

Warrant, Proper Function, and the Great Pumpkin Objection

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Alvin Plantinga claims that belief in God can be taken as properly basic, without appealing to arguments or relying on faith. Traditionally, any account of the knowledge for the existence of God has gone something like this:

- (1) Person P believes the statement S “God exists” is true.
- (2) The statement S “God exists” is true.
- (3) P has sufficient evidence for the truth of the statement S “God exists”.

Thus, (4) Person P knows that God exists.

Plantinga maintains that any formal process of justification, supplied by premise (3), is unnecessary in giving one knowledge to the existence of God. He claims one can bypass premise (2) and (3) and go directly from premise (1) to the conclusion. Plantinga maintains that “belief in God is properly basic - that is, such that it is rational to accept it without accepting it on the basis of any other propositions or beliefs at all.”¹ Thus, it is rational to believe in the existence of God without appeal to arguments or appeal to faith. In other words, we can just ‘know’ God exists. Plantinga claims “a believer is entirely rational, entirely within his epistemic rights in starting with belief in God, in accepting it as basic, and in taking it as premise for argument to other conclusions.”²

But, as Plantinga asks, “what is the status of criteria for knowledge, or proper basicity, or justified belief?”³ To answer this, Plantinga rejects the epistemology of both foundationalism and coherence theories. That is, he claims (1) “being self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses is not a necessary condition of proper basicity”⁴ and (2) “belief in God is... rational to accept it without accepting it on the basis of any other propositions or beliefs at all.”⁵ Instead, Plantinga accepts a version of weak foundationalism that relies on a notion of proper basicity, and claims, “A weak foundationalist is likely to hold that some properly basic beliefs are such that anyone who

accepts them, knows them.”⁶

But how reliable is this account to give us knowledge, especially of the existence of God? While responding to an objection against his own theory of proper basicity (The Great Pumpkin Objection), Plantinga develops an account of epistemic warrant upon the notion of having proper functioning cognitive equipment. In light of this theory, Keith Lehrer has raised several objections against Plantinga’s account of epistemic warrant. In this paper, I will look at Plantinga’s account of epistemic warrant and Lehrer’s objections to Plantinga’s theory. Finally, after having evaluated Lehrer’s objections and Plantinga’s responses, I will maintain that Plantinga still has not satisfactorily established a viable epistemology that accounts for the existence of God.

(I) The Great Pumpkin Objection

This objection asks, “If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything can properly be taken as basic?”⁷ In other words, since Plantinga makes the claim that the knowledge of God’s existence can be taken as properly basic without any reference to other beliefs that we have, then does that mean that someone can hold, as properly basic, beliefs that other “bizarre aberration(s)” also exist? As Plantinga asks, “What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I take that as basic? And if I can’t, why can I properly take belief in God as basic?”⁸

This objection recognizes the difficulty in maintaining knowledge of God’s existence while appealing to a system that lacks either internal and external justification or coherence. If knowledge is simply a matter of holding a true belief about something, then why is it not possible to claim beliefs about things like ‘the Great Pumpkin exists’ as knowledge? Plantinga maintains that holding such a claim is mistaken. But why? At first Plantinga responds, by claiming that according to reformed epistemologists, “certain beliefs are properly basic in certain circumstances; [while] those same beliefs may not be properly basic in other circumstances.”⁹ Thus Plantinga is making some sort of distinction between which beliefs count as being properly basic from those that do not. Here, Plantinga relies on the use of the phrase “in certain circumstances”. In certain circumstances,

it is rational for a belief to be taken as properly basic; but what are those 'certain circumstances'? Plantinga seems to know what these certain circumstances are, but he is not effective at elucidating what they are. By what theory does Plantinga propose to outline those circumstances?

Plantinga contends that "What the Reformed epistemologist holds is that there are widely realized circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic."¹⁰ However, this response does not answer the question about a criterion of 'circumstances'. While maintaining a weak foundationalist account of proper basicity, Plantinga must still accept the burden of being accountable for some explanation of his theory. That is, he must be able to demonstrate how, under these 'certain circumstances' it is possible to take the existence of God as properly basic. To this objection, Plantinga claims,

Must one have such a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgements - positive or negative - about proper basicity? Surely not. Suppose I do not know of a satisfactory substitute for the criteria proposed by classical foundationalism; I am nevertheless entirely within my epistemic rights in holding that certain propositions in certain conditions are not properly basic.¹¹

But as Lehrer claims, "To raise objections against a theory is, however, not sufficient in philosophy. One must show that one can construct a theory that avoids the objections and, moreover, that clarifies the underlying problem."¹² That is, while Plantinga's account of proper basicity is a response to classical foundationalism, it still has not given a convincing answer to the question, "How do we know that God exists?" Plantinga's account of proper basicity maintains,

the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, inductive. We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously not properly basic in the

latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples.¹³

The way that Plantinga proposes this criterion is by (1) framing a picture of knowledge and (2) using this to account for how we can have knowledge in the existence of God.

The first of these two claims is very ambitious, for Plantinga attempts to describe a picture for a theory of knowledge. Plantinga's theory is: "The correct picture of knowledge, then, goes as follows: a belief constitutes knowledge, if it is true, and if it arises as a result of the right use and proper functioning of our epistemic capacities."¹⁴ Here, Plantinga has developed three conditions for a belief to be considered as knowledge: (1) the belief must be true, (2) the belief must arise from our epistemic capacities functioning properly, and (3) the true belief, derived from our epistemic capacities functioning properly, must result from our capacities under the right use. This definition will later be developed into an epistemic system of warrant, and what these three conditions mean exactly will be discussed in that account of warrant.

(II) Warrant and Proper Functionality

In his book *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga develops his 'picture of a theory of knowledge' that was presented in his paper *On Reformed Epistemology*, into a modified account of epistemic warrant. But what exactly does warrant do? As Jonathan Kvanvig claims, "Warrant is thus that elusive property sought by epistemologists for centuries that distinguishes true belief from knowledge."¹⁵ Further he claims that "warrant is that property, enough of which, that is sufficient for knowledge."¹⁶ So, certainly we would hope that an account that attempts to define knowledge, will be able to distinguish mere belief in God from knowledge of God. Plantinga's account of warrant is as follows:

"A belief has warrant for you if and only if (1) the cognitive faculties involved in the production of B are functioning properly...(2) your cognitive environment is sufficiently similar to the one for which your cognitive faculties are designed; (3) the

triple of design plan governing the production of the belief in question involves, as purpose or function, the production of true beliefs; and (4) the design plan is a good one: that is, there is a high statistical or objective probability that a belief produced in accordance with the relevant segment of the design plan in that sort of environment is true."¹⁷

As was demonstrated earlier, this notion of 'proper functionality' plays a very important role in Plantinga's epistemology. It is with the concept of proper functionality that Plantinga introduces a condition of design into the properly basic system of belief. Considering the four conditions that Plantinga has outlined, all of them rely on properly functioning cognitive faculties. For one's cognitive faculties to be functioning properly, they must operate as they are designed to operate. That is, for example, if you question whether your sense of vision is functioning properly, then you may rely on past experiences when you have known your vision to work properly and then adjust your present vision experiences according to those past vision experiences. For example, if I am myopic and my eyesight is getting progressively worse, one day I might say to myself, "I think my eyesight is getting worse, perhaps I should get a stronger prescription to my glasses." I would be advised to focus my vision on objects that normally in the past have been relatively easy for me to focus on. I would continue trying to focus my vision upon objects at different distances, different sizes, and different sources of light until I make note of all the variations between my past (better) vision and my new (degenerated) vision. Thus, if I am able to tell that my sense of vision is not functioning properly, then I am perhaps not best equipped for making claims to knowledge of events that I cannot decipher visually. For example, if my vision is bad, and I am the only witness to a murder, but did not get a good look at the murderer, then when a row of suspects are presented to me, I ought not to rely on just my visual accounts in deciding the guilt of a suspect. Thus, under Plantinga's account, I could not take as properly basic the knowledge that any one person committed the murder, solely based on my visual experience.

Not only do we have to possess properly functioning

cognitive equipment, but our equipment must be functioning in an environment for which our faculties were designed. That is, all of us with a good sense of hearing would find it most difficult to listen to our favorite music 60 feet under water and really make any sense out of it. Likewise, our normal properly functioning environment for thinking is not a drug-induced state. However, if we were to take an hallucinogenic or narcotic drug, then we would find it difficult to carry on the normal thoughts that we typically do when we are not under the influence of these drugs. Thus, for beliefs to count as knowledge, not only must the right conditions of cognitive equipment (properly functioning as it is designed to operate) be met, but also that our equipment is in an environment that cooperates with our equipment functioning in the reliable and predictable way that it is supposed to.

The third and fourth conditions concern the production of true beliefs. What is required in condition (3) is that the beliefs produced by the first two conditions, being met, are typically true beliefs. This condition makes it so that our claims to true beliefs are reliable, predictable, and accurate. That is, that we are used to having true beliefs as a result of our properly functioning equipment. Condition (4) goes beyond the claim of individual true beliefs to see how well our beliefs correspond with reality. Again, the concern is over how reliably, and accurately we can predict our beliefs being with reality. If the beliefs that we typically have in a certain environment are true, then we would be able to take those beliefs as properly basic.

(III) Lehrer's Critique

Keith Lehrer presents a critique against Plantinga's epistemology and his notion of proper functionality and warranted belief. The critique asks whether proper functioning is enough to yield warrant, and, combined with true belief, knowledge. In his objection, Lehrer tries to prove that proper functioning is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge. Lehrer gives two examples to illustrate this point. The first of the two considers a man by the name of Mr. Truetemp. Mr. Truetemp is the sufferer of an odd brain malady that requires the usage of medication to treat it. Mr. Truetemp is only supposed to take this medication when his temperature exceeds 98 degrees. But of course, it is very difficult for him to monitor his

temperature all the time. The risk of him not taking his temperature at appropriate moments, and thus failing to take his medication, could be fatal. Thus, Mr. Truetemp's concerned doctor, along with several neural surgeons, discovered a way that Mr. Truetemp could regulate his body temperature without having to constantly take his temperature. The doctors have made it possible to install a small device in the brain of people that is able to take the patient's body temperature and produce true beliefs about one's body temperature. Thus, if the doctors could implant the device into Mr. Truetemp's brain and program the device to produce true beliefs once an hour, then Mr. Truetemp's life would become much more efficient by not having to worry about a fatal dysfunction caused by an excellerated body temperature.

Suppose they go through with the procedure and the operation is a success. When Mr. Truetemp wakes up, and after being awake for a while, Mr. Truetemp claims, "You know, I am suddenly convinced that my temperature is 98 degrees, but I do not have the slightest idea why I believe that ." Thus, the doctors conclude that this confirms that the device works, that is, it "worked just as it was designed to do and is functioning properly to produce true beliefs on the hour about the brain temperature of Mr. Truetemp."¹⁸

Now, the problem that this poses for Plantinga is that Mr. Truetemp is having true beliefs about his temperature. His beliefs are "produced by a device that is properly functioning to produce true beliefs as it was designed to do in the environment it was designed for."¹⁹ But, "Mr. Truetemp does not know that his temperature is 98 degrees when he believes it is."²⁰ Thus, Mr. Truetemp's account fulfills Plantinga's account for warrant but it does not produce knowledge. Thus, this objection demonstrates that proper functionality is not a sufficient condition for knowledge.

The second objection that Lehrer raises against Plantinga is the example of Ms. Prejudice. Just as the previous example showed that proper functionality is not sufficient, this objection shows that proper functionality is not a necessary condition for knowledge. This example demonstrates how a belief might arise from improper functioning (e.g. racial prejudice) but become warranted later by the acquisition of evidence. Take for example, Ms. Prejudice. Ms. Prejudice has a strong belief that

members of a race contract a certain disease because of their genetic makeup. This, for her, demonstrates their racial inferiority, and her racial superiority. Now, also take into consideration that Ms. Prejudice is a medical student and through her research comes to discover that the medical evidence for her prejudiced belief is strong. In time, she becomes a very successful and respected medical research scientist, and she gets nominated to be on a research team to investigate the genetic nature of this elusive disease. As circumstances permit, all of her fellow research colleagues know of her prejudice and determine that she will be a good member of the team because of her prejudice (that is, she will be the strongest opposition that they could possibly find). But they also know of her strong convictions to science and medicine. So, they are completely confident in her ability.

As the team's research develops, it becomes clearer that the evidence points to the claim that the disease is indeed caused by genetic makeup of the patient. Thus, Ms. Prejudice becomes very careful with her evidence so that she cannot be charged with making conclusions based on her unwarranted belief. However, the evidence becomes overwhelming. To the dismay of the other medical researchers, they all conclude that the evidence conclusively demonstrates that the disease is indeed derived from the genetics of the patient. Thus the evidence has been rigorously tested, but her belief that the disease is genetically caused is the result of her still very intense prejudice. That is, "After the investigation, her belief has warrant, all the warrant the matter admits of, and she knows that the disease is genetically caused."²¹ But, "her belief is the product of an improperly functioning system of racial prejudice."²²

Again this example is a problem for Plantinga. It demonstrates how one who has knowledge, true beliefs, and beliefs that are warranted does not arrive at one's beliefs via cognitive faculties functioning properly. Therefore, with these two examples, Lehrer has demonstrated that proper functionality is neither necessary nor sufficient as a condition for knowledge.

(IV) Plantinga's Responses

The counterexample of Mr. Truetemp, Plantinga claims, does not pose a problem for his account of warrant. Plantinga claims, that Mr. Truetemp has a belief that no one else has,

namely that he has beliefs about his temperature. However, if he shared these beliefs with other people, they would think that he is mad. That is, Mr. Truetemp is “constructed like other human beings and none of them have this ability; furthermore, everyone he meets scoffs or smiles at his claim that he does have it.”²³ This accounts for a defeater in his system of beliefs. That is, since these experiences are out of the ordinary of any properly functioning system, then this anomaly is enough to defeat his claims that he does indeed have knowledge of his temperature.

But how viable of a solution is this anyway? It seems that all that is required to defeat Mr. Truetemp’s “defeater” is for the doctors to simply explain to Truetemp what they had implanted in his brain and how it is supposed to function. That is, they could explain what it is supposed to do, and under what conditions it is functioning properly to Mr. Truetemp. However, if he knows the device is in his brain, does that follow that he now knows what his temperature is, as opposed to holding a true belief without knowledge? According to Plantinga, if Mr. Truetemp believes that the device is indeed delivering true beliefs about his temperature then clearly, yes. But, Mr. Truetemp never gets this opportunity to reflect about whether the belief is true or not, he just assents to it without ever wondering if it is caused in the right way.

On this point, Plantinga may want to claim that this can count as a special case of a cognitive process. That is, the fact that I am simply and directly having a belief, Plantinga might ask whether one can “take this to be a special limiting case of cognitive faculties or belief-producing processes functioning properly?”²⁴ Plantinga has therefore been willing to say that “this belief isn’t exactly produced by a cognitive faculty, or at least by one of my cognitive faculties; but it is produced by a properly functioning cognitive process, and I [Plantinga] think that’s sufficient.”²⁵

But, wait a second. In both of these objections, the agents are receiving true beliefs passively. That is, they are not directly aware of the cause of their true beliefs, or of the ‘why’ of their true beliefs. They assent to their beliefs without determining if their beliefs are caused in the right way or if their cognitive equipment is working properly. They lack justification. But in the Mr. Truetemp example, Plantinga is quick to say that it does not count as warrant because of the lack of cognitive faculties,

but later would be committed to claiming that as long as it is caused by a cognitive process, then it can be warranted. So, what's the difference?

Plantinga has not given a clear account of why he thinks one way or the other. He has only suggested the latter is produced by a "properly functioning cognitive process". But so is the former. That is, the process that Plantinga is referring to in the latter (receiving true beliefs) is also present in the former (receiving true beliefs). I am not sure how Plantinga might try to respond to this. However, in light of considering one agent superior over the other, with equal consideration of evidence, it is clear that he must respond to this.

Conclusion

The problems that Plantinga is committed to responding to involve the same type of problems that he was originally responding to in the Great Pumpkin Objection. I agree with Van Hook when he claims that Plantinga takes the Great Pumpkin Objection too lightly, and clearly from this paper, it has resulted in making vague statements about proper basicity. Perhaps Plantinga needs to go back and reformulate his responses to the Great Pumpkin Objection, since that seems to be where his troubles begin. Or perhaps Plantinga does after all have to concede to either the strong foundationalist or the coherence theorist, and place knowledge of God's existence on some foundation or coherence with other beliefs.

Notes

¹ Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) p. 72

² *Ibid.*, p. 72

³ *Ibid.*, p. 75

⁴ Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 320

⁵ Plantinga and Wolterstorff, p. 72

⁶ Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger., p. 317

⁷ Plantinga and Wolterstorff, p. 74

⁸ Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger., p., 318

⁹ Plantinga and Wolterstorff, p. 74

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 74

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75

¹² Keith Lehrer, "Proper Function versus Systematic Coherence" in *Warrant in*

Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Alvin Plantinga, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1996), p. 36

¹³ Plantinga and Wolterstorff, p. 76

¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology" in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 336

¹⁵ Kvanvig, p. viii

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. viii

¹⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 194

¹⁸ Kvanvig, p. 32

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 32

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 34

²² *Ibid.*, p. 34

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 333

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 338

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 338

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