

# COHERENTISM AND BELIEF FIXATION

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**ABSTRACT:** Plantinga argues that cases involving ‘fixed’ beliefs refute the coherentist thesis that a belief’s belonging to a coherent set of beliefs suffices for its having justification (warrant). According to Plantinga, a belief cannot be justified if there is a ‘lack of fit’ between it and its subject’s experiences. I defend coherentism by showing that if Plantinga means to claim that *any* ‘lack of fit’ destroys justification, his argument is obviously false. If he means to claim that *significant* ‘lack of fit’ destroys justification, his argument suffers a critical lack of support. Either way, Plantinga’s argument fails and coherentism emerges unscathed.

**KEYWORDS:** coherentism, Alvin Plantinga, warrant, justification

## 1. Introduction

Many theorists think cases involving ‘fixed’ or ‘frozen’ beliefs refute the following thesis:

**Coherence Suffices (CS):** If (i) S’s belief B belongs to a coherent belief set *and* (ii) S is not violating any intellectual duties in holding B, then B is epistemically justified (has a significant degree of warrant – the property enough of which makes true belief knowledge).

In what follows, I will defend CS from Alvin Plantinga’s<sup>1</sup> (1993a, 1993b) influential version of the ‘frozen beliefs’ objection to coherentism. Plantinga uses the term warrant in two very different though not always clearly delineated ways, only one of which applies with respect to his argument against CS. On the one hand Plantinga uses the term ‘warrant’ to describe the difference maker between true belief and knowledge. Alternatively Plantinga also describes the term ‘warrant’ as something that comes in degrees.<sup>2</sup> Indeed Plantinga describes himself as “committed to the thought that false beliefs can have *some* warrant, but not to the thought that they can have warrant *sufficient for knowledge*.”<sup>3</sup> This degreed notion of warrant describes something very much like what most philosophers call epistemic justification. Beliefs, both true and false, can have warrant on this view, to varying degrees without necessarily yielding knowledge. Plantinga’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, “Warrant and Accidentally True Belief,” *Analysis* 57, 2 (1997): 140-145.

<sup>3</sup> Plantinga, “Accidentally True Belief,” 140.

claim is not that persons in frozen belief cases lack knowledge-level warrant – this is indeed a weak claim. Rather Plantinga’s claim is much stronger. Plantinga claims that the beliefs of persons in these types of cases have no warrant whatsoever due to the lack of fit between those beliefs and the relevant experiences. But this is surely not an obvious claim. On the contrary, it seems intuitive to me that the beliefs of persons undergoing this kind of cognitive malfunction would have some degree of warrant, indeed a significant degree of warrant. Certainly not enough warrant to yield knowledge from true belief, but a significant degree nonetheless. Throughout the remainder of my paper, I will therefore present Plantinga’s argument against CS in terms of epistemic justification in order to avoid confusion with respect to the differences between knowledge-level warrant, which has little to no bearing in the context of Plantinga’s frozen belief objection to coherentism, and the degreed notion of warrant to which Plantinga appeals in this context.

Plantinga has us imagine a subject, S, whose system of beliefs is (initially) both coherent and appropriately responsive to her experiences. S’s cognitive faculties then malfunction; as a result, S’s beliefs are ‘fixed’ or ‘frozen’ in their present (coherent) state, unresponsive to subsequent changes in S’s experiences. According to Plantinga, such cases establish that a belief’s cohering with the other beliefs in its system does not suffice for the belief’s being epistemically justified.

I will disable this objection to CS. ‘Belief fixation’ cases like the ones Plantinga describes turn on the following premise:

If there is a lack of fit between one’s experiences and one’s beliefs, then one’s beliefs cannot be epistemically justified.

I will argue that this premise faces a dilemma. On the strong interpretation which takes Plantinga as asserting that *any* lack of fit between one’s experiences and one’s belief suffices to destroy justification for that belief, this premise is clearly false. If, on the other hand, we take Plantinga to be asserting the weaker claim that *a significant* lack of fit between one’s experiences and one’s belief suffices to destroy justification for that belief, then this premise suffers from a critical lack of support. Either way, Plantinga’s argument fails and CS emerges unscathed. (I strongly suspect that my objection to Plantinga’s argument applies to other ‘anti-CS’ arguments similar to Plantinga’s [e.g., that developed by Richard Feldman<sup>4</sup>], but won’t have space here to extend my objection beyond Plantinga.)

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

## 2. Plantinga's Paradigm Case: The Epistemically Inflexible Climber

In what follows, I will examine and critique one of Plantinga's most famous alleged counterexamples to CS. Since all of Plantinga's attempted counterexamples to CS follow the same structure as the one which I now critique, the following objections can be generalized to impugn Plantinga's other examples.

Ric is climbing Guide's Wall... [While he is] enjoying the mountain sunshine and idly looking around, he forms the beliefs that Cascade Canyon is down to his left, that the cliffs of Mount Owen are directly in front of him, that there is a hawk gliding in lazy circles 200 feet below him, that it is broad daylight, that the sun is wonderfully warm and pleasant, that he is wearing his new *Fire* rock shoes, and so on. His beliefs, we may stipulate, are coherent. Now add that Ric is struck by an errant burst of high-energy cosmic radiation, causing subtle but pronounced brain damage. As a result, he is subject to cognitive malfunction: his beliefs become *fixed*, no longer responsive to changes in his experience. No matter what his experience, his beliefs remain the same... That evening, in a desperate last-ditch attempt at therapy, his partner takes him to the opera in nearby Jackson, where the New York Metropolitan Opera on tour is performing *La Traviata*. Ric's experience is the same as everyone else's; he is inundated by wave after wave of golden sound. The effort at therapy unhappily fails; Ric's beliefs remain fixed and wholly unresponsive to his experience... Furthermore (since he believes the very same things he believed when seated on the ledge), his beliefs are coherent. But surely they have little or no warrant for him... Here the problem was an unfortunate lack of fit between the way in which Ric appeared to – 'operatically' as we might say – and the beliefs he held about his surroundings.<sup>5</sup>

### 2.1 Conscious vs. Nonconscious Experience: An Implied Distinction

It is at first tempting to say that Ric's cognitive malfunction is far more severe than Plantinga lets on. Intuitively, we might find ourselves attracted to the idea that in losing the ability to form new beliefs, one loses the ability to have experiences generally. This notion rests on the view that experiences and beliefs are in some way conceptually linked – if you have an experience of the world, then you have a belief about the world. Upon reflection however, we find that this intuition is simply not tenable.

As I sit in my study hunched over my keyboard composing these words, I have a wide variety of subjective experiences – that is to say that I am being appeared to in many different ways. I have subjective experiences of my monitor in front of me, of my keyboard clicking and clacking beneath my fingers, and of

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<sup>5</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 179-181.

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the breeze blowing gently from my window. And indeed I do form beliefs about the world on the basis of these subjective experiences (that there is a breeze coming through my window, that my monitor is in front of me, that I have a keyboard and that it is a noisy keyboard at that). But I have numerous other subjective experiences on the basis of which I do not form new beliefs about the world. Indeed, we can conceive of many circumstances where we have experiences, but where we do not form beliefs about the world on the basis of those experiences. Consider the following example:

Suppose that Tom at time  $t_1$  differs (perceptibly) from Tom at  $t_2$  only in having a moustache at  $t_2$ . S sees Tom at both times but does not notice the moustache – is not, therefore aware that he has grown a moustache. Since, however, S spends twenty minutes talking to Tom in broad daylight, it is reasonable to say that although S did not notice the moustache, he (must) nonetheless have seen it.<sup>6</sup>

In this example S is being appeared to moustache-ly but does not notice that Tom has grown a moustache, does not therefore form the belief that Tom has a moustache from his experience of Tom's moustache. From these sorts of examples, we can draw a fairly straightforward distinction between what I will call 'conscious experiences' – experiences on the basis of which we do form beliefs about the world – and 'nonconscious experiences' – experiences like S's experience of Tom's moustache, on the basis of which we do not form new beliefs about the world.<sup>7</sup>

The details of the epistemically inflexible climber case seem to indicate that Plantinga has this distinction or something very much like this distinction in mind with regard to Ric's operatic experiences. Plantinga needs such a distinction in order to explain how it is that Ric can continue to have experiences even though

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Dretske, "Conscious Experience," *Mind* 102, (1993): 267.

<sup>7</sup> Dretske uses this illustration for a slightly different purpose. For Dretske, all experiences are conscious. The distinction which Dretske uses the example of Tom's moustache to explain is one between a person's conscious awareness of things (S's experience of Tom's moustache at  $t_2$ ) and a person's conscious awareness of facts (S's belief *that* Tom has a moustache at  $t_2$ ). Thus for Dretske one can have a conscious experience that one is not conscious of having, because being conscious of having an experience involves the operation of concepts involved in the formation of beliefs. So again in reference to Tom's moustache, S's believing that Tom has a moustache at  $t_2$  involves the concept of a moustache and the identification of that concept with the thing being experienced. But all this is to say that one can have an experience without forming a belief about that experience – roughly what my distinction between 'conscious' and 'nonconscious' experience is designed to illustrate. I want to be clear however that my use of Dretske's illustration does not amount to the claim that Dretske would endorse my view. Rather, here I am using Dretske's example to illustrate a distinction which is implied by the way Plantinga constructs the case of the epistemically inflexible climber.

his ability to form new beliefs has been lost. All of Ric's post-radiation experiences must be of the nonconscious type. To say otherwise – i.e., to say that Ric has conscious experiences of the opera – would be to say that Ric forms new operative beliefs. But this conclusion would call into question the very point of Plantinga's example. Thanks to the belief fixing ray of cosmic radiation, Ric's coherent set of beliefs cannot change. He can neither lose the beliefs that he had when he was struck nor can he receive new beliefs based on his post-radiation experiences. But if we stipulate that one has a conscious experience only if that experience generates a new belief, it follows that Ric no longer has new conscious experiences. So, if Plantinga refuses to invoke the notion of *nonconscious* experience, then his example is incoherent, and so not a genuine counterexample to CS.

As we shall see, even if we do interpret Plantinga as holding that Ric's post-radiation experiences are of the non-conscious type, his argument against CS still faces a rather nasty dilemma.

## 2.2 Plantinga's Argument

I now turn back to Plantinga's paradigm 'belief fixation' case, and the argument against CS it yields. The argument against CS arising from the case of the 'Epistemically Inflexible Climber' can be formalized as follows:

1. If CS is true, then Ric's (post-radiation) beliefs are epistemically justified.
2. But due to cognitive malfunction, there is a lack of fit between Ric's nonconscious experiences and his beliefs.
3. If there is a lack of fit between Ric's nonconscious experiences and his beliefs, then Ric's beliefs are not epistemically justified.
4. So: Ric's beliefs are not epistemically justified. [2, 3]

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C. Therefore: CS is false. [1, 4]

## 3. Plantinga's Dilemma

I will show that the above argument faces the following dilemma: Premise three of Plantinga's argument is ambiguous, admitting of a strong interpretation (3S) and a weak interpretation (3W). We can generalize these interpretations as follows.

- 3S:** If there is *any* lack of fit between one's nonconscious experiences and one's beliefs, then one's beliefs are not epistemically justified.
- 3W:** If there is a *significant* lack of fit between one's nonconscious experiences and one's beliefs, then one's beliefs are not epistemically justified.

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As we shall see, the strong interpretation (3S) is too strong, ruling out justification for one's beliefs not only in belief fixation cases but in ordinary cases as well. But just as the strong interpretation is too strong, we shall see that the weak interpretation (3W) isn't strong enough. Applying the term 'significant' to the antecedent of premise three can only get Plantinga so far. In order to use 3W as the central premise in his argument against CS, he'll need to rule out certain alternative explanations of the absence of justification in cases featuring a significant lack of fit between nonconscious experiences and belief, explanations that (unlike Plantinga's) focus on something other than the lack of fit itself; and he'll have to do this without assuming his own theory of warrant (for, given the overall structure of Plantinga's argumentation, his objection to CS is designed to lend support to his preferred theory of warrant, 'proper functionalism'). In either case, Plantinga's central premise will remain open to question, and Plantinga's argument against CS will be on shaky ground at best.

### 3.1 Does 'Any' Lack of Fit Suffice to Destroy Justification?

The first horn of the dilemma facing Plantinga's argument suggests that a subject S's belief has positive epistemic status (justification) only when that belief fits perfectly with S's relevant nonconscious experience. If there is any discord between one's belief and one's experience, that belief cannot be epistemically justified. But I submit that this strong interpretation is simply too strong. As the following example demonstrates, even Plantinga will want to concede that a belief of yours may be justified so long as the lack of fit between your belief and the relevant experience is only slight.

#### *The Truck Driver Case (TD1)*

Consider the case of the long-distance truck driver. Let us stipulate that the trucker is not paying attention to the time. At 5am, the trucker forms a justified belief that it is pitch black outside. His pitch black belief coheres with the other beliefs in his belief set. The trucker then 'zones out' until 5:05am. At some point during this interval, the sun begins to rise. Near the end of the interval, the trucker's experience has changed slightly (due to the sun's starting to rise) but because he is not attending to his 'lightness' experiences he simply hasn't noticed *that* it is no longer pitch black. He hasn't formed any new beliefs based on these experiences. Rather throughout the interval, the trucker continues believing it is pitch black out. This is not to say that the trucker did not form other beliefs during these five minutes: we may allow that he did (i.e. that the road curves to the right up ahead, that the radio is playing his favorite song, etc). Nor is it to say that these new beliefs did not cohere with his 'pitch black' belief. It is simply to

say that the trucker's pitch black belief did not change even though there was a slight change in his 'lightness' experience.<sup>8</sup>

Now, some will be tempted to reply that after five minutes of sunrise, the circumstances informing the contents of the trucker's 'lightness' experience will have changed so drastically that the idea of his having a justified 'pitch black' belief becomes outlandish – the trucker should have formed a new belief. I submit however that such a response misunderstands the distinction between conscious and nonconscious experience implicit in Plantinga's argument. Certainly, at some point during the morning, the trucker's nonconscious experience of daylight will become conscious causing his 'pitch black' belief to change, but then he would be having a conscious experience of daylight rather than a nonconscious one. At any rate, the temptation to withdraw justification from the trucker's 'pitch black' belief should lose its intuitive appeal if we modify the example so as to shorten the time during which the trucker 'zones out' to 1 minute or less. So, at 5:01am the trucker's belief set includes the 'pitch black' belief mentioned above even though he is being appeared to in a manner that is just slightly lighter than pitch black. To say that this belief lacks justification would be to endorse a brand of skepticism with regard to justification which most epistemologists (Plantinga included) would find hard to swallow.<sup>9</sup>

But 3S rules that our truck driver is *not* justified in his pitch black belief. The truck driver's pitch black belief does not fit perfectly with his slightly lighter

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<sup>8</sup> This case (TD1) and the next (TD2) were inspired by a similar truck driving case offered originally by David Armstrong, *The Nature of Mind and Other Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 59. This case was later referenced in Dretske, "Conscious Experience," 271.

<sup>9</sup> One further response to this case might involve the claim that normal human beings are not able to make extremely fine discriminations between it being perfectly pitch black or just slightly lighter than pitch black. Moreover, normal human beings ought to be well aware of this fact. Consequently, even if it is perfectly pitch black out, it is not plausible that the truck driver is justified in so believing. At best, what he is justified in believing is that it is somewhere in the vicinity of being pitch black. Believing anything more precise than that is simply not justified for such an individual. But if he only justifiably believes the less precise claim, then his belief still continues to fit the subsequent experiences he has at 5:05. I suspect however that this response leads once again to an implausible skepticism about what we're justified in believing. Indeed, any belief we have as to quantitative measurement would be deemed unjustified without adding the clause 'somewhere in the vicinity.' Thus, I would not be justified in believing such things as "my two-year-old son weighs twenty-eight pounds." Rather, I would only be justified in believing something like, "my son, who is approximately two years old, weighs somewhere in the neighborhood of twenty-eight pounds." With respect to our beliefs about the world most of us simply do not hedge our bets in this way.

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than pitch black experience and on 3S, no lack of fit, no matter how slight, is compatible with that belief's being justified. But this just isn't true. Our sensory experiences are constantly changing, our beliefs are not. We want to say that under normal circumstances, a belief is justified even when the fit between it and our experience is slightly off. Moreover, an approach to justification which cannot account for this intuition is one which will fail to attract those already convinced by or on the fence about CS.

So, it looks as though a belief's being justified does not require that it fit perfectly with one's nonconscious experience. But then premise 3 (or, in this case 3S) of Plantinga's argument is dubious at best. From this we must conclude that if we interpret Plantinga's third premise strongly then his argument against CS fails.

### 3.2 Does 'Significant' Lack of Fit Suffice to Destroy Justification?

Perhaps Plantinga will respond by saying that TD1 is different from Ric's case in the following way: In TD1 (and in cases relevantly similar to TD1) the discord between the trucker's pitch black belief and the trucker's slightly less than pitch black experience is slight, whereas the difference between Ric's mountaintop beliefs and Ric's operative experience is significant. So, Plantinga might concede that a slight lack of fit between one's beliefs and one's experiences does not suffice to eliminate the epistemic justification of those beliefs. It is however open to Plantinga to claim that when the lack of fit between one's beliefs and one's experiences is radical (like in the case of the epistemically inflexible climber) justification is lost. All of this is to say that Plantinga could respond with an endorsement of the weak interpretation of the third premise of his argument (3W). It is, at this point, important to note that though 3W would no doubt be deemed acceptable by many committed foundationalists, foundationalists are not the target audience for Plantinga's argument. Plantinga's target audience includes proponents of CS and those who remain uncommitted with respect to CS (persons for whom the truth of 3W will not be regarded as obvious). Thus, Plantinga might try to support 3W by generalizing from the following TD1 inspired case:

#### *The Modified Truck Driver Case (TD2)*

Like the previous example, suppose that the truck driver is not aware of the time, that he forms a pitch black belief at 5:00am, and that that pitch black belief coheres with the rest of his beliefs. But whereas the truck driver from the previous example 'zones out' for only 5 minutes, this truck driver "zones out" for 5 hours. Over the course of this 5 hour time period the truck driver's pitch black belief does not change despite the fact that he sees the sun in the sky, that is, he is being appeared to sun-ly. Surely this truck driver is not justified in his pitch



black belief. His pitch black belief exhibits a significant lack of fit with his sunlight experience.

Unfortunately for Plantinga, it would be hasty to generalize to 3W from TD2 because it is not clear that significant lack of fit offers the best explanation as to why we should conclude that the truck driver's belief is unjustified. Unless Plantinga can explain why the significant lack of fit between the truck driver's belief and experience accounts for the loss of justification for the truck driver's pitch black belief, it is open to the proponent of CS to either argue that the truck driver remains justified in believing that it is pitch black so long as his pitch black belief continues to cohere with the rest of his beliefs, or (more plausibly) to offer another 'CS-friendly' explanation for why that justification has been lost which does not appeal to a lack of fit between experience and belief.

Plantinga seems to have only two options available. Either (a) the problem with the truck driver in this example is that he has suffered some sort of *cognitive malfunction* prohibiting him from forming relevant beliefs about the world based on his subjective experience, or (b) the problem with the truck driver in this example is that he has *neglected his epistemic duty* to form relevant beliefs about the world based on his subjective experience.

The first of these options has the virtue of consistency. Cognitive malfunction was also to blame for the significant lack of fit between the experiences and the beliefs of the protagonist in Plantinga's other example. Unfortunately the consistency of this option is also its undoing. To see why, it is necessary to take a step back and examine Plantinga's overall dialectic purpose. Ultimately Plantinga means to introduce his own theory of warrant, a theory which explains warrant (that stuff enough of which suffices to make true belief knowledge) in terms of one's properly functioning cognitive faculties operating in the right kind of environment.<sup>10</sup> But before he can explain his own theory of warrant, he has to motivate his view by providing theory independent reasons as to why other leading theories are untenable and thus inferior to his own (otherwise, his argument for his distinctive theory of warrant from his claims about cases like that of Ric is viciously circular).

Enter Plantinga's 'belief fixation' argument against CS. The case of the epistemically inflexible climber is supposed to put the nail in the coffin for CS by showing that it is obviously wrong regardless as to the theory of warrant one takes. Certainly it is open to Plantinga to show how his own view fares better

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed exposition of Plantinga's own theory of warrant, see Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, chapters 1 and 2. See also, Alvin Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2, Epistemology (1988): 32-47.

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given the details of this sort of case, but it is not open to Plantinga to take his own view for granted as part of his criticism of CS (given that his objection to coherentism serves as a premise in his overall argument for proper functionalism). If Plantinga's proper function view is meant to rise from the ashes of CS, he cannot use an argument from proper function to set CS aflame. To do so would be to argue in a circle.

The second of these options does not fare any better. If we incorporate a negligence condition into the antecedent of 3W, we make Plantinga's overall objection to coherentism considerably less plausible:

**3WW:** If there is a significant lack of fit between one's nonconscious experiences and one's beliefs and *one has violated certain of one's epistemic duties*, then one's beliefs are not epistemically justified.

But this weakened premise presents its own dilemma for Plantinga's argument. On the one hand, using 3WW requires Plantinga to strengthen premise 2 of his anti-CS argument in a way that makes it false – the significant lack of fit between Ric's experiences and Ric's beliefs is due not to epistemic negligence but to a ray of belief fixing cosmic radiation. Thus, Ric is in no way responsible for his predicament. On the other hand, if we allow Plantinga to specify that the ray of cosmic radiation which fixes Ric's beliefs does so by somehow making Ric neglect his epistemic duties, premise 1 of Plantinga's argument is no longer true.

Recall that CS, the thesis that Plantinga's belief fixation case is meant to refute, specifies that a belief B is justified for S if B belongs to a coherent belief set and S is not violating any intellectual duties in holding B. Using the modified case would make premise 1 of Plantinga's argument false: CS simply does not imply that Ric's belief in the modified 'negligence-involving' case is justified. Hence, even if Ric was somehow epistemically blameworthy for his cognitive malfunction it would be open to the coherence theorist to point out that Plantinga's modified case simply isn't of the right form to be a counterexample to CS, since CS's antecedent is false on the interpretation now being considered.

So the advocate of CS could claim that if the significant lack of fit between the truck driver's pitch black belief and his experience of the sun is caused by some sort of cognitive malfunction (as was the case with Ric the rock climber) it is not clear that the truck driver is unjustified in believing that it is still pitch black out insofar as coherence suffices for justification. If on the other hand, the significant lack of fit between the truck driver's pitch black belief and his experience of the sun is the result of epistemic negligence on the part of the truck driver, the advocate of CS could respond by arguing that it is the truck driver's

negligence which is responsible for his pitch black belief being unjustified, not the lack of fit between it and his experience of the sun.

Now, it might be objected that I have stacked the deck with my choice of examples. The circumstances described in TD2 are such that we cannot help but conclude that our trucker has neglected his epistemic duty. A truck driver who zones out for five hours at a time while driving such a large and potentially dangerous vehicle is not only epistemically blameworthy but morally blameworthy as well. There may not be many obligations for truck drivers but at the very least one of them involves the duty to consciously monitor one's environment. So, the objection goes, by using a truck driver who zones out for five hours as the protagonist in TD2, I have manipulated the reader into concluding as I do that negligence is the only real explanation for a lack of fit between experiences and beliefs. But what would happen if we considered another, less leading example?

### *The Case of the Insatiable Scholar (ISC)*

Imagine a somewhat eccentric scholar who has made it her life's work to study that which she loves the most: the writings of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Our scholar has spent many a day completely absorbed in her study, reading for hours on end without taking so much as a short break to eat, drink or go to the bathroom. While she is reading Hegel, our scholar 'gets into the zone' focusing only on her reading despite the fact that she has many nonconscious sensory experiences on the basis of which no beliefs are formed. One Saturday, right after a rather large breakfast of pancakes and eggs, our scholar forms the belief that she is full. She forms this belief right as she begins one of these extended study sessions. We may specify that this fullness belief is justified, it coheres with the rest of her beliefs. Our scholar then 'gets into the zone' and proceeds to read Hegel for the next 12 hours straight. During this time our scholar believes that she is full despite the fact that over time her experience changes. But surely after 12 hours our scholar is not justified in believing that she is full. For now our scholar experiences an intense hunger which exhibits a significant lack of fit with her fullness belief. But unlike the truck driver in TD2, it makes little sense to assign blame to our scholar for not noticing her hunger experience. Our scholar has not violated any epistemic duties/requirements stemming from her professional and/or moral obligations. Indeed, in this example our scholar has dutifully fulfilled her obligations of scholarship.

Unfortunately, I don't think that this example fares any better than TD2 with regard to the violation of one's *purely* epistemic obligations. Certainly, both the truck driver and the Hegel scholar have *occupation specific* epistemic duties to fulfill. But to say that fulfilling the epistemic obligations imposed by one's occupation suffices to fulfill the epistemic obligations stipulated by the second

clause of CS is to confuse two different kinds of epistemic obligation. The duties which must not be violated according to CS fall in line with Chisholm's notion of epistemic obligation, a notion which Plantinga himself explains as a duty we have "qua intellectual beings" – "that is, just by virtue of being the sort of creature that is capable of grasping and believing (or withholding) propositions."<sup>11</sup> These sorts of obligations I will call *purely* epistemic/intellectual obligations or requirements. Plantinga notes that "our natures are such that for each of a wide variety of circumstances there are certain beliefs we are strongly disposed or inclined to form and when we find ourselves in these circumstances, we find ourselves with those beliefs."<sup>12</sup> In these circumstances, our epistemic duty or obligation (qua intellectual beings) is to "fall in with our natural inclinations and accept the beliefs nature inclines us towards."<sup>13</sup> But then it seems that the case of the insatiable scholar assumes a faulty view of (what I'm calling) purely epistemic duty, one which somehow absolves the Hegel scholar by saying that she has no such epistemic duty to monitor her fullness experiences. For if all intellectual beings have a purely epistemic duty to accept the beliefs which their nature inclines them to accept (as Plantinga suggests, at least), and if it is natural that a person should have intense hunger experiences after 12 hours with no food, then even if she fulfills the epistemic duties stemming from her professional obligations, the Hegel scholar is flouting her purely epistemic duties by ignoring her hunger experiences.

In the end, then, employing the Insatiable Scholar Case (ISC) on 3W's behalf gives rise to the same dilemma facing TD2: step 2 of Plantinga's argument is false if Ric's case *isn't* modified to be like ISC, whereas step 1 is false if the case *is* so modified (since the second clause of CS should be understood in terms of purely epistemic duties).

Though I suppose it is possible that Plantinga could develop a modification to 3W which does not rely on epistemic negligence and which would be applicable to cases of 'belief fixation' without thereby referencing proper function, I find it highly unlikely that such a modification exists. As it stands, the weaker version of Plantinga's key premise, while not conclusively false, is in critical need of support. Thus, on the weak interpretation of 'lack of fit,' Plantinga's argument against CS fails.

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<sup>11</sup> Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status," 6.

<sup>12</sup> Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status," 7.

<sup>13</sup> Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status," 7.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Insofar as Plantinga's 'belief fixation' cases are meant to persuade proponents of CS and those who remain uncommitted with respect to CS that CS is obviously false, his objection simply doesn't work. I have shown that Plantinga's central premise faces a nasty dilemma. On the strong interpretation it is obviously false, and on the weak interpretation it's in critical need of support. As a result Plantinga's 'belief fixation' arguments fail to convincingly refute CS.