

MUST AN 'ORIGINS AGNOSTIC' BE SKEPTICAL ABOUT EVERYTHING

Wes Morriston

Abstract: Plantinga claims to give a person who is agnostic about the ultimate source of his cognitive faculties an undefeatable defeater for all his beliefs. This argument of Plantinga's bears a family resemblance to his much better known argument for saying that naturalism is self-defeating, but it has a much more ambitious conclusion. In the present paper, I try to show both that Plantinga's argument for this conclusion fails, and that even if an "origins agnostic" were to succumb to it, a cure for his skepticism is ready at hand—one that does not involve believing in anything like God.

Alvin Plantinga's claim that naturalism is self-defeating has received a great deal of critical attention. Much less attention has been paid to Plantinga's even more ambitious thesis that a person who is merely agnostic about the source of her cognitive faculties can be given a powerful defeater for everything she believes.¹ As soon as she hears and understands a certain argument, Plantinga thinks that rationality requires her to give up all her beliefs about everything.² In this paper, I take issue with this thesis. Rationality does not, so I shall argue, require an "origins agnostic" to be agnostic about everything when she is confronted with Plantinga's supposedly powerful "defeater."

Here, briefly, is Plantinga's argument for the claim that I shall be taking issue with. Let R be the proposition that my cognitive faculties are generally reliable, and let F be "the relevant facts about their origin, purpose, and provenance (224)." Now, then, suppose I have no idea what the source or purpose (if any) of my cognitive faculties might be. I'm completely in the dark about all that. I don't know whether Plantinga's God or Dawkins's "Blind Watchmaker" or some other unknown thing or process is responsible for the way I form beliefs. Now if I don't know what the "origin, purpose, and provenance" of my cognitive faculties might be, then obviously enough, I don't know enough about the "relevant facts" to make any judg-

ment about the probability of R on F. On some origin scenarios, it might be high, on others low, and on others completely inscrutable. Add to that the fact that there are indefinitely many possible scenarios that I haven't even considered, and I can only conclude that P(R/F) is completely inscrutable for me. I can't give it a high or a low or a middling value or, indeed, any value at all. This, Plantinga claims, gives me a *defeater* for R. He further claims that I can't defeat this defeater, since any belief I might use to defeat it would be an output of the very faculties whose reliability is in question. Since I can't defeat this defeater for R, the only rational thing for me to do is to withhold judgment about R.

It gets worse. Since all my beliefs are the outputs of cognitive faculties that *may* (for all I know) have been produced by some X that was unlikely to produce reliable cognitive faculties, rationality requires me to drop all my beliefs. I can't (rationally) believe that *I am typing now* or that *the sun is shining* or that $2+2=4$ or that *Plantinga wrote a book about warrant*. Why? Because I am an origins agnostic, and have encountered Plantinga's argument and understood it. That gives me a defeater for *all* my beliefs. Worse still, it's a defeater that I can't defeat, since anything I might use to defeat it has already been defeated.

The linchpin of Plantinga's argument is his claim that when the "origins agnostic"—or simply "Agnostic," as I shall call him—recognizes that P(R/F) is inscrutable for him, he acquires a defeater for R—a reason for suspending judgment about it, for not believing (or continuing to assume) that R is true.

Is Plantinga right? Does the inscrutability of P(R/F) give Agnostic a defeater for R? Let's imagine his situation in a bit more detail. Remember that the reason P(R/F) is inscrutable for Agnostic is not something he believes. It is rather that, although he can entertain any number of possible scenarios, he has no beliefs about the origin of his cognitive faculties. Of course, he knows that children have parents, and that one both inherits and is taught various things. But he hasn't the slightest idea what the source of human nature is, and has no opinion as to whether our standard ways of forming beliefs are part of some Master Plan. He might believe that the theory of evolution is true, but he hasn't the slightest idea whether evolution was "guided" or "unguided." When you ask him about it, Agnostic says such questions are too deep for him. If his faculties *were* designed, it is apparent to him that they weren't designed to handle such big questions. When pressed, he likes to quote Hume: "Our line is too short to fathom such immense abysses."³

Plantinga thinks that this puts Agnostic in a completely untenable position. Using Hume—a prime example of an origins agnostic—as his example, Plantinga writes:

[S]uppose Hume asks himself how likely it is that our cognitive faculties are reliable, given his views (or rather lack of views) about the origin and provenance of ourselves and those faculties. What is the probability that our faculties produce the considerable preponderance of true beliefs over false required by reliability, given his views of their origin and purpose (if any)?

I should think he would have to say that this probability is either low or inscrutable (222–3 my italics).

This, Plantinga thinks, gives Hume a defeater for the reliability of his cognitive faculties that he can't defeat. If an origins agnostic like Hume continues to believe that they are reliable, he is being irrational.

Is Plantinga right? What difference should these considerations make to our assessment of Agnostic's rationality if he continues to believe R once he has taken them fully and properly into account? Let's begin by asking what rationality required of him *before* he encountered Plantinga's argument.

A lot depends on what kind of rationality we have in mind. It will help to draw a rough distinction between what I'll call *external* and *internal* rationality. I won't try to provide a counterexample-proof analysis of either. Broadly speaking, here is what I have in mind.

One requirement of *external* rationality is that one's beliefs (however they are produced) not be radically at odds with the way things are. When a person finds herself believing that there is a brown cow in the field, there is (usually) a brown cow in the field. When she seems to remember having had granola for breakfast, it is generally that case that she did in fact have granola for breakfast. If she finds herself believing that $33*33=1089$, $33*33$ is 1089. In short, external rationality requires that one's cognitive faculties be fairly reliable. We don't have to prove that they are, or even that they probably are. But external rationality does require that they *be* reliable.⁴

The requirements for *internal* rationality are quite different. Even if the Cartesian demon were deceiving me about everything that I can be deceived about, I might still be *internally* rational. So what is required? Coherence, for one thing. A rational person does her best to be consistent.⁵ When she notices an inconsistency, she must do something about it. She must either find an appropriate way to decide which belief is more likely to be true, or else withhold judgment.

A further requirement of internal rationality is that a person's beliefs be formed in appropriate ways. For example, even if tall green aliens really do inhabit a distant planet, it's irrational to believe that this is so if one has no evidence of it. Beliefs like that are not, to borrow an expression from Plantinga, "properly basic." Another class of examples concerns the appropriate "grounding" of properly basic beliefs. When I *seem to see* a cow in the field, I don't find myself believing (in the basic way) that there is a plane flying overhead. That's the wrong "trigger" for beliefs about airplanes.

It may be useful to think about this aspect of internal rationality in the following way. A person has various cognitive modules, corresponding to the different kinds of things she forms beliefs about. These modules operate in accordance with something like "rules." If she breaks them, she is being irrational, and her cognitive faculties are, to borrow another expression from Plantinga, not "functioning properly."

After this brief digression, and with this bit of terminology in hand, let's return to the question of interest, viz., whether rationality requires Agnostic to give up all his beliefs. It seems to me that *internal* rationality must be

what's at issue here. If external rationality were what mattered, then there would be no reason at all to think that Agnostic's failure to have opinions about the origin of his faculties would contribute anything to making him irrational. He might still have quite reliable cognitive faculties and an overwhelming preponderance of true beliefs.

So, then, the question is whether his failure to have opinions about those large issues somehow undermines Agnostic's *internal* rationality. How would it do that? Well, let's suppose that among his opinions is the belief (R) that his cognitive faculties are in fact reliable. He acknowledges that he sometimes makes mistakes, but he thinks he usually knows how to correct them. (His cognitive modules provide nifty tests and checks for error, and he is very adept at using them.) For the most part, Agnostic assumes that his faculties produce true beliefs, and that most of his errors get thrown out. In short, Agnostic assumes that R is true.

Is it (internally) rational for him to believe R? We can approach this question by asking *why* he believes it. He certainly doesn't have any particular evidence or argument for believing it. He doesn't believe it on the basis of other things he believes. He just believes it. In "the basic way."

Should this embarrass Agnostic? He thinks not. He has read Descartes and Hume. He was amused by the circularity of Descartes' attempt to prove that our faculties are reliable, and he thinks Hume was absolutely right to point this out. But he never thought for a moment that he *needed* to provide a non-question-begging argument for R. He was especially encouraged when he read a long article by Plantinga arguing that belief in God is "properly basic." He wasn't much inclined to adopt this particular belief, or even to think it properly basic, but he did rather like the concept of a properly basic belief, and it seemed to him that "My cognitive faculties are reliable" could be properly basic for him—and, indeed, for everyone. So he went merrily on his way, assuming that R is true even though (as he had first learned from reading Hume) it can't be shown to be true. As he sees it, he is well within his epistemic rights in continuing to assume that R is true even though he has no non-question-begging argument for R.

Is Agnostic irrational? Not yet, clearly. I think even Plantinga would agree that R is *properly* basic for Agnostic *until* he encounters a defeater that he can't defeat. That's where Plantinga's argument comes in. It is intended to present him with just such a defeater.

So, then, suppose that Agnostic encounters this allegedly dangerous argument of Plantinga's. He admits to having no opinion about the ultimate origin of anything, and he agrees that it would be irrational for him to give any estimate at all of P(R/F). For him, P(R/F) is simply inscrutable. So far, so good.

But why should the inscrutability of P(R/F) give Agnostic a defeater for R? All he has done is to acknowledge that he has no opinion about something (the origins of his cognitive faculties) that might make a difference to the reasonableness of believing R if he did know it. But he doesn't, and so he can't take it into account. How is that supposed to put him into a deep skeptical hole?

Until now, Agnostic has never taken seriously the possibility that R is

false. He may have entertained origins scenarios on which R would likely be true, ones on which it would not be, and ones on which there is no telling. He has no idea which, if any, of them is correct or to even to what degree they form a representative sample of the possibilities. He must acknowledge, of course, that it's possible that there is—out there somewhere—a defeater for R. But how is this supposed to provide him with an actual defeater? Why should it make any difference to have it pointed out to him that there is a class of unknown facts such that, were they known to him, *might* have some (presently unknown) bearing on the reasonableness of believing R?

This is, after all, precisely the situation we're in all the time with respect to our most well established beliefs about the world. The realm of the unknown is much larger than the realm of the known. It's always that case that some of what's unknown might conceivably have a bearing on the epistemic status of what we presently take ourselves to know. Surely *that's* not a good reason to be skeptical about everything. So far, then, I cannot see that Agnostic has been given any reason whatever to change his mind about R.

It's true, of course, that there are no (non-circular) grounds for believing R. We can't, for example, use our cognitive faculties to show that they were designed by a God who wanted them to be reliable, and then use that alleged fact to show that they are reliable. But Agnostic has known about this for a long time. If it didn't give Agnostic a defeater for R *before* he encountered Plantinga's argument, why should it give him one *now*? The answer is that it shouldn't. R should have the same epistemic status it had for Agnostic before his exposure to Plantinga's supposedly deadly argument.

I suggest therefore that Agnostic has not been given a genuine defeater. He can quite properly go on believing R in the basic way, and he'll be no worse off for acknowledging that he has no idea what (objective) probability to assign to R on F.

Plantinga tries to elicit the contrary intuition by asking us to consider the following analogy.

Imagine . . . that you embark on a voyage of space exploration and land on a planet revolving about a distant sun. This planet has a favorable atmosphere, but you know little more about it. You crack the hatch, step out, and immediately find something that looks a lot like a radio; it periodically emits strings of sounds that, oddly enough, form sentences in English. The sentences emitted by this instrument express propositions only about topics of which you have no knowledge: what the weather is like in Beijing at the moment, whether Caesar had eggs on toast on the morning he crossed the Rubicon, whether the first human being to cross the Bering Strait and set foot on North America was left-handed, and the like. A bit unduly impressed with your find, you initially form the opinion that this quasi radio speaks the truth: that is, the propositions expressed (in English) by those sentences are true. But then you recall that you have no idea at all as to what the purpose of this apparent instrument is, whether it *has* a purpose, or how it came to be. You see that the probability of its being reliable, given what you know about it, is for you inscrutable. Then (in the absence of investigation) you have a *defeater* for your initial belief that the thing does, in fact, speak the truth, a reason to reject that belief, a reason to give

it up, to be agnostic with respect to it. Relative to your beliefs about the origin, purpose, and provenance of this apparent instrument, the probability that it is a reliable source of information is low or (more likely) inscrutable. And that gives you a defeater for your original and hasty belief that the thing really does speak the truth. If you don't have or get further information about its reliability, the reasonable course is agnosticism about that proposition (224–225).

Plantinga thinks Agnostic should draw exactly the same conclusion about the belief that his own cognitive faculties are reliable as the one that the space explorer (quite rightly) draws about the propositions she associates with the sentences emitted by the “radio.” I take it that this is supposed to give Agnostic a very strong reason to think that the inscrutability of P(R/F) yields an undercutting defeater for R itself—a defeater that (as noted above) Agnostic cannot defeat. Rationality therefore requires that he cease believing R, together with all the other beliefs his faculties have generated.

Is the situation of Agnostic relevantly similar to that of the space traveler in Plantinga's example? I think not. I shall try to show that the analogy is fatally flawed. At best, it supports a very modest and limited conclusion—one that has no implications for an origins agnostic.

The first thing to see is that at the beginning of the story the space traveler is not a bit like Agnostic. In believing the outputs of his cognitive faculties, Agnostic was perfectly within his epistemic rights—at least until presented with Plantinga's argument. The space traveler, by contrast, is irrational from the get-go—leaping to conclusions, breaking the rules of sound thinking, and forming beliefs improperly. It is an understatement to say that she is “unduly impressed” with her find. It is downright absurd for her even to *start* forming beliefs about *what Caesar had for breakfast the day he crossed the Rubicon* or *what the weather in Beijing is like now* on the basis of what the “sentences” emitted by the device seem to be “saying.” Unlike Agnostic, she is faced with a completely novel situation and a possible new way of forming beliefs—one whose reliability can, at least in principle, be checked. And if it can't be checked at the moment, the rules of sound thinking and believing require her to wait for more evidence before she starts forming beliefs based on the “sentences” emitted by the “radio.” (This is implied by the last sentence of the passage just quoted.)

It might be objected that testimony is a source of properly basic beliefs. In the absence of a defeater, it is rational to believe what someone says. So prior to noticing the obvious defeater, Plantinga's space explorer might be perfectly rational in believing the deliverances of the “radio.”

Of course not all philosophers accept the view that beliefs formed in response to testimony are properly basic. Hume famously held that such beliefs should be based on a body of experience in which testimony of the relevant sort has proved itself to be generally accurate.

I don't want to get too far into the epistemological debate about testimony, but for present purposes I don't think I need to. As I see it, it isn't at all obvious that the deliverances of the radio should count as *testimony*. No

doubt, the radio was designed by intelligent beings. But the space explorer is already familiar with earth-bound machines designed to emit “sentences” that do not express propositions that would normally be accepted as being true. Just think of listening to the radio broadcast of a play, or of listening to a recording designed to help one learn a foreign language through the repetition of typical sentences in that language, or of listening to a true/false quiz show in which the “questions” are statement-like in form but do not make assertions. In such cases, one is not in the presence of “testimony” to the truth of the propositions expressed by those sentences. Why should the space explorer naively assume that anyone is attempting to make truth claims through the deliverances of the “radio” she has encountered in this unfamiliar environment?

When we hear genuine testimony, we are normally in a familiar environment, we know that we are dealing (directly or indirectly) with people who say things with the aim of being believed, and we have quite a bit of background information about what people are like in that sort of environment. None of this is true of Plantinga's space explorer. The explorer is, after all, in a completely unfamiliar environment, and she has no idea what sort of “game” whoever designed the “radio” might be playing. It is inappropriate for her just to assume that one is meant to believe the propositions expressed by the sentences emitted by the “radio.” So for her the radio is not automatically a source of testimony on which she should rely in the absence of a defeater. It is more like a puzzle that she hasn't even begun to figure out. To solve the puzzle, she requires *evidence*.

Evidence could come in the form of an independent check on the truth of what the device seems to be saying. If, over the long haul, nearly all the checkable propositions turn out to be true, that would be significant. Evidence could also, of course, come in the form of learning something about the source and purpose of the device. (As noted above, it's obviously an artifact.) But the important thing to see is that the space explorer is *already* in an irrational state of mind the moment she starts forming all those beliefs without any sort of investigation. She doesn't need to wait for some “defeater” to withhold belief. That's what she should have been doing from the very start.

In the case as Plantinga imagines it, rationality requires the explorer to ask, *Should I believe that the propositions expressed in English by these sentences are true?* It requires that she withhold judgment until a satisfactory answer can be found. She can and should insist on independent testing and checking *before* adopting this novel way of acquiring information about all sorts of obscure trivia.

In the required investigation, the imaginary space explorer has something to work with—viz., her ordinary faculties of sense perception, memory, rational intuition, inductive and abductive reasoning, and so on. She can and should rely on them in order to determine whether the device in Plantinga's example gives her a reliable new way of forming beliefs. If she doesn't have time for a proper investigation, then she should indeed be

agnostic about the “deliverances” of the device.

By contrast, Agnostic cannot step back from *all* his faculties and their outputs and decide from the outside whether it's rational for him to continue to believe R. From the outside, there is nothing to work with. There is no larger context within which Agnostic could answer such questions. He can *ask* them, all right. Descartes and Hume showed him how to do that. But as Hume saw so much more clearly than Descartes, he cannot answer them without relying on the very faculties whose reliability is in question. In this case, it is *not* reasonable to demand that he first adopt “the view from nowhere” and then try to find evidence that his cognitive faculties are reliable.

Of course, Plantinga doesn't think an ordinary person needs to do *that*. He grants that—until a defeater is produced—it is perfectly proper to believe R in the basic way. But once the question of origins has been raised, Plantinga appears to think rationality requires that a person suspend judgment *unless* . . .

Unless what? Unless, apparently, he has some appropriate *belief* about those origins—one that makes it reasonable for him to believe that P(R/F) is fairly high. If, given his beliefs (or lack thereof) about the origin of things, P(R/F) is inscrutable for him, then he has a defeater for R, and consequently for all his other beliefs.

Our intuitions about the space explorer example are supposed to show us that this is a good argument. But in my opinion, they teach a different and much more modest lesson—*viz.*, that when we're looking at a fairly small-scale and untested way of forming beliefs, we ought to rely on the rest of our epistemic apparatus to decide whether that way of acquiring beliefs is at all likely to be reliable.

Suppose, for example, that a friend has just invited me to have my fortune told. He swears by this particular psychic, but I'd like to have a little more empirical evidence of her reliability before I give any of my hard earned cash to his favorite fortuneteller. Rationality requires that much of me. But this says nothing about what I should do when the question concerns the reliability of *my entire system of belief-forming modules*. There is no investigating that I *could* do to answer that question.

Might rationality require me to stop believing R? I can't see why. As soon as I formulate R at all, I see that there is no way to “certify” R that does not presuppose the truth of R. I also see that R is the presupposition of everything else I do in the belief-forming way—that I cannot give it up without giving up everything else as well. How could internal rationality require me to do more with respect to R?

There is, then, a large and relevant difference between Agnostic and the space explorer. Agnostic's cognitive faculties can't be certified and don't need to be, whereas the so-called “radio” can—at least in principle—be certified or debunked, and it does require certification. To put it succinctly, Agnostic's belief that R is properly basic, whereas the explorer's unthinking assumption that the “radio” spits out sentences that express truths is groundless and improper. In this case, the question of origins is obviously

one of the things the space explorer needs to investigate before putting her trust in the “radio.” I fail to see why the same should go for Agnostic.

However, it might be thought that Plantinga's space explorer example could be tweaked in such a way as to bring it closer to the case of Agnostic. Here is one such attempt. Suppose that the “radio” is shipped back to earth and lost. Suppose, further, that it looks very much like terrestrial radios. Next imagine that someone who has yet to hear about the “lost alien radio”—call her “Susan”—finds it and starts listening. What she hears sounds to her like an ordinary trivia program with contestants and a host who poses questions about matters concerning which Susan has no independent information. It would be quite reasonable—wouldn't it?—for her to believe that she is being given genuine information about the weather in Beijing and what-not. But now suppose Susan watches a TV news show and learns that an alien “radio” from a distant planet has been transported to earth and lost. Let's suppose further that she has some reason to think that *this* is the very “radio” she has been listening to. Would she not then have a defeater for the earlier naïve but perfectly rational beliefs engendered by the deliverances of the “radio?”

Let's suppose she does. What we must ask next is whether Agnostic is in a sufficiently and relevantly similar situation with respect to the deliverances of his own cognitive faculties. Should Plantinga's argument persuade him that he now has a defeater for everything he has ever believed by relying on them?

The Susan case is certainly more challenging than Plantinga's original example, but I still think there is an important and relevant dissimilarity between Susan and Agnostic. Susan is faced with a *local* question about a limited set of beliefs. Her normal standards for holding and withholding assent require that she back up and investigate the situation, and they also provide her with standards that must be observed in any such investigation. There are—at least in principle—other sources of information against which she might try to check the outputs of the alien device. She might even hope—somewhere down the road—to find out something about its origin and purpose—something that would resolve the doubts that have been raised about its reliability as a source of true beliefs. If—as things are at the moment—nobody can do a suitable investigation into the source or purpose or reliability of that mysterious device, then rationality requires Susan to withhold belief in its deliverances.

It is possible, then, to conceive of a case in which, although one was initially justified in basing beliefs on (or having them triggered by) the outputs of some device, new information removes that justification and rationality requires that one withhold belief pending an inquiry into its reliability. Such an inquiry might well be concerned with the “origin, purpose, and provenance” of the device, although I can certainly imagine coming to be assured of its reliability without having a clue as to its origin. Empirically established correlations would be sufficient for that purpose.

To see whether the case of Agnostic is relevantly similar to that of Susan,

we need to back up a bit and ask what exactly has been removed from Susan's noetic structure by the defeater she has encountered. The answer must surely be that prior to watching the TV news report about the lost alien radio, Susan had every reason to assume that she was dealing with an ordinary radio, broadcasting a program produced by intelligent (human) beings who would not be likely to broadcast quiz programs in which the answers given to trivia questions are false or are simply unknown even to the experts. That basis for her trust in the deliverances of the radio has now been removed.

By contrast, Agnostic has long been aware of global philosophical skepticism and of the possibility that R is false. He has also, we may suppose, done what he can to find out something about his origins that would be relevant to the P(R/F), but has (rightly or wrongly) come up empty-handed. What has changed is not that he's been given new information. What has changed is merely that he's been told that his lack of information about origins all by itself gives him a defeater for the outputs of all his faculties (including those that are involved in giving him the new information!). He asks why, and is invited to consider a case like that of Susan, which—so he is told—is relevantly like his.

But surely the differences between the two cases are at least as striking and relevant as the similarities. The question about R is a *global* one, and it is not one that our normal standards for holding and withholding assent require us to answer. It would be nice if we could investigate the source of our cognitive faculties and come up with sensible judgments about the likelihood that faculties with such a source would generate true beliefs before relying on them. But that's impossible, and rationality does not require any such investigation *before* we start forming beliefs. (This is a point that I do not think Plantinga would dispute.) So why, I wonder, does rationality *now* require an investigation? It is especially hard to answer this question, given the fact (admitted at least for the sake of argument by all sides of this particular dispute) that such an investigation is bound to be fruitless.

Actually (see below), Plantinga doesn't really think an evidence-based, fruit-bearing *investigation* into the sources of one's cognitive faculties is required. By his lights, it's enough just to have a certain belief (that God produced my faculties with the aim of making them produce true beliefs in the sort of environment in which I find myself). If rationality were that easy to achieve, then I wonder why Susan shouldn't resume believing the deliverances of the alien radio. As long as she adds a suitable belief about the source of the radio to her belief set, she might go right back to forming beliefs on the basis of its outputs. ("I don't know how the aliens find out these things or how they are able to broadcast them on earth," she might say, "but I believe *that* they do."⁶)

Returning to the case of Agnostic, I would have a good deal of sympathy for him if he were to reply to Plantinga's irrationality charge simply by saying: "I have always implicitly assumed that R is true. And ever since the question was raised for me, I have explicitly believed it to be true and

believed it in the properly basic way. I grant you that I cannot make a probability assignment for R, given what little I know about the origin of my cognitive faculties. I have made the best use of them that I can to find out something about my (and their) origin, and I have come up empty-handed. For me, therefore, P(R/F) is indeed inscrutable. You are right about that. But I don't see how this adds anything of real weight or significance to what I've know since I first read Descartes and Hume—viz., that there is no non-circular way to establish the truth of R. If I didn't have a defeater for R then, why do I have one now?"

Not everyone will be persuaded by these reflections. So suppose that (despite my best efforts to prevent it) Plantinga succeeds in getting Agnostic to see that his lack of belief about origins provides him with a defeater for R—a defeater that, given his present belief set, he cannot defeat. Following Plantinga's reasoning, Agnostic sees that rationality requires him to give up all his beliefs—including, of course, the belief that rationality requires him to do this!⁷

This is a bad spot to be in. What is poor Agnostic to do next? Where might he turn for help? How can he get his beliefs back in a way that isn't positively irrational? If Plantinga is right, a painless remedy is easily available. All Agnostic has to do is believe one little thing, and back comes R along with all the other beliefs he's just given up. Reason will not be offended.

Here's the good part. Agnostic doesn't need any *evidence* for this one little thing—which is fortunate, since in the fix he's gotten himself into, nothing could count as evidence for anything. So what's the secret? Well, it isn't exactly a secret. Agnostic just needs to believe that God (or at least something like God—an intelligent and powerful and good being) designed his cognitive modules for the environment in which he finds himself, and he's good to go. The undefeatable defeater is *gone*, P(R/F) is now quite properly *high* for him, and he can stop worrying. Now that he is a theist, he is free of his epistemic angst.

But wait a minute . . . If it's that easy for Agnostic to dig himself out of the skeptical hole his agnosticism (with an assist from Plantinga's argument) has supposedly put him in, aren't there a lot of *other* beliefs that would do the trick? Why shouldn't Agnostic play his hand conservatively, and say something along the following lines?

I still haven't the slightest idea what the origin of my faculties is, but—and here is the belief that saves me from skepticism while restoring me to perfect rationality—I believe that *some* unknown X (directly or indirectly) caused human beings to have cognitive faculties like mine, *and* that the probability of R given the relevant facts about X (whatever it is and whatever they are) is quite high.

Notice that Agnostic is still completely up in the air about the identity of X. It could be God. Or not. The only requirement is that X be *something* such that R is likely given the relevant facts about X. Or rather, the only requirement is that Agnostic *believes* that there is such a something. Don't ask him what it is. About *that* he remains agnostic. In this way, he escapes

the skeptical pit without falling into the arms of God.

If you ask him, Agnostic readily admits that he doesn't know what the origin of his cognitive faculties is. Nevertheless, *within his new belief system*, P(R/F) is reasonably believed to be quite high, and rationality is restored by his new-found belief that *whatever produced his cognitive faculties is such that it was likely to produce reliable ones*.

Is the belief that P(R/F) is high basic for Agnostic? Not necessarily. He may be thought of as reasoning in this way. He starts by assuming R, observes that this requires him to assign a high probability to P(R/F) if he wants to be rational, and proceeds to do so. The key to Agnostic's success is the insight that he doesn't need to know what X is in order to reason in this way.

This procedure may strike one as having what Russell called "the virtues of theft over honest toil." But it is hard to see why more is required of Agnostic by the argument of Plantinga's under consideration. Plantinga will need to rely on other arguments to show that Agnostic's "way out" is inferior to his own theistic solution.⁸

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the Editor of *PHILO* for spotting several mistakes in the original version of this paper, and for helping me to develop an alternative to Plantinga's key example that bypasses one of my criticisms.

NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 218–227.

2. Including, of course, the premises and the conclusion of Plantinga's argument!

3. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Understanding*, Section VII, Part I.

4. For some classes of beliefs, external rationality may also have causal requirements, but I think we needn't go into that.

5. That is the ideal, at any rate. Internal rationality comes in degrees. Probably most people experience a certain degree of cognitive dissonance. How they handle it is what matters.

6. No doubt Plantinga would reject this way out for Susan on the ground that such beliefs as these are not properly basic. Still, I think it's worth reflecting on just how little Plantinga actually requires in the case of Agnostic for a complete restoration of rationality. I will return to this point at the end of the paper.

7. An infinite regress of defeaters defeated by defeaters defeated by yet other defeaters threatens to engulf us. Does this make the skeptical problem even worse, as Plantinga thinks, or does it merely show that there never was a real problem in the first place? Other people have said enough about this important issue, and I won't try to address it here. For Plantinga's view of the matter, see his "Naturalism Defeated," Part IV, Section E. (<http://philofreligion.homestead.com/files/alspaper.htm>: accessed on 7/24/2008.)

8. Of course, Plantinga has many other arrows in his quiver. Here I mean to be addressing just this one small argument.