Sennett, MODALITY, PROBABILITY, AND RATIONALITY

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James Sennett's *Modality, Probability, and Rationality* succeeds in presenting an "overview and critical analysis of many of the central doctrines in the philosophy of Alvin Plantinga" (p. 1). Since no single book could discuss everything of importance in Plantinga's work, Sennett focuses on a thread running through most of Plantinga's work—the epistemology of religion. Accordingly, he includes chapters on Plantinga's *God and Other Minds*, the ontological argument, the logical argument from evil, the probabilistic argument from evil, the development of Reformed epistemology, and the more recent development of the notion of proper function as epistemic warrant. Each chapter is well organized, insightful, and, for the most part, clearly written. In addition to these positive general features, I found the exposition of Plantinga's more technical work—the ontological argument and the arguments from evil—to be clear and helpful, often stating the crux of the matter in succinct and penetrating ways. Sennett's description of Reformed epistemology is well done, and his well-grounded speculations into the implications of Plantinga's analysis of warrant for the Reformed epistemology project are thought-provoking. There are some improvements Sennett might have made, however. I have one general comment and two more specifically philosophical comments to make.

One mildly disappointing issue is Sennett's employment of the rubric under which he discusses Plantinga's position. Sennett suggests that the central point Plantinga wishes to make in his religious epistemology is "The Plantinga Thesis," namely, that "there is no plausible epistemological theory that rules out theistic belief as a category of epistemically appropriate belief" (p. 1). The disappointing thing is not the rubric itself but Sennett's sometime failure to tie the rubric directly into what he is discussing. This happens most obviously in the chapters on the problem of evil. Although in each chapter there are sections where Sennett attempts to connect the issues under direct consideration to the Plantinga thesis, a little more development of Sennett's overall approach would help—the approach seems a little strained. Nevertheless, Sennett shows that the rubric is a useful one, and true to Plantinga's philosophy, in his discussion of Plantinga's epistemology where the development of the Plantinga thesis fares quite a bit better. Here it is helpful and more directly connected.

Sennett's criticisms of Plantinga's various arguments are quite good. As I've noted, his exposition of various arguments is often penetrating. This enables Sennett to get directly at the problems with Plantinga's arguments,
where he finds them. Most problematic for Sennett are Plantinga’s ontological argument and the Reformed epistemology project, both in its early version and in Sennett’s construction of the project as he draws on Plantinga’s recent work on warrant. His criticisms are careful and creative. However, I think they are not without difficulties.

Sennett’s position on Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument includes the claim that one cannot rationally believe its premises without an argument that would not be an independent argument for its conclusion (pp. 24-29, 35-36). Sennett’s argument for this suggests that “there is a possible world in which unsurpassable greatness is exemplified” (the first premise in Plantinga’s ontological argument) cannot be rationally believed without appeal (via argument) to the conclusion, “there actually exists a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, and has these properties in every world.” Any argument for the former includes an argument for the latter. This is true, Sennett argues, because the argument uses modal terms stipulated as S5 terms, so a cognizer S does not understand the propositions expressed by sentences utilizing these modal terms unless she understands that the theorems and axioms of S5 are true. In turn, S does not understand S5 in this way unless she understands the invariance of modality thesis—that possibility and necessity do not vary from world to world. From this it follows that if it is true in some world that maximal excellence is borne in every world, then it is true in every world that maximal excellence is borne in every world. Hence, S understands “there is a possible world in which something is omnicompetent (has omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection) in every world” only if she understands it to entail “something is omnicompetent in every world.” Furthermore, Plantinga’s argument relies on the serious actualist thesis that objects bear properties only in the worlds in which they exist. S understands “something is omnicompetent in every world” as a serious actualist thesis only if she understands it to entail “something exists in the actual world that exists in every world and is omnicompetent in every world.” This last proposition is only a thinly veiled version of the stated conclusion of Plantinga’s ontological argument, “there actually exists a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect, and has these properties in every world.” So, one cannot rationally believe the premises of the argument without an argument that would not be an independent argument for the conclusion.

Sennett illustrates his point by suggesting that an argument from “2 + 2 = 4 & God exists” to “God exists” is problematic in just the way Plantinga’s ontological argument is. No good argument exists for the former that is not also a good argument for the latter, so no one could be rationally convinced of the former without being antecedently and independently convinced of the latter. One cannot understand “2 + 2 = 4 & God exists” without knowing that
it entails "God exists," since one cannot understand the premise without knowing the truth-functional import of "&." Sennett's criticism relies on the notion of "obvious entailment" which he defines in this way: "A proposition \( P \) obviously entails a proposition \( Q \) just in case it is impossible for a cognizer \( S \) to justifiably believe \( P \) and fail to be justified in believing \( Q \)." On this account, "if \( P \) obviously entails \( Q \), then \( S \)'s justifiably believing \( P \) and failing to be justified in believing \( Q \) is impossible precisely because understanding \( P \) is not possible without understanding that it entails \( Q \)" (p. 2).

My question has to do with obvious entailment, deduction, and rationality. While it seems clear enough that there is such a thing as obvious entailment—the intuitive cases are easy enough to grasp—isn't there a problem with the notion of "understanding" to which it appeals, when it is applied outside the more or less intuitive cases? When does the understanding involved in following an argument become so complex that the "obviousness" in the entailment gets lost? Sennett suggests that because there is no way of understanding the premises of Plantinga's ontological argument without understanding the conclusion to be entailed by the premises, the argument cannot function as a good reason for the conclusion for anyone. There is, he says, an unacceptable epistemic circularity involved. But where, exactly, is it? And isn't there a similar circularity involved in all valid deductive arguments? At some point, doesn't one's understanding the premises of a valid deductive argument force one into admitting that the conclusion is entailed by them? Eventually, doesn't one move from not understanding to understanding? At that juncture, can't the argument have epistemic force that is not circular? Doesn't the epistemic role an argument plays in one's noetic structure have something to do with what one learns in coming to understand the argument? In short, what notion of rationality is Sennett appealing to here, and what is its connection with how we use deductive arguments in our being justified in holding beliefs? This is especially pressing given the context of Plantinga's philosophy, since Sennett goes on later to argue that one of the things Plantinga's version of the ontological argument reveals is what is wrong with all ontological arguments.

There is much more to be said about Sennett on the ontological argument, but something should be said about the chapters on Reformed epistemology. Again, there is much to be learned from Sennett's work on Reformed epistemology. The exposition is clear and often excellent on getting directly to the points of contention. Still, at least one issue warrants further discussion.

Sennett criticizes Plantinga's conclusion that evidentialism (the position that theistic beliefs must be based on propositional evidence) is false. The connection between the failure of classical foundationalism and evidentialism is not so close as Plantinga suggests. Sennett introduces what he calls "modified foundationalism" to support his view. Modified foundationalism accepts beliefs as properly basic if they meet classical foundationalism's criteria.
Faith and Philosophy

(self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses) or meet an expanded set of criteria derived from "problem cases" (memory beliefs, for example). Problem cases have in common what Sennett calls "universal sanction," that is, they are typically held by virtually all cognizers, are held as essential to normal living, and life without them is unthinkable. For example, life without memory beliefs is difficult even to imagine, let alone live. Since theistic beliefs do not enjoy universal sanction, there is good reason to accept modified foundationalism while rejecting theistic beliefs, and hence evidentialism can be accepted while rejecting classical foundationalism. Universal sanction provides, says Sennett, prima facie reason to accept evidentialism and to reject the Reformed epistemology project.

But why should universal sanction provide prima facie reason to accept evidentialism? Some of William Alston's arguments are relevant here. Universal engagement in an epistemic practice may indicate reliability, and hence justification, but that says nothing about theistic practices. They may have their own internal accounts—spiritual development, for example—providing prima facie reason for taking the practices, and by extension, the beliefs, to be justified.

There is much more to discuss about Sennett's fine book than I can do here. Despite the critical issues I raise, Modality, Probability, and Rationality is well worth reading. In fact, it is a must for anyone interested in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, particularly those interested in Plantinga's contributions.


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For over a decade now, debate concerning the epistemology of religious belief has focused on the provocative arguments by Alvin Plantinga for the doctrine known as "Reformed Epistemology"—the doctrine that theistic belief may be fully justified without propositional evidence. The debate is well known. What is not so well known is that the historical roots of Reformed epistemology are deep, widespread, and dialectically healthy. This is the contention of Dewey Hoitenga, who presents an impressive and detailed investigation into what he sees to be the philosophical ancestry of the doctrine. While Plantinga claims to draw his ideas from the work of John Calvin and his interpreters, Hoitenga contends that Calvin is only the tip of the philosophical iceberg. Below the surface lie important contributions from Plato, the Bible, and Augustine as well.