

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 15 | Issue 3

Article 1

---

7-1-1998

## Calvin's "Sense of Divinity" and Externalist Knowledge of God

David Reiter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Reiter, David (1998) "Calvin's "Sense of Divinity" and Externalist Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol15/iss3/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# CALVIN'S "SENSE OF DIVINITY" AND EXTERNALIST KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

David Reiter

In this paper I explore and defend an interpretation of Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity which implies the following claim: (CSD) All sane cognizers know that God exists. I argue that externalism about knowledge comports well with claim CSD, and I explore various questions about the character of the theistic belief implied by CSD. For example, I argue that CSD implies that all sane cognizers possess functionally rational theistic belief. In the final sections of the paper, I respond to two main objections and argue that CSD is consistent with the existence of various kinds of atheists and agnostics.

According to John Calvin, human beings naturally possess a "sense of divinity"—i.e., they naturally possess some awareness of God. This paper explores a robust interpretation of Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity, according to which any sane cognizer knows that God exists. This interpretation is robust in at least two respects. First, with respect to the *level* of awareness, this interpretation asserts that the sense of divinity yields knowledge of God, as opposed to yielding mere justified or rational belief in God. Second, with respect to the *scope* of awareness, this interpretation asserts that knowledge of God is nearly universal among human cognizers. In this paper, I articulate and explore this interpretation, and then defend it against two main objections.

The paper is structured as follows: In section one, I highlight three main features of Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity and formulate the robust interpretation. In section two, I briefly characterize the externalist approach to knowledge, and explain why it comports well with Calvin's doctrine. Section three is a discussion of four questions: 1. Does Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity entail that sane cognizers have *basic* theistic belief? 2. Does it entail the existence of a successful natural theology? 3. Does it entail that sane cognizers have *rational* theistic belief? 4. Does it entail that there is no evidence *against* theism? Sections four and five deal with two objections that might be raised against CSD. Section four considers the claim that CSD is objectionable because it precludes the existence of atheists. Finally, section five considers the claim that CSD is objectionable because it precludes the existence of agnostics.

## 1. Calvin's Doctrine of the Sense of Divinity

The essence of Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity is that God has naturally implanted in each human being a "sense of divinity" or



“seed of religion”: “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.” (I.3.1., 43)<sup>1</sup> By virtue of this sense of divinity, human beings naturally possess a kind of knowledge of God. I will now highlight three features of Calvin’s doctrine of the sense of divinity.

1. Although the sense of divinity provides some kind of knowledge of God, it does not provide knowledge of God in what I shall call the *strict or proper sense*. On Calvin’s understanding, knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense involves more than a mere cognitive grasp of the proposition that *God exists*—it also essentially involves grasping how one ought to be situated as a creature with respect to this God:

Now, the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what it is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety. (I.2.1., 39).

The point to be emphasized here is that Calvin’s concept of knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense is a religiously rich concept. For the possession of knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense entails the practice of piety. McNeill comments that “It is a favorite emphasis in Calvin that *pietas*, piety, in which reverence and love of God are joined, is prerequisite to any true knowledge of God.” (39)

Under the fall, the sense of divinity does not provide us with knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense. Calvin indicates that if Adam had not fallen, then humans would naturally possess knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense: “the very order of nature would have led us [to this knowledge] if Adam had remained upright.” (I.2.1., 40)

2. Although the sense of divinity does not (under the fall) provide knowledge of God *in the strict or proper sense*, Calvin holds that it does provide what I shall call *bare knowledge* that God exists. In my usage, to say that a person possesses bare knowledge of God is precisely to say that he or she knows that the proposition *God exists* is true. I am calling this “bare knowledge” in order to sharply differentiate it from what we have been calling “knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense.” Possessing bare knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense entails possessing bare knowledge of God, but the converse is not true.

The heading of book I chapter 3 is “The Knowledge of God Has Been Naturally Implanted in the Minds of Men.” And Calvin makes it clear that the sense of divinity provides this bare knowledge of God even under the fall:

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. Since, therefore, *men one and all perceive that*

*there is a God* and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will. [emphasis mine] (I.3.1, 43-44)

It is evident from the last sentence of this passage that the sense of divinity provides knowledge of God's existence even under the fall—for those who perceive that there is a God are *condemned by their failure to honor Him*.<sup>2</sup>

3. Although the sense of divinity does provide the bare knowledge that God exists, Calvin is very emphatic that under the fall, the sense of divinity is compatible with all sorts of superstition and rebellion against God. (Note that this is a consequence of the first point discussed above, that the sense of divinity under the fall fails to provide knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense.) This is the main theme of chapter four of book one, which is headed "This knowledge [provided by the sense of divinity] is either smothered or corrupted, partly by ignorance, partly by malice." In this chapter, Calvin stresses that as a consequence of the fall, people naturally respond to bare knowledge of God in an inappropriate manner:

Experience teaches that the seed of religion has been divinely planted in all men. But barely one man in a hundred can be found who nourishes in his own heart what he has conceived; and not even one in whom it matures, much less bears fruit in its season [cf. Ps. 1:3]. Now some lose themselves in their own superstition, while others of their own evil intention revolt from God, yet all fall away from true knowledge of him. As a result, no real piety remains in the world. But as to my statement that some erroneously slip into superstition, I do not mean by this that their ingenuousness should free them from blame. For the blindness under which they labor is almost always mixed with proud vanity and obstinacy. (I.4.1, 47)

It is clear then that while knowledge of God in the strict or proper sense entails pious living, bare knowledge of God does not.

Having briefly reviewed some of the main features of Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity, I now turn to formulating what I take to be a central implication of Calvin's doctrine. We have seen that according to Calvin, "men one and all perceive that there is a God." (I.3.1, 43-44) Therefore, I think the following is a reasonable starting point:

- (1) For any human being S, S knows that God exists.

Perhaps someone might object against (1) that Calvin means to claim only that all *mature* or *adult* human beings perceive that there is a God. However, I think this is mistaken, since Calvin writes that: "it [the sense of divinity] 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 that end." (I.3.1, 46) Nevertheless, I think that it is appropriate to qualify (1) for the following reason. Even if Calvin means to assert that human

beings possess knowledge of God at birth or at some stage prior to birth, it does not follow that he also means to assert that human beings possess knowledge of God at even earlier stages of existence. Consider a human zygote. If, as I believe, a human zygote is a human being, then (1) implies that this zygote possesses propositional knowledge that God exists. But we do not know that a human zygote even has the *capacity* to have propositional knowledge. Therefore, I believe it is reasonable to amend (1) as follows:

(1\*) For any human being S, if S has any propositional knowledge at time t, then S knows at t that God exists.

If we let the term “cognizer” mean “human being who has some propositional knowledge,” then (1\*) is equivalent to the claim that all cognizers know that God exists. This claim allows for the possibility that there are some human beings who, perhaps because they are at very early stages of existence, are not yet cognizers.<sup>3</sup> But I believe we ought to add one more qualification to (1\*). I think it is reasonable to qualify (1\*) to allow for the possibility that someone who is insane or suffers from severe brain damage might have some propositional knowledge but nevertheless lack knowledge that God exists. Here I propose to use the term “sane” to mean something like “someone who is neither insane nor suffers from severe brain damage.” So we can now amend (1\*) as follows:

(CSD) For any sane human being S, if S has any propositional knowledge at t, then S knows at t that God exists.<sup>4</sup>

Given our terminology, (CSD) can also be expressed as the claim that for any sane cognizer S, S knows that God exists. Given the standard assumption that knowledge entails belief, CSD implies that all sane cognizers are theists.<sup>5</sup> Of course, CSD implies neither that every sane cognizer is a *self-conscious* theist (i.e., someone who is aware of their belief that God exists) nor a *professing* theist (i.e., someone who professes or claims before others belief that God exists). In the final sections of this paper, we will consider the question of whether CSD is consistent with the existence of sane cognizers who are either atheists or agnostics.

## 2. The Significance of Externalism for CSD

In this section, I want to explain why the externalist approach to knowledge is relevant to our discussion of Calvin’s doctrine of the sense of divinity. In order to explain the externalist approach to knowledge, it is first necessary to explain internalism about warrant, where warrant is that which makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief.<sup>6</sup> An internalist approach to knowledge is one which places one or more *internalist constraints* on warrant.<sup>7</sup> Now rather than attempting to give a general characterization of just what counts as an internalist constraint (a task that might involve considerable difficulty), I will provide a few paradigm examples of internalist constraints:

- a. S is warranted in believing that p only if S can tell just by reflection that S is violating no epistemic duties in believing that p.
- b. S is warranted in believing that p only if S can tell just by reflection that S has adequate reasons for believing that p.
- c. S is warranted in believing that that p only if S has adequate reasons for believing that p.

The externalist approach to knowledge is simply the denial of internalism; externalism imposes no internalist constraints on warrant. Here then are some examples of externalist theories of knowledge:

- a. Skp (i.e., S knows that p) iff S believes p because p is true (causal theory).
- b. Skp iff S's belief p is true and reliably produced (reliabilism).
- c. Skp iff S's belief p is true and produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties (abbreviated statement of Plantinga's warrant theory).

The causal and reliabilist theories were both proposed by Alvin Goldman.<sup>8</sup> While it is generally acknowledged that the causal theory suffers from serious difficulties, it is arguable that reliabilism is the dominant theory of knowledge in contemporary epistemology. However, Alvin Plantinga has argued that reliabilism is inadequate, and that his warrant theory is a superior alternative to reliabilism.<sup>9</sup> But the point I want to stress here is that on each of these three theories, it is *in general* possible for a person to possess knowledge without satisfying any internalist constraints. For example, on a simple reliabilist theory of knowledge, it is quite possible for me to know that it is 80 degrees outside, even if I cannot tell just by reflection that I have adequate reasons for believing this.

There are at least two potentially attractive features of externalist approaches to knowledge. First, externalism appears to provide simple solutions to some traditional epistemological problems. For example, philosophers have grappled with the problem of whether beliefs formed on the basis of induction have positive epistemic status. Reliabilist externalism provides a simple and reassuring solution to this problem: if true beliefs based on induction are formed in a sufficiently reliable fashion, then they count as knowledge—problem solved! Second, because externalism imposes no internalist constraints on warrant, it makes knowledge more accessible to infants, young children, and animals. For satisfaction of the internalist constraints often requires that the cognizer possess well-developed cognitive faculties and perhaps even concepts such as that of epistemically justified belief. This general point carries implications for our discussion of knowledge of God. If there are no internalist constraints on warranted belief in God, then knowledge of God also becomes more widely accessible.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Alston has claimed that on a relatively externalist approach to knowledge, "it is quite possible that knowledge of God extends more widely than many of us suspect."<sup>11</sup> Alston's point suggests that the externalist approach to knowl-

edge should be attractive to the defender of CSD. Therefore, throughout the rest of this paper, I shall adopt the externalist approach to knowledge as a working hypothesis. Hence, the remainder of the paper will explore the implications of (CSD) on an externalist reading.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Exploring Some Implications of CSD

In this section, we will discuss four questions, each of which explores implications of CSD. These questions are: 1. Does CSD entail that sane cognizers hold *basic* theistic belief?, 2. Does CSD entail the existence of a successful natural theology?, 3. Does CSD entail that sane cognizers hold *rational* theistic belief?, and finally, 4. Does CSD entail that there is no evidence against theism?

1. We noted above that given the standard assumption that knowledge entails belief, CSD implies that every sane cognizer holds theistic belief. It is then natural to inquire into the character of this theistic belief. First then, does CSD entail *basic* theistic belief—i.e., belief (that God exists) not based on propositional evidence?

In general, externalism allows that knowledge can be realized in either basic or nonbasic belief. However, it is significant that CSD entails that every sane cognizer acquires knowledge of God at the inception of propositional cognition. Because of this, I think it reasonable to suppose that this early knowledge of God is realized in basic belief. Therefore, CSD suggests that it is typical or normal for sane cognizers to hold basic theistic belief, especially at earlier stages of cognition. But it may also be the case in the development of some sane cognizers that basic theistic belief eventually comes to be replaced by nonbasic theistic belief. And nothing in CSD precludes some sane cognizers from knowing that God exists by holding *nonbasic* theistic belief.<sup>13</sup>

2. Does CSD entail that the classical arguments for the existence of God are successful? No, because externalism implies that there can be knowledge of God, even if none of the classical theistic arguments is successful. Alston and Plantinga have argued persuasively that our beliefs about external objects may be warranted, even if there are no good arguments from sensory experience to the existence of external objects.<sup>14</sup> And Plantinga has argued that one can be warranted in believing that there are other minds, even if none of the traditional “other minds” arguments is successful.<sup>15</sup> Given Plantinga’s theory of warrant, if *S*’s (true) belief that “There are other minds” is an instance of proper cognitive function (and the other relevant conditions are met), then *S* knows that there other minds.

The same point goes for belief in God. Suppose that none of the traditional theistic arguments is successful. Nevertheless, if *S*’s belief that God exists is both true and reliably produced, then Alston’s RTB view (i.e., the view that knowledge is reliably formed true belief) implies that it is knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Or, if *S*’s belief that God exists is both true and an instance of proper cognitive function (accompanied by the other relevant conditions), then Plantinga’s warrant theory implies that *S* knows that God exists.<sup>17</sup> So the externalist approach implies that CSD does *not* entail a successful natural theology.

3. Our third question is: does CSD entail that sane cognizers hold *rational* theistic belief? But recent epistemological discussion of the concept of rationality shows that this is not a simple question. In *Warrant: The Current Debate*, Plantinga identifies four different concepts of rationality.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, we will consider four different versions of the original question "Does CSD entail rational theistic belief?," where each version corresponds to a concept of rationality identified by Plantinga.

a. Aristotelian Rationality. Here rationality is not a property of beliefs, but a property of a creature, or perhaps a kind of creature (as in "human beings are rational beings"). Plantinga points out that being a rational creature is a necessary condition for the possession of knowledge. Hence, this concept of rationality entails that any cognizer (i.e., a human being who knows something) is a rational creature. So it obviously follows that anyone who knows that God exists is a rational *creature*.

b. Deliverance of Reason Rationality. On this concept, S's believing that p is rational just in case p, the proposition believed, is a "deliverance of reason," where this means that p is either self-evident (i.e., such that one cannot grasp the proposition without seeing that it is necessarily true) or is deducible from self-evident propositions by means of self-evidently valid inferences. So, whether CSD entails rational theistic belief in this sense depends on whether CSD entails that the proposition "God exists" is a deliverance of reason in this narrow sense. But for all I know, CSD neither entails (nor precludes) that "God exists" is a deliverance of reason.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, for all I know, CSD does not entail rational theistic belief in this sense. But it is important to note here that even if theistic belief is *not* rational in this sense, it does not thereby follow that it is *irrational*. For given this concept of rationality, it is in general quite possible that S's belief that p is neither rational nor irrational.<sup>20</sup> And it is important to recognize the point emphasized by Plantinga that many paradigmatically rational beliefs are not rational in this "deliverance of reason" sense.

c. Evidentialist Deontological Rationality. On the concept of deontological rationality, according to Plantinga, S's believing that p is rational just in case S's believing that p violates no epistemic duties. And according to evidentialist philosophers, one is permitted to believe a proposition only if the proposition either satisfies the conditions for proper basicity (e.g., by being self-evident or about one's own mental states) or one has propositional evidence in support of that proposition. Therefore, according to this evidentialist account, S's belief that p is deontologically rational only if p is properly basic for S or S has propositional evidence that p.<sup>21</sup>

I think that on this *evidentialist account* of deontological rationality, CSD does *not* entail that sane cognizers possess (deontologically) rational theistic belief. For externalism straightforwardly implies that S can know that p even if p does not satisfy the evidentialist conception of proper basicity and S also lacks propositional evidence that p. But it is important to again note Plantinga's point that many paradigmatically rational beliefs are not deontologically rational on the evidentialist account.<sup>22</sup>

I have claimed that CSD on our externalist reading allows for the possibility that a cognizer S can know that God exists, even if S possesses no



propositional evidence that God exists. In other words, CSD does not entail that every sane cognizer possesses propositional evidence that God exists. But here is a separate question: does CSD perhaps entail that *at least some* sane cognizer (somewhere) possesses evidence that God exists? In a pair of very interesting articles, Steve Wykstra has drawn attention to precisely this question: does knowledge of God entail that someone (somewhere) has evidence for the existence of God? Wykstra expresses some sympathy for an affirmative answer to this question. According to the view which he calls *warrant evidentialism*, a person *S* knows that God exists only if there is at least some theistic evidence (i.e., propositional evidence that God exists) which is available to *S*'s epistemic community. *Warrant basicism*, on the other hand, holds that *S* can know that God exists, even if there is no theistic evidence available to *S*'s epistemic community. While it may be that CSD is strictly consistent with warrant evidentialism, it probably comports much better with warrant basicism. The model suggested by warrant evidentialism suggests that knowledge is transmitted from those who possess evidence to members of the community who do not, and this in turn suggests that there would probably be some degree of failure to transmit the knowledge to all members of the community. CSD, on the other hand, entails that each sane cognizer has the knowledge in question.<sup>23</sup>

d. Rationality as Proper Function. I noted above that there are beliefs (e.g., the belief that there is a tree before me) which are paradigms of rational belief, and yet these beliefs do not qualify as deliverances of reason, nor are they rational in the deontological sense. This suggests that there must be some other central concept of rationality.

Plantinga suggests there is a concept of rationality according to which a particular piece or segment of cognitive functioning is rational just in case it is *proper cognitive functioning*: "Here 'rationality' means absence of dysfunction, disorder, impairment, pathology with respect to cognitive faculties."<sup>24</sup> According to this concept, there are various cognitive activities which can be rational or irrational: believing a proposition, believing a proposition with a particular degree of firmness or strength, withholding belief in a proposition, making an inference, etc. Thus we can say that *S*'s believing that *p* is *functionally rational* just in case *S*'s believing that *p* is an instance of proper cognitive function. And more generally, any piece *x* of *S*'s cognitive functioning is functionally rational just in case *x* is an instance of proper cognitive function.

In conjunction with Plantinga's overall theory of warrant, CSD entails that each sane cognizer does exhibit functionally rational theistic belief. This is because according to Plantinga's theory, proper cognitive function is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for warrant, which is, in turn, a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of knowledge. However, even if Plantinga's overall theory of warrant is incorrect, so long as proper cognitive function is a necessary condition on knowledge, then functional rationality is a necessary condition on knowledge, so that CSD entails that sane cognizers possess functionally rational theistic belief. Although philosophers such as Hasker and Alston have challenged the claim that proper cognitive function is required for knowledge, I find this claim

plausible, and therefore I also find it plausible that CSD entails that each sane cognizer believes that God exists and holds this belief in a functionally rational manner.<sup>25</sup>

4. Our fourth and final question in this section is: does CSD entail that no sane cognizer possesses evidence *against* theism? Plantinga has presented a "disappearing letter case" which is relevant to this question. Here is the case:

I am applying to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a fellowship; I write a letter to a colleague, trying to bribe him to write the Endowment a glowing letter on my behalf; he indignantly refuses and sends the letter to my chairman. The letter disappears from the chairman's office under mysterious circumstances. I have a motive for stealing it; I have the opportunity to do so; and I have been known to do such things in the past. Furthermore, an extremely reliable member of the department claims to have seen me furtively entering the chairman's office at about the time when the letter must have been stolen. The evidence against me is very strong; my colleagues reproach me for such underhanded behavior and treat me with evident distaste. The facts of the matter, however, are that I didn't steal the letter and in fact spent the entire afternoon in question on a solitary walk in the woods; furthermore I clearly remember spending that afternoon walking in the woods. Hence, I believe in the basic way

(13) I was alone in the woods all that afternoon, and I did not steal the letter.

But I do have strong evidence for the denial of (13). For I have the same evidence as everyone else that I was in the chairman's office and took the letter; and this evidence is sufficient to convince my colleagues (who are eminently fairminded and initially well disposed towards me) of my guilt.<sup>26</sup>

Plantinga thinks it is obvious that S is rational to continue believing he did not steal the letter, in spite of the propositional evidence to the contrary. Thus Plantinga takes this case to show that: It is possible that S's belief that p is rational even though S has strong propositional evidence that not-p. Now Plantinga does not go so far as to suggest that the subject in this case might *know* that p ("I did not steal the letter") in spite of the strong counterevidence, but I think it is plausible that the case can be altered slightly to support the following principle: It is possible for S to know that p, even though S has (some) propositional evidence that not-p. Let us weaken the counterevidence somewhat by supposing that it is *not* the case that S has been known to do such things in the past; then I think it becomes plausible that S might *know* that he did not steal the letter, even though S has some propositional evidence that he did (for S believes that an extremely reliable member of the department claims that S stole the letter). The above principle (that knowledge is compatible with propositional counterevidence), which I believe is quite plausi-

ble, suggests that CSD is consistent with the claim that some sane cognizers have (some) propositional evidence against theism. I should perhaps make it clear that I am not *endorsing* the claim that anyone actually has propositional evidence against theism. I do not think this claim is obviously true. All I am suggesting is that CSD may well be *consistent* with propositional evidence against theism. Of course, it is quite clear that CSD is also consistent with the claim that *no* sane cognizer has propositional evidence against theism.

#### 4. *The First Objection: CSD Precludes Atheism*

Thus far, we have explored my interpretation of Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity (CSD) and seen that on this interpretation, CSD entails that every sane cognizer is a theist. In the remaining sections of the paper, I will defend this interpretation against two objections: 1. CSD is objectionable because it is inconsistent with the existence of atheists, and 2. CSD is objectionable because it is inconsistent with the existence of agnostics.

The first objection runs as follows: if CSD is true, it follows that there are no sane cognizers who are atheists. But it is obvious that there are sane cognizers who are atheists; hence CSD is false. I will consider two different versions of this objection. The first version claims that it is impossible for someone to hold contradictory beliefs, and therefore (given that propositional knowledge entails belief) CSD precludes anyone from believing the contradictory of "God exists." The second version concedes the possibility of holding contradictory beliefs, but it claims that whenever a person *S* believes a pair of contradictory propositions, then it is not the case that *S* knows either of these propositions.

We will begin with the first version. If it is impossible to hold contradictory beliefs, then (given that propositional knowledge entails belief) CSD precludes sane cognizers from believing that God does not exist—i.e., CSD precludes atheism.

So is it possible for a person to simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs?<sup>27</sup> (For convenience, I will omit the qualifier "simultaneously" throughout the remainder of this discussion—so it should be understood as implicit.) More precisely, the question we are discussing here is whether it is possible for someone to believe a proposition *p*, and at the same time also believe the contradictory of that proposition—viz., not-*p*. So we are *not* discussing the distinct question of whether a person can believe a self-contradictory proposition of the form (*p* and not-*p*). Nor are we discussing the distinct question of whether a person can simultaneously believe propositions which are inconsistent with each other (I think it is uncontroversial that this is unfortunately quite possible).

Let's start with this question: is it possible for a person to *occurently* hold contradictory beliefs? Let us say that *S* *occurently believes p* at *t* just in case *S* believes *p* and *S* is (consciously) thinking that *p* at *t*. (And we can say that *S* *dispositionally* (or *non-occurently*) believes *p* at *t* just in case *S* believes *p* but is not (consciously) thinking that *p* at *t*.) So a question which arises here is whether it is possible for someone to think that *p* and at the

very same time to think that not-p? I submit that this seems impossible to me, in nearly the same way that it seems impossible to me that someone could think that (p and not-p) at some time. So I will not defend the claim that a person might *occurently* hold contradictory beliefs.

Is it then possible for a person to hold contradictory beliefs, where at least one member of the pair is held non-occurently (or dispositionally), and where both members of the pair are ordinary beliefs? (Let us say, following Richard Foley, that an *ordinary belief* is just a belief which is neither repressed nor unconscious. We will bring non-ordinary beliefs into the discussion a bit later.)

In an article entitled "Is It Possible to Have Contradictory Beliefs?," Richard Foley has defended the claim that it is impossible for a person to hold contradictory beliefs, when both members of the pair are ordinary beliefs.<sup>28</sup> For convenience, I will refer to this as the *impossibility thesis*. Foley defends the impossibility thesis by arguing for the following claim, which I shall just refer to as *Foley's premise*: *For any putative case of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs, that case can be given a plausible explanation as a case where the person does not genuinely hold contradictory (ordinary) beliefs.* (For convenience, let's call an explanation which implies that the person does not genuinely hold contradictory ordinary beliefs a "non-genuine explanation.") Foley explains six different strategies for providing non-genuine explanations for any putative case of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs. For example, the case may be explained by supposing that the person holds inconsistent but not contradictory beliefs, or that the person holds contradictory beliefs but not simultaneously, or that the person holds contradictory beliefs but one member is a non-ordinary belief.

My evaluation is that Foley's defense of the impossibility thesis is rather weak. First, it is unclear to me that Foley adequately supports his premise that any putative case of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs can be given a plausible non-genuine explanation. For it is unclear that Foley considers all of the relevant kinds of cases—e.g., Foley does not consider any putative cases of self-deception, where it might be thought that these cases cannot be given plausible non-genuine explanations. But the main point I want to make is this: even if Foley's premise is true, it does not follow that it is *impossible* for someone to hold contradictory (ordinary) beliefs. Foley's premise only entails that if there *are* any genuine cases of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs, then those cases can be given a plausible (but false) explanation as non-genuine.

Foley's premise does not entail the impossibility thesis. Indeed, his premise does not even entail the much weaker thesis (i.e., weaker relative to the impossibility thesis) that it is always rationally preferable to explain any putative case of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs as non-genuine. Note that Foley's premise is perfectly consistent with each of the following claims:

- A. There are some putative cases of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs such that these cases can be given a plausible explanation as a case where the person *genuinely* holds contradictory (ordinary) beliefs.

B. There are some putative cases of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs such that the *most plausible* explanation is that the person genuinely holds contradictory (ordinary) beliefs.

Given Foley's premise, if either A or B is true, then it follows that there are putative cases of contradictory (ordinary) beliefs which are susceptible of explanations, where these explanations are inconsistent with each other but both are plausible. If A is true, then there may be cases where it is not rationally preferable to explain them as non-genuine, since the genuine explanation may be just as plausible as the non-genuine explanation. And if B is true, then there are cases where (i) the non-genuine explanation is not rationally preferable, and (ii) the genuine explanation is the rationally preferable explanation. So even if Foley has succeeded in establishing his premise (and it is unclear to me that he has succeeded even in this), he has *not* provided strong reason to believe that it is impossible for someone to hold contradictory (ordinary) beliefs.

I have argued that Foley's argument fails to warrant us in believing that it is impossible for a person to hold contradictory ordinary beliefs. To conclude this section, I will argue that even if Foley's impossibility thesis turns out to be true, there are at least two other relevant possibilities which should be considered.

First, it is important that so far we have been restricting our focus to consideration of cases where both members of the pair are *ordinary* beliefs. And even if these ordinary-belief cases are impossible, it still might be possible for a person to hold contradictory beliefs where at least one member of the pair is a *non-ordinary* belief—i.e., a belief which is unconscious or repressed. Foley explicitly limits his argument to showing that it is impossible to hold contradictory ordinary beliefs—he states explicitly that he does *not* want to argue that it is impossible to have contradictory beliefs where at least one member of the pair is a non-ordinary belief.<sup>29</sup>

Second, let's suppose for the sake of argument that it is flat-out impossible for a person to hold contradictory beliefs, regardless of whether one member of the pair is a non-ordinary belief. At this point I think it is important to consider a distinction drawn by some philosophers between belief and acceptance. This distinction has been discussed by Plantinga and Lehrer, and developed in impressive detail by L. Jonathan Cohen.<sup>30</sup> I will explain this distinction by following Cohen's account.

According to Cohen, for S to believe that p is for S to be disposed such that whenever S considers p S normally feels it true that p. On the other hand, for S to accept that p is for S to have chosen a policy of using p as a premise in S's reasoning and decision-making. Because of these differences, belief and acceptance are logically independent in that one can believe a proposition not accepted, and one can accept a proposition not believed. For example, although the moral skeptic may not accept the proposition *Some actions are right and others wrong*, she may nonetheless find herself compelled to believe this proposition. And although she may accept the proposition *No actions are either right or wrong*, she may be humanly unable to believe this proposition. Cohen argues that

while belief is involuntary (although we can do things which *influence* what beliefs we hold), acceptance is fully voluntary—we choose or decide what propositions we will accept.

The point I want to highlight here is that it is possible for a person to believe that *p* while simultaneously accepting that not-*p*. Cohen claims that this is what is going on in self-deception. If Cohen is correct, then it may also be possible for a person who believes that God exists to simultaneously accept that God does not exist. That is, it is possible that some people might be disposed to normally feel it true that God exists whenever they consider the matter, while they also have a policy of using the proposition *God does not exist* as a premise in their reasoning and decision-making. So even if holding contradictory beliefs is flat-out impossible, if Cohen's account of self-deception is correct, then CSD does not preclude the existence of atheists—i.e., provided that the definition of atheism is broadened so that atheistic *acceptance* is a sufficient condition for atheism.

Let me conclude our discussion of the first version of this objection by summarizing its results: 1. I have argued that Foley's discussion does not adequately support the thesis that it is impossible for a person to hold contradictory ordinary beliefs. 2. I have noted that even someone like Foley (who defends the impossibility thesis) allows room for the possibility that holding contradictory beliefs is possible when at least one member of the pair is a non-ordinary belief. And 3. I have suggested that even if it is flat-out impossible for a person to hold contradictory beliefs, the putative distinction between belief and acceptance makes relevant Cohen's claim that a person can believe that *p* while simultaneously accepting that not-*p*. Given these results, I conclude that we are not warranted in claiming that CSD precludes atheism.

We will now consider the second version of the objection that CSD precludes atheism. This objection concedes the possibility of holding contradictory beliefs, but claims that whenever a person *S* believes a pair of contradictory propositions, then it is not the case that *S* knows either of these propositions. For if *S* believes the proposition not-*p*, then *S* has a rebutting defeater for the proposition *p*, and this precludes *S*'s knowing that *p* (since propositional knowledge requires the absence of a defeater).

I shall make three points in response to this objection. First, this objection fails if a hardcore externalist account of knowledge is correct. For on this sort of account, if *S*'s (true) belief that *p* is produced by a reliable belief-forming process, then *S* has knowledge that *p*, regardless of whether *S*'s belief that *p* is irrational due to the presence of a rebutting defeater.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, even if it is a true principle that *S* has a rebutting defeater for *p* whenever *S* believes not-*p*, this does not preclude a situation where *S* believes that not-*p* and yet knows that *p*.

Second, this objection succeeds only if *S* has an *undefeated* rebutting defeater for *p* whenever *S* believes that not-*p*. To clarify this point, it will be helpful to briefly discuss the nature of defeaters.<sup>32</sup> In general, a defeater is a reason for withholding belief in a proposition, so that *S* has a defeater for *p* just in case *S* has a reason to withhold belief that *p*. If I believe that (F) *Feike cannot swim*, and I then learn that *Feike is a lifeguard*, I have acquired a rebutting defeater for (F). But defeaters can them-

selves be defeated. If I later learn that *Feike is a Frisian lifeguard and 99 out of 100 Frisian lifeguards cannot swim*, then my original defeater for (F) has been defeated, and it is rational for me to believe (F) Feike cannot swim. If S has an *undefeated* defeater for p (i.e., a defeater for p which is not itself defeated) but nevertheless believes p, then S's belief that p is irrational. Two kinds of defeaters have been identified in the literature: S has a *rebutting* defeater for p where S has a reason for thinking that p is false, and S has an *undercutting* defeater for p where S has something which undermines the adequacy or reliability of S's reason(s) for thinking that p is true. We can now return to the objection that if S is an atheist, then S has an undefeated rebutting defeater for theism so that S cannot know that God exists.

The objection is successful only upon the assumption that whenever a person S believes a proposition not-p, then it is also the case that S has an *undefeated* rebutting defeater for p. But this principle seems false. Suppose that Norman just finds himself with the belief that (not-w) The President is not in the White House, although Norman has nothing that would normally be regarded as *evidence* that the President is not in the White House. (We may suppose that Norman's belief that not-w is produced by a reliable but fallible power of clairvoyance.) And suppose that Norman in fact has strong evidence for the proposition that (w) The President is in the White House. (Suppose Norman is sitting in a room in the White House, witnessing the President give a news conference.) Is this a situation where Norman has an undefeated rebutting defeater for the proposition that w? I suggest that *if* Norman does possess a rebutting defeater for w (just by virtue of the fact that he believes that not-w), then this defeater is itself defeated (by Norman's strong evidence for w), so that it is *not* the case that Norman has an undefeated defeater for w. Thus, at least as far as defeaters are concerned, there is nothing to preclude Norman from *knowing* that (w) The President is in the White House (in spite of the fact that he also believes the contradictory of this proposition). Thus, even if it is true that S has a rebutting defeater for p whenever S believes not-p, it appears false that S has an *undefeated* rebutting defeater for p whenever S believes not-p.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, it is also important to mention cases of self-deception, where it seems that a person knows that p is true, even while he or she (somehow) believes the proposition not-p. If, as some philosophers claim, there are genuine cases of this sort (not necessarily involving theistic and atheistic belief), then the objection is mistaken (since these are cases where S believes that not-p while knowing that p).<sup>34</sup> I conclude that this second version of the objection also fails to preclude the possibility that a sane cognizer who is an atheist might nevertheless possess knowledge that God exists.

##### 5. The Second Objection: CSD Precludes Agnosticism

The second objection runs as follows: if CSD is true, it follows that there are no agnostics. But it is obvious that there are agnostics; hence CSD is false.

I will begin my response to this objection by distinguishing four dif-

ferent kinds of agnosticism. First, S is a *doxastic* agnostic just in case S is neither a theist nor an atheist (i.e., S does not believe the proposition "God exists," nor does S believe the proposition "God does not exist"). Second, S is a *professing* agnostic just in case S claims and/or believes that S is neither a theist nor an atheist (in other words, S claims and/or believes that S is a doxastic agnostic). Third, S is a *classical* agnostic just in case S believes that neither theism nor atheism can be rationally justified or warranted.<sup>35</sup> And finally, S is an *acceptance* agnostic just in case S accepts neither theism nor atheism.

Now it is obvious that there are professing agnostics in the world, but this fact is perfectly consistent with the truth of CSD. For it is possible that all sane cognizers who are professing agnostics are actually theists who mistakenly (even if sincerely) believe that they are neither theists nor atheists. Perhaps it is also obvious that there are classical agnostics in the world, but this too is consistent with CSD. For a sane cognizer who believes that neither theism nor atheism can be rationally justified might nevertheless believe the proposition "God exists." And it is clear from our discussion of belief and acceptance that CSD is consistent with the existence of acceptance agnostics. Thus, CSD is only inconsistent with the existence of doxastic agnostics. But I question whether it is obvious that there are doxastic agnostics. Certainly, the claim that there are doxastic agnostics is not nearly as obvious as the claim that there are professing agnostics, and therefore I think this is by no means a decisive objection against CSD.

## 6. Conclusion

I will conclude by briefly summarizing what I take to be the most significant results of our discussion. First, we have seen that CSD suggests that sane cognizers typically possess basic theistic belief, especially at early stages of cognitive development. And while CSD does not entail the existence of a successful natural theology, nor does it preclude the existence of evidence against theism, it is plausible that CSD entails that each sane cognizer is functionally rational in holding theistic belief. Finally, I have argued that even though it entails that every sane cognizer is a theist, CSD is consistent with the existence of various kinds of atheists and agnostics.<sup>36</sup>

*University of St. Thomas*

## NOTES

1. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). The reference here is to book I, chapter 3, section 1, and page 43. All further references to Calvin's *Institutes* will be from this edition.

2. Note that in the quotation, Calvin asserts that each person knows that God is his or her maker. (I presume that part of Calvin's thinking here is that this knowledge is a necessary condition of one's being morally



accountable before God.) So perhaps Calvin holds that the sense of divinity provides more than just what I am calling bare knowledge of God.

3. Claim (1\*) does not entail that anyone possesses propositional knowledge of God at birth, although it does entail the conditional claim that if someone has propositional knowledge at birth, then he or she has propositional knowledge of God at birth.

4. I am proposing (CSD) as expressing an important implication of Calvin's doctrine of the sense of divinity. I am not suggesting that (CSD) in any way expresses or captures the full richness of Calvin's doctrine.

5. Since CSD implies that all sane cognizers are theists, it trivially follows that CSD implies that all sane cognizers are *implicit theists*, where an implicit theist is someone who believes a proposition which entails theism. Of course, if theism is necessarily true, it trivially follows that anyone who believes any proposition is an implicit theist.

6. Here I follow Alvin Plantinga's usage of the term "warrant."

7. Almost all epistemologists agree that knowledge involves at least one internalist component—viz., the belief component. So what distinguishes internalists from externalists (with regard to knowledge) is the question of whether warrant involves one or more internalist components. I thank an anonymous referee for this point.

8. For the causal theory, see Goldman's "A Causal Theory of Knowing," *Journal of Philosophy* 64 (1967): 355-72. Goldman provides an initial and relatively simple presentation of the reliabilist theory in "What is Justified Belief?" in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George Pappas (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1979): 1-23. Goldman develops a much more complicated reliabilist theory in his *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

9. For Plantinga's argumentation against reliabilism, see chapter nine of his *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For his theory of warrant, see *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), especially chapters one and two. For other significant attacks on reliabilism, see Keith Lehrer's *Theory of Knowledge* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), ch. 8; John Pollock *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), ch. 4; and Richard Feldman "Reliability and Justification," *Monist* 68 (1985).

10. It should be noted that while externalism imposes no internalist constraints on knowledge in general, externalists can consistently impose internalist constraints on specific *kinds* of knowledge. Therefore, it would be consistent for an externalist to impose one or more internalist constraints on knowledge of God—of course, such a position would need an adequate motivation. Thanks to Steve Evans for raising this point.

11. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): 285.

12. Someone might question whether knowledge that God exists on the externalist interpretation is sufficient to render a person morally accountable before God. I think this is an interesting and important question, but I will not attempt to pursue it here.

13. Although Reformed epistemology is organized around the claim that theistic belief can be properly basic, two epistemologists have recently done interesting work in exploring the role of nonbasic theistic belief within the Reformed epistemology framework. Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth suggests that "mediate natural theology" (a form of nonbasic theistic belief) may be implicit in John Calvin's theology in his "The Prospects For 'Mediate' Natural Theology in John Calvin," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 53-68. And Sudduth's

doctoral thesis is an insightful and more general exploration of nonbasic theistic belief within Reformed epistemology. Stephen J. Wykstra argues that some Reformed epistemologists have tended (perhaps due to the influence of internalism) to understand nonbasic belief in general in an artificially narrow manner. So Wykstra sketches what he takes to be a more realistic account of nonbasic belief, in his "Is Theism a Theory? Externalism, Proper Inferentiality and Sensible Evidentialism" in *Topoi* (1995).

14. Alston argues extensively in ch. 3 of *Perceiving God* that there are no good noncircular arguments for the reliability of our perceptual faculties. And Plantinga points out that if Alston's argument is correct, it then follows that there are no good noncircular arguments from sensory experience to the existence of external objects.

15. See *Warrant and Proper Function*: 75-76.

16. This is the main point of Alston's elegant and insightful article entitled "Knowledge of God" in *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism*, ed. Marcus Hester (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992): 6-49.

17. I look forward to the publication of *Warranted Christian Belief*, in which Plantinga explains how his general theory of warrant applies specifically to Christian beliefs.

18. See *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 132-37. Actually, Plantinga identifies five different concepts of rationality, but I am going to forego discussion of "Foley-rationality."

19. Given Plantinga's definition (see WCD 134-135), *p* is a deliverance of reason only if *p* is a necessary truth. But even if CSD does entail that *God exists* is a necessary truth (note that if the proposition *God exists* is a necessary truth, then the proposition "*God exists*" is a necessary truth is itself a necessary truth, in which case it is entailed by any proposition, including CSD), CSD may not entail that the proposition *God exists* satisfies whatever further conditions are required for being a deliverance of reason.

20. According to Plantinga, a belief is irrational (in this sense) only if the believed proposition is inconsistent with a deliverance of reason or some set of deliverances of reason.

21. This concept of deontological rationality is an essential component of the "evidentialist objection" against theistic belief. For discussion of this objection, see Plantinga "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983): 16-93. Also see (in the same volume) Nicholas Wolterstorff's "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?": 135-186.

22. It is an interesting and important question whether CSD implies deontologically rational theistic belief on the assumption that the evidentialist account of epistemic duty is false. I won't attempt to explore this question here. Although I find it at least somewhat intuitive to suppose that knowledge that *p* entails epistemically permitted belief that *p*, Plantinga has argued that this supposition is false (see WCD p. 45). Of course, if it turns out that there are no epistemic duties at all, then it trivially follows that any belief is deontologically rational.

23. I thank Steve Evans for this point.

24. *Warrant: The Current Debate*: 137.

25. For Hasker's challenge, see his "Proper Function, Reliabilism, and Religious Knowledge: A Critique of Plantinga's Epistemology," in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing, 1993): 66-86. Plantinga responds to the Hasker objection in *Warrant and Proper Function*: 29-31. For Alston's challenge, see his "Epistemic Warrant as Proper Function"

*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. LV, no. 2 (June 1995): 397-402. Plantinga responds to Alston in the same volume.

26. Alvin Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* vol. 3 no. 3 (July 1986): 310.

27. Clearly, it is possible for a person to hold contradictory beliefs at different times—i.e., for S to believe p at t and then at some later time to believe not-p.

28. Richard Foley, "Is It Possible to Have Contradictory Beliefs?," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy X*, eds. Peter A. French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., Howard K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 327-355.

29. Foley writes: "I do not want to claim that there are not contradictory beliefs of this sort. All I want to claim is that a person cannot in an ordinary, conscious, nonrepressed sense believe p and also in an ordinary, conscious, nonrepressed sense believe not p." See "Is It Possible?": 331.

30. Plantinga discusses the distinction in "Reason and Belief in God": 37-38. L. Jonathan Cohen develops his theory of the distinction in *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Keith Lehrer provides an interesting discussion of the distinction in his *Theory of Knowledge* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), see especially pp. 10-11 and 26ff.

31. William Alston expresses sympathy for Fred Dretske's hardcore externalist account of knowledge in "Knowledge and Justification" in *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). There Alston explains a case where S knows that p, in spite of the fact that S has an undefeated (undermining) defeater for p.

32. The following brief discussion (and the example of Feike) is drawn from Alvin Plantinga's extensive discussion of defeaters in his currently unpublished manuscript, "Naturalism Defeated."

33. I have argued that mere belief that not-p is not sufficient to provide an undefeated defeater for p. Of course, there can be cases where S's belief that not-p (which provides the defeater for p) does possess the epistemic status required to stand as an undefeated defeater for p (thus precluding knowledge that p). So the question here would then become: is it possible for a sane cognizer to hold a rational or warranted belief that God does not exist? This is a substantive question in the philosophy of religion the discussion of which would require at least another paper. In this section, I have only been dealing with an objection against CSD which is based on general epistemological considerations together with the claim that there are atheists.

34. In a seminal article in the literature on self-deception, Raphael Demos characterizes self-deception as follows: "Self-deception exists, I will say, when a person lies to himself, that is to say, persuades himself to believe what he knows is not so. In short, self-deception entails that B believes both p and not-p at the same time." Raphael Demos, "Lying to Oneself," *Journal of Philosophy* 57 (1960): 588-595.

35. According to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, "agnosticism" is the "term invented by Thomas Henry Huxley in 1869 to denote the philosophical and religious attitude of those who claim that metaphysical ideas can be neither proved nor disproved." *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Robert Audi, editor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

36. I thank the following people for helpful comments and discussion in connection with the development of this paper: the Calvin College philosophy department, Robert Audi, Al Casullo, Dewey Hoitenga, Reg McLelland, James Sennett, Michael Sudduth, William Wainwright, Steve Wykstra, and two anonymous referees. Finally, thanks to my wife Carla for all of her encouragement.