

**Critical Examination of Plantinga's Defense of
Christian Exclusivism**

*Dr. Amir Hesam Karbasizadeh**

Abstract

The argument that I have presented in this paper is not that any experience-based religious exclusivist, including Faith, has false religious beliefs; rather, I am arguing that without evidentially independent support that she has a special source of religious knowledge that her opponents lack, her exclusivist beliefs will stand defeated. And if (as I have maintained) it turns out that any such independent support is highly implausible then Faith cannot rationally continue to maintain her experience-based Christian belief. Plantinga's claim is that if Christianity is true, then Christian belief is most likely warranted. But, I think this is mistaken. If Christian belief is true, then it is true; however, experience-based Christian belief cannot be warranted, even if true, since it faces a defeater furnished by the facts of religious pluralism. The same holds for any kind of exclusivist religious belief which is similarly based on non-perceptual religious experience.

Key Words: 1. Religious Exclusivism 2. Warranted Beliefs
3. Plantinga 4. Pluralism

1. Introduction

Suppose someone believes in a particular religious doctrine the truth of which is incompatible with the truth of other religious doctrines. Suppose further that she becomes aware of the existence of some of these incompatible religious doctrines. Might she continue rationally to believe in her own religious doctrine?

There would be no problem in doing so if she had some proof or demonstration that would convince any reflective, intelligent

* Associate Professor of Iranian Institute of Philosophy

person that her doctrine was true and that the conflicting religious doctrines were false. The fact that others do not accept her doctrine would merely be an indication that they have not seen or do not fully appreciate the proof; however, let us suppose that she has no such proof or demonstration. Might she then continue rationally to believe in her own religious doctrine?

Let us call the person who maintains belief in a religious doctrine in light of the existence of incompatible religious doctrines a religious *exclusivist*. Alvin Plantinga asks whether someone might rationally be a Christian exclusivist even though she does not have a proof or argument for the truth of Christianity that could be counted on to convince those who disagree with her; rather, he seeks to know whether one might rationally base one's Christian belief on a non-perceptual kind of religious experience.¹

Plantinga asks his question about the rational defensibility of Christian exclusivism using the technical language of defeaters. A defeater for Christian belief would be some other belief (or other epistemic state) the possession of which would make it rationally impossible to continue to believe in the truth of Christian doctrine.² Plantinga's question, then, is whether the facts of religious pluralism provide a defeater for a belief in Christian doctrine that is based on religious experience. And his answer is that the "facts of religious pluralism...do not or need not constitute a defeater for Christian belief" (457).

In this paper I will review Plantinga's experience-based defense of Christian belief. I will then argue that the facts of religious pluralism *do* provide a defeater for his version for Christian exclusivism, and indeed for any version of religious exclusivism that is similarly based on religious experience. This is because such a defense of religious exclusivism faces a dilemma: either it involves a *kind* of vicious epistemic circularity, or it is highly implausible.³

I shall proceed as follows: in the next section I will review Plantinga's claim that an exclusivist religious belief can properly be based not on argument, but on religious experience. In the third section of the paper I will discuss Plantinga's response on behalf of the experience-based religious exclusivist to the challenge posed by the facts of religious pluralism. Then, in the fourth section I will (drawing forth from principles that Plantinga himself accepts)

explain why Plantinga's response is either inappropriately circular, or highly implausible. In the last section I will address some objections to my argument.

2. Religious Exclusivism based on Religious Experience

2.1. A Quick Tour of Plantinga's Theory of Epistemology

In order to explain Plantinga's defense of religious exclusivism we must first give a quick tour of his general epistemological theory. The key epistemic notion for Plantinga is that of *warrant*. Warrant is that property which transforms a true belief into knowledge.⁴ Warrant is distinct from justification since (as Gettier famously pointed out) it is possible to have a justified, true belief which does not count as knowledge.⁵

Plantinga's account of warrant, roughly, is as follows: a belief is warranted for an agent just in case she arrives at that belief in accordance with her epistemic design plan (successfully aimed at acquiring the truth) in a suitably congenial environment. How do we know what a human's epistemic design plan looks like? This is a difficult question to answer; however, we can illustrate this design plan by looking to perception and other examples.

It is part of the human design plan, Plantinga maintains, to form perceptual beliefs on the basis of percepts. For example, one might form the belief 'There is a red truck in front of me' on the basis of a perceptual image of a red truck. A percept does not serve as a premise in an argument for a perceptual belief--how could it, since it is non-propositional in nature? Nonetheless, the perceptual belief is warranted since it is arrived at in accordance with the human design plan which includes forming beliefs on the basis of perception. Let us say that perceptual beliefs so formed are held in a *basic* way since they are not held on the basis of any other beliefs (p. 175). Furthermore, since perceptual beliefs formed in a basic way often have warrant we shall say that they are *properly basic* (pp. 177-9).

We can look to other examples of faculties which (apparently) provide properly basic beliefs. Consider memory: a person seems to remember that she went to the store on her birthday, and on the basis of that seeming forms the memory belief that she went to the store on her birthday. Again, there is no argument connecting the

seeming-to-remember and the memory belief; rather, memory beliefs are basically justified (and properly so) in virtue of their being occasioned by the seemings-to-remember.

Now consider testimony: if someone tells me that X is true, and I form the belief X, have I done something epistemically irresponsible? In the normal course of events the answer is no. This is because, as Plantinga puts it, "testimonial evidence is a basic sort of evidence for me." (WPF, p. 80) Let us agree with Plantinga on this point and take it that testimony can serve as the basis of properly basic testimonial beliefs. (Let us call this fact that testimonial beliefs can be properly basic the principle of testimony; this principle will play an important role later in my argument and it is crucial to note that it is a principle that Plantinga explicitly accepts).

We thus have identified three kinds of properly basic beliefs: those derived from perception, memory and testimony. We should be careful to note, though, that properly basic beliefs are *defeasible*; for example, a belief that I form on the basis of testimony will be defeated by the belief that the testifier is a habitual liar; or, it will be defeated by the belief that the testifier has arrived at her belief in an epistemically irresponsible fashion.

2. 2. Religious Experience as Properly Basic

Plantinga aims to show that Christian belief, like perceptual, memory and testimonial beliefs, can be properly basic. In order to do this he refers to two religious faculties which might produce warranted religious beliefs: (i) the *sensus divinitatis* (i.e., the sense of divinity referred to by Calvin) that produces belief in God, and (ii) a faculty that produces specifically Christian beliefs in response to the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit.⁶

The *sensus divinitatis*, if it exists, is a cognitive faculty placed in human beings by God for the purpose of detecting basic divine truths such as the existence of God. How is this *sensus divinitatis* supposed to operate? Plantinga answers that it:

Will always involve the presence of experience of some kind or other.... Sometimes there is sensuous imagery; sometimes there is something like feeling the presence of God, where there seems to be no sensuous imagery present, but perhaps something (necessarily hard to describe) *like* it....A common component is a sort of awe, a sense of the numinous; a sense of being in the

presence of a being of overwhelming majesty and greatness (P: 183).

Let us take one of these kinds of experiences--the numinous sense of being in the presence of a being of overwhelming majesty and greatness.⁷ Such an experience might occur in a person after gazing at the Grand Canyon as the early morning fog melts away. The numinous experience occurs, and the person is occasioned by a belief, e.g. that God exists and is responsible for this awesome sight. The belief is held in a basic way, but is it properly basic; i.e. is it likely to have epistemic warrant?

The answer to this question depends on whether forming beliefs via a *sensus divinitatis* is part of the human design plan. So is this faculty part of the human design plan? We can answer as follows: if God does not exist, then probably not; however, if God does exist, at least the traditional all-good God who would design us in a benevolent fashion, then something like the *sensus divinitatis* probably also figures in the human design plan--and thus the beliefs produced by this cognitive mechanism would have epistemic warrant and would be properly basic (pp: 188-90).

Moreover, we needn't suppose, if theism is correct, that God has limited human cognitive faculties to sensing basic divine truths such as God's existence. We might also suppose that God created human beings with a distinct faculty to learn some more precise divine details. And this is precisely what Plantinga proposes with the faculty that is sensitive to the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. Plantinga's model is that Christian belief comes "by way of the work of the Holy Spirit, who gets us to accept, causes us to believe these great truths of the gospel" (p: 245).

The experience associated with the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit is that of *faith* which carries with it the phenomenology of *conviction*. Plantinga gives an example of this kind of experience: "We read Scripture...or in some other way encounter a proclamation of the Word. What is said simply seems right; it seems compelling; one finds oneself saying "Yes, that's right, that's the truth of the matter; this is indeed the word of the Lord"" (p: 250). In this example one experiences conviction and this experience is occasioned by the belief that the Scripture is true. This belief is basic since it is based on experience, and not on some other belief.

But is this basic belief properly basic, i.e. is it likely to have warrant? This depends on whether forming belief in response to the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit is part of the human epistemic design plan. So is this the case? We can answer as before. If Christian doctrine is false, then probably not; however, if Christian doctrine is true, then it is plausible to suppose that forming beliefs in response to internal instigation of the Holy Spirit is indeed part of the human design plan produced by a loving God.⁸

We have in place, then, Plantinga's model of how it is the case that if Christian belief is true, it most probably has epistemic warrant. It most probably has warrant (again, if Christianity is true) since God would design the cognitive faculties of human beings in such a way as to be able to sense the divine presence, and to be receptive to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

3. Plantinga's Response to the Facts of Religious Pluralism

3.1. The Challenge Posed by the Facts of Religious Pluralism

The facts of religious pluralism pose a considerable challenge to Plantinga's Christian and other experience-based religious exclusivists. To see the nature of this challenge let us examine someone who believes Christian doctrine based on the experiences that she takes to be delivered by the *sensus divinitatis* and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. Let us call her Faith. Suppose now that Faith's entirely truthful friend Victor reports that he too has had a variety of religious experiences, including numinous experiences and feelings of religious conviction. The problem lies in that he reports a set of religious beliefs which are incompatible with the Christian religious doctrine that she holds; for example, he finds himself with the conviction that God never became incarnate. Or, he reports his conviction that God, while immensely powerful (indeed powerful enough to create human beings with a cognitive faculty suitable for apprehending divine truths), is not all powerful.

Importantly, Victor not only reports that he has had a religious experience which has led him to believe that Christian doctrine is false; in addition, he reports his belief that Christian doctrine is indeed false. This latter report provides Faith (or, in any case, *ought* to provide her) with a basic belief that Christian doctrine is false.

Recall that we (at least Plantinga and I) are accepting the principle of testimony which holds that testimonial beliefs are properly basic. Faith thus has two conflicting basic beliefs: (i) the belief provided by religious experience that Christian doctrine is true, and (ii) the belief provided by Victor's testimony that Christian doctrine is false.

Which belief should she adopt, that provided by her own religious experience or that provided via Victor's testimony? Or, is the only epistemically acceptable option to refrain from any contested religious belief? Like Plantinga we can put this issue using the language of defeaters: does knowledge of Victor's religious beliefs provide Faith a defeater for her belief in Christian doctrine? In order to answer this question we must first take a brief detour to explore the notion of a defeater.

3. 2. The Language of Defeaters

Plantinga's rough characterization of a defeater is as follows:

A defeater for a belief *b*...is another belief *d* such that, given my noetic structure [i.e., the rest of what I know and believe], I cannot rationally hold *b* given that I believe *d* (p: 361).

This is a bit abstract. It would be helpful to look at an example from Plantinga:

[Y]ou and I both believe that the University of Aberdeen was founded in 1495; you but not I know that the current guidebook to Aberdeen contains an egregious error on this very matter. We both win a copy of the guidebook in the Scottish national lottery; we both read it; sadly enough it contains the wholly mistaken affirmation that the university was founded in 1595 (p: 360).

In this example the guidebook provides me (*qua* speaker) with a defeater for my belief that the university was founded in 1495. I cannot rationally hold that belief given what I have read in the guidebook (along with the other beliefs in my noetic structure). The same does not hold for you. You may continue to rationally hold your belief that the university was founded in 1495. This is because you "already know that the current guidebook contains an error on the matter of the date of the university's foundation; this neutralizes in advance (as we might put it) the defeating potential of the newly acquired bit of knowledge" (pp: 360-1).

Following Plantinga's lead here let us say that your belief about what the guidebook says is a potential defeater (or has "defeating potential"); but, this potential defeater is "neutralized in advance" by the belief that the guidebook is in error on this matter. Let us say that this is a neutralizing belief, or a neutralizer for short. The potential defeater becomes actualized for me; but, since you have a neutralizer available it does not become actualized for you.

Plantinga says rather little about potential defeaters as such. But at the very least I take it that any beliefs which directly contradict each other are potential defeaters of each other. This would explain why in the example I (*qua* speaker) have a potential defeater for my belief that the university was founded in 1495. This is because the belief I obtain from the guidebook directly contradicts this prior belief.

In addition I take it that potential defeaters who are not neutralized are *ipso facto* defeaters. Their potential, so to speak, is actualized unless neutralized. In the example this is precisely what happens to me. Since I have no neutralizing belief for the potential defeater provided by the guidebook, the potential defeater becomes actualized, and I thereby obtain a defeater for my belief that the university was founded in 1495. I maintain that belief on pain of irrationality.

We can apply these two points about potential defeaters back to the discussion concerning religious exclusivism: Victor's testimony provides defeasible support for Faith to accept that Christian doctrine is false. Since this belief directly contradicts her prior Christian beliefs (which were obtained via religious experience) it thus provides a potential defeater for them.⁹

Is this potential defeater actualized? Or does Faith have a neutralizer for the defeating potential of Victor's testimony?

3. 3. Plantinga's Response to the Facts of Religious Pluralism

Plantinga would respond that Faith does indeed have a neutralizer for the defeating potential of Victor's testimony. Consider the following passage:

If the believer concedes that she *doesn't* have any special source of knowledge or true belief with respect to Christian belief--no *sensus divinitatis*, no internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. . .nothing not available to those who disagree with her--*then*. . .she will have a defeater for her Christian

belief. But why should she concede these things? She will ordinarily think (or at least *should* ordinarily think) that there are indeed sources of warranted belief that issue in these beliefs....She may be *mistaken*, in so thinking, deluded, in serious and debilitating error, but she needn't be *culpable* in holding this belief....And this protects her...from the defeater that might accompany awareness of [the religious beliefs of those who disagree with her](pp: 453-4).

The neutralizing belief Plantinga offers on behalf of those in Faith's position, then, is the belief that she is epistemically advantaged over those with whom she disagrees since *she* has a special source of religious knowledge that her opponents lack. Let us call this belief SSRK (for special source of religious knowledge).

There is an immediate problem with this reply. Plantinga states that belief SSRK is held nonculpably. But is this the case? This is suspect because (in the case we are considering) Victor's testimony also provides a potential defeater for Faith's belief that she has a special source of religious knowledge. Let us see why this is so: if SSRK is true, then all, or nearly all, of Faith's religious beliefs will turn out true; however, if Victor's testimony is true, then a good many of Faith's religious beliefs will turn out false. We see, then, that Victor's testimony is not compatible with Faith's belief that she possesses a special source of religious knowledge.

So, we find that Victor's testimony provides a potential defeater for Faith's belief in SSRK (in addition to providing a potential defeater for her belief in Christian doctrine). This shifts the question: given that Victor's testimony provides a potential defeater for Faith's belief in SSRK, is Plantinga's defense of Faith's belief in Christian doctrine successful? In the next section of the paper I shall claim that it is not.

4. Why Plantinga's Response is Unsuccessful: The Independence Constraint on Neutralizers

In the last section of the paper I showed that Victor's testimony provides a *potential* defeater for Faith's belief that Christian doctrine is true (i.e., belief C). The neutralizer that Plantinga offers on her behalf is the belief that she possesses a special source of religious knowledge which her opponents lack (i.e., belief SSRK).

In this section of the paper I will present a dilemma for Plantinga's response: either it is viciously circular, or highly implausible.

Recall from the last section that not only does Victor's testimony provide a potential defeater for Faith's belief in C, but it also provides a potential defeater for her belief in SSRK. The question we shall presently address is whether Faith can provide a neutralizer for the potential defeater of SSRK. Without such a neutralizer, both SSRK and C will be actually (and not merely potentially) defeated, and Faith will maintain these beliefs on pain of irrationality.

Let us look then at various possible neutralizers for SSRK. Consider first an attempt by Faith to neutralize the potential defeater of SSRK by offering up C, the belief that Christian doctrine is true. The idea here is that the truth of C demonstrates that she has a special source of religious knowledge which Victor and other religious opponents lack because she sees that C is true, whereas they do not.

I claim that this attempt to neutralize Victor's testimony is illegitimately circular. But why is this? Intuitively, this is so because SSRK is being offered as a neutralizer for C, and C is in turn being offered as a neutralizer for SSRK. But I can make the charge of vicious circularity more precise by introducing the notions of evidential dependence and evidential independence:

Belief Z is evidentially dependent on belief Y for agent S just in case it is rational for S to believe that the warrant for Z is derivative of the warrant for Y. Otherwise Z is evidentially independent of Y for agent S.

Given this definition we can see that for Faith C is evidentially dependent on SSRK. This is due to the fact that SSRK is being offered up by Faith as a neutralizer for C; thus, it is rational for Faith to believe that the warrant for C is derivative of the warrant of SSRK.

It is important to note that C is evidentially dependent on SSRK because this fact shows that it is illegitimate for Faith to offer C as a neutralizer for a potential defeater of SSRK. This is due to a principle (which is explicitly endorsed by Plantinga) that I call the independence constraint on neutralizers:

Z cannot neutralize X as a potential defeater for Y if Z is evidentially dependent on Y.¹⁰

Let's illustrate this principle with the case of someone (let's call him Mark) who maintains that he has a reliable psychic faculty. Mark's predictions all deal with events far in the future, so there is no direct way to ascertain their truth; nevertheless, his claims are so fantastic that we are a bit incredulous; for example, he claims that in twenty years time people will be able to take space trips through the core of the sun. We take the fantastic nature of the claims to provide a potential defeater for anyone, including Mark, who believes that he has psychic powers.

Given our incredulity we ask Mark to tell us how he knows that he has psychic powers. He answers that he knows this because his psychic powers tell him that this is so. When pressed he is unable to muster any other support for his belief. Mark's reasoning, of course, should meet with less than universal acclaim. The reason why is that it runs afoul of the independence constraint. This is because the only evidence that Mark has to offer in favor of his having reliable psychic powers is based on his supposition that he indeed has reliable psychic powers. In this case, then, Mark's belief that he has reliable psychic powers is evidentially dependent on itself; but, we then see that Mark's reasoning violates the independence constraint since a belief which is evidentially dependent on itself cannot provide a neutralizer for itself.

Things do not get any better for Mark if he reasons as follows: "I know that I have psychic powers since this explains how I came to believe lots of incredible things (e.g., that people will travel through the core of the sun in twenty years time) that in fact turn out to be true." This bit of reasoning is no better because the only support that Mark has for the belief that people will travel through the core of the sun in twenty years time is derived from the belief that he has reliable psychic powers; thus, his belief that people will travel through the core of the sun is evidentially dependent on the belief that he has psychic powers; but, we see then that Mark's new bit of reasoning also runs afoul of the independence constraint: the belief that people will travel through the core of the sun in twenty years time is evidentially dependent on the belief that he has reliable psychic powers, and thus cannot provide a neutralizer for the belief that he has reliable psychic powers.

With the independence constraint on neutralizers in hand we can now see more clearly why it would be illegitimately circular for

Faith to offer C as a neutralizer on behalf of SSRK. It is illegitimately circular because C is evidentially dependent on SSRK (again, due to the fact that SSRK is being offered as a neutralizer on behalf of C). Since C is evidentially dependent on SSRK it would run afoul of the independence constraint for Faith to offer C as a neutralizer on behalf of SSRK. This would be like Mark defending the reliability of his psychic powers by noting that his psychic powers have led him to believe that people will travel through the core of the sun in twenty years time, and by noting that in fact, this unlikely belief is true.

Moreover, Faith could not legitimately defend SSRK against its potential defeater by claiming that she has a special source of religious knowledge which has informed her that SSRK is true. In this case the alleged warrant of SSRK is dependent on the alleged warrant of SSRK; that is, SSRK is evidentially dependent on itself. Since SSRK is evidentially dependent on itself it would violate the independence constraint for it to provide a neutralizer for itself. This would be like Mark defending his belief that he has reliable psychic powers by claiming that his psychic powers tell him that this is so.

The dilemma for Faith's reply to Victor's testimony, then, is this: either the proposed neutralizer for SSRK is evidentially dependent on SSRK itself, or it is evidentially dependent. If it is evidentially dependent then it runs afoul of the independence constraint on neutralizers and thus cannot legitimately provide a neutralizer on behalf of SSRK. The other horn of the dilemma concerns possible neutralizers which are evidentially *independent* of SSRK. So let us ask what prospects there are for a neutralizer which is evidentially independent of SSRK to provide a neutralizer for SSRK.

So far as I can tell Plantinga does not refer to anything that could provide an evidentially independent neutralizer on Faith's behalf for Victor's testimony.¹¹ But perhaps such a complaint is merely an instance of cursing the darkness, whereas the proper response would be to light a candle and come up with independent evidence in support of SSRK. But it is not so easy to come with any independent evidence for SSRK that is even remotely plausible. Consider, for example, the arguments that Yehudah Halevi (1085--1141) offers on behalf of exclusivist Jewish belief¹²: He argues that the Jewish people alone, among all the nations, have

possessed a special source of religious knowledge. Halevi accounts for the existence of this special faculty with a theory of biological and geographical conditioning. The Jewish people, he maintains, possessed the right biological characteristics, and were in an ideal geographical environment when they were at the stage of making prophecies--hence their epistemic superiority over less biologically and geographically blessed nations.¹³ This account provides independent evidence in favor of the proposition that the Jewish people have a special source of religious knowledge in that it relies on allegedly empirical facts about geography and biology.

To modern ears Halevi's theories would be merely quaint if they did not so sadly remind one of virulent forms of modern racism. But let us put aside worries both of empirical and moral plausibility. What is relevant to our present purposes is that Halevi has shown that how it is at least conceivable to offer beliefs that are evidentially independent of SSRK as providers of neutralizers for SSRK. And without this independent evidence religious exclusivism (Christian or otherwise) which is based on non-perceptual religious experience is epistemically untenable. But, this is precisely what Plantinga offers: Christian exclusivism based on religious experience without evidentially independent support. The challenge to Plantinga and other experience-based religious exclusivists, then, is this: they should provide independent evidence for the claim that they have a special source of religious knowledge (i.e. belief SSRK), or they should relinquish their exclusivist religious beliefs.

5. Objections and Replies

5. 1. Plantinga's Burden

I concluded the previous section of the paper with the demand that religious exclusivists who base their beliefs on non-perceptual religious experience either provide independent support for the claim that they have a special source of religious knowledge, or relinquish their particular form of religious exclusivism. Note that this demand follows directly from principles that Plantinga explicitly endorses: the potential defeater for the experience-based religious belief is derived from the principle of testimony, and the independence constraint on neutralizers constrains the availability of neutralizers to those provided by independent evidence.

Since Plantinga explicitly endorses the principles which my argument relies upon a defender of Plantinga could not simply point out (should it be the case) that my form of argument leads to unacceptably counterintuitive results and use this fact as the basis of a *reductio ad absurdum*. To say that my argument has counterintuitive results is to say that Plantinga's epistemic system, as it stands, has counterintuitive results.

Of course, someone who is interested in defending experience-based religious exclusivism, but not in the way that Plantinga aims to, is in a better position to point out any counterintuitive results of my line of argumentation, and then use those results as a basis of a *reductio ad absurdum*. In order for my argument to hold against them I must respond then to the charge that the principles I rely upon lead to counterintuitive results. So, in the interest of defending my argument against this sort of critic I will look at various counterintuitive results that might be thought to follow from my argument, and then argue that these counterintuitive results do not actually follow.

5. 2. Moral Disagreement and Independent Evidence

The first source of concern involves the possibility of holding moral positions which are contested by others. Consider, for example, the anti-racist who is made aware of the existence of people who harbor racist views. The worry is that the anti-racist can maintain her anti-racism in light of the knowledge of such people only by employing a defense similar to that provided by Plantinga on behalf of the Christian exclusivist who is faced by the facts of religious pluralism.

If this turned out to be true then my line of argument would entail that the beliefs of both the anti-racist and the racist would stand defeated once they became aware of each other, and neither would be entitled to a view on the moral acceptability of racism; but surely, the critic charges, this is an absurd conclusion: the anti-racist is certainly entitled to her moral views despite knowing of the existence of those who harbor racist beliefs.

In order to respond to this critic I shall start by agreeing that it would be a devastating result for my line of argument if it turned out that the anti-racist was *always* unable to maintain her moral views when confronted with the views of a racist; but, I shall argue that it is a strength, rather than a weakness, of my view that it

sometimes forbids the holding of contested moral positions, and at other times permits or requires it.

Let us start by examining those circumstances for which my argument does rule out the holding of contested moral positions. In order to do so we must set up a moral disagreement between a racist and an anti-racist analogous to the religious disagreement between Faith and Victor described earlier in the paper: the racist reports an experience of *moral conviction* followed by the belief that racism is correct, and the anti-racist reports a phenomenologically similar experience of moral conviction followed by the belief that racism is morally unacceptable.

If this were the whole extent of the disagreement between the racist and the anti-racist, then I would maintain that neither of them would be entitled to a view regarding to the truth or falsity of racism--their moral beliefs would defeat each other in just the way that the religious beliefs of Faith and Victor defeat each other. This, I take it, is a strength of my view since it does not allow the racist to claim that he is behaving in an epistemically responsible fashion so long as he takes his racist beliefs to be basically justified by his feelings of moral conviction; rather, my view forces the racist to either provide independent evidence for his belief that he has a special source of moral knowledge (and I am highly skeptical that this is a live option), or to withdraw his experience-based belief in racism. Of course, the same holds *mutatis mutandis* for the anti-racist; however, this by no means implies that the anti-racist must give up her moral views once confronted by the views of the racist.

This is because one might base one's rejection of racism not on the implausible belief that one has a special source of moral knowledge that the racist lacks, but rather on the belief that one possesses a moral proof or demonstration that *would* convince the racist if he were suitably informed and if he were behaving in an epistemically responsible fashion. (Note that such an appeal to *religious* proof or demonstration is explicitly not taken by Plantinga in his defense of belief in Christian doctrine.)

Let me sketch an example of a kind of how this might work. Suppose that a racist, let us call him Rick, accepts that it is the attainment of a certain threshold of rationality which is the basis of human worth. Suppose further that he believes the following: all members of race X fail to attain this minimum threshold.

If Rick has reached this empirical belief in an epistemically responsible fashion then he need not give up his racist beliefs when faced by the views of the anti-racist since he has a neutralizer available for the testimony provided by the anti-racist which does not run afoul of the independence constraint. I should make emphatically clear, though, that I don't think that an adult in our culture today could reach such an empirical belief in an epistemically responsible fashion.

Indeed, it is this emphatic belief of mine which allows me to maintain my anti-racism in light of the knowledge of the existence of a racist like Rick: given our shared understanding of the basis of human worth, I think that if he were epistemically responsible in the formation of his empirical beliefs he would come to the conclusion that racism is to be rejected. Of course, not all people are epistemically responsible in their collection of empirical data, and this helps explain why racist views persist. But, so long as I believe in an epistemically responsible fashion that (given our background of shared moral beliefs) the empirical facts support the rejection of racism then I might maintain my own anti-racist views fully aware that my moral view is contested by people like Rick.

There are, of course, racists who do not share Rick's belief concerning the basis of human worth--they might, for example, base their racism on a kind of social Darwinism; however, it is not to my point here to show that it is possible to refute every kind of racism (even though I am highly confident that this can be done). My point here is merely to show that it is possible for one to nonculpably continue to be an anti-racist even when faced with a real-live racist. And the gist of this first concern was that according to my argument this was not possible.

5. 3. Philosophical Disagreement and Independent Evidence

The second of the alleged counterintuitive results of my argument concerns the possibility of holding a philosophical position which one knows to be contested. The worry is that the only way to maintain a contested philosophical position is to mimic Plantinga's response to the facts of religious pluralism on behalf of the Christian exclusivist. But if this maneuver is disallowed by my argument, then it appears that it is not epistemically possible to hold a contested philosophical position.

This too would be a devastatingly counterintuitive result of my theory; however, I shall argue that it is indeed compatible with my argument for one to hold a philosophical position that one knows to be contested. In order to show that this is so I will start by pointing out those instances in which my argument *does* rule out the holding of contested philosophical positions; but, I shall argue (as I did above in the section on moral disagreement) that my view does allow the holding of philosophical positions given other common kinds of philosophical disagreement.

In order to see when my view disallows the holding of contested philosophical positions we must first set up a philosophical disagreement analogous to the religious disagreement between Faith and Victor described earlier in the paper. Consider, for example, the following disagreement between a utilitarian and a non-consequentialist: the utilitarian is struck by a feeling of philosophical certainty which is occasioned by the belief that utilitarianism is the correct moral theory; and, the non-consequentialist is struck by a phenomenologically similar feeling of philosophical certainty which is occasioned by the belief that some version of non-consequentialism is correct.

The story should be familiar by now--*if* this is the full extent of their disagreement then neither is entitled to a view concerning who is correct. But, this does not mean that it is epistemically untenable to hold a philosophical position which one knows to be contested. This is because one might believe in an epistemically responsible fashion that one has access to a philosophical proof or demonstration that *ought* to convince one's opponents once they become apprised of it, even if in fact they are not so convinced.

Let us see how this applies in the case of the utilitarian and the non-consequentialist. The two, let us suppose, are conducting their debate against the background of a shared set of moral and other philosophical beliefs. The non-consequentialist might then offer the following sort of argument: there are some of these shared moral beliefs (e.g. those concerning rights and justice) which utilitarian theory cannot adequately account for. The utilitarian might respond, though, that her theory can indeed accommodate these shared intuitions, and moreover, that non-consequentialism itself has some fatal defect in regards to some shared philosophical beliefs (e.g. it is inconsistent with a shared epistemological theory).

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper to actually enter into this debate. But note that if, say, the non-consequentialist comes to believe in an epistemically responsible fashion that the utilitarian simply cannot accommodate some *shared* moral belief (and otherwise all things are equal) then he might legitimately hold onto his non-consequentialist beliefs even when faced with the views of the utilitarian. More generally, we should note that it is epistemically possible for one to hold a contested philosophical position so long as one believes in an epistemically responsible fashion that one has access to a proof or demonstration that ought to convince one's opponents once they are suitably apprised of it, even if in fact it does not.

This general principle shows why, for example, I am justified in holding my belief that Plantinga's defense of Christian belief fails even though I know that there are those (e.g. Plantinga himself) who disagree with me. Despite our disagreement we have a shared set of philosophical beliefs importantly including the principle of testimony and the independence constraint on neutralizers. The source of my disagreement with Plantinga is logical--I believe (and so far as I can tell, I believe in an epistemically responsible fashion) that a logical consequence of these shared philosophical principles is that Plantinga's defense of Christian exclusivism fails. Of course, I might be wrong about this; but, so long as I have in fact acted in an epistemically responsible fashion I am not being arbitrary in holding my position even though I know that Plantinga and others disagree. (cf. with Plantinga on p. 453)

To sum up: it might be thought that my argument against Plantinga forbids one from holding moral or philosophical beliefs which one knows to be contested. This would indeed be a devastating consequence of my argument; but, I have argued that it is epistemically possible to hold contested moral and philosophical positions so long as one believes in an epistemically responsible fashion that one has access to a proof or demonstration that *ought* to convince one's opponent. But, again, it is not epistemically responsible to suppose that one has a special source of religious, moral or philosophical knowledge without evidentially independent support for that claim. And, that is precisely what Plantinga offers us with his experience-based defense of Christian belief.

Notes

- 1- *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford 2000). Unless otherwise noted all quotes are from this text.
- 2- Note that a defeater for Christian belief need not provide a reason to think that Christian doctrine is false; rather, it might only provide a reason to be agnostic about the truth of Christian doctrine. The idea of a defeater will be further explored in section III(B) of this paper.
- 3- For the first horn of the dilemma I am not claiming that the exclusivist is illegitimately putting forward an argument whose conclusion is already contained as one of the premises. This kind of circularity is not at issue since, as we shall see, Plantinga's defense of the religious exclusivist does not attribute to her any *arguments* for her views. Instead, Plantinga seeks to defend the religious exclusivist on the basis of her religious *experience* and her belief that she has a cognitive faculty which reliably provides her with religious beliefs. See Plantinga's discussion on pp. 455-6.
- 4- See Plantinga's *Warrant and Proper Function*, ch. 1 & 2. (Oxford 1993) I will henceforth refer to this work as *WPF*.
- 5- "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" pp. 121-23.
- 6- This reference to the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit is drawn from Calvin's development of an idea from Aquinas: see p. 249.
- 7- For an explanation of the 'numinous' see Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*.
- 8- I should be careful to note that it is the *receptivity* to the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit which is allegedly part of the human design plan. It is a matter of gift, though, whether the Holy Spirit speaks to a particular person.
- 9- This is so even if it turns out that Victor's belief has little or no warrant as would be the case if in fact Christianity was true. As Plantinga says, "it is quite possible for a belief *A* to serve as a defeater for another belief *B* even if *A* has little or no warrant, and even when *B* has more warrant than *A*." (364)
- 10- Something like this principle is defended by Plantinga in footnotes 57 and 58 on pages 238 and 239, as well as chapter 12 of *WPF*. In addition the principle is explicitly defended in Plantinga's unpublished manuscript "Naturalism Defeated":

"If *D* is a defeater of *B* for *S*, then for any belief *B** of *S*, if *S* rationally believes that the warrant *B** has for her is derivative (wholly or partly)

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from the warrant B has for her, then B* is not a defeater-defeater, for S, of D." (50)

11- He does offer an argument that if successful would provide a neutralizer for the testimony provided by an atheist. See p. 227 ff.

12- I am indebted to Peter Lipton for this example.

13- See Halevi's *The Kuzari*, Book I, section 95 or Neil Gillman's brief account of Halevi's views in *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*, p. 126

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