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## Is Plantinga's A/C Model an Example of Ideologically Tainted Philosophy?

Ever since I began giving lectures in the philosophy of religion, I've treated Alvin Plantinga's version of Reformed epistemology, especially as found in his magnum opus *Warranted Christian Belief*. And every year, I'm challenged by students who express a distinct aversion to Plantinga's treatment of the epistemic status of theistic beliefs. This aversion sometimes takes very emotional forms. Quite often, accusations of "fundamentalism" or "ideology" are bandied about. Apparently, Plantinga's epistemology of religious belief strikes some students as an ideological justification of religious beliefs in the guise of philosophy, a position which is not only philosophically mistaken, but is also a provocation because Plantinga seems to be playing with the philosophical cards stacked in his favor. As a result, we usually don't make much headway during class discussions.

In the following paper, I want to investigate whether my students' negative reactions have any basis in fact i.e. whether Plantinga's epistemology of theistic belief is based on an ideologically tainted philosophy.

A principal difficulty in posing this question is the ambiguity and vagueness of the term "ideology" and its derivatives. Definitions and uses of the term "ideology" vary to such an extent that one gets the impression that "the same word serves to describe a variety of phenomena—not just a single one..." (Boudon 1988, 25). Correspondingly, theoretical reflection on the concept and the phenomenon of ideology is many-sided and confusing. "If one looks at the literature that exists on the concept of ideology and explanations of the phenomenon of ideology, then one is overcome by the irresistible feeling that above all there is a great deal of confusion." (Boudon 1988, 25)

Fundamentally, one can distinguish between a pejorative and a purely descriptive (non-evaluative) use of the term. Since evaluative elements are part of the meaning of the one expression, these two uses of "ideology" cannot involve the same concept, but rather the terms "ideology" or "ideological" must involve two or more different concepts.<sup>1</sup> Since my students were using the expression "ideology" in the pejorative sense to express their disapproval of Plantinga's position, I will focus in this present context only on the pejorative mean-

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<sup>1</sup> The question of whether "ideology" is used equivocally or analogically is a question which can remain open in the present context.

ing of the term. But even then there is no uniform picture. Even Marx' and Engel's famous "The German Ideology" presents neither a coherent concept nor a developed theory of ideology.<sup>2</sup>

For my purposes I define the basic idea of the pejorative use of "ideology" as a divergence between the real underlying purpose of something and an ideology's intellectual justification for it. Characteristically, ideologies in this sense are not concerned with weighing the reasons for and against the truth of a belief i. e. not concerned with the search for truth, but rather about providing legitimacy for already fixed beliefs by providing them with an "intellectual alibi" (Thielicke 1958, 44). As a result, ideologies are not open to critical inquiry but try to avoid it at all costs.<sup>3</sup> Ideology thus bars our access to reality. Correspondingly, Hans Kelsen has defined "ideology" (in the pejorative sense) as "... a representation of the object which is non-objective, influenced by subjective value judgments, concealing, transfiguring or disfiguring the object of knowledge ..." (Kelsen 2000<sup>2</sup>, 111).

Ideologies have a practical function of achieving specific goals rather than giving priority to the epistemic goal of achieving knowledge.<sup>4</sup> A philosophy is ideological when it is not concerned with the search for truth by way of reasoned argument, but rather with a retrospective legitimation of beliefs which one is unwilling under any circumstances to subject to serious discussion. Philosophy is ideological when it takes the form of a rationalization of what in fact are irrational attitudes and beliefs by producing theories and arguments which are created solely for the purpose of justifying such irrational phenomena.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to deception or fraud, however, the ideologue is personally convinced of the truth of his ideology.<sup>6</sup>

On this view, a critique of ideology consists in exposing or unmasking the real motives behind an assertion or line of argument by reference to these underlying but hidden motives.<sup>7</sup> My students probably have the impression that Plantinga's theories and arguments are not primarily concerned with providing neu-

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<sup>2</sup> Marx/Engels (1962<sup>3</sup>) The "German ideology" characteristically describes the divorce between philosophical ideas and social reality; ideology is the illusion that ideas rather than material social conditions are the driving force behind historical change that serves to maintain the dominant social order and to which even the ruling class is subject; cf. Bohlender (2010, 41f.).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Thielicke (1958, 46).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Althusser (1968, 181f.).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Vilfredo Sun Pareto's theory of "derivations", see Pareto (1970).

"Derivation" is Pareto's term for ideologies.

<sup>6</sup> Lübke (1963, 15).

<sup>7</sup> However, such a critique has no implications for the truth of an assertion or the validity or soundness of an argument.

tral, rational philosophical analysis and argument, but are rather an attempt to provide legitimation to certain religious beliefs and defend them philosophically at all cost.

In Plantinga's epistemology of theistic Christian belief,<sup>8</sup> especially as developed in *Warranted Christian Belief* (WCB)<sup>9</sup>, there are primarily three main areas which might be interpreted as corroborating the suspicion of ideology in the sense described above: the charge that Plantinga's argument is circular, the so-called "Great Pumpkin Objection", and the role of defeaters and internal defeater-defeaters (in the following abbreviated as defeaters<sup>2</sup>) in Plantinga's epistemology.<sup>10</sup> After providing a brief overview of the most important issues in WCB for the question under consideration, I will consider each of these three issues in turn.

## 1 A Brief Overview of Plantinga's Epistemology of Theistic Belief in WCB

In WCB Alvin Plantinga pursues two main goals: First, he wishes to contribute to Christian apologetics by showing that if the Christian faith is true, it is most likely in good epistemic order. Second, he wants to provide an epistemology of theistic belief from a Christian perspective, and in so doing make a contribution to Christian philosophy.

His starting point is the distinction between *de facto* objections to Christian theistic belief which challenge its claim to truth and *de jure* objections which challenge its positive epistemic status. In particular, Plantinga has in mind a version of the *de jure* objection which argues that theistic belief is epistemically defective and therefore unacceptable, independently of the question of its truth. Plantinga's argument is that this form of the *de jure* objection fails, because the success of any viable *de jure* objection assumes the success of the *de facto* objection.

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**8** In the following, "theism" is used as a generic term. Unless expressly stated otherwise (especially in the context of Plantinga's so-called *extended A/C model*) no sharp distinction is made between theism and Christianity.

**9** I shall use the following abbreviations: FT = *The Foundations of Theism: A Reply*; RBG = *Reason and Belief in God*; WCB = *Warranted Christian Belief*; WPF = *Warrant and Proper Function*.

**10** In addition to these three issues, one could also explore Plantinga's remarks on the relationship between Christian presuppositions and autonomous science as a starting point for an ideological critique of his position.

Plantinga focuses on a form of the *de jure* objection which challenges whether Christian belief has warrant. According to Plantinga, warrant is that epistemic property which when combined with true belief produces knowledge. Central to Plantinga's notion of warrant is the concept of proper function. If a belief is produced by a cognitive mechanism that is functioning properly in accordance with a design plan directed at generating true beliefs, then this belief has warrant, if it is produced in the appropriate cognitive environment and unless it faces any undefeated defeaters.<sup>11</sup> How a belief is produced is crucial for whether that belief has warrant, but this does not mean that the epistemic subject who has the belief must know how it was produced or be able to show that the respective cognitive module that produced the belief is reliable. If all warrant conditions are fulfilled, then the degree of warrant for a belief depends upon the strength of that belief.

In a second step, Plantinga develops his so-called A (quinas) / C (alvin) model for the warrant of the theistic core of Christian faith. This model claims to be logically consistent and epistemically possible i.e. it is consistent with our current state of knowledge and is free from outstanding non-defeated defeaters. Plantinga holds this model to be true, but he does not claim to have proven this; nevertheless he believes that if the Christian faith is true then this model or some model very similar to it is very likely to be true. The A/C model says that God has created in human beings a *sensus divinitatis*, a cognitive module which reacts to various stimuli to produce (basic) theistic beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Since, by hypothesis, the *sensus divinitatis* is a work of God, it is reliably aimed at truth and therefore beliefs generated by means of it have warrant. If the Christian God exists, it is very likely that there is a *sensus divinitatis* or some similar capacity which is reliably directed toward truth and functions properly. In other words, if the Christian God exists, then it is very likely that as a product of the *sensus divinitatis*, theistic-Christian beliefs have warrant.

However, according to Plantinga's extended A/C model, the *sensus divinitatis* has been badly damaged (though not completely destroyed) by original sin. Therefore, because of the noetic effects of original sin, our *natural* knowledge of God is both limited in scope and damaged, distorted or completely destroyed.<sup>13</sup> But God does not abandon humanity to this ruinous condition; rather He offers them a way to salvation. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus

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<sup>11</sup> In the following, the formulation "properly functioning cognitive faculties," includes the fulfillment of all warrant conditions.

<sup>12</sup> Basic beliefs are not the result of argument. Properly functioning basic beliefs are beliefs that have positive epistemic status immediately (independently of evidence or argument).

<sup>13</sup> WCB, 184, 186.

Christ, human beings are offered salvation. This salvation includes the restoration of the *sensus divinitatis* by the Holy Spirit, whose work in the believing Christian brings forth faith, in order that the Christian teachings proclaimed in the Bible can be understood and their truth recognized.

## 2 The Alleged Circularity of Plantinga's Position in WCB

Ideologies in the pejorative sense are closed systems in that the arguments they produce always presuppose what they are required to prove and thus are circular.

The charge of circularity has been sometimes raised against Plantinga's position in WCB.<sup>14</sup> To assess the strength of this charge, one must first clarify what exactly is meant by "circularity" because this is not always clear. At any rate circularity is a possible property of arguments and it counts as a fallacy. The most obvious case of a circular argument is an argument which is meant to prove  $p$  to someone not accepting  $p$ , using  $p$  as one of its premisses (i. e. "begging the question") or an argument in which one proposition is justified by reference to a second, and the second is justified by reference to the first.<sup>15</sup> Such arguments are not necessarily formally flawed (i. e. invalid solely because of their circularity).<sup>16</sup> But they are dialectically impotent, because they afford their conclusions no support. We expect from arguments for a certain proposition  $p$  offering the unconvinced reasons to accept  $p$ . But if the offered reasons contain or presuppose  $p$ , they won't convince  $S$  who exactly does not believe  $p$ . They won't possess any dialectical force. "If an argument is to be successful, the truth of the premisses must be admitted by both sides. When a disputant asserts a premiss, he is, therefore, asking his opponent to grant it to him (cf. "claim"). When he asserts the conclusion as one of his premisses, he is asking his opponent to grant him the truth of the statement whose truth has been questioned..."<sup>17</sup> Via circular arguments one can produce arguments for any odd claim.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> E.g. Löffler (2003, 143).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Mackie (1967, 177).

<sup>16</sup> The nature of the charge of circularity is not logical but dialectical or epistemic. "If the charge of circularity were logical and not epistemic ... all deductive arguments would be viciously circular." Psillos (2012, 42).

<sup>17</sup> Sparkes (1966, 462f., 462).

<sup>18</sup> Moser (1993, 4f).

An argument is a covertly circular argument for  $p$ , if its logical validity or the truth or epistemic justification of one of the premisses of the argument assumes the truth of  $p$  without expressly stating it.

Evident and covert logical or propositional circularity are to be distinguished from epistemic-performative circularity.<sup>19</sup> Epistemic circularity is involved when the reliability of a belief forming mechanism or doxastic practice is argued for in a way that presupposes the reliability of that very mechanism or practice, because it assumes or relies on beliefs whose positive epistemic status<sup>20</sup> (in the sense of their probable production of true beliefs) depends upon the epistemic reliability of that practice or belief forming mechanism. Epistemic circularity consists in the “... commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be *justified* in holding the premises ...” (Alston 1996, 15). In this epistemic sense, the inductive argument for the general reliability of memory beliefs based on the fact that my memorial beliefs have been reliable in the past is circular because it assumes that I can *correctly* remember that my previous memory beliefs were reliable.

Is Plantinga’s A/C model circular in one of the above senses and would such circularity justify the charge that the theory is ideological?<sup>21</sup> To answer this question I will consider the objections of two German philosophers of religion. Saskia Wendel holds that Plantinga’s argument in WCB is circular because he attempts to justify one religious belief (“God has forgiven my sins”) by the appeal to another religious belief (the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*).<sup>22</sup> Even if we leave aside the terminological vagueness of her objection (the A/C model is mainly not concerned with epistemic justification but rather with (possible) warrant), she overlooks that Plantinga’s aim in WCB is not to prove that theistic beliefs such as “God has forgiven my sins” are *de facto* warranted. Plantinga does not argue from the (actual) truth of theism to its (actual) being warranted, but rather he argues that if theism is true, then theistic beliefs very likely have warrant. *Pace* Wendel, Plantinga does not need to presuppose the truth of theism or the existence of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* to provide reasons for his positive assessment of the epistemic status of theism, since his positive assessment of its actual status does not play any role in his philosophical argument (although he is convinced that theistic beliefs do in fact have warrant).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> On epistemic circularity, cf. Alston (1996, 15–17), cf. also: Alston (1996b, 271).

<sup>20</sup> In the following “positive epistemic status” serves as a generic term that includes positive epistemic concepts such as “epistemically justified”, “rational”, “warranted” etc.

<sup>21</sup> For Plantinga’s answer to the circularity objection cf. WCB, 351f.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Wendel (2010, 88).

<sup>23</sup> Plantinga considers it impossible to show that theism has warrant; cf. WCB, 169f.



This reconstruction is identical with the previous version and therefore not obviously circular.

If you understand “presuppose” in the sense that TT is a sufficient condition of TTE, you get the following reconstruction:

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|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1) TT → TTE        | A / C model        |
| 2) TTE             | from 1) (and 4))   |
| 3) TTE → TT        |                    |
| ∴ 4) TT            | from 2) and 3)     |
| ∴ 5) TTE           | from 1) and 4)     |
|                    |                    |
| 6) (TTE & TT) → WT |                    |
| ∴ 7) WT            | from 4), 5) and 6) |

This reconstructed version of Plantinga’s A/C model is in fact obviously circular. However, it misunderstands Plantinga, and confuses two distinct epistemological projects in WCB with each other.

Plantinga’s A/C model does not claim that an epistemically justified belief in TT (i. e., WT) presupposes any belief in TTE. I don’t have to have *even heard* of a *sensus divinitatis*, much less Plantinga’s A/C model, for my theistic beliefs to have warrant. It is only required that my theistic beliefs are (at least in part) the product of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. Nothing more is required for WT according to Plantinga’s epistemically externalist warrant theory and correspondingly, nothing more is required by his A/C model either. Therefore, the theist does not need arguments for the warrant of (at least of some of) his theistic beliefs.

On the one hand, WCB is an exercise in apologetics in the sense that Plantinga defends the possibility of properly basic warrant for theistic belief; on the other hand, Plantinga pursues the project (internal to Christian faith) of providing an epistemology of theistic-Christian belief.<sup>24</sup>

Plantinga’s apologetic project in WCB is to defend the possibility of the A/C model and to seek to prove that in the case that theism is true, then it highly likely has warrant. For this project, he must neither presuppose TT or WT. By contrast, the project of providing an internal epistemology of theistic belief presupposes the truth of theism. This project is *theological* insofar a theistic-Christian theory of knowledge is a project internal to Christianity, and as a result, Plantinga can assume the truth of Christian theism.

However, Ricken’s objection to Plantinga’s argument can also be understood as follows: According to Plantinga, one can recognize the truth of theism in a le-

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<sup>24</sup> For other aims in WCB cf. Dieter Schönecker’s article in this volume.



gitimate way only if theism is true. The truth of theism is therefore a necessary condition for legitimately believing that it is true.

“Legitimate” in this context can be understood in two ways:

a) in the sense of “alethically legitimate” viz. appropriate to something’s being true; or

b) in the sense of “epistemically legitimate” viz. that a cognition is legitimate or justified if the resulting belief has positive epistemic status.

Interpreting Plantinga as saying a) would be trivial since it applies to every proposition and every type of knowledge. I can only appropriately recognize the truth of a proposition if that proposition is in fact true. “Legitimate” in the sense of b) is more interesting and relevant to the issue of circularity. Plantinga does in fact assume that one can legitimately come to know the truth of theism only if the A/C model (or something like it) is true, since he considers the arguments for the truth of theism too weak to justify an epistemically legitimate knowledge of its truth.<sup>25</sup> No obvious circularity is apparent here.

The suspicion of a *covert* circularity in Plantinga’s argument might focus on Plantinga’s hypothesis that his theistic theory of knowledge is correct only if theism is true. From this one might conclude that my belief in theism can only have a positive epistemic status, if the theistic theory of knowledge is correct and I know that it is correct. This would mean that if I am to be reasonably convinced of the truth of theism, I have to be convinced of the correctness of the theistic theory of knowledge, which implies in turn that I know the truth of theism. This would amount to a circle in that if I am to be reasonably convinced of the truth of theism, I must already assume theism is true.

However, the circularity of this reconstructed argument does not reflect Plantinga’s position. Plantinga’s A/C model does not claim that I have to assume the theistic theory of knowledge is correct in order to be epistemically reasonable in accepting the truth of theism. Indeed Plantinga does not require any meta-beliefs *at all* about the conditions for the positive epistemic status of my theistic beliefs in order for them to enjoy positive epistemic status. The only requirement is that these beliefs are (at least in part) the product of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. Nothing more is required on Plantinga’s epistemically externalist warrant theory and correspondingly, neither is his A/C model. Therefore, Plantinga’s A/C model is not covertly circular.

However, this version of Ricken’s objection suggests two other senses in which Plantinga’s A/C model might be epistemically circular. I see two possible starting points for making that case:

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<sup>25</sup> WCB, 170 can be understood in this way.

1. The epistemic justification of Plantinga's argumentation for a belief being warranted is that it is a product of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, that is, a reliable cognitive capacity for knowledge of theism's truth. But this presupposes that there is such a capacity and that it functions reliably. However, in WCB Plantinga does not argue that there is in fact a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* and therefore doesn't present any argument that could be epistemically circular.

2. The warrant for the belief that there is a reliable and proper functioning *sensus divinitatis* and therefore that belief in the truth of theism might be epistemically justified, presupposes that theistic beliefs are warranted and therefore the existence and proper functioning of the *sensus divinitatis*. In fact, according to the A/C model, theistic beliefs only have warrant if they are the result of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. However, in WCB Plantinga does not assert that there is such a *sensus divinitatis*. And according to Plantinga's theory, the theist *need not* be convinced that a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* for his theistic beliefs exists, in order for those beliefs to have warrant. Therefore, there is no basis in fact for the suspicion that Plantinga's position is epistemically circular in this sense either.<sup>26</sup>

But even if Plantinga's epistemology of theistic belief *were* circular, this would not imply it was ideological. The problem of epistemic circularity has plagued (non-skeptical and non-relativist) theories of knowledge since their inception.<sup>27</sup> So unless one wants to brand every (non-skeptical and non-relativistic) philosophical theory of knowledge as ideological from the outset, the presence of epistemic circularity will not be sufficient to support the allegation of ideology.

Yet these reflections on epistemic circularity point to another potential starting point for suspecting Plantinga's approach is ideological. An important aspect of defending Plantinga's A/C model and his theory of warrant against the charge

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<sup>26</sup> In a way Plantinga's entire Christian philosophy is epistemically circular in the sense that he presupposes that the possibility that our beliefs have warrant and the possibility of knowing that naturalism is false requires him to presuppose some form of supernaturalism since according to Plantinga, the conjunction of evolutionary theory (which he accepts) and philosophical naturalism (which he doesn't) is irrational. As a result, the probability that our cognitive faculties function properly and are aimed at truth under the assumption that evolutionary theory and philosophical naturalism are true, is extraordinarily low. See: WPF, Chapter 12. This kind of epistemic circularity, however, is not relevant to a possible ideological criticism of Plantinga, since if Plantinga's evolutionary anti-naturalist argument is valid, any claim to rationality and truth presupposes the truth of theism (on the assumption that evolutiontheory is true).

<sup>27</sup> "Epistemic circularity has dogged epistemology from the time of the Greek skeptics, Descartes through Hegel's circle and serpent biting its tail ..." (Sosa, 1996, 303).

of circularity is the insight that theism's being warranted does not depend upon arguments for its truth / for its warrant. This could suggest however, that Plantinga's theory is ideological insofar as it frees theism from any requirement to provide rational grounds or answer to criticism.

### 3 The Great Pumpkin Objection

Another interpretation of the ideological objection to Plantinga is that his epistemology of theistic beliefs is overly lax by allowing (in theory) even fantastic and abstruse systems of belief to claim epistemic warrant but (in practice) limiting this epistemic liberality to theistic beliefs, unjustifiably excluding the beliefs of other religious or quasi-religious world views.

Michael Martin has objected that Plantinga's thesis that theistic beliefs are possibly properly basic is radically relativistic because any belief can be immunized from criticism by declaring it to be basic.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, Plantinga does not say that all beliefs which are taken to be basic *are* in fact *properly* basic. And from the fact that Plantinga holds theistic beliefs to be (possibly) properly basic, it obviously does not follow that any belief whatsoever is properly basic or that the epistemic subject's belief that his beliefs are properly basic necessarily means they have positive epistemic status.<sup>29</sup>

Warrant-basicality does not provide a belief with epistemic immunity either. Even beliefs that are properly basic or held to be so are subject to defeaters. According to Plantinga's warrant theory, a belief B for an epistemic subject S has sufficient degree of warrant, only if S is unaware of any defeaters for B or if S can defeat all known defeaters for B, and hence possesses a defeater-defeater (defeater<sup>2</sup>) for B. Plantinga already addressed the concern voiced by Martin in his seminal essay "Reason and Belief in God"<sup>30</sup> under the section "The Great Pumpkin Objection" (hereinafter: GP).<sup>31</sup> The term is lifted from Charles Schultz's

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**28** Cf. Martin (1990, 272ff.). For lack of space, I will abstract from the different senses in which epistemic subjects or their beliefs can be defective (or epistemically legitimate). I will not always be explicit about the kind of epistemic merit under consideration: whether the merit in question is warrant, a deontological understanding of justification, rationality, entitlement or whatever. I appeal to the goodwill of the reader to choose the most benign interpretation of the strongest reading in each case.

**29** Martin (1990, 272): "Plantinga's proposal would generate many different communities that could legitimately claim that their basic beliefs are rational ... Among the communities might be devil worshippers generated, flat earthers ..."

**30** RBG, 74–78.

**31** GP surfaces first in: Plantinga (1980, 49–63).

cartoon *Peanuts*. In the cartoon, Linus van Pelt, Charlie Brown's best friend, expects the arrival of the Great Pumpkin in the pumpkin patch every year on Halloween. The objection is that if theistic beliefs are properly basic, then on Plantinga's A/C model, Linus' belief in the appearance of the Great Pumpkin could also be considered properly basic.<sup>32</sup> Plantinga correctly responds to this objection by noting that even if theistic beliefs are properly basic under particular circumstances, it does not follow that they are basic under all circumstances or that other beliefs are basic under all, the same or different circumstances, respectively.<sup>33</sup> However, there is a question about the relevant difference between theistic beliefs and Great Pumpkin beliefs which allows Plantinga to distinguish between their epistemic statuses. What epistemically relevant *difference* is there between theistic belief and Linus' Great Pumpkin faith?

The assumption that theistic beliefs and Great Pumpkin beliefs have unequal epistemic statuses points at an ambiguity in Plantinga's formulation of GP (at least in RBG). Plantinga formulates GP primarily as if it's a question of whether (under certain circumstances) the possibility of properly basic theistic beliefs implies the (possible) proper basicity of all possible beliefs.<sup>34</sup> In some places, however, GP runs as follows: the possibility that even apparently absurd beliefs can justifiably be held as properly basic is inferred from the fact that theists hold some of their beliefs as properly basic.<sup>35</sup> The difference between the two formulations of the objection is not without significance. The second version of the GP is not concerned with the connection between the *fact (possibility)* that some belief B is properly basic and the *fact (possibility)* that theistic beliefs are properly basic, but rather about the warrant for the *meta-belief* M, that if theists hold theism for properly basic, then one can be equally justified in holding completely absurd beliefs for properly basic. This second issue is explicitly addressed by Plantinga in WCB under the heading "The Son of Great Pumpkin Objection" (SGP).

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**32** In WCB, this objection is found in the following modal version: "if belief in God can be properly basic then so can any other belief, no matter how bizarre ..." (WCB, 344).

**33** Cf. Plantinga (1983, 74).

**34** In WCB Plantinga does not argue that theistic beliefs are actually properly basic, but that they are possibly properly basic and *in the case* of the truth of theism, are actually properly basic.

**35** "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, thus throwing wide the gates of irrationalism and superstition?"; RBG, 74 (underlining OJW). Cf. to the first formulation of the objection: "If belief in God is properly basic, why can not *just any* belief be properly basic?"; RBG, 74 (italics by AP; underlining OJW).

SGP in WCB is stated as follows:<sup>36</sup>

1) If it is epistemically legitimate to hold theistic beliefs as basic, then epistemologists of any community are epistemically permitted to hold the central beliefs of their community as properly (rationally) basic, no matter how absurd these beliefs are.

2) But it is not epistemically legitimate to hold any belief whatsoever as properly basic, regardless of how absurd it is.

3) Therefore, one cannot legitimately hold theistic beliefs for properly (rationally) basic.<sup>37</sup>

Some distinctions and clarifications show that even apart from the fact that Plantinga only claims that basic theistic beliefs *can* have warrant, this variant of the SGP is not a good objection to Plantinga's A/C model. It does not follow necessarily from the warrant of the claim that theistic beliefs can have warrant that the meta-belief of the Great Pumpkinites, viz. that their Great Pumpkin beliefs are properly warrant basic, actually has warrant. If the A/C model is correct, theistic beliefs have warrant *qua* products of the *sensus divinitatis* in a basic manner, but it does not follow that Great Pumpkin beliefs which are *not* products of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* are properly (rational) or warrant-basic.

At this point, however, perhaps the one decisive weakness of the A/C model and Plantinga's apologetic strategy centering on this model<sup>38</sup> becomes clear: Plantinga has no good (dialectical) reason<sup>39</sup> to accept the truth of central theistic beliefs. Correspondingly, Plantinga's remarks on the *sensus divinitatis* and the proper basicity of central theistic beliefs in his A/C model take the form of a conditional: *if* theistic beliefs are true, *then* they are most likely the products of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* and therefore have warrant. But the A/C model leaves open the following issues: the question of the truth of theism,

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. WCB, 345.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. WCB, 345. As a *reductio ad absurdum* (and not a *modus tollens*) argument SGP can be formulated as follows: a warrant theory or a doxastic practice which allows you to hold obviously bizarre beliefs as properly basic leads to a *reductio ad absurdum*. With respect to his response to GP or SGP there is an interesting development to be found in Plantinga's thinking. If in RBG he attacks the first premise on the grounds that Great Pumpkinism is epistemically defective but basic, then in WCB he admits that at least in some respects, Great Pumpkinism is epistemically in order, and his criticism is directed primarily to the second premise of the objection.

<sup>38</sup> I understand Plantinga's apologetic strategy as having two parts: one part consists in the rejection of the evidentialist objection by pointing to the possibility of having proper warrant-basicity for at least some theistic beliefs; whereas the second part is concerned to argue that the success of the *de jure* objection to theism depends upon the success of the *de facto* objection.

<sup>39</sup> A dialectical reason for *p* is a reason which in a discussion is accepted by all parties as a relevant reason for *p*.

the reasons for the truth of theistic belief, and the reasons for believing in the existence of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. As a result, it remains open which reasons speak in favor of the claim that theistic beliefs actually have warrant or are properly warrant-basic.

But if the question of the truth remains an open question in the A/C model, then it is unclear whether there is indeed *any* relevant epistemic difference between Great Pumpkinites and theists, because according to Plantinga, the crucial epistemic difference between Great Pumpkinism and theism is that there is a *sensus divinitatis* such that the beliefs produced by it are warrant-basic, whereas there is no corresponding cognitive module for the Great Pumpkin believer, a *sensus cucurbitatis* as it were. Thus within the framework of his Reformed Epistemology<sup>40</sup> (within the A/C model), Plantinga's apologetic project can not assume that there is any relevant epistemic difference between theism and Great Pumpkinism.

If one understands the main thrust of SGP as a good objection to Plantinga's apologetics of theistic faith to show that he cannot point to any epistemically relevant difference between theism and bizarre belief systems, and views the ability to cite a relevant difference as a *necessary precondition* for the rationality of the denial of the (possible) warrant basicity of bizarre beliefs, then it seems that Plantinga has no good answer to SGP.

Plantinga might argue that it is unclear why the theistic apologist should have any *interest* in citing any epistemically relevant difference between theism and Great Pumpkinism. In order to examine this as a possible response, I will introduce three hypothetical characters: the theist, Christian; the Great Pumpkinite, Linus; and the neutral observer between these two worldviews, Philo.<sup>41</sup> Linus and Christian hold key elements of their respective creeds<sup>42</sup> to be true and hold these beliefs in an epistemically basic way; furthermore, they are not aware of any other evidence for these beliefs, so that any warrant for these beliefs must be based (directly or indirectly) on their having been produced by a *sensus divini-*

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<sup>40</sup> This is true at least in terms of the apologetic aspect of Plantinga's Reformed epistemology.

<sup>41</sup> Insofar as Philo's position is neutral between theism and Great Pumpkinism (and other philosophical, religious and quasi-religious belief systems, such as naturalism), it represents the perspective from which Plantinga's apologetic project must be judged. Plantinga understands his apologetic project as a "contribution to an ongoing public discussion of the epistemology of Christian belief; it does not appeal to specifically Christian premises or presuppositions. I shall argue that, from this public point of view, there isn't the faintest reason to think that Christian belief lacks justification, rationality, or warrant ...", WCB, XIII.

<sup>42</sup> The term "creed" will be understood as a collection of the central tenets of a religious or general philosophical community, the acceptance of which is required for membership in that community; for a similar treatment; cf. Swinburne (2005, 198).

*tatis* or *sensus cucurbitatis*, respectively. Furthermore, let's assume that both Christian and Linus are convinced that the warrant for their religious beliefs or worldviews fundamentally depends upon their having been produced through a properly functioning, truth-oriented, etc. cognitive module and that their beliefs have warrant, if they are true on the A/C model or, alternatively, the *L(inus)* / *S(chultz)* model of the Pumpkinite apologist, and that both view their (respective) models as epistemically possible. Finally, let's assume that the truth of theism and Great Pumpkinism are mutually exclusive and that Christian, Linus and Philo know this.<sup>43</sup>

What reasons does Philo have for granting theistic beliefs a higher epistemic status than Linus' Great Pumpkinite beliefs? Under the assumptions of our example (and Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology), it seems that he has *no* good reasons to do so. Since Linus' creed is incompatible with the Christian faith, on pain of inconsistency Philo cannot hold both creeds to be true, and since he does not have any good (epistemic) reason to hold one of the two creeds as more likely to be true than the other or one of the two creeds as more epistemically reliable than the other, then, unless he has additional relevant evidence, Philo should suspend judgment about the truth of the two creeds. Plantinga's claim in RBG that there is an epistemically relevant difference between theistic belief and Great Pumpkin belief because there is no Great Pumpkin and therefore no cognitive faculty which functions properly to produce Great Pumpkin beliefs etc.<sup>44</sup> is irrelevant for Philo since God's existence and the existence of a *sensus divinitatis* is precisely what is contested. From this perspective, there is no independent evidence either for theism or Great Pumpkinism i. e. evidence independent of the belief in their respective truths. Any attempt to privilege theism over alternative belief systems which are equally (internally) consistent, in keeping with our current knowledge etc. will seem irrational because it treats seemingly similar things differently.

If, however (at least) one of the two creeds must be false, and there is no neutral ground (i. e. in terms of the probability of the truth of one of the two faiths) to give one priority over the other, then it is not epistemically possible to exclude the truth of the pumpkinite creed which would imply the falsity of

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<sup>43</sup> Great Pumpkinism can be considered a religion (or quasi-religion) similar to theism although there are differences between the God of theism and the Great Pumpkin, e. g. that Great Pumpkin is creator of the universe and possesses all compossible great making properties but does possess them neither essentially nor in an unsurpassable extent. In addition to all theistic attributes he possesses a predilection for pumpkins (because of the high intrinsic worth of pumpkins) and has the habit to appear to some of his devotees on halloween.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. RBG, 78.

the theistic creed. If the theistic creed should be false, however, the theistic hypothesis of the existence of a (universal and properly functioning) *sensus divinitatis* (and thus the A/C model) is questionable on two counts:

1. If the theistic creed is false, then there is no God and hence no *sensus divinitatis* created by God, whose deliverances can be trusted as reliable by virtue of its having been created by God. In this case, theistic beliefs are not only false, but have no warrant.

2. If theistic faith is false but nevertheless the product of a cognitive module that is at least functionally equivalent to the *sensus divinitatis*, then this module must function for the most part falsely, or its design plan cannot be directed toward truth or alternatively, it is not working in an environment for which it was designed etc. In this case also theistic beliefs are not only false but have no warrant.

Philo therefore has no reason to give preference to theism over Great Pumpkinism with regard to either truth or warrant. Viewed from his neutral perspective, there is no perceptible difference between the epistemic status of the L/S model and the A/C model, or between Christian's use of Plantinga's apologetic strategy such that if theism is true it has warrant such that a *de jure* objection against theism assumes the success of the *de facto* objection (or the stronger claim, which Plantinga does not argue for, that properly basic theistic beliefs possess warrant), and Linus' analogous application of this defensive strategy, or the stronger claim that Great Pumpkinism has properly basic warrant.

For Philo there is every indication that there is no discernable difference to the neutral observer that would make it (epistemically) impossible for Linus to adopt the theists' defensive strategy. That means that from the perspective of Plantinga's *apologetic* project, there is no difference between the application of his strategy by Great Pumpkinites and by theists. In this case, SGP (at least on my interpretation) has achieved its aim.

On my interpretation, SGP—perhaps it would be better to call my objection the G(rand) S(on of the) G(reat) P(umpkin) GSGP—is less concerned with the unacceptable epistemic permissiveness of the A/C-model or its epistemic principle; rather it shows that Plantinga's A/C model and the apologetic strategy associated with his theory of warrant could be taken captive by representatives of some obviously bizarre belief system, since one is unable to point to any epistemically relevant difference (from an apologetic perspective) in the way the strategy should be applied.

If the same apologetic strategy can be applied with equal apologetic force to the beliefs of Great Pumpkinism and theism, then this raises question what theism gains by this strategy. Plantinga could argue that his apologetic project is primarily concerned with clarifying the relationship between *de jure* and *de*



*facto* objections and this goal is not called into question by SGP or GSGP. However, Great Pumpkinism, whose truth and warrant is incompatible with the truth and warrant of theism, also benefits from clarifying this relationship such that now two mutually exclusive religious (or quasi-religious) systems can both point out that, firstly, their potential positive epistemic status is independent of positive evidence, and secondly, the question of their epistemic status can not be answered independently of the question of their truth.

The fact that some<sup>45</sup> bizarre belief systems, such as Great Pumpkinism, can appropriate Plantinga's apologetic strategy to advance their cause, sheds a bad light on the strategies' epistemic value or utility. An epistemological and apologetic strategy that protects some (not all) absurd or bizarre belief systems from some (not all) types of objections (such as certain evidentialist objections), gives the impression of following a mere immunization strategy, from which even absurd systems can profit and use to their ideological advantage.<sup>46</sup>

A neutral observer (but probably also some theists) would probably recommend that Christian find a strategy which (regardless of the condition of the truth of theism and the falsity of Great Pumpkinism) can point to a relevant epistemic difference between Pumpkinism and theism, and so show that Pumpkinites can not use Plantinga's strategy with the same epistemic legitimation as the theist, so that his strategy is at least in principle immune to ideological abuse or misuse. However, in the context of Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology, this seems impossible or at least very difficult, which must leave theists as well as all Philo sympathizers unsatisfied.

Plantinga would perhaps respond that the theist/christian *qua* theist/christian knows that the Great Pumpkinite cannot apply Plantinga's apologetics or theory of knowledge simply because there is no Great Pumpkin and therefore no *sensus cucurbitatis*. But at least the neutral observer of his apologetic project should reserve judgment about the A/C model (and all other competing models) because there is a possible strong objection to its truth: the (possible) truth of Great Pumpkinism and the L/S model. And the question of the truth of the two competing models cannot be settled without recourse to arguments like those of traditional natural theology.

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<sup>45</sup> I do not claim that *any* belief or system of beliefs whatsoever can adopt this strategy (cf. WCB, 350), but only that in addition to theism, *some* evidently absurd systems like Great Pumpkinism can.

<sup>46</sup> The possible counter-argument, that the abuse of a principle does not refute the principle itself, overlooks the fact that from the perspective of Plantinga's own apologetic strategy, it is not possible in *principle* to distinguish evidentially between the two.

Finally, from GSGP it follows that doubts concerning the truth of the A/C model and the warrant of theistic belief do not necessarily presuppose the belief that theism is false. Rather GSGP shows that a neutral observer need not deny the truth of theism in order to be justified in withholding assent about the truth of the A/C model as well as Plantinga's theory of the (possible) proper warrant-basicality of theistic beliefs, but that it is enough to suspend judgment about the truth of the theistic creed (or Great Pumpkin creed), which implies withholding judgment about whether theism has warrant and about the epistemic possibility of the A/C model. There does seem to be at least a "faintest reason" (WCB, XIII) for this suspension of judgment.

Our examination of GP, SGP or GSGP has not proven that Plantinga's apologetic strategy is evidently ideological. However, there is some reason to believe that it can be understood ideologically or abused for that purpose—especially if one plays down the importance of defeaters for the warrant or the lack of warrant of religious beliefs. I will conclude by considering this point.

## 4 Defeaters and Internal Defeater-Defeaters

Up to this point GP, SGP and GSGP have been considered from a perspective external to theism. But this is not the only possible perspective. SGP, GSGP and the underlying concerns that motivate them can also be formulated from a perspective internal to theism.

As we've described the situation, from Christian's perspective there are reasons for thinking that Linus is right, or at least that he is in an equally good or bad epistemic position as Christian himself. Suppose that Linus' other beliefs (i.e., the beliefs in his noetic system which do not belong to his Pumpkin creed) prove to be as reliable as the average person's, that there are no obvious internal inconsistencies in his Great Pumpkin creed, that it does not conflict greatly with the background knowledge he shares with non-Pumpkinites, and that there is no (ideologically neutral, i.e. dialectical) reason<sup>47</sup> to doubt the sincerity and seriousness of Linus' faith; in this case, are his Great Pumpkin creed and his epistemological model of the production of core Pumpkin beliefs (which are warrant-basic because they are produced by a properly functioning *sensus cucurbitatis*, the L/S model) as epistemically legitimate (e.g. justified or warrant

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<sup>47</sup> In this context, an ideologically neutral standpoint is one which is independent of the truth or warrant of theism or Great Pumpkinism, i.e. beliefs whose propositional content, truth or falsity or epistemic status can be agreed upon in principle by all participants in the discussion; cf. WCB, 169.

rational) as Christian's beliefs on the A/C model and which (apologetically neutral) reasons does Christian have to postulate an epistemic difference between himself and Linus and to doubt the epistemic legitimacy only of Linus' Pumpkin creed and L/S model but not of his own creed and model?

Linus' Great Pumpkin belief would gain plausibility for Christian (via the principles of credulity and testimony)<sup>48</sup> if Linus was to sincerely claim that he had a religious encounter with the Great Pumpkin or if his experience could be understood under such an interpretation. However, since the truth of Linus' creed is incompatible with the truth of Christian theism, it is (according to Christian's A/C model) incompatible with theistic belief having warrant, because if the Great Pumpkin creed is true, then there is no properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* producing true theistic beliefs according to a design plan aimed at truth etc.

In this situation, Christian might ask himself what impact his knowledge of Linus' Great Pumpkin faith and Philo's assessment of the epistemic parity between Great Pumpkinism and theism should have on his own epistemic position. Under these circumstances, can Christian simply assume a decisive epistemic difference between Great Pumpkinism and theism such that Great Pumpkinism is false and therefore without warrant? Formulated in contemporary epistemological terms: Does Christian's knowledge of Linus' Great Pumpkin faith and Philo's assessment of the epistemic parity between the two creeds constitute a defeater for his theistic faith?

A defeater provides a reason to give up a belief that one already has.<sup>49</sup> The belief D is a defeater (simpliciter) for the belief B of an epistemic subject S, if the proper functioning of S's relevant cognitive capacity requires that S give up B, if S's noetic structure contains D and the defeater function of D is not neutralized by any other belief in S's noetic system.<sup>50</sup> Whoever has a defeater (which is undefeated) for a belief can not rationally continue to hold that belief.<sup>51</sup> Defeaters do not need to be products of a properly functioning cognitive capacity nor do they need to have their origins in our rational capacities.<sup>52</sup> Even a belief that

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<sup>48</sup> To these two principles and their religious and philosophical relevance, cf. Swinburne (2004<sup>2</sup>, 322).

<sup>49</sup> WCB, XIII.

<sup>50</sup> For Plantinga's notion of epistemic defeaters cf. WCB, 363.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. WCB, 357. Nearly every belief is subject to possible defeat. Plantinga, however, makes certain exceptions: for example, one's own mental states e.g. pain sensations, beliefs about one's own existence, perfectly self-evident beliefs and those which are held to be true with a maximum degree of certainty (WPF, 41).

<sup>52</sup> WCB, 363–366.

is not acquired by rational means can function as a defeater for a rationally acquired belief.

As a result of his encounters with Linus and Philo, Christian can ask himself whether it was he rather than Linus who was wrong about the epistemic status of his creed and its truth, i.e. whether his own creed isn't false or at least epistemically deficient.<sup>53</sup> Such reflections constitute a (potential) defeater for his belief in the truth and warrant of his theistic beliefs.

The (in Plantinga's view) apologetically justifiable belief in the mere *possibility* that his theistic beliefs are properly basic does not help Christian, since from the latter's perspective, nothing except for theistic convictions speaks against the epistemic possibility of the L/S model and the possible truth of Great Pumpkinism, and in this situation, Christian is no longer certain of the truth and warrant of his theistic beliefs.

But why shouldn't Christian simply assume the truth and properly basic warrant of theism and thus infer that Great Pumpkinism and the L/S model are false?<sup>54</sup> In this case, Christian would not weigh the reasons for Great Pumpkinism and theism against each other like a neutral observer, but take sides, although he has no neutral epistemic grounds (i.e. reasons that are independent of his theistic position) for preferring theism. The use of theistic grounds does not arise for him in this context, since he has called the truth of theism, and hence whether it is warranted, into question. That is to say, in this ambivalent situation he has no good epistemic reason to favor theism over the alternative, if he doesn't know of any independent reason to believe its truth. As a result, Christian cannot defend his choice by arguing that his theistic beliefs spring from an epistemic source which Linus lacks, viz. a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. Perhaps Christians' theistic beliefs are in fact the product of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* and his theistic faith implies that this is the case, but in his situation he cannot rely on this assurance because the truth and origins of his theistic creed is what he questions. This does not mean that

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<sup>53</sup> Indeed two reasons speak in favour of such pessimistic thoughts. The first reason is theological in nature. It is the Christian belief that the *sensus divinitatis* suffers heavily from the cognitive consequences of original sin and perhaps even in a Christian is still in a very poor condition. The second reason is more epistemological in nature and is based on the fact, that every reflection on the reliability of some of one's beliefs and of one's epistemological capacities presupposes a basic trust in the principal reliability of one's cognitive capacities. But which reason allows me to withhold such epistemic trust from other people? If this is so the detection of disagreement with others lowers one's own epistemic trust at least *prima facie*; cf. Foley (2001).

<sup>54</sup> Christian's reaction would correspond to Plantinga's response to the original GP viz. that the difference between theism and Great Pumpkinism is that there is no Great Pumpkin and hence no *sensus cucurbitatis*; cf. RBG, 78.

Christian must deny that his theistic convictions have a special epistemic source which gives them warrant,<sup>55</sup> but only that in the situation he is in, he must withhold judgment about whether there is an epistemically relevant difference between the reliability of the source of his theistic creed and the source of Linus' Great Pumpkin faith.

But can't Christian call upon what Plantinga describes as the phenomenology of a "doxastic experience" (WCB, 111) or "impulsional evidence" (WPF, 192) to ground his theistic beliefs? A doxastic experience is a kind of experience that always accompanies the formation of a belief. It consists in the feeling that the belief is true and an experience which seems to compel acceptance of the truth of the belief. The assumption is that beliefs I have and hold to be true are accompanied by feelings different from the beliefs I hold to be false. Why can't Christian appeal to this experience as a sign of the truth of his theistic beliefs, arguing that he has no doxastic experience of Great Pumpkin beliefs, and that this constitutes an epistemically relevant difference between his and Linus' situation, which in turn is evidence of the falsity of Linus' Great Pumpkin beliefs?

The problem with this line of argument is that doxastic experiences are not an appropriate criterion for distinguishing true and false beliefs because they are too subjective. They do not consist in the fact that true beliefs "feel" different from false beliefs, but only that the beliefs which I *hold* to be true, "feel" different to me from the beliefs I *hold* to be false.<sup>56</sup> For any epistemic subject, doxastic experience is linked with propositions that are believed to be true.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> For example, Plantinga in WCB, 453.

<sup>56</sup> Strictly speaking, one must say: *propositions* which I hold for true feel differently than those I hold for false. If doxastic experience is recognized as a criterion for truth, then *ceteris paribus*, all my present beliefs must be true, since all my beliefs are accompanied by doxastic experiences. But since not all my present, past or future beliefs are true, doxastic experience is no reliable indicator of the truth of my beliefs. This is evident by considering the following thought experiment: Assume that at time  $t$  I believe  $p$  but at time  $t_1$  I believe  $non-p$ .  $P$  and  $non-p$  cannot both be true, but both  $p$  and  $non-p$  are accompanied by doxastic experiences at the respective times  $t$  and  $t_1$ . The proposition  $p$  (in contrast to  $non-p$ ) does not result in a doxastic experience at  $t_1$ , but this is not an argument against the truth of  $p$  and for the truth of  $non-p$ , since the reverse is true at time  $t$  and perhaps at some time  $t_2$ . Or put differently, my doxastic experience is no reason for me to hold a proposition as true, but the doxastic experience associated with  $p$  is a consequence of my holding  $p$  as true (or my growing conviction of the truth of  $p$ ).

<sup>57</sup> One could argue that every form of arguing and reason depends on doxastic experiences in that I have no other reasons than my doxastic experiences for believing a certain proposition or viewing an argument as valid. Maybe, but especially in such controversial areas as in matters of religion one should search for reasons which do not convince alone me but also other people (who I value as rational beings) because this minimizes the danger of being mistaken and maximizes mutual understanding and confirmation or correcture between human beings. Perhaps

Therefore, Linus could equally well cite his own doxastic experiences associated with his Great Pumpkin beliefs, which challenge Christian's theistic beliefs (and Christian is aware of such a possible response by Linus). Therefore, there is no epistemic significance in the fact that Christian's doxastic experience is associated with his theistic beliefs rather than with Great Pumpkin beliefs, since this difference is trivial; it only suggests that Christian is (was) convinced of the truth of theism and the falsity of Great Pumpkinism—but it doesn't say anything about the truth aptness or epistemic status of these beliefs.<sup>58</sup>

Could Christian perhaps point to the strength of his basic theistic convictions and claim that the certainty of these convictions speaks for their truth and thus against the truth of Linus' Great Pumpkin beliefs? "Certainty" here can be understood in at least two different ways. First, "certainty" can mean the epistemic certainty of a belief i.e. the degree to which the belief is based on evidence.<sup>59</sup> However, according to the A/C model, the warrant for Christian's theistic beliefs is not primarily based on (propositional or non-propositional) evidence, but on the proper production of those beliefs by the *sensus divinitatis*. Therefore, only the second, subjective and psychological sense of certainty is at issue: In this sense, "certainty" is the degree to which I hold a belief to be true, or the strength of my convictions.<sup>60</sup> On Plantinga's model for meeting the conditions for warrant, the degree of warrant of a belief corresponds to its degree of psychological

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even our ordinary arguments rest on doxastic experiences but these doxastic experiences are intersubjective—contrary to most of the doxastic experiences in religious matters.

**58** Finally, it is questionable whether in the situation as I've described it, Christian's beliefs regarding the truth and positive epistemic status of theism are accompanied by the corresponding doxastic experience or whether, by contrast, his theistic faith now appears doubtful to him and leaves him "cold". Moreover, according to the extended A/C model, Christian, as a pure theist, does not have a *sensus divinitatis* that functions perfectly, but its proper function is damaged by the effects of original sin. If we assume that Christian is a Christian believer and that the Holy Spirit has restored his *sensus divinitatis*, then, according to Plantinga, the "restoration" of the damaged *sensus divinitatis* by the Holy Spirit does not happen in an instant, but occurs over a period of time, and thus one cannot assume that on Plantinga's extended A/C model Christian presently finds himself in the best possible epistemic position (since the work of the Holy Spirit is not complete) so that other evidence i.e. the differences in the religious convictions between him and Linus, Linus' sincerity in believing etc. might not foreclose the possibility that his faith is still relatively weak, perhaps even so weak that it no longer has positive epistemic status for him.

**59** Whether "evidence" is understood as propositional or non-propositional can remain open here.

**60** In this sense, I'm more sure that I'm sitting in my office writing this paper than I am that Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet.

certainty.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, Christian might argue that the high degree of psychological certainty of his basic theistic beliefs constitutes a reason for assuming they have a high degree of warrant. If theistic beliefs possess a strong warrant, they are probably true and if they are probably true, it follows that Great Pumpkinism is probably false and lacks warrant. In this case, the high degree of psychological certainty of his theistic belief speaks for an epistemically relevant difference between theism and Great Pumpkinism. However, this argument assumes that Christian's theistic beliefs in fact have warrant, i.e. that they are the product of a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*. The plausibility of this assumption, however, is precisely what Christian's knowledge of Linus' Great Pumpkin beliefs calls into question. In addition, it cannot be ruled out that even Linus' Great Pumpkin beliefs possess a high degree of psychological certainty for him and therefore Linus could argue in the same fashion as Christian—with the only difference being that for Linus this line of argument is used to defend his Great Pumpkin faith against theism and not vice-a-versa. Put somewhat differently: in this situation it is neither evident nor can Christian simply assume that his (probable) strong psychological certainty of the truth of theism is truth-tracking.<sup>62</sup>

It seems that once Christian is aware of Linus' Great Pumpkin faith, he possesses a defeater for his theism that he can not easily refute. In some respects this conclusion is not surprising if we call to mind Plantinga's apologetic goal in WCB. He wants to show above all that the anti-theistic *de jure* objection is dependent upon the anti-theistic *de facto* objection. But it remains an open question what grounds the theist has for the truth of his beliefs and therefore for the epistemic distinction between theistic and Great Pumpkin beliefs. But if the theist cannot answer this question, he can not remove the suspicion of epistemic favoritism, viz. that theism and Great Pumpkinism are not being treated equally, even though he has no reasons or at least gives no reasons for this unequal treatment.

The theist is thereby subject to the suspicion of having violated the fundamental principle of rationality, viz. treating similar cases similarly, which also means (*prima facie*) treating what appears to be the same in the same way.<sup>63</sup> This

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61 Cf. WPF, 47, at least if "degree of belief" is understood as "psychological certainty of belief".

62 This consideration speaks against Vogelstein's argumentation, especially his "Principle of Testimonial Evidence" in: Vogelstein (2004).

63 The rational principle of treating similar cases similarly and dissimilar cases differently requires criteria for determining what is "similar" and "different". However, in most cases, we understand the relevant sense of equal (unequal) treatment. If I'm considering the appropriate gift for a wine lover who is blind and has a penchant for Chardonnay wines, the sort of grape and

not only represents a possible violation of a rationality requirement, but it also moves dangerously in the vicinity of ideological thinking, since it unintentionally gives the appearance that there is a relevant epistemic difference between theism and Great Pumpkinism; but this relevant difference is only presented from a perspective internal to theism and can only be recognized from within it. As a result, Plantinga's presentation of the epistemic status of Great Pumpkinism seems to be "influenced by non-objective, subjective value judgments", which is Kelsen's definition of ideology.<sup>64</sup>

However, Plantinga could respond, that the considerations presented thus far ignore the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup> or at least misunderstand the role of intrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup>.<sup>65</sup> Intrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup> are beliefs that can be challenged by potential defeaters but defeat these because their warrant is greater than the warrant of the potential defeater in question.<sup>66</sup> Plantinga supports the theory of intrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup> with his example of the missing letter.<sup>67</sup> Peter is a philosophy professor who writes a letter to a colleague in which he tries to bribe him into writing a glowing letter of recommendation on Peter's behalf for his latest research project. The colleague, however, indignantly refuses and sends the letter to the faculty dean. Soon the letter disappears from the dean's office under mysterious circumstances. Peter had the means, motive and opportunity to steal the letter and was known to have done such shiftless things in the past. In addition, an extremely reliable faculty member reported he had seen Peter near the dean's office during the time when the letter must have been stolen. The evidence against Peter is very strong and all his colleagues are convinced he was the perpetrator. However, Peter is in fact innocent. At the time of the crime, he distinctly remembers going for a walk in the woods and therefore believes in a basic way that he did not steal the letter. The evidence against Peter is very strong and all of his colleagues are convinced of his guilt. This evidence is also available to Peter and it constitutes a potential defeater for his memory belief. The only reason Peter has for holding this defeater for false is his memory belief which therefore acts as an intrinsic defeater<sup>2</sup>. He has no addi-

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color (texture, flavor etc.) of the wine is important, but not the color or design of the label. Whoever doesn't understand this, does not understand what it means to be blind and have a strong preference for Chardonnay wines (or what it means to choose an appropriate gift); or she suffers from a cognitive disorder which makes it unable to come to this conclusion.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Kelsen (1960<sup>2</sup>, 111).

<sup>65</sup> On the role of intrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup> cf. FT, 310 f.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. FT, 311: "When a basic belief **p** has more by way of warrant than a potential defeater **q** of **p**, then **p** is an intrinsic defeater of **q**—an intrinsic defeater-defeater, we might say."

<sup>67</sup> Cf. FT, 310; WCB, 371.



tional defeater<sup>2</sup> independent of this belief. For Plantinga the case is clear: Peter is perfectly rational in continuing to hold his memory belief because the warrant conferred by this belief is greater than the warrant (conferred by the available independent evidence) of the potential defeater. Peter's first-person epistemic perspective is thus decisive for determining whether or not he has a defeater.

Analogously, basic theistic beliefs can act as intrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup> because of their high degree of non-propositional evidence.<sup>68</sup> For theists, whose *sensus divinitatis* is working perfectly, even the problem of evil is not a valid defeater, but is "only" an occasion for perplexity and for questioning what reasons God could have for permitting terrible evil.<sup>69</sup> An important assumption behind Plantinga's story of the missing letter is the high degree of basic warrant and psychological certainty that Peter's memory beliefs have for him (or at least which he associates with them). This can be made clear by the following sequel to the story. Let's assume the case is never resolved and in time is forgotten. Meanwhile, Peter develops a scientific ethos, such that his past attempt at bribery appears to him as irresponsible, indeed reprehensible. To find why he let himself succumb to bribery, he undergoes psychoanalysis. Over the course of his therapy, he comes to realize that his desire for academic recognition was so strong that he not only attempted to bribe his colleague, but he also tried to cover up any traces of evidence that he had done so and suppressed any unpleasant memories of the fact or alternatively, interpreted them in a self-serving manner. Under these circumstances, Peter should rationally begin to doubt the reliability of his memory belief (and his innocence) regarding the missing letter. He should ask himself whether his recollection of taking a walk in the woods at the time of the crime is not simply an instance of his general tendency to suppress or falsify unpleasant memories. It would seem plausible to assume that by this time, the testimony of Peter's colleague—who saw him near the dean's office at the scene of the crime—represents an effective defeater for his memory belief that he was

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68 WCB, 485, 489 f.

69 WCB, 490. Another area in which Plantinga appeals to intrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup> is the apparent conflict between religious belief and natural scientific hypotheses. He writes, "even if, contrary to fact, there were scientific evidence for unguided evolution and hence for atheism, that would by no means settle the issue. Suppose there is scientific evidence against theism: it does not follow that theism is false, or that theists have a defeater for their beliefs, or that theistic belief is irrational, or in some other way problematic. Perhaps there is also evidence, scientific or otherwise, for theism. But second ... if theism is true, it is likely that it has its own intrinsic and basic source of warrant... If so, the warrant for theistic belief doesn't depend on the state of current science" (Plantinga, 2011, 1–23, 15f.).

walking in the woods at the time (and hence for the belief he is innocent), and therefore his memory belief can no longer function as an intrinsic defeater.<sup>70</sup>

To return to our three characters, whether Christian's theistic beliefs can function as an intrinsic defeater<sup>2</sup> depends essentially on its degree of basic warrant and psychological certainty. The question of the degree of certainty and warrant for Christian's beliefs cannot be answered with certainty, however, because the warrant for these beliefs depends on the extent to which Christian's *sensus divinitatis* is affected by the noetic effects of original sin or, by contrast, whether it has been healed by the work of the Holy Spirit, and this eludes human judgment. Instead, one can ask what degree of warrant it is rational for him to ascribe to his Christian beliefs.

If "rational" is conceived in terms of Plantinga's warrant approach, the rationality of Christian's assessment of the warrant for his beliefs cannot be determined with certainty because we do not know if Christian's assessment of the warrant for his belief comes about through a process that is epistemically reliable (and neither does Christian). By contrast, if "rational" is understood in the sense of internal rationality,<sup>71</sup> then Christian's assessment of the warrant for his Christian beliefs depends not only on his own experiences (including his doxastic experiences) but also upon his other beliefs and the conclusions he draws from them.<sup>72</sup> If Christian already has beliefs that from his perspective speak against the truth or the warrant of his theistic beliefs and if his relevant doxastic experience is relatively weak, then he doesn't have a high degree of internal rationality for his claim to have strong warrant for his Christian beliefs. For the sake of his internal rationality, he should not judge the warrant for his theistic beliefs as being very strong. In this case, Plantinga's analogy with the example of the missing letter breaks down. It seems to me that among intellectual christians in some modern Western societies, cases such as this are not that rare.<sup>73</sup>

The situation of many contemporary christian intellectuals in Western society with regard to the degree of certainty of their beliefs seems rather like Peter's situation *after* his psychoanalysis. They are uncertain whether the potential defeater they have encountered doesn't point to the dubious epistemic status of

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70 For a similar argument cf. Sennett (1993, 189–207, 195 ff.).

71 For Plantinga's understanding of internal rationality cf. WCB, 110–113.

72 Cf. WCB, 111 f.

73 Psychological certainty distinguishes theistic beliefs from more pragmatic types of beliefs that Plantinga sometimes mentions as paradigm cases of basic beliefs, such as memory beliefs, whose fundamental reliability we presuppose and whose justification or epistemic status we question more for academic reasons rather than from a genuine concern about their reliability. Cf. also Alston (1999, 238 ff.).

their theistic beliefs, or even to their falsity.<sup>74</sup> Many present-day Christian intellectuals are plagued by doubts and intellectual difficulties with their faith, not only of a superficial or momentary kind, but of a more profound nature.<sup>75</sup>

In our pluralistic Western societies "... all see their option as one among many ... We all learn to navigate between two standpoints: an 'engaged' one... and a 'disengaged' one ..." (Taylor 2009, 31, original; 12), and under the conditions of secularization not all, but many Christians, "... cannot help looking over their shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty...." (Taylor 2009, 28, original; 11). The cognitive situation of Christians in the present seems to be more differentiated and difficult than Plantinga's remarks on Christian intrinsic defeaters<sup>2</sup> assume. In this situation of pluralism, Plantinga's apologetic approach seems more easily interpreted as ideological than in a situation of greater religious uniformity and certainty.

However, Plantinga argues that even if theism were improbable with respect to the rest of what the theist believes, and even if the theist's other beliefs offer only evidence *against* theism, nothing epistemically decisive follows from this.<sup>76</sup> He argues that there are many true beliefs which are improbable with respect to the rest of what we believe. Plantinga illustrates this point by the following example: When I play poker, it must be improbable to me, based on the rest of my beliefs (for example, that the deck has exactly 52 cards), that I have drawn an inside straight. But it doesn't follow in the least that it is irrational to believe that I've drawn an inside straight, because my warrant for the belief is not based on its being highly probable with respect to the rest of my beliefs, but it is rather based on sense perception.

But Plantinga's poker example cannot be easily applied to the case of theistic beliefs.

In a poker game, every player is dealt some combination of 5 cards (otherwise it wouldn't be a poker game). Hence the probability of the event type in

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<sup>74</sup> In addition, it is unclear how many theists have had religious experiences that confer such a strong degree of certainty that defeaters simply bounce off them. Very few theists find themselves in a similar epistemic position to Moses standing before the burning bush (Ex 3,1 to 15), whose belief that God has spoken to him, according to Plantinga, could not be invalidated by any precursor to Feuerbach or Freud; cf. FT, 312.

<sup>75</sup> Even exemplary Christian believers like Therese of Lisieux and Mother Teresa of Calcutta suffered years of doubt and spiritual darkness (Plantinga cites in WCB, 491 from a letter in which Therese describes her "dark night of faith"). Their faith in these periods does not seem to be characterized by the steadfastness and liveliness which Plantinga characterizes as an internal defeater<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. WCB, 464.

which every player is dealt a combination of five cards is 1.0. Since every combination of cards is equally likely, it's possible to have any combination of cards (i.e. any particular token of the type that a player has a certain combination of 5 cards), since this combination is no less likely than any other combination of cards (the antecedent probabilities of the various combinations of cards being the same) and since a player must have *some* combination of 5 cards. Since the relevant event type (I have a combination of 5 cards) is highly probable, and the individual event tokens are equally likely, the sensory perception of the event tokens has, *ceteris paribus*, sufficient justification.

However, if the relevant event type is itself unlikely, or the individual event tokens differ greatly in their likelihood, my perceptual experience does not (automatically) provide me sufficient justification for the belief that a particular event token is present, or alternatively, the experience is more vulnerable to defeaters. If Hans claims that he has seen a UFO, we have good reason, based on our well-justified belief that the antecedent probability of the event type “encounter with a UFO” is low, not to believe Hans, although we otherwise trust his perceptual beliefs as generally reliable.

If Plantinga's poker example is to contribute to the question how theistic beliefs can respond to defeaters based on counterevidence, we have to determine the initial probability of events of the type “I met God,” “I know God”, etc. Assessing the probability of these event types in turn depends largely on how one accesses the probability, based on the available evidence, that God exists. The arguments of natural theology (and natural atheology) seem to me to play an important role in answering this question.<sup>77</sup> But if this is the case, then natural theology plays a more important role in the success of Plantinga's apologetic project than he thinks.

## 5 Conclusion

I conclude that Plantinga's epistemology of theistic belief does not represent a clear case of ideologically tainted philosophy. This result should not surprise those who have followed Plantinga's efforts to provide a plausible theory of warrant and warranted Christian belief, with all its modifications, responses, defens-

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<sup>77</sup> Reasons for affirming God's existence should not be based directly on perceiving God since it is a matter of debate what sort of force such perceptions have in the face of (undermining or undercutting) defeaters. However, they might play an indirect role of providing cumulative or mutually inferential support for other arguments e.g. cosmological arguments from natural theology.

es etc. over the last several decades. For some, Plantinga's acumen together with his acerbic wit and hyperbole in dealing with objections to his theory or objections to the truth of Christian theism may occasionally give the impression that he is unwilling to take these objections seriously. However, this impression is mistaken. Less mistaken, it seems to me, is the impression that Plantinga at times appears to underestimate the concrete epistemic situation of many intellectual theists in contemporary, pluralist, liberal Western societies and consequently the epistemic starting point for an apologetic for theism. This also probably contributes to the suspicion that Plantinga's epistemology of theistic beliefs is ideologically tainted.

This limitation, and thus the potential starting point for an ideological critique of his position, is one which Plantinga can relatively easily overcome, since he is convinced that there are enough good, if not cogent arguments for the existence of the theistic God.<sup>78</sup> The fact that natural theology doesn't have to commit itself to a concept of proof as demanding as that proposed by Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics*, viz. of deductive proof from self-evident premises, but that it can appeal to cumulative probabilistic arguments, has been shown by authors as diverse as John Henry Newman, Basil Mitchell and Richard Swinburne, each in their own way. By giving greater consideration to such forms of natural theology, Plantinga not only could more easily sidestep the charge of circularity, he also would have a plausible response to the Great Pumpkin objection and its assorted descendants, while leaving himself less exposed to possible suspicions and charges of ideology.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. Plantinga (2007).

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