in one fell swoop. Nielsen's argument that there is no evidence for God's existence, that religious pluralism poses an intractable difficulty for particular religious truth

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claims, and that theism is essentially incoherent and irremediably superstitious is obviously designed to show that ongoing belief in such a deity is exceedingly irrational.

The typical way for a theist to respond to such atheological accusations is to construct or at least rehearse arguments, both *a priori* and *a posteriori*, in favor of God's existence. Teleological, ontological, cosmological, and moral arguments, and more besides those, are trotted out and presented in the hopes of answering the skeptic, persuading the nearly convinced, or at least satisfying the believer.

That approach will not be taken here. For one, such a huge task would simply be too daunting. Each of those arguments for God's existence, not to mention those posed *against* God's existence, represents a book in itself. Such a venture would simply take us too far afield. How can a response be offered to Nielsen without the task becoming unwieldy? What sorts of considerations can be offered to show that religious belief is not irrational after all? The way it will be done here is by means of an extended comparison between two American philosophers, one born in 1842 and now gone, the other born in 1932 and still quite alive. One was a pragmatist and radical empiricist, the other a leading contemporary analytic philosopher and epistemologist. They both loved to climb mountains, attended Harvard, struggled with the problem of evil, and believed in God: William James and Alvin Plantinga.

A comparison of Plantinga and James is instructive on several counts. Overlaps between them, especially in the face of their differences of approach and conviction, can prove to be helpful starting points in an analysis of the epistemic merits of theism. Discussing these points of contact can also provide a general orientation to some of the prominent terms of the debate about God's existence. An examination of their views is especially effective in raising prior questions that often go unasked and unanswered, questions that really ought not to be neglected given their centrality to religious conviction. This examination will primarily be a comparison, rather than a contrast, though points of difference between their views clearly exist and will occasionally be mentioned in the context of the comparison, especially when doing so offers a point of illumination. What is remarkable is the number of poignant commonalities in their views, the convergence of so many of their conclusions, often based on quite different sorts of reasons (only occasionally inconsistent ones, though). What follows is a list of about a dozen or so of these similarities.

Both James and Plantinga were vitally concerned about the intellectual propriety and philosophical reasonableness of theistic conviction. James counted himself among the "crass" supernaturalists, and he took seriously the charge by such eminent agnostics of his day like Clifford and Huxley that theism and religious belief were irresponsible or even immoral, a flouting of our epistemic duties. Louis Menand writes, "It's not exactly emphasized any longer, but one of James's original purposes in promoting pragmatism was not to get rid of empirically unverifiable beliefs, but to make room, in a scientific world view, for faith and God.... This was explicitly the context for the 1898 lecture."⁴ The 1898 lecture to which Menand refers, of course, is "The Will to Believe," which has been described by Richard Taylor as perhaps the most widely read defense of the rationality of religious faith in the English language. In James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, his concern to uphold the importance of religious belief and practice is patently obvious even to the most casual reader.

Plantinga, similarly, has taken for one of his career goals the deployment of his work in

defense of theism. His work on modality in the *Nature of Necessity* culminated in his defense of a modal version of the ontological argument and a dismantling of the deductive version of the problem of evil; his *God and Other Minds* canvassed the traditional arguments for God's existence and ended with an analogical argument for theism; his *Does God Have a Nature?* discussed the connections between God and various necessary truths; and his trilogy on epistemology had for its goal all along *Warranted Christian Belief*, the final installment of the series and a brilliant defense of both theism generally and robust historical, orthodox Christianity particularly.

Both philosophers can thus be rightly characterized as concerned with religious epistemology, in two senses: epistemology as it is brought to bear on religious hypotheses both broad and narrow. Secondly, they are also concerned with epistemology as it is shaped by a perspective unwilling to stack the deck against theism from the outset, unwilling to presume the falsehood of theism.⁵ Plantinga and James were theists, and thus they stand among a crowd of prominent religious believers in the history of western philosophy, including Kant, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Descartes, Hobbes, Augustine, Aquinas, and Ockham, to whom the religious hypothesis has seemed to be true, and perhaps even, in Plantinga's words, "the maximally important truth."⁶

Concerned with the epistemic status of religious belief, both James and Plantinga examined the evidence for its truth and rationality; and when they did so they both concluded that the decision to accept or reject theism was not a question that could be definitively settled on evidential grounds. As a radical empiricist, James insisted on looking at the evidence available both for and against the religious hypothesis—and unlike Hume he didn't confine such experiential evidence to the bare deliverances of the physical senses. Neither theism nor atheism was presumed to have the upper hand. What James encountered from the perspective of the "purely logical perspective" was that there was not decisive evidence for theism. Evidence and arguments could be cited and adduced for theism, but so could evidence and arguments on the other side. A deductive version of the problem of evil, for instance, was mistakenly believed by James to pose intractable problems for an Anselmian conception of God. But his mistake is reflective of the fact that James refused to ignore the counterevidence for any proposition. When he considered the arguments both for and against theism, he concluded that this is not a question that can be definitively settled on evidential grounds. Important to note is that James was as skeptical of the arguments favoring atheism or agnosticism as he was skeptical of those favoring theism.

Plantinga, likewise, assessing the traditional theistic arguments early in his career, concluded that none of them is successful from a strict evidential perspective. Years later he wrote about his earlier work:

I employed a traditional...standard: I took it that these arguments are successful only if they start from propositions that compel assent from every honest and intelligent person and proceed majestically to their conclusion by way of forms of argument that can be rejected only on pain of insincerity or irrationality. Naturally enough, I joined the contemporary chorus in holding that none of the traditional arguments [for theism] was successful.⁷

Also paralleling James, Plantinga similarly found the arguments *against* theism equally

unimpressive. Plantinga's powerful refutation of the deductive version of the problem of evil has now pretty much shifted that entire discussion to probabilistic versions of the challenge. From the perspective of the early Plantinga's internalism and classical foundationalism and of what James called the purely logical intellect, evidentialism fails to provide a decisive case for either theism or its rejection. Both philosophers would thus agree that strict evidentialism is likely of only limited efficacy in resolving this issue.

The question of what to do in the face of indecisive evidence with respect to theism constitutes one of the great divides among philosophers. Plantinga and James represent one side of that divide. Confronted with Clifford's dictum that indecisive evidence for theism means one should suspend judgment and affirm agnosticism, and to do otherwise involves a violation of one's epistemic duties, James remained unconvinced. His famous "will to believe" doctrine was his elaborate way to argue to the contrary: that a religious believer is well within his rights to retain his convictions. In his lucid and tightly crafted book on James, Hunter Brown battles fideistic and subjectivist interpretations of James by cogently arguing that James's robust empiricism's careful attention to all features of experience imposed a number of constraints on belief formation, constraints metaphysical, noetic, evidential, factual, discursive, and theological. Brown persuasively argues that the issue that concerned James, particularly in his will to believe doctrine, is what would constitute intellectually responsible behavior towards certain existing beliefs, including religious ones that, while not entirely conclusive evidentially, are nonetheless generally congruent with those constraints. Although Brown notes that James never developed his views on classical foundationalism so technically as Plantinga, James's rejection of Clifford's dictum certainly moves in the direction of rejecting the classical picture so prominent after Descartes and Locke. Plantinga, even more so than James, insists that theistic believers can be deontologically justified in their convictions and thus flouting no epistemic duties in the exercise of their faith. In point of fact, Plantinga thinks that this question of justification is so easy to answer that the real essence of any theory of knowledge certainly must not rest content with an answer to it. Likewise with questions of internal and external rationality. This is of course part and parcel of his wholesale rejection of justification with its deontological connotations, and rationality too, as the basis of *warrant*, that quality or quantity enough of which, when conjoined with true belief, constitutes knowledge. Not only is such justification rejected as inadequate for warrant, Plantinga argues persuasively against the whole traditional package involving classical foundationalism, evidentialism, and internalism, opting instead for a conception of warrant involving proper function of our cognitive faculties operating in a congenial environment with its relevant parts aimed at truth. Clifford's dictum that "it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" is taken by Plantinga to be a stellar example of the classical package. Plantinga says, "Here we have the combination of deontologism and evidentialism. This passage doesn't display classical foundationalism as well (it doesn't say what the evidence must consist in), but no doubt Clifford was a classical foundationalist; at least he thought that belief in God requires evidence."⁸

Plantinga notes the way James's "The Will to Believe" is almost a companion piece to Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief," noting that a better title for James's piece would have been "The *Right* to Believe." In this suggestion Plantinga may well be correct, since the

right to believe (more specifically, the right to retain an already existing belief) seemed to be James's main concern. In a book review in 1875 of P.G. Tait's *The Unseen Universe*, James spoke of a "duty" to believe, holding that belief in a transcendent realm was something one may be duty-bound to hold if it would, for the believer, be a source of commendable action or peace of mind. It has been suggested that such duty terminology had its origins in James's contact with the work of Charles Renouvier, to whom James announced his indebtedness at the outset of *The Will to Believe*. The influence of friend and Cambridge philosopher Chauncey Wright seems to have changed James's mind about the propriety of duty terminology.⁹ After 1875, James no longer used such language: entitling the essay "The Will to Believe" and writing in 1904 to L.T. Hobhouse that his essay should instead have been called "The *Right* to Believe" (emphasis added).

The basic idea of the will to believe doctrine is that under certain conditions it is not contrary to duty to retain belief in a proposition that is not certain. The requisite conditions are the proposition's being forced, live, and momentous for the believer. Plantinga characterizes James as endorsing belief in a proposition for which one has *no* evidence for it, and suggests that in this way James tried to "make room for belief in God (even if not full Christian belief) by inserting it in the gaps of the evidence. The evidentialism and deontologism, again, are evident."¹⁰ Although James had made some movement away from the classical picture, he was still implicitly beholden to it, Plantinga notes. This seems right. I am less confident in Plantinga's claim, though, that James thought *no* evidence was required for the proposition in question. As will be made clearer, James—perhaps exactly because of vestiges of allegiance to the classical picture—insisted on continuing to speak in the evidentialist terms of his day and certainly believed that a proposition was not a living hypothesis unless it carried a great deal of evidential support.

Plantinga notes that earlier in his own career he was somehow both accepting and questioning what was then axiomatic: that belief in God, if it is to be rationally acceptable, must be such that there is good evidence for it. This evidence, he notes, would be propositional evidence: evidence from other propositions you believe, and it would have to come in the form of arguments. This claim was not itself argued for, he notes. It was just assumed as self-evident and utterly obvious. This view is what has come to be known as evidentialism (with respect to belief in God). Plantinga further notes that he failed to ask why justification is important. Further, why would rational justification require *evidence*? What is the connection between these? And if evidence is required, why would that evidence have to take the form of arguments? "I didn't raise these questions," he says. He continues:

It wasn't, however, because their answers were well known, so that further inquiry would be carrying coals to Newcastle. On the contrary: no one else asked or answered these questions either; instead, people turned directly to the arguments for and against theistic belief, taking it utterly for granted that this was the way to investigate its rational justification.

But then Plantinga points out the one exception, the one philosopher who refused the fashionable answer to the 'meta-question':

The exception was William James, whose 'The Will to Believe'...was widely anthol-

ogized and took the radical line (as it was then perceived) that if religious belief is a live option for you, and a forced option, then believing even without evidence is excusable."¹¹

Recall that James thought that evidential considerations for and against theism were not decisive from the perspective of the purely logical intellect. This is instructive, because it suggests that the perspective of the purely logical intellect is potentially truncated and incomplete, only a partial means of recognizing life's realities. If so, then James's admission that there is not decisive evidential support for theism from one angle may be consistent with his also thinking that there remain other kinds of evidence for theism that can distinctly tip the scales in its favor, even if not to the degree satisfactory to the classical foundationalist. That theism is not conclusively demonstrated to be the sober truth by the evidence does not, in other words, remotely suggest that James considered theism and its alternatives to be on an epistemic par. In fact, James did not think they were commensurate in evidential support in the least (nor does Plantinga), and this is part of the significance of what he was getting at in discussing the *liveness* of the theistic hypothesis.

Hunter Brown has done the philosophical community a service by highlighting some of the heretofore neglected aspects of Jamesean liveness, not the least of which is a strongly noetic element in the believer. A proposition, to be living, must possess for the believer a great deal of persuasive power and intellectual plausibility. Liveness involves a strong inclination to believe a proposition. That this inclination is threatened for lack of conclusive evidential support has usually been interpreted to mean that alternative beliefs make comparable claims on the subject. But for James, there is distinct imbalance between religious options and alternatives, and it is only rationality construed narrowly and evidential considerations construed strictly that make it appear otherwise. Unlike its alternative, live theism involves a tenacious passion need, engages one's sympathetic nature in ways not to be found in a purely abstract analysis of theism, and generates an invigorating disposition, intellectual openness, and what James calls the 'strenuous mood'.¹² Depending on the expansiveness of one's conception of *evidence*, such considerations by James may or may not be construed as evidentialist. If all evidence, for instance, needs to be propositional, then some of these Jamesean considerations would fall outside the purview of evidence. But if all evidence need *not* be propositional in nature, and can be essentially unanalyzable, something more immediately felt and intuitively grasped, then such Jamesean considerations can be incorporated into an evidentialist framework more expansive than Clifford's classical and strict evidentialism. Such expansive evidentialism seems to accord with Pascal's notion of the heart having reasons the mind knows not of, Emersonianism's inner light, and the biblical conception of faith as being the "substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen." Live belief, as Brown has demonstrated, arises from a complex interdependence of many influences, the neglect of which in the development of norms for responsible intellectual conduct risks creating only a facade of doxastic responsibility behind which subjectivity may continue to exercise a powerful and unregulated influence. Among what is constitutive of the delicate idiosyncrasy and labyrinthine character of the intellectual life include an incalculable number of intertwining historical, cultural, linguistic, temperamental, neurological, and volitional influ-

ences, rendering irredeemably simplistic those appeals to evidence *per se* or the deliverances of a dispassionately judicial intellect.

One of James's favored descriptions of moral knowledge was a kind of discernment or divining power, a bringing to bear of all the resources at our disposal to catch a vision of reality and truth. James's expansive evidentialism is undoubtedly pushing in the direction of nondiscursive, immediately experienced, intuitively grasped insight, which will no doubt remind readers of Plantinga's Reformed epistemology. According to Plantinga, the reason why theistic belief, to be rational, justified, and warranted, need not be evidentially supported by other propositions is because of the possibility that it is *basic*, and properly so. Basic beliefs, on a foundationalist picture, are those starting-point beliefs on the basis of which other propositions are derived and inferred deductively, inductively, or abductively. They are not believed on the evidential basis of other propositions; one simply sees that they are true and accepts them. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga demonstrates the way testimony, memory, induction, and a range of other parts of our cognitive systems function to provide us with basic beliefs. Plantinga's (and Wolterstorff's, etc.) huge contribution, of course, is the suggestion that theistic belief itself might be a properly basic belief. If so, then to be justified it need not be grounded in evidential considerations at all, at least classically construed. It can be justified, rational, and warranted if it is properly basic. Plantinga's story of how theism can be properly basic hearkens back to Aquinas and Calvin's notion that God has implanted within the human heart a capacity to know his reality. If this faculty—the *sensus divinitatus*—is functioning properly, in accord with Plantinga's theory of warrant and proper function, then someone can come to believe (and, if God really does exist, know) that God exists, and can do so nondiscursively, nonevidentially, and basically.

Plantinga's account of the basicity of religious belief is quite different from James's account of the intuitive, nondiscursive belief in God's existence. However, to grasp some of the similarities here, recall that James presupposed that to be a living proposition a belief has to be plausible and compelling for someone. There has to be a strong inclination to believe it, even after all the evidence both for and against it has been considered; a "pre-existing tendency to believe," as James put it. What he defended was the intellectual right of those *already with* such pre-existing tendencies to believe a proposition to retain such a belief, so long as there are no compelling arguments against it. Induction, the deliverances of memory, testimony, etc. are all such that none of them can be noncircularly established as reliable. Yet they are all also such that we possess a strong tendency to believe them. This would seem to make the deliverances of such cognitive faculties conform to Jamesean liveness in this regard. Those examples are strategically selected: Properly basic beliefs bear a striking resemblance to those propositions that conform to Jamesean liveness. If a foundationalist theory of knowledge like Plantinga's is found compelling that avoids the circularity involved in trying to evidentially support the deliverances of induction, testimony, etc. by emphasizing proper function, then just such a theory, when conjoined with the *sensus divinitatus*, can make belief in God stand among our properly basic beliefs. That is, an epistemic account has been provided and story told that could make belief in God rational, justified, and warranted.

James's conviction that theism bears the nondiscursive mark of rationality locates him

in the company of contemporary epistemologists such as Plantinga, Brown insists:

James bears a closer family resemblance to a number of contemporary non-fideistic philosophers of religion than to the prudential fideists with whom he is more often associated. There is a significant resemblance, for example, between James's position and the positions held by some contemporary philosophers regarding epistemically 'basic' beliefs. Discussion of what constitutes a properly basic belief is extensive. One common theme, however, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has put it, is that 'the proper way to arrive at...a criterion [of basicity] is, broadly speaking, inductive'. This way requires looking to certain existing beliefs in the process of producing a criterion of proper basicity, rather than beginning with the criteria of classical foundationalism, for example, which Plantinga, Sosa and others have shown to have serious shortcomings. Norms of basicity should be developed from 'below', as it were, avoiding what William Alston has deplored as the 'epistemic imperialism' involved in the indiscriminate application of certain abstract standards of basicity. Such standards, he and many others argue, prematurely exclude claims to the reasonableness of certain widely existing beliefs, including theism, and dismiss prematurely the possibility of the proper basicity of such beliefs.¹³

It might be suggested that theistic belief thus construed does not involve basicity at all, but just quick inferences based on the evidence. The suggestion goes like this: Rather than nondiscursively, knee-jerkedly coming to believe in God's existence when appeared to in certain ways, one is actually making an inference—an inference from, say, the profound sense of the deeply rooted moral nature of the universe to the conclusion of an omnibenevolent Creator as, say, the most plausible account of such moral phenomenology. However, both James and Plantinga wished to emphasize that the degree of assurance and conviction that this world is theistic far surpasses the level of belief characterizing the deliverances of natural theology. Bringing the notion of insight to the fore, James wrote about the distinctly noetic characteristics of religious experience in *Varieties*. Many putative religious experiences reported there are "as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experience can be," and such experiences are reported in terms not just of personal edification or subjective feelings but of "genuine perceptions of truth." A widespread claim among such reports is that the noetic element involved in such instances more closely resembles an increased breadth and depth of insight than forms of comprehension garnered through scientific inquiry, and that belief in the factuality of theism is related closely to these "states of religious insight into depth of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect." As an empiricist, James considered it his bounden duty not to neglect reports of such accounts in any thoroughly empirical study of the phenomenon of religious experience.

Plantinga, similarly, contrasts the confidence and sense of certitude characteristic of religious phenomenology with the tentative, probabilistic inferences of arguments for religious truth. Plantinga has dubbed the sense of congruity or certainty, of rightness and truth, that accompanies religious phenomenology (as well as other basic-belief providers like memory), 'doxastic evidence' or 'impulsional evidence', showing his openness to a more expansive evidentialism potentially in line with that of James's. Such *evidence* carries

with it an assurance of conviction that exceeds what propositional evidence can provide. Even supposing that a case can be made for, say, the historicity of Christ's resurrection that renders such a contingency more likely than not to have occurred (a case that I believe *can* be made), that is not necessarily enough to generate belief (even in one who finds the argument convincing!), and certainly not belief of sufficient strength to satisfy the requirements of knowledge. Suppose that from a tub of 1,000 balls, of which 499 are white and 501 are black, I reach in and randomly select a ball. It is more likely, of course, that I grabbed a black one, but that is hardly any basis for a *belief* to that effect of any significant strength. Or put it this way: If the Bayesians are right that degree of belief can be measured by a willingness to bet, it would not be very rational of me to wager very much on that ball being black. Though the proposition in question ("A black ball was selected") is more likely than not to be true, my conviction that it is true is nowhere near the conviction characteristic of religious phenomenology: a depth of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. Besides, it makes perfect sense that God, if he exists, would not structure our cognitive systems in such a way that only the most tutored evidentialists and skilled reasoners would believe in his existence on the basis of often complex philosophical argumentation. A sense of God's reality universally implanted within the human heart, making knowledge of God available to king and peasant, educated and uneducated alike, certainly resonates more deeply with the message of God's universal love as revealed in the Christian gospel. This account also, incidentally, makes considerable sense of the widespread belief in God's existence throughout the world and human history.¹⁴

A few additional points of similarity between James and Plantinga deserve emphasis. The epistemic theory being sketched here, with points of commonality between James and Plantinga, can be characterized as a version of naturalistic epistemology. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga talks about three senses of such epistemology, the most stringent of which involves Quine's "transmogrification of epistemology into descriptive psychology." Whenever epistemology accords great weight in determining normative constraints on intellectual behavior on the basis of widespread psychological phenomena, the reminder invariably manifests: "We're supposed to be doing epistemology, not psychology!" James was one of the first leading psychologists of course and the author of the magnum opus *Principles of Psychology*. He only naturally allowed his psychological interests, it can be argued, to dictate the form of his epistemological musings. The bulk of "The Will to Believe" can be thought of as an elaborate parenthetical exploration of the actual psychology of human opinion and an exploration of the relations among the many influences that really do produce our creeds. The picture that emerges is one of considerable complexity. But epistemology, *contra* Wittgenstein, is *not* the science of psychology. Fortunately, there are weaker versions of naturalistic epistemology that do not commit one to equating or reducing epistemology to descriptive psychology.

Both James and Plantinga expressed strong reservations about treating the religious hypothesis like a scientific postulate. In James this took the form of his denying that the function or purpose of religion is to solve our intellectual problems. James did not think the purpose of religion was to close questions, but to fire our imaginations and sustain philosophical questions. He was opposed to all forms of clean-shaven theories that treated questions as definitively closed. He did not consider scientific reasoning to be the most

pristine form of reasoning to which all other forms should aspire; to the contrary, he thought scientific reasoning was one kind among many others, and that the considerably more fundamental method of rationality than scientific reasoning was the creative imposition of form that was as much within the artist's purview than the scientist's. James was not a divine command theorist, for instance; most of James's moral concerns were bottom-up, less interested in moral metaphysics than moral epistemology. An ineliminable aspect of his moral epistemology, consistent with his radical empiricism, were the actual concrete historical processes by which we hopefully come ever closer to that maximally inclusive moral order in which James believed. He had little patience for any top-down, single-principled moral theory of any kind, theistic or otherwise, especially one that claimed to give the definitive explanation of something so rich as morality. He thought that the moral life necessarily requires not just theory but a dialectic between thought and history, the theoretical and concrete. In speaking of a transcendent moral order, and heaven as symbolic of our deepest moral ideals, he occasionally sounded a bit like a divine command theorist, but he was not. A large reason for this was his aversion to treating religion as a hypothetical postulate rather than a living experiential reality.

In Plantinga the analogous aversion takes the form of rejecting the practice of making theism's epistemic status dependent on how well it functions as the best explanation of various phenomena, that is, treating the religious hypothesis as a mere scientific-like postulate. He thinks that theism may well be a good or even the best explanation of various phenomena, morality included, but that even if it were explanatorily idle it would be no less warranted in the contingency that God exists. For again, religious belief for Plantinga is not warranted on the basis of abductive inferences.¹⁵ Such a foundation is neither necessary nor sufficient for the degree of belief religious knowledge requires. Robert Adams, too, in his latest book on theistic ethics, also echoes scepticism concerning science-inspired epistemologies as applied to either religion or ethics, epistemologies that outside the realm of an empirical analysis of the physical world have not yielded nearly so much fruit as science herself.¹⁶

In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga distinguishes the question of the truth of the theistic hypothesis from the rationality or epistemic status of theistic belief. He calls the former the *de facto* question, and the latter the *de jure* question. One of his recurring theses is that answering the *de jure* question in the negative is difficult to do without presupposing a negative answer to the *de facto* question. Without assuming the falsehood of theism one is hard-pressed to argue for the irrationality, unjustifiability, or unwarranted nature of religious belief. In contrast to his former classical foundationalist self, he has now rejected internalism, taking the salient lesson from Gettier problems to be the inadequacy of an internalist model of justification as constitutive of warrant (even with the benefit of various contenders for fourth conditions). His theory of knowledge is now distinctly externalist, recognizing the connections between ontological assumptions about the way the world is and what strikes one as rational. If God does not exist, Plantinga admits that warrant is probably not enjoyed by religious believers, as there would be no *sensus divinitatus* by which theistic conviction would enjoy the status of proper basicality, no functioning internal instigation of the Holy Spirit to seal knowledge of the distinctively Christian God on our hearts. Plantinga also admits, in consonance with his rejection of classical foundationalism, that a story like his about justified, rational, and warranted *de jure* belief in God's

existence will by no means prove universally compelling to all rational persons. There is thus no logical guarantee to which we can be privy given our epistemological limitations that there is the requisite commensurateness between our *de jure* and *de facto* beliefs, between persons and world. It is just such absence of a guarantee of commensurateness that impels a classical evidentialist like Clifford to insist that the possibility of being wrong — even in the face of the most personally compelling phenomenological features of religious conviction — makes agnosticism the proper course. Better lose truth than risk error. Of course James wished to ask why this Cliffordian passional decision under the guise of a purely judicial intellect is any less a risk of error. In fact, James insisted that, if it should turn out to be the case that it is only by an experience of the world that accords epistemological significance to distinctive experiential states that a particular commensurateness between persons and world can be discovered, then the *a priori* discounting of those states would permanently preclude its discovery. As Brown makes clear, James found entirely dubious the propensity to beg such questions by automatically privileging conventional canons of evidentially responsible behavior without due regard for the challenge posed to those very canons by such a recalcitrant phenomenon as live theism. For James, whether religious phenomenology functions as evidence depends on whether there is this commensurateness between person and world. However, the potential evidence, *to be* evidence, does not require our knowing in advance that it is. To require that it did would be to say that knowledge requires knowledge that we have knowledge, and James explicitly rejected such a formula as reflective of the sort of rationalism and absolutism against which he valiantly labored. So for both Plantinga and James, if the world turns out to be a certain way, something like religious phenomenology can function evidentially for us, in a broad sense. This would raise the possibility that we can have a firm knowledge of aspects of divine reality without our knowing that we possess such knowledge.

Supposing that one is wrong about what he thinks to be divine reality, though, is it the case that there is nothing that could possibly undermine his conviction here and now? This question has been posed to both James and Plantinga in different ways. Cannot James's will to believe doctrine be used for all sorts of beliefs, without anything holding such liberal applications of his method in check? Similarly with Plantinga; does not his view entail that all sorts of eccentric views can be held to be properly basic? Are there no constraints in place to preclude such wishful thinking? Here James and Plantinga each has an effective answer, it seems to me, though their answers somewhat diverge, owing to differences in their conception of God and, to some degree, differences in what it is they are trying to defend. But each answer is worth mentioning. First, what was James's response to such accusations of his view lending itself to unchecked willful wishful thinking? In James's account subjective influences do not enjoy the degree of autonomy imputed to them by critics who saddle him with the charge of wishful thinking. James depicted subjective states as framed and limited in their influence by their interrelations within the unity of the many elements that together constitute immediate experience, and also by their interrelations with the many different kinds of consequences which flow from particular beliefs. Brown attacks the long-standing propensity among commentators to ignore this complex unity of immediate experience, and neglect therefore the degree to which, within such a position, subjective influences are integrally involved in an immediate, multi-

dimensional concrete relationship with the world which issues in results and consequences that cannot be responsibly ignored. The related prudential complaint that James gave primacy to personally desirable consequences in defending theistic belief fails to grapple with what consequences were in fact held by James to flow from live theism. The major consequence of theistic belief as James construed it is the strenuous mood, which suffuses the moral life with the note of infinitude and mystery. Living in the strenuous mood is to reject self-interest, identify with the disenfranchised, elevate the fervor with which the pursuit of moral discernment is undertaken, and heighten participation in the historical dialectic of theory and demand. The often trying, counter-cultural, and costly features of the strenuous mood bear little resemblance to easy conformism, personal advantage, or wishful thinking.

Plantinga in the past has had to contend with the "Great Pumpkin Objection": If belief in God can be properly basic, then so can any other belief, no matter how bizarre, including belief in the Great Pumpkin. To which Plantinga's answer is simply that just by recognizing that *some* kinds of beliefs are basic does not for a moment commit one to saying that all other kinds of belief are. Michael Martin recognizes that that objection is a non-starter, but still thinks that Plantinga's view is radically relativistic. Plantinga dubs Martin's criticism "Son of Great Pumpkin": Take any possible community and any beliefs accepted as basic in that community. The epistemologists of that community could legitimately claim that these beliefs are rationally accepted in the basic way, on Plantinga's view, according to Martin. But Plantinga replies by showing that the only respectable objection requires taking both "rationally" and "legitimately" as "warrantedly." Now, does it follow that for any proposition *p*, if there were a community who endorsed *p*, these people would be warranted in believing that *p* is properly basic with respect to warrant for those in that community? No, for suppose that Plantinga's model is true and the central claims of Christianity are true, there really is the *sensus divinitatus*, and the deliverance of such a process meets the conditions for warrant. It by no means follows that, say, the voodoo epistemologist is also warranted in claiming that voodoo belief is properly basic with respect to warrant. For such belief could be false or the product of all kinds of cognitive malfunction or could lack warrant for yet some other reason. Martin's argument fails.

Plantinga applies the notion of defeaters to warrant, though, in raising a way in which a properly basic belief can be called into question. Suppose the following scenario: I see a person from a distance at a party whom I think is Brian, but later discover from a totally reliable source that he was elsewhere at the time. The belief I had earlier that Brian was at the party was a basic one, based in immediate sense perception. I did not infer that Brian was there on the basis of having seen someone whom I thought was him. Seeing that person was just the occasion in which I automatically formed the properly basic belief that Brian was there. The additional information I discover later serves as a defeater for my warranted belief that Brian was at the party. A defeater makes it the case that the belief that until then may well be warranted can no longer be believed rationally. Plantinga admits that theistic belief in theory might confront such a defeater, just as James believed that the theistic hypothesis could in principle confront some intractable experiential or consequential difficulty. Plantinga examines four possibilities: projective theories of religion, contemporary biblical criticism, pluralism and postmodernism, and the facts of

evil. He concludes that none of these defeaters works and, as the contemporary epistemological scene stands, he agrees with Chesterton that "The philosophical case against theism is rather easily dealt with. There is no philosophical case against theism."¹⁷

Before applying this set of epistemic insights and perspectives to Nielsen's challenge to theistic belief, a brief summary is in order. Classical foundationalism, Cliffordian evidentialism, and the notion of deontological justification pose no difficulties for theistic faith: Classical foundationalism is self-referentially refuting; Cliffordian evidentialism is as motivated by its own passional subjective commitments that involve no less a risk of error as do Jamesian rights to believe; and countless religious believers, having weighed the evidence both for and against the religious hypothesis, have persisted in their intuitive sense that theism is the sober truth of the matter. As Plantinga has argued, they are thus subjectively justified, and if there is some objective duty that such believers are flouting, it remains unclear what it is. The question of rationality really comes down to the question of warrant, and something like Plantinga's account of warrant and proper function may well constitute at least the approximately right view of the matter. Such a theory of knowledge, on the assumption that God is real and has given us a faculty to recognize that, not only makes religious belief possible and permissible, but knowledge of God intended and normative. On such a picture, belief in God is properly basic, and this can be construed as consonant with evidentialism broadly construed, where religious phenomenology can be taken to be a kind of nonpropositional evidence. Such evidence is not assumed to be able to meet the standards imposed by classical foundationalism, however. But for those for whom the religious hypothesis seems to be true, even after all the evidence against it has been carefully weighed, such ongoing religious belief retains positive epistemic status. In fact, belief produced according to at least roughly to Plantinga's story would be considerably stronger than belief produced by the deliverances of the discursive intellect applied to natural theology. The broadly empirical theory of knowledge adhered to here can be described as markedly externalist, which has for one of its entailments that if God does not exist, the religious believer is radically wrong. But if God does exist, then the religious believers who allow such belief to shape their view of rationality and the nature of the world—including morality—are likely radically right. Theism is not, however, to be treated by believers as a tentative scientific hypothesis that commands only as much conviction in its adherents as what can be generated by abductive inferences to the effect that theism best explains various phenomena. The account can also be seen as a mild species of naturalistic epistemology, but one that avoids the reductionism of stronger versions of it, and one that by according such weight to insight and the nondiscursive intellect carves out as much epistemic space for intuitions to satisfy practically the most ardent intuitionist. Although by this account the religious believer can be said to have knowledge that God exists if God exists, it remains the duty of at least a critical mass within such communities, given our current epistemic limitations (such as our inability to know that we know God exists), to critically examine potential defeaters to religious belief, and for *all* religious believers to examine carefully and honestly the consequences produced by their conviction.

As to Nielsen's claim, recall his bold assertion that there is simply no evidence for Christianity in particular or theism generally.¹⁸ Most of what needs to be said has already been covered. For simplicity's sake, let us confine our attention to the latter claim, that

there is no evidence at all to suggest that God exists. Nielsen insists that this is the case, repeatedly in fact. But it should be obvious by now that the mere assertion of such a bold claim does nothing to make it true, and next to nothing by way of dissuading thoughtful, committed theists from retaining their faith. What does Nielsen mean by evidence? Does he automatically preclude the potential nonpropositional evidence provided by Plantinga's impulsional beliefs or James's nondiscursive deliverances? If so, why? More specifically, why should a committed *theist* concur? Nielsen reminds me of those who claim that no right-thinking persons can possibly believe in God anymore, when it certainly seems like there are a great number of them! What could motivate such bold claims? Does Nielsen really think that every effort to show that God exists, every person for whom the existence of God seems as clear as anything, every piece of religious phenomenology, every deliverance of an expansively empirical study of religious experience, cumulatively add up to absolutely *no* evidence at all for the truth of theism? If he does, that strikes me as monumentally unlikely, so much so in fact that further discussion with him on the issue would probably prove pointless. For it would seem altogether probable that his atheological bias is radically skewing his capacity for fair-minded examination of the evidence. And if God *does* exist, and something like Plantinga's model is essentially right, then it is not the theist who is cognitively at fault, but rather it is one like Nielsen who is suffering from a sort of cognitive dysfunction. Though I point that out, it is not my goal to engage in a contentious epistemic tit-for-tat here. I would rather counsel that we proceed in the spirit of this passage from James:

We ought...delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism's glory; then only shall we live and let live in speculative as well as in practical things.¹⁹

NOTES

1. Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo: Prometheus Press, 1990): pp. 49-50.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 100. J. L. Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) makes similar claims.
3. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): p. 200.
4. Louis Menand, "An American Prodigy," *New York Review of Books* (December 2, 1993): p. 33.
5. Plantinga, more so than James, is interested in asking what sort of picture is the right view of epistemology on the assumption that theism generally and Christianity particularly is true. He is actually attempting to do more than just not give the presumptive benefit of doubt to atheism, but to give it to Christianity instead, at least to see what might follow from that. He can be understood as following his own advice that he gave to Christian philosophers, namely, to allow their convictions to shape their doing of philosophy, and to do so unapologetically. Even if this was his motive, however, his arguments for his theory of knowledge were developed independently of those theistic considerations.
6. Plantinga, *op. cit.*, p. 499.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
9. For fascinating biographical details about Chauncey Wright's life (along with James and

other such notable figures as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Charles Peirce, and John Dewey), see Louis Menand's recent, hugely informative *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001).

10. Plantinga, op. cit.

11. Ibid., p. 70.

12. Hunter Brown, *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 39ff.

13. Ibid., pp. 144-145.

14. Consensus certainly does not establish truth, but widespread belief in a particular phenomenon may have for its explanation that there is something utterly right or obvious about the belief in question. Bertrand Russell once remarked, no doubt somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that a widespread belief is probably false given the general silliness of the masses: something of an inverted *ad populum* argument! The suggestion here has been quite the opposite: given the possibility of the *sensus divinitatus*, widespread religious phenomenology involving a natural conviction in God's existence may well be reliably indicative of the nature of reality after all.

15. Richard Swinburne is probably the most prominent example of a theistic evidentialist who seems committed to the classical model of justifying religious belief. Swinburne's work is worthy of much attention, of course, and it goes to show that abductive inferences can potentially be enlisted to the cause of according theism positive epistemic status. Swinburne's efforts at cumulative case-building are especially worthy of mention and accolades, for from the more narrowly circumscribed perspective of evidentialism a cumulative case argument for God's existence seems to hold the best hope for success. However, I will subscribe to an epistemic model much closer to Plantinga's than to Swinburne's, as it seems to resonate more closely, in my estimation, to the biblical revelation and to what philosophy can reasonably hope to accomplish.

16. See Robert Adams's *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

17. Plantinga, op. cit., p. 357.

18. Plantinga actually extends his epistemic model to allow for the possibility of the entire panoply of distinctively Christian beliefs to be warranted as well. Most of that material was not included here, but mention of it is made now just to suggest that much more could be said to defend the positive epistemic status of Christian truth claims in particular.

19. William James, "The Will to Believe," in (London: Collier Press, 1948): p. 109.

