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Andrew McCafferty

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CALVIN AND INSIGNIFYING GROUNDS

Andrew McCafferty

Calvin claims that various created objects contain "marks" or "insignia" of being created by God. Using some examples, I first distinguish between insignifying and non-insignifying grounds for a basic belief—Calvin's claim being that we have insignifying grounds for belief in God. I then develop a "probabilistic support thesis." As a first approximation the thesis is that an insignifying disposition to form a basic belief is noetically proper only if the belief is probable relative to propositions describing the features which trigger the disposition. The direct implication for Calvin is that our insignifying disposition to believe that God created an object is noetically proper only if this belief has this property.

John Calvin claims that our universe has unmistakable marks of being God's creation. He writes,

[God] discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.... Upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered folks cannot plead the excuse of ignorance.¹

He expresses this same idea in various ways. He writes that we see in creation "signs of divinity," "innumerable evidences...that declare his wonderful wisdom," "insignia whereby he shows his glory to us."²

Alvin Plantinga interprets Calvin as maintaining that seeing certain objects (the night sky, a field of flowers, etc.) triggers in us a belief that God created them. This belief is not derived from other beliefs by a reasoning process. It is a basic belief grounded in the experience itself.³ Although this is reasonable, to articulate Calvin's view we must also distinguish between "insignifying" grounds and "non-insignifying" grounds for basic beliefs. The purpose of this paper is to make this distinction and raise some questions about it.

1. *Insignifying Grounds for a Basic Belief*

What does Calvin mean when he claims that created works bear God's marks and insignia? The sense of this can be illustrated by some examples:

- (1) A painting which bears Rembrandt's insignia. Suppose I see a painting in an art museum, and immediately realize, based on its look, that it is a Rembrandt painting. The painting evidences itself to be a Rembrandt, containing his insignia.

- (2) A symphony which bears the insignia of being the work of a great musician. Suppose I hear my first Bach symphony and am highly impressed. The symphony evidences to me that Bach was a good musician.
- (3) A dress which bears the insignia of a bridesmaid's dress. Suppose I'm at a formal party and realize that a certain woman is wearing a bridesmaid's dress. I might not know how I know this. The dress just has a bridesmaid's dress look.
- (4) A tree which bears the insignia of an oak tree. Suppose a fellow employee asks me what type of tree is in front of our office building. I look out the window at it and immediately answer, based on its look, that it is an oak tree. The tree bears the insignia of an oak tree.

These are plausible analogies to Calvin's claim. In each example an experience triggers a disposition in me to form a belief. This experience does not involve reasoning. Rather, the belief arises from perceiving certain marks or insignia.

I will call an experience of this sort an "insignifying ground" for the belief.⁴ Some commonplace examples of non-insignifying grounds for a basic belief would be:

- (5) I begin to wonder about what kind of tree is in front of my office building. After a few seconds of thinking, I remember that it is an oak tree.
- (6) I want to know what kind of tree is in front of our office building, so I ask a fellow employee. He tells me that it is an oak tree and I unquestionably believe him.
- (7) I read in our office newsletter that an oak tree has been planted in front of our building. Without thinking, I form the belief that this is so.

In each of these cases my belief is basic. However, it is not grounded in perceiving marks or insignia of an oak tree or of one being in front of my office building.

As an example of non-insignifying grounds for a basic theistic belief, suppose a young child is told by her mother that God is good. If the circumstances are right, this experience will ground a basic belief in the child. However, the child does not have the type of ground to which Calvin is pointing. The child does not see God's insignia.

2. *Insignifying Grounds and Probability*

The distinction between insignifying and non-insignifying grounds raises complex issues. I limit myself to developing—in an exploratory way—a "probabilistic support thesis" (PST). I begin by stating a preliminary version of the thesis. I then isolate the question it addresses, consider four objections, and comment on its implications for Calvin.

Call a disposition “insignifying” if it gives insignifying grounds for a belief. As a first approximation, the probabilistic support thesis (PST) is that if a disposition to believe *Q* is insignifying, then the triggering features of the disposition make *Q* probable. For example, PST asserts that when I believe on insignifying grounds that a tree is an oak tree, the tree having the features which trigger my disposition make it probable that the tree is an oak tree.⁵

A full defense of PST would require a discussion of probability. Here I simply assume that probability is an *a priori*, logical, objective relation between propositions. Although this theory is not problem free, of existing theories it is the one closest to what is intended by PST. PST is the thesis that propositions describing the triggering features of an insignifying disposition *partially entail* the belief.

The question which PST addresses is how the reliability of insignifying dispositions can be explained. To see why this is a problem, consider a non-insignifying disposition such as memory. It is a matter of debate what features trigger memory, but a plausible candidate is that the remembered proposition comes into mind with a certain “memory” feeling. The reliability of memory can be explained (roughly) as follows: this triggering feature reliably indicates that the proposition is in my memory, and this in turn reliably indicates that the belief is true.

The reliability of insignifying dispositions can’t be explained in this way. The triggering features do not indicate that the belief is included in some other source of information. Rather (according to PST) the triggering features of insignifying dispositions directly support the belief. An insignifying disposition is reliable because the belief is probable relative to propositions describing these features.

I use the Rembrandt example to raise objections to PST, and briefly argue that they don’t show that PST is unreasonable. In this example a subject is in a museum and features of a painting trigger an insignifying disposition to believe that it is a Rembrandt. These features would be difficult to pinpoint. But perhaps they are properties such as a Rembrandtesque color, texture, theme, etc. They may also include that the overall painting has a certain Rembrandtesque look.

As a first objection, suppose that our subject’s disposition to believe that a painting is a Rembrandt is triggered by Picasso paintings and not Rembrandt paintings. The disposition may still be insignifying; it may be triggered by noticing certain marks or insignia. However, the features of the painting which trigger the belief would not make it probable that the painting is a Rembrandt.

The point of this objection is that PST is meant to apply only to noetically proper or non-defective insignifying dispositions. PST should be read:

PST-version 2

If a *noetically proper* disposition to believe *Q* is insignifying, then *Q* is probable relative to propositions describing the disposition's triggering features.

This answers the objection because an insignifying disposition to believe of Picasso paintings that they are Rembrandts would be noetically defective.

A second objection argues that even if our subject's disposition is proper, the features which trigger it don't make it *a priori* probable that the painting is a Rembrandt. There is no logical connection between a painting having Rembrandtesque features and its being a Rembrandt. One might even argue that *a priori* it is just as likely that Picasso would paint with Rembrandt's style as it is that Rembrandt would.

In reply, implicit in PST is that the features of the disposition *together with a set of contextually provided background propositions* must make the belief probable. We have:

PST-version 3

If a noetically proper disposition to believe *Q* is insignifying, then *Q* is probable relative to propositions describing the disposition's triggering features together with background knowledge.

A plausible assumption (which I don't defend here) is that background propositions consist of the subject's relevant knowledge. This would include some knowledge about how Rembrandt painted (it includes at least that a certain set of paintings which the subject has seen before are Rembrandts, and that another set are not). It would also include various other propositions such as that painters tend to paint in a consistent style. Relative to this background knowledge, it is not unreasonable to suppose that propositions describing the triggering features of our subject's disposition partially entail that the painting is a Rembrandt.⁶

As a third objection, suppose that it is known to our subject that the museum contains a mixture of Rembrandt forgeries and authentic Rembrandt paintings. Suppose as well that she is able to distinguish between these—and so her disposition to believe that the painting she sees is a Rembrandt is noetically proper in this context.⁷ It still may be the case that the features which trigger the disposition are as likely to be present in forgeries as in authentic Rembrandt paintings (and so these features don't make it probable that the painting is a Rembrandt as opposed to a forgery). Perhaps our subject uses certain additional flaws which forgeries have to recognize when a painting is a forgery.

To be more precise, let *k* be our subject's background knowledge, *t* be a conjunctive proposition describing her disposition's triggering features, *f* be that the painting is a forgery, and *r* be that the painting is an (authentic)

Rembrandt. In the context envisioned, before seeing the painting the subject knows it is either a forgery or a Rembrandt, but has no reason to favor one of these; that is, $p(r/k)$ equals $p(f/k)$ equals one-half. Now, even though our subject can distinguish authentic Rembrandt paintings from forgeries, it still may be the case that $p(t/f.k)$ is as great as $p(t/r.k)$ —and so by Bayes' theorem $p(f/t.k)$ is as great as $p(r/t.k)$. This may be the case if the way our subject distinguishes forgeries is to spot some defect in them—some defect unrelated to the features which trigger her disposition to believe that this painting is a Rembrandt.

In reply, our subject's disposition (in the context envisioned) is proper only because forgeries have certain defects which she notices and which prevent the disposition from firing. Call such a defect a "defeater" for her disposition. To define "defeater" we would need to take into account defeaters for defeaters. However, the intuitive idea is enough for our purposes, and we modify PST to read:

PST-Final version

If a noetically proper disposition to believe Q is insignifying, then Q is probable relative to (1) propositions describing the dispositions triggering features, (2) the negations of propositions describing its defeaters and (3) background knowledge.

This version of PST overcomes the counter-example. Let $\sim d$ be the negation of the disjunction of propositions describing the defeaters for our subject's disposition. Assuming our subject's disposition is proper, it is not unreasonable to assume that $p(t.\sim d/r.k)$ will be significantly higher than $p(t.\sim d/f.k)$, and so r will be highly probable relative to $t.\sim d.k$.

A final objection, raised by an anonymous referee, involves a case of what Thomas Reid calls "original perception":

Reid thinks, for example, that among our powers of original perception is the ability, even of tiny infants, to perceive certain emotional states through the "natural language" of grimaces, voice, etc. In this connection, Reid mentions a man who could make babies cry by whistling a "sad" melody, or make them laugh by whistling a jig. Suppose that Reid is right about there being a power of "original" perception. Consider then a well played blues harmonica improviser, who can, through what he spontaneously plays, *manifest* or *evidence* an emotional state, triggering in us beliefs about the emotions he means to be expressing (or portraying). Does this entail that propositions describing the tune (the written score of it, say) must make probable some conclusion about the emotions the song is meant to manifest?

A minor problem with the objection is that it is unclear what the features are which trigger the disposition to believe that the musician means to express, say, a "blues" emotion. I don't see that we should suppose it is the written score—a written score can be played in different ways. The key feature may

be that the music has a certain phenomenal feel—a feel which we can identify as a “blues” feel.

A more serious problem concerns background knowledge. What background knowledge must a person have for a tune to “manifest” a blues emotion? Perhaps the point of the disposition’s being a power of *original* perception is that the subject does not need to have heard any similar tunes before. Still, it would seem to be the case that the subject must know something about blues emotions and the way they are usually expressed.

These problems aside, is this a counter-example to PST? The force of the objection can be seen by considering a simple version of one of Plantinga’s “accidentally reliable” examples.⁸ Consider world β —a possible world exactly like ours, except that (1) a trumpet sound in β triggers a belief that there is an elephant nearby and (2) whenever a trumpet sounds in β an invisible elephant is created nearby.

In world β (as on earth), a trumpet sound (the triggering feature of the disposition) does not make it probable that there is an elephant nearby (the belief formed). However, this example is not a counter-example to PST for two reasons. First, the disposition would not be noetically proper (even though reliable). Second, the disposition would not be insignifying. The trumpet would not “manifest” that there is an elephant nearby.⁹

The blues musician example, as I understand it, is an attempt to give an “accidentally reliable” example which overcomes these points. In contrast to the world β example, a blues phenomenal feel to a song does trigger in us a proper insignifying disposition to believe that the song is meant to express a blues emotional state. Yet, it is being suggested, as in the world β example, the connection between the triggering feature and the belief is contingent—the triggering feature does not make the belief probable.

A mistaken reply to this objection is that in world β the trumpet sound actually does make it probable that there is an elephant nearby (and so *a fortiori* a blues phenomenal feel makes it probable that the song is meant to express a blues emotion). There are two reasons it might be thought that the trumpet sound makes the presence of an elephant probable, but both of these miss the point of PST.

First, in world β the trumpet sound would make the presence of an elephant probable *if* we included in our background knowledge that the disposition is reliable (or that an elephant is created nearby when a trumpet sounds). But the claim of PST, if it is to be interesting, must be that the features which trigger the disposition make the belief probable *apart from any assumptions about the reliability of the disposition*. Otherwise, we couldn’t use PST to explain why the disposition is reliable—which is what PST is meant to do.

Second, on a relative frequency theory of probability it is true that in world

β the trumpet sound makes it probable that an elephant is nearby. But, probability in PST is not relative frequency. The world β example illustrates why. This reading of probability at least threatens to make PST trivial. A proper insignifying disposition is reliable (I assume), and so the features which trigger it will be highly correlated with the truth of the belief. This is true even for accidentally reliable dispositions, but it is just such dispositions that PST is meant to rule out as insignifying.

The blues musician example is complex. The nature of the connection between an emotion and outward expressions of it is complex, and it is difficult at best to make a probability judgement here. But I don't see that it is implausible to suppose that a well played blues song together with background knowledge makes it probable that the song is meant to express a blues emotion.

Finally, what are the implications of PST for Calvin? Calvin claims that the night sky gives proper insignifying grounds for the belief that God created it. The features of the night sky which trigger this belief are hard to specify, but would seem to include it having a certain beauty, vastness, and order. PST immediately implies that if this disposition is noetically proper, then propositions describing these features together with background knowledge and the absence of any defeaters make it probable that God created the night sky.

This implication is not that the subject (or anyone else) must be able to reason from these propositions to the belief that God exists. PST is not a thesis about reasoning or the ability to reason on reflection. All that is required is that, as a matter of fact, these propositions make the belief probable. I think it is reasonable to suppose that they do, but must leave this for further discussion.¹⁰

*Louisiana State University
Tao Sheng Seminary, Taipei*

NOTES

1. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.5.1, 1559 edition, ed. J. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960).

2. *Ibid.*, I.5.4, I.5.3, and I.5.1.

3. See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

4. The phrase "insignifying ground" was suggested to me by an anonymous referee.

5. I'm assuming that the dispositions are individuated by their triggering features, so that it is permissible to speak of "the" triggering features of a disposition. On the other hand, as noted later, I don't assume that every relevant change in context individuates dispositions.

6. Actually, most people have a good deal of relevant background information about Rembrandt and museums. Most people know that Rembrandt is one of a relatively small number of famous painters and that museums tend to have paintings by such painters. Including this sort of information in background knowledge eliminates a variety of related objections. For example, the information that museums do not display imitations makes it irrelevant that there is a high probability that there are many Rembrandt imitations which have the features which trigger our subject's disposition.

7. A disposition may be noetically proper in a context known to contain only Rembrandt and Picasso paintings, but not in a context known to contain Rembrandt paintings and Rembrandt forgeries. This requires speaking of "noetically proper in a context" rather than simply "noetically proper."

8. See Alvin Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function" in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2, *Epistemology*, ed. James Tomberlin (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1988).

9. The kind of evidence I would have for the presence of an elephant in world β would not be the kind of evidence Calvin is suggesting we have that God created the world.

10. A crucial question is whether we should take it as part of background knowledge that God exists. Dewey Houtenga argues that Calvin's claim that we can see God's insignia assumes Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*. He writes, "We can take Calvin as holding that knowing the universe as a sign of God presupposes knowing God himself as the creator whom it signifies." Houtenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 156.

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