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IS IT NATURAL TO BELIEVE IN GOD?

Mark R. Talbot

Believing that traditional Christian theism implies there is something epistemically wrong with religious unbelief, I examine John Calvin's claim that everybody would believe in God if it weren't for sin. I show why this claim ought to be more common than it is; develop it in terms of our naturally having certain reliable *epistemic sets*; utilize that development to specify exactly what is wrong with unbelief; and then argue that even unbelievers have some reason to think it is true.

Philosophical strategies for defending religious belief may be less or more bold: they may maintain, for instance, that there is nothing epistemically wrong with religious belief; or, more boldly, they may maintain that there is something epistemically wrong with religious unbelief. When Alvin Plantinga claims that some beliefs about God can be *properly basic*, he is deploying the former sort of strategy;¹ when Bonaventure claims that doubts about God's existence come "from a defect in the knower rather than from a deficiency in the object known," he is deploying the latter sort.²

One of the boldest strategies maintains it is natural for us to have some theistic beliefs. John Calvin, for instance, claims that everybody would believe in God, if it weren't for sin. In Calvin's hands, this amounts to the claim that any minimally developed and psychologically healthy human being, inevitably and without having first to think about it, would trust, honor, and obey God. Thus, even very young children and mentally defective adults naturally tend to believe that God exists and that he is their loving Father; and the psychological health of each of us depends on our nurturing this tendency, for belief in God is produced and sustained by inclinations we must honor if we are to escape the distress that disbelief brings.

I shall examine Calvin's claim; show why it ought to be a common claim among theists; develop it in terms of our naturally having certain reliable *epistemic sets*; utilize that development to specify exactly what is epistemically wrong with religious unbelief; and then argue that even unbelievers have some reason to think that Calvin is right.

I

Although Calvin's may be the most provocative, the best worked out, and the most philosophically interesting of these claims, Christians usually have taken

some theistic beliefs to be natural. They have done this by enlarging upon biblical passages such as Psalms 14:1 & 19:1-4 and Romans 1:18-32 in various ways.

Tertullian, for example, maintains that the healthy soul naturally knows some Christian truths:

Do you wish us to prove His existence from His numerous, mighty works by which we are supported, sustained, delighted, and even startled? . . . [Or] do you wish us to prove Him from the testimony of the soul itself? The soul, though it be repressed by the prison house of the body, though it be circumscribed by base institutions, weakened by lust and concupiscence, and enslaved to false gods, yet, when it revives, as from intoxication or sleep or some sickness and enjoys health again, names 'God' with this name alone because, properly speaking, He alone is true. 'Good God!' 'God Almighty!' and 'God grant it!' are expressions used by all mankind. That He is a Judge, also, is testified by the phrases: 'God sees,' and 'I commend it to God,' and 'God will reward me.' O testimony of the soul, which is by natural instinct Christian!³

Augustine thinks we naturally have specific beliefs about God's nature. He urges those "implicated in those shocking and damnable errors" of the Manichees, for instance, not to seek any demonstrations of God's nature, and to fall back on

the natural conviction of every human mind, unless it is corrupted by error, of the perfect unchangeableness and incorruptibility of the nature and substance of God.⁴

And Aquinas speaks of "a common and confused knowledge of God." For

man can immediately reach some sort of knowledge of God by natural reason. For, when men see that things in nature run according to a definite order, and that ordering does not occur without an orderer, they perceive in most cases that there is some orderer of things that we see.

Not having this knowledge "makes [a person] appear very blameworthy"; it involves being culpably dull; and,

[i]ndeed, a man's dullness is chiefly indicated by this: he fails to perceive such evident signs of God, just as a man is judged to be dull who, while observing a man, does not grasp the fact that he has a soul.

"That is why," Aquinas continues, "it is said in the Psalms: 'The fool hath said in his heart: There is no God.'"⁵ He adds that

who or what kind of being, or whether there is but one orderer of nature, is not yet grasped immediately in this general consideration;⁵

but this does not weaken his claim that at least one theistic belief is so natural

that lacking it signals a morally blameworthy cognitive defect.

A variety of Christian philosophical traditions claim, then, that some beliefs about God are in some sense natural.

II

We can clarify Calvin's claim by asking two sorts of questions. First, there are questions about the belief itself. What kind of belief is it? Is it really a matter of believing *in* God or is it just a matter of believing *that* God exists? What is its content? Is it just a generalized sense that some deity exists or is it the possession of specific beliefs about the God who actually exists? Secondly, there are questions about its acquisition and retention. What produces this belief? Are natural beliefs acquired only in certain ways? In what sense of the word "natural" is it natural to have this belief? And are natural beliefs always retained?

For Calvin, this claim is partly about what each of us *would* believe, if we *weren't* damaged by sin, and partly about what each of us still *does* believe, in spite of sin. Undamaged by sin, each of us would really believe *in* God; we would know the God who actually exists and trust Him as our Father.⁶ Each of us, more specifically, would know that

God as our Maker supports us by his power, governs us by his providence, nourishes us by his goodness, and attends us with all sorts of blessings;⁷

that "he is the fountain of every good, and that we must seek nothing elsewhere than in him"; and that "his will ought . . . to be the law by which we live" (I, ii, 2). Knowing these things would move us to piety; for piety is "the reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces."

But we are now ruined by sin. Thus ruined, "no one now experiences God either as Father or as Author of salvation, or favorable in any way" (I, ii, 1). So now we lack the "primal and simple knowledge [of God] to which the very order of nature would have led us if Adam had remained upright." As long as we are unregenerate, we no longer in fact believe in God.

Yet, even in "this ruin of mankind," Calvin thinks, no one lacks all knowledge of God. There remains within the human mind, "and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity" (I, iii, 1). Even the sin-damaged retain some belief. We still believe *that* there is some God, who, simply because he is God, ought to be worshiped and obeyed. "[M]en one and all," Calvin declares, "perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker"; and, consequently, "they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will." Everyone knows "that there is some sort of divinity" (I, iv, 4).

The soul's two faculties of understanding and will individually and jointly produce beliefs that clearly entail God's existence.

Calvin's account of the understanding and its operations is sketchy, but this much is clear: possessing understanding *empirically inclines* us to sense God's glory in his handiwork. God, Calvin claims, "has revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe" (I, v, 1); our senses, as part of our faculty of understanding, naturally perceive what is empirically the case (see II, ii, 12); and hence we "cannot open [our] eyes without being compelled to behold him." Our minds tend, by God's intention, to grasp truth; and this inclines us to take the universe's wonders for what they are—marks of his glory.

Our wills, moreover, *psychologically incline* us to feel God's majesty.

In part, this inclination manifests itself as an *emotional urge* to worship something. Undamaged by sin or in the regenerate, this urge amounts to "a lively longing to worship God and a sincere intent to live a godly and holy life" (IV, x, 4). The unregenerate experience it, however, as a more generalized "feeling of nature" (I, iv, 2) to attribute to something "the praise of righteousness, wisdom, goodness, and power" (I, v, 15).⁸ This feeling is part of the "seed of religion" which "experience shows" God has sown in everyone (I, iv, 1; and see I, iii, 1; and I, xv, 6). Properly tended, it would bear the fruit of true piety. "But," says Calvin, "scarcely one man in a hundred . . . fosters it, once received, in his heart, and [there is] none in whom it ripens—much less shows fruit in season" (I, v, 1). So although "a certain understanding of his divine majesty" (I, iii, 1) is "freely suggested to [everyone] inwardly from the feeling of nature" (I, iv, 2), "all degenerate from the true knowledge of him."

In part, this inclination manifests itself as a *moral goad* to acknowledge sin. For sinners often feel God's majesty as God's judgment; and these pangs of conscience prompt belief. Indeed, consciousness of God's judgment is something no one escapes. "When men grasp the conception of things with . . . the understanding," Calvin states, "they are said 'to know,' from which the word 'knowledge' [*scientia*] is derived" (IV, x, 3); and,

[i]n like manner, when men have an awareness of divine judgment adjoined to them as a witness which does not let them hide their sins but arraigns them as guilty before the judgment seat—this awareness is called "conscience." It is a certain mean between God and man, for it does not allow man to suppress within himself what he knows, but pursues him to the point of making him acknowledge his guilt.

This distressing awareness of God differs from the "simple awareness" that the understanding supplies. Pangs of conscience, unlike insights about the world's Maker, cannot repose in us, "bottled up, as it were."

These emotional and moral propensities to acknowledge God work in sequence; when we refuse to heed the former, the latter kicks in (see IV, x, 3 & 4).

For Calvin, a belief is natural only if it is produced by "inclination of nature rather than [by] deliberation of mind" (II, ii, 26).⁹ But, then, all of these empirically and psychologically prompted beliefs are natural, for they are all produced *immediately or noninferentially*. Yet Calvin recognizes that different beliefs about God can be natural in different senses. He takes the general belief that some God exists, for instance, to be natural in the very strong sense of its being a 'universal impression' (see II, ii, 13) present at birth in each of our minds:

this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow . . . [I]t is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive with every nerve to this end [I, iii, 3].

Calvin claims this belief is part of the "seed of religion" which is sown in everyone; and so, it seems, would say that it is initially produced by our natural emotional urge to worship something.¹⁰ The belief that God reveals himself and "daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe" is natural, we may assume, in the weaker sense of its being an impression that each of us is disposed to acquire, under specific conditions, at a certain stage of human development. And the belief that God is the fountain of every good from whom we must seek everything is, Calvin states, natural only in a still weaker sense. Only sinless human beings naturally acquire it; none of us have it until we are regenerate (see II, i, 10 & 11).

God, then, according to Calvin, made it natural for us to believe in him. Sin causes these natural inclinations to degenerate until they are no longer spiritually fruitful. But everyone still believes that some God exists, who ought to be worshiped and obeyed. Consequently, "no region, no city, in short, no household" has ever been utterly irreligious; and those who try to be "yet willy-nilly . . . from time to time feel an inkling of what they desire not to believe" (I, iii, 2). With these people, Calvin concedes, the sense of the Lord's presence may "sometimes seem to vanish for a moment," yet, he insists, it "returns at once and rushes in with new force." No one, Calvin reminds us,

burst forth into bolder or more unbridled contempt of deity than Gaius Caligula; yet no one trembled more miserably when any sign of God's wrath manifested itself; thus—albeit unwillingly—he shuddered at the God whom he professedly sought to despise.

"You may see now and again," Calvin declares, "how this also happens to those

like him; how he who is the boldest despiser of God is of all men the most startled at the rustle of a falling leaf." Indeed, if, for these despisers of God,

there is any respite from anxiety of conscience, it is not much different from the sleep of drunken or frenzied persons, who do not rest peacefully even while sleeping because they are continually troubled with dire and dreadful dreams.

"The impious themselves therefore," Calvin concludes, "exemplify the fact that some conception of God is ever alive in all men's minds."

III

Three considerations prompt Calvin's claims.

First and foremost, he wants to establish the inexcusability of unbelief. To prevent anyone from being able truthfully to say 'I didn't know,' "God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops" (I, iii, 1). No one, then, is utterly ignorant of God; and anyone's failure to honor him is attributable to stubbornness (see I, iv, 4).

Secondly, by establishing that certain truths about God are plain to everyone, Calvin intends to show that

it is utterly vain for some men to say that religion was invented by the subtlety and craft of a few to hold the simple folk in thrall by this device and that those very persons who originated the worship of God for others did not in the least believe that any God existed [I, iii, 2].

The ubiquity of theistic belief is, for Calvin, a sign of its truth.

Thirdly, he holds that the naturalness of theistic belief attests to God's goodness. Since "[t]he final goal of the blessed life . . . rests in the knowledge of God" (I, v, 1), God, in his goodness, manifests himself as our Maker and as the one that we ought to believe in.

Consequently, our failure to believe in God is our fault and not God's. And, hence, God's goodness and justice cannot be questioned when he condemns those who do not believe.

Most theists in the Western philosophical and theological traditions have similar considerations that should prompt them to make similar claims. For theists typically take belief in God to be an essential element in any truly satisfying life.¹¹ They also hold that God is good and just. God, then, will insure everyone the opportunity to get genuine satisfaction. So God will insure everyone the opportunity to believe in him. If belief in God is natural, and if our not so believing can only result from some moral or spiritual failing on our part, then

all have this opportunity. If, however, belief in God is not natural for us, and if our unbelief can result from factors for which we are not responsible (such as, e.g., my not being born with enough native intelligence to comprehend a proof for God's existence), then all do not have this opportunity. But if all do not have this opportunity, then theists must concede either that belief in God is not essential to a truly satisfying life or that God is not good and just. Theists won't generally concede either of these. So theists ought to claim that everybody would believe in God if it weren't for sin.¹²

IV

Calvin's general approach to religious belief suggests a credible way to specify exactly what is wrong with religious unbelief.

This is because *experience* is, for Calvin, a normative notion: to say that "experience shows" something is to claim that we *should* acquire specific experiential beliefs under specific experiential conditions. But, then, experience may show something that we should but do not see. Hence, to claim, as Calvin does at II, ii, 17 of the *Institutes*, that

surely experience shows . . . , when those who were once especially ingenious and skilled are struck dumb, [that] men's minds are in God's hand and under his will, so that he rules them at every moment,

is not necessarily to claim that everyone sees this. The wicked, for instance, according to Calvin, "neither think nor recognize that these benefits come to them from the Lord's hand; or if they do recognize it, they do not within themselves ponder his goodness" (III, ii, 32). Seeing what is in fact God's beneficence, they do not see it to be God's beneficence. And hence the wicked "cannot be apprised of his mercy any more than brute animals can, which, according to their condition receive the same fruit of God's liberality, yet perceive it not."

Experience is 'normed' for Calvin because of his belief that God has created us with inclinations to sense and feel in particular ways. These inclinations are among our epistemic 'sets.' An *epistemic set* is a disposition to have particular experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and so on, in particular situations. On looking out my study window, I see that the sky is now bright blue. If you have just calculated it, and you haven't made a mistake, you are inclined to believe that $365 + 41 + 7 = 413$. On recalling the past-due dates on some of my bills, I recognize that some of my accounts are in arrears. In each of these situations, having a particular belief depends on having a particular epistemic set. More precisely, in each of these cases there is a set of conditions—some specifying certain propensities, dispositions, or inclinations of the believer—which, when

fulfilled, tends to produce some belief. In the first case, the conditions include my having certain concepts (such as 'sky' and 'blue'), having a certain sort of visual stimulation, and my being disposed, on having that stimulation, to believe that the sky is blue. In the second, you must have certain concepts, know how to perform a certain sort of arithmetical computation, perform that computation, and have an inclination to believe, on performing it, that the number you reach is the sum of the other numbers. The crucial conditions in the last case include my inclination to trust my memory about the dates on those bills and my knowing that my failure to have paid them on or before those due dates is what puts those accounts in arrears.

Epistemic sets can be variously classified. Many of them involve our reliance on cognitive 'faculties.' Sometimes it is useful to classify our epistemic sets in terms of these faculties. *Empirical sets* produce empirical beliefs by disposing us, upon the operation of our external senses, to believe certain things about our contingent physical environment. Using my sight sometimes disposes me, for example, to believe that I see automobiles. *Nonempirical sets* produce nonempirical beliefs. Using your philosophically trained reason disposes you to read and evaluate this paper in specific ways; it prompts you, among other things, to construe certain sequences of my sentences as arguments where some of my claims serve as evidence for others.

Some of our epistemic sets produce *noninferential* or *immediate* beliefs, and others do not. With the appropriate moral set, a very young child may immediately and noninferentially grasp, through what his conscience feels, that God wants him to tell the truth to his mother. The appropriate arithmetical set allows me to infer that $365 + 41 + 7 = 413$.

Sometimes it is useful to focus on our being set to have certain *kinds* of beliefs. Upon having certain sorts of sensations, we are all inclined, for instance, to have beliefs about other people. Again, in certain situations, everyone is disposed, upon having certain experiences, to have beliefs about the past. Sometimes, however, it is better to focus on our dispositions to have—or not to have—*particular* beliefs. If Melanie knows that Jack was in New York City two hours ago, then she won't usually be disposed to believe that she sees him now in the distance in Philadelphia, even if it is he. Our being set to have certain kinds of beliefs often is among the conditions disposing us to have particular beliefs. We are all inclined, for instance, to have beliefs about the future. Some of these beliefs are produced by the common human disposition to assume that certain experienced regularities will not change. This disposition, coupled with our particular histories, inclines each of us to have a unique set of expectations about the particular ways in which our individual futures will resemble our individual pasts.

Some sets are distinguishable by their most characteristic conditions. The characteristic condition in some sets, for instance, is a kind of *conceptual readiness*.

I won't be disposed to believe that I am seeing a giraffe unless I know what a giraffe is; and, conversely, if I know what a giraffe is, I will be disposed, under certain conditions, to believe I am seeing one. With others, the connection with *presuppositions* and *previous beliefs* sets the stage. If you were reared to believe that there are no honest computer salesmen, then, even if there is one, you won't be inclined to think that he is. Sometimes what we believe or don't believe hinges on what we do or don't take to be *objectively probable*. Thus Melanie is disinclined to believe that she is seeing Jack in the distance in Philadelphia now because she knows that that isn't likely, since he was in New York City just two hours ago.

One more important distinction is that between shorter and longer epistemic sets. Melanie's disinclination to believe that she is seeing Jack won't last the hour, even though it is partly based on a much longer-lasting disposition to believe what she takes to be objectively probable. Your disposition to read and evaluate a paper like this in specific, philosophically appropriate ways may last your lifetime—or it may disappear soon if you get disgusted with philosophy and abandon it. Our dispositions to believe that there are other people and that there is an external world usually last our lifetimes, but it is risky to claim they must. Someone adequately motivated by odd enough desires, such as wanting to evade responsibility and escape the strains of interpersonal interaction, could embark on a program that would eventually modify and perhaps even eclipse those sets. A seriously disturbed friend has told me that she has at times been tempted, by just those desires, to do just that.

No matter how we classify them, it is clear that our epistemic sets affect what we can believe; similarly placed people with different epistemic sets tend to know or believe different things. Hospital rounds develop epistemic sets that enable doctors to examine sick people and find what ails them. Being reared among card sharks can give you an epistemic set that will leave you in the lurch, with regard to your beliefs about what you ought and ought not to do, when you are in Dodge City playing for keeps.

We account for someone's epistemic sets when we specify what has produced or modified his epistemic dispositions. We don't know what all of the potential producers and modifiers are, nor is it always clear which of them has been active in which cases; and so none of us is completely sure what has in fact produced or modified our particular sets. But three of the most general sources of our more durable sets would seem to be these. First, some of our epistemic dispositions seem to involve *natural propensities*.¹³ This seems, for instance, to be the key factor in our beliefs that there are other people and that there is an external world. Secondly, some of our epistemic sets are produced by *social conditioning*. Society has conditioned me to believe that a certain range of color is red. And, thirdly, some epistemic dispositions are linked to our *desires* and *choices*. If I were to decide to cheat often enough, I would probably leave myself ill-disposed

to believe that cheating is wrong.

More of our epistemic dispositions seem to be dependent on conditioning and choice than most philosophers have been inclined to believe.

A very large number of our sets, for instance, seem to be dependent on the sort of social conditioning that results from *nurture*. Our disposition to carve up the world the way we do is probably more a matter of the way we have been cared for than the way the world is. A hungry baby cries, though he doesn't know what's bothering him. His mother surmises what's wrong; and puts his mouth against her breast. Lots of these instances dispose that baby to pick out objects, identify appetites, and spot causal relations.

Again, some of our epistemic dispositions are clearly the result of our having worked to develop *habits of discernment* or *indiscernment*; and, since these sets depend on our wills, they reflect, as well, consciously chosen habits of the heart. You may, with practice, become good at spotting a class's perplexity; and I may work to blind myself to any facial signs that my wife gives of her emotional distress.

The nesting of epistemic sets within more-inclusive sets enables us to occupy a *world*. We can hardly help believing, for instance, in the external world; and that belief is probably the product of a complex set of epistemic dispositions that are unified by more and more general and partly counterfactual epistemic sets. David Hume thinks, for instance, that it includes being inclined to have certain beliefs about certain objects upon having certain sensations, as well as having a natural propensity to take there to be more order and uniformity among those objects than we actually observe. Epistemic sets such as this natural propensity are best analyzed in terms of our disposition to believe some contrary-to-fact conditionals that have antecedents that never obtain. Hume believes, for instance, that this natural propensity inclines us to believe that the laws of nature would be observed to be perfectly regular, if it weren't for our limited powers of observation. Everyone's epistemic sets must include some of these counterfactual dispositions, for otherwise we would not generalize and project our experience in ways essential to our occupying a world.

When they are *epistemically reliable*, our sets enable us to believe that the world is more or less as it actually is. You may be set to know what some particular things are; for example, that one thing is a desk and another a chair. But I may lack a reliable set to believe some very important things. I may not, for instance, be disposed to believe, even after all these years, how much my father loves me. The reliability of our epistemic sets depends on what accounts for our having them. The wrong social conditioning, for instance, can give you some pretty unreliable epistemic sets.

Calvin's claim that we are empirically inclined to sense God's glory in his handiwork amounts to the claim that God has more or less permanently set us

to get, in looking about us, a lot of noninferential, empirical beliefs about God. Likewise, his claim that we are psychologically inclined to feel God's majesty within us amounts, in part, to the claim that we tend naturally and immediately, upon having certain feelings, to acquire a lot of moral beliefs.

To sense God's glory in his handiwork and to feel his majesty within us is, by this account, a matter of possessing reliable epistemic sets. Since he thinks we naturally possess these sets, anyone's not possessing them signals, according to Calvin, his having worked to dismantle or lose them. So in saying that "experience shows" something, he means that, under the right conditions, everyone *should* experience it—that this is, in these conditions, what *real* or *veridical* experience shows. Echoing Tertullian, he says,

it is true that the name of one God was everywhere known and renowned. For men who worshiped a swarm of gods, whenever speaking from a *real* feeling of nature, as if content with a single God, simply used the name "God" [I, x, 3, my emphasis].

Those who don't have these sets ought to work to re-acquire them. This life, for instance, "however crammed with infinite miseries it may be, is still rightly to be counted among those blessings of God which are not to be spurned" (III, ix, 3); and thus "if we recognize in it no divine benefit, we are already guilty of grave ingratitude toward God himself." Consequently, "we must," Calvin claims, "*become so disposed and minded* that we count it among those gifts of divine generosity which are not at all to be rejected" (my emphasis).

Calvin's claims that "experience shows [that] God has sown a seed of religion in all men" and that "the impious themselves . . . exemplify the fact that some conception of God is ever alive in all men's minds" are to be similarly analyzed.

It may be true, for example, that all unbelievers *do* display their underlying belief by their anxieties; and yet these anxieties may now be manifest only to the regenerate or to the spiritually wise or to rightly trained observers, such as depth psychologists. Perhaps, indeed, any depth psychologist can determine that *something* is bothering a particular unbeliever, but only some of them can see that *what* is bothering him is caused by his unbelief. It may be that an unbeliever's anxiety needn't manifest itself in any particular way. Then a believer, relying on what she knows nonempirically, might justifiably say, 'I can't see that every unbeliever is anxious, but I know that each unbeliever must be, and I'm sure I would see it if I knew where to look.' So not seeing that unbelievers manifest the naturalness of theistic belief may itself be a matter of lacking some reliable epistemic set.

Sometimes Calvin claims that unbelief displays the naturalness of belief by its very abandonment. The "worst of all evils, brought upon men by their own wrong-doing," Calvin declares, is that, "having become deadened, and sorrow

extinguished in their conscience, they abandon themselves to all iniquity.”¹⁴ When this happens, sinners sport a kind of counterfeit peace. But this very peace, Calvin insists, marks them as judged and possibly rejected by the God whom they have deliberately sought to overthrow. Properly disposed onlookers, he claims, will see this insensitivity to God’s judgment for what it is: a sinful perversion of some natural moral sensitivities.

Religious unbelief, then, involves lacking¹⁵ or overriding or in some other way interfering with one or more of our natural and reliable epistemic sets.

V

Even unbelievers have some reason to think this is true. For experience gives virtually everyone some reason to think that everybody would believe in God, if it weren’t for sin.¹⁶

“Everybody would believe in God, if it weren’t for sin” is a contrary-to-fact conditional with an antecedent which, if the doctrines of traditional Christianity are true, no longer ever obtains. Now unless no one is ever justified in asserting anything, everybody can justifiably assert some contrary-to-fact conditionals like this. For, as I have noted, some epistemic dispositions are best analyzed in terms of this kind of conditional; and each of us must have some epistemic sets that include this kind of epistemic disposition if we are to occupy a world.

These dispositions systematize our experience. Thus, every normal, mature human being is epistemically set to believe that the future will cohere with the past; and thus, as I have already observed, even a thoroughgoing empiricist like Hume, who “talks with contempt of hypotheses,”¹⁷ endorses our disposition to believe in causal uniformity:

in the human body, when the usual symptoms of health or sickness disappoint our expectation, when medicines operate not with their wonted powers, when irregular events follow from any particular cause, the philosopher and physician are not surprised at the matter, nor are ever tempted to deny, in general, the necessity and uniformity of those principles by which the animal economy is conducted. They know that a human body is a mighty complicated machine, that many secret powers lurk in it which are altogether beyond our comprehension, that to us it must often appear very uncertain in its operations, and that, therefore, the irregular events which outwardly discover themselves can be no proof that the laws of nature are not observed with the greatest regularity in its internal operations and government.¹⁸

In other words: the laws of nature would be observed to be perfectly regular, if it weren’t for our limited powers of observation.

Now consider what the criterion for someone's justifiably asserting such a conditional must be.

It cannot be that what convinces those who assert it must convince those who do not, for something may be implausible to you simply because you lack a reliable epistemic set. Nor can it be that defenders of the conditional must factor in, as evidence relevant to their asserting it, the opinions of those who are challenging it. For I may realize that the conditional is not evident to you simply because you lack the right set. Nor will it do to say that this assertion is adequately grounded only if the grounds for asserting it entail its truth. For then no one will be justified in asserting any of these conditionals; and no one will justifiably possess some indispensable epistemic sets.

Someone is justified in asserting such a conditional if and only if it seems true to her when she surveys all of her relevant experience and belief. And, thus, asserting the uniformity of causal influence is, as it should be, justified for almost all of us.

But, then, Christians can be justified in asserting that everybody would believe in God, if it weren't for sin.

For suppose someone is converted and then argues like this: 'At conversion, I realized that, up to then, I had been sinfully resisting acknowledging what I am naturally inclined to believe, namely, that God exists, that he is my Maker, and that I ought to make his will the law of my life. Others tell me that they also, at conversion, realized this. Moreover, before I was converted, I wasn't clearly aware of my resistance because of the damage that sin had already done to my epistemic sets. Therefore, my experience—and that of these others—suggests that a sinner's judgment about moral and spiritual matters is unreliable. And, therefore, my postconversion experience justifies my discounting such preconversion judgments and my accepting the claim that everybody would believe in God, if it weren't for sin.'¹⁹

How can anyone justifiably object to this?

No one can claim that the believer is unjustified in asserting this conditional because that believer's grounds do not convince him. That begs the question against belief by failing to come to grips with the believer's claim that if you don't find her reasoning convincing it may be because you are unregenerate and thus lack a reliable epistemic set. Nor can anyone insist that the believer must factor in, as evidence relevant to her asserting this conditional, his opinion challenging it. For then his judgment would necessarily weaken or falsify her assertion, which begs the question again. Nor will it do to say that adequate grounds for justifiable assertion, in circumstances like these, must guarantee the assertion's truth. For that applies a stricter standard to the believer than it is possible to apply to oneself.

And even unbelievers have some reason to think that everybody would believe in God, if it weren't for sin.

For even unbelievers are somewhat aware of the damage they have done to some of their epistemic sets. Who hasn't lied; and then realized that it was easier, the next time round, to dismiss the promptings of conscience and lie again? And who hasn't judged someone *perverted*—that is, morally *unnatural* or *abnormal*—because he seemed to lack all compunction against, say, being shockingly cruel? We all tend to be at least dimly aware of our own—and much more vividly aware of each others'—moral insensitivities. Perhaps Calvin's doctrine of abandonment is true; perhaps the greater the damage we do, the less we are later inclined to be aware of it. But our tendency to damage our morally relevant epistemic sets is abundantly clear.

This gives even unbelievers reason to wonder how bad the damage is, and whether it affects more than just their moral beliefs. And once they have heard a believer's story, how can they dismiss the possibility that they are resisting theistic belief and this is, in various ways, blinding them?

Moreover, the serious practice of biblical Christianity may make its adherents uniquely sensitive to certain sorts of epistemic damage. Of course, 'conversion' to other psychological, moral, or religious ways of seeing things also involves the acquisition and retention of characteristic epistemic sets—sets that inevitably presuppose the truth of some conditionals of the same kind as the Christian claim that everybody would believe in God if it weren't for sin. But some of these sets are obviously incapable of making their converts face up to the whole range and the entire depth of the damage they have done to their moral sensitivities. Freudianism, for example, with its attack on some moral sensitivities, necessarily keeps its adherents from accomplishing that critique. Under the right circumstances, then, perhaps even unbelievers can be brought to see that Christian conversion and practice alone enables us to start seeing whole and steady the moral insensitivity that each of us, in part and fitfully, recognizes we ought to see. It seems to me, in fact, that this often *does* happen when unbelievers have prolonged and intimate contact with Christian communities that are seriously practicing biblical faith.

A Christian's experience, then, can justify her claiming that everybody would believe in God, if it weren't for sin; and even a nonChristian's experience makes that claim more probable for him than it would otherwise be. Consequently, the strategy of claiming it is natural to believe in God is one that even unbelievers cannot easily dismiss.²⁰

NOTES

1. "[A] proposition," as Plantinga put it in his article "Is Belief in God Rational?" (in C. F. Delaney, ed., *Rationality and Religious Belief* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979]), "is *basic* for a person *S* if and only if it is in the foundations of *S*'s noetic structure" (p. 19). It is, moreover, *properly basic* for *S* if and only if it can be basic for *S* in a "rational noetic structure" (p. 26). So Plantinga's strategy (in this article) for defending religious belief is this: he claims that there are some propositions about God which are such that someone could be rationally justified in believing them even though that person would not believe them on the basis of believing any other propositions. In more recent articles, such as "Reason and Belief in God" (in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983]), Plantinga seems to endorse Calvin's strategy.

2. Bonaventure, *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, translated by Zachary Hayes, O.F.M. (St. Bonaventure, New York: The Franciscan Institute, 1979), Question I, Article 1, Replies to the Objections 1.2.3.

3. Tertullian, *Apology*, translated by Sister Emily Joseph Daly, C.S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950), chapter 17, sections 4-6.

4. Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichean*, translated by Richard Stothert (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), Book XXXIII, chapter 9.

5. Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, translated by Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Doubleday, 1956), Book III, Part I, chapter 38. These claims of Aquinas' are strikingly similar to some of Calvin's; see, for instance, Calvin's commentary on *The Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 14, verse 17.

6. Calvin, as some of the quotations make clear, really thinks that we have some natural *knowledge* of God; he would object, I suppose, to my characterizing his doctrine as one that makes claims about natural *belief*. But I shall usually stick with the 'belief' terminology because it affords us the useful distinction between believing-in and believing-that.

7. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), Book I, Chapter ii, section 1; hereafter cited in the text by book, chapter, and section number. When passages are cited from Calvin without reference, they are found at the place most recently cited.

8. Compare Augustine:

Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you *thwart the proud*. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you [*Confessions*, Book I, chapter 1; translated by R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961)].

9. Any interpretation of Calvin with regard to the points I make in this paragraph must be tentative, since Calvin's remarks about our various natural beliefs are brief and somewhat enigmatic.

10. Calvin does not usually tell us which beliefs about God are prompted by which inclinations. So we have to piece together this part of his account by ourselves.

11. Usually, theists have also held that you must believe in God if you are to enjoy a blessed afterlife. This is obviously true for Western theism as it comes to us in the three major religious traditions;

e.g., Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedism. But it is also true for Western theism as it comes to us through the philosophical tradition; e.g., in Plato's *Apology*.

12. George Schlesinger argues similarly in his article, "The Availability of Evidence in Support of Religious Belief," in *Faith and Philosophy*, I, 4.

13. Thomas Reid's epistemology appeals to such natural propensities. Recently, Nicholas Wolterstorff has examined and evaluated Reid's epistemological views. See, especially, his "Thomas Reid on Rationality," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, edited by Hendrik Hart, Johan van der Hoeven, and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983).

14. *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, translated by T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), p. 188. This declaration is probably inconsistent with Calvin's claim, as I have quoted it on pp. 6f, above, that no sinner escapes the pangs of a guilty conscience. The inconsistency can be overcome by taking Calvin's claims about the inescapability of a guilty conscience either to be only very widely, but not universally, true or to be true only at certain stages in an individual's moral development; and then to take these claims about deadened consciences to apply only in the other cases where a sinner has more or less destroyed the natural epistemic set that otherwise would make his sense of God's judgment inescapable.

15. A belief may be natural, even though the epistemic set needed to get it would not develop under some socially adverse conditions, in the same way as a biological feature (e.g., a human being's having straight legs) can be natural, even though the physiological conditions necessary for its development may not obtain under some nutritionally adverse conditions.

16. With regard to matters such as this, both Scripture and experience, Calvin thinks, say the same thing. See *Institutes* I, x, 2, and III, ix, 3.

17. E.g.,

He proposes to anatomize human nature in a regular manner, and promises to draw no conclusions but where he is authorized by experience. He talks with contempt of hypotheses; and insinuates, that such of our countrymen as have banished them from moral philosophy, have done a more signal service to the world, than my *Lord Bacon*, whom he considers the father of experimental physicks [*An Abstract of A Book lately Published, entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c.*, as found in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 646].

18. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Charles W. Hendel (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), p. 97.

Hume gives his plain-prose rationale for accepting the principle of the uniformity of causal influence a paragraph earlier in the *Inquiry*:

The vulgar, who take things according to their first appearance, attribute the uncertainty of events to such an uncertainty in the causes as makes the latter often fail of their usual influence, though they meet with no impediment . . . But philosophers, observing that almost in every part of nature there is contained a vast variety of springs and principles which are hid by reason of their minuteness or remoteness, find that it is at least possible the contrariety of events may not proceed from any contingency in the cause but from the secret operation of contrary causes. This possibility is converted into certainty by further observation, when they remark that, upon exact scrutiny, a contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes and proceeds from their mutual opposition . . . From the observation of several parallel instances philosophers form a maxim that the connection between all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that

its seeming uncertainty in some instances proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes.

Despite the talk about possibilities being converted into certainties by further observation, the underlying claim here is still, obviously, contrary-to-fact.

19. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in "Is reason enough?" (*Reformed Journal* 31, 4), confirms that, for Calvinists, resistance is the primary factor in religious unbelief. And, somewhat similarly, J. Kellenberger argues, in *The Cognitivity of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), that

the requirements of living one's life in a relationship to God identifying one's will with God's will, and the life that we are required to give up, provide an ample motive for the unbelieving to avert their gaze from the evidence of God's presence. And this reason, be it noted, provides what could be a universal motive for self-deception on the part of unbelievers, even if to a great extent it is an unconscious motive [126f.].

Kellenberger claims, as well, that the main motives that have been suggested to account for self-deception among the religious are *not* universally applicable. This gives unbelievers yet another reason to think that everybody would believe in God if it weren't for sin.

20. I thank Arvin Vos, David Clowney, Michael Luccione, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Kenneth Konyn-dyk, Alvin Plantinga, and, especially, James F. Ross for important criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.