

Plantinga on warrant

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Alvin Plantinga Warranted Christian Belief (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

In the two previous volumes of his trilogy on ‘warrant’,¹ Alvin Plantinga developed his general theory of warrant, defined as that characteristic enough of which terms a true belief into knowledge. A belief B has warrant if and only if: (1) it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly, (2) in a cognitive environment sufficiently similar to that for which the faculties were designed, (3) according to a design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs, when (4) there is a high statistical probability of such beliefs being true.

Thus my belief that there is a table in front of me has warrant if in the first place, in producing it, my cognitive faculties were functioning properly, the way they were meant to function. Plantinga holds that just as our heart or liver may function properly or not, so may our cognitive faculties. And he also holds that if God made us, our faculties function properly if they function in the way God designed them to function; whereas if evolution (uncaused by God) made us, then our faculties function properly if they function in the way that (in some sense) evolution designed them to function.

God or evolution designed us to function only in a particular environment (e.g. in a particular ecological niche, or in a society where people always tell the truth). Plausibly, whether God or evolution made us, they meant most of our cognitive faculties to work in such a way that they yield true beliefs, e.g. so that when we look at a desk, we acquire the belief that there is a desk in front of us – in a typical Earth environment. However some of our cognitive faculties may be designed to produce beliefs having characteristics other than or additional to truth – e.g., comforting or inspiring beliefs; and warrant only arises when the cognitive faculty operating is the one designed to produce true beliefs. But some designers may be bad designers, and so the faculty has to produce true beliefs most of the time, for a particular belief which it produces to have warrant. Given that my belief that

there is a desk in front of me was produced by a perceptual faculty designed to produce true beliefs on Earth, and that that sort of perceptual process normally produces true beliefs on Earth, then my particular belief has warrant. A belief can have different degrees of warrant – it has the right degree if it is as strong as its design plan indicates that it should be. Thus if the process which produces it was designed only to produce true beliefs sixty per cent of the time, then it will only have a moderate degree of warrant. But if it has enough warrant and is true, then it amounts to knowledge – I know that there is a desk in front of me.

Now this is a highly controversial theory of knowledge. The first problem is that there is – to my mind – no conceptual connection between the ‘proper functioning’ of a faculty or organ (in the normal sense, insofar as there is one), and its functioning in the way that God or evolution designed it to function. What the ‘proper functioning’ of an organ or faculty seems to me to amount to is its functioning in ways (normal to the species) conducive to the survival, health, or flourishing of the organism in various respects including holding true beliefs. Whether we are ‘functioning properly’ in this way seems independent of whether God or evolution made us. Plantinga is, of course, entitled to define his own sense of ‘proper functioning’. But a definition in terms of a thing functioning in the way and environment that God or evolution designed it to function is highly unsatisfactory, for evolution is blind and can design nothing in a literal or anywhere near literal sense (despite the incautious talk by some biologists of evolution’s ‘design plan’). The only sense which I can give to evolution ‘designing’ something to function in a certain way in a certain environment is evolution causing it to ‘function properly’ in what I have taken to be the normal sense in a certain environment.

Similarly, if evolution (uncaused by God) made us, a belief being produced in accord with a design plan ‘aimed’ at the production of true beliefs just is it being produced by a process which does produce true beliefs. The ‘sufficient similarity’ of a cognitive environment to the one for which the process was designed could be understood in many ways, but presumably the requisite similarity is similarity in respect of it facilitating the production of true beliefs. Hence, if evolution (uncaused by God) made us, warrant seems to reduce to (4) – which is simple reliabilism. A belief is warranted if, and only if, it is produced by a process which produces true beliefs most of the time. And that raises all the problems of reliabilism (a theory which Plantinga himself rejects in *Warrant: The Current Debate*) including – among other problems – the problem that a token belief-forming process will belong to many different types of such processes of very different degrees of reliability. If there is such a thing as ‘knowledge’ in the absence of a personal creator, this theory to my mind does not produce a satisfactory analysis of it. And if we are made by God or other personal creator, it is still the case – I suggest – that some of us know some very simple necessary truths, for example, the principle of non-contradiction, and that $2+2=4$, even if these

beliefs were produced in us by a process which God did not design as a true-belief-producing process. The processes which produced me and their plans for me seem in such cases not to affect whether my true beliefs amount to knowledge.

However, Plantinga will surely have various counter-objections to these objections, and this is not the place for a full discussion of his theory of warrant. He argued for two volumes in favour of his theory of warrant, and may reasonably move on in this third volume of his trilogy to applying his account to showing what would give warrant to Christian beliefs. He is concerned not merely with the belief that there is a God, but also with the beliefs encapsulated in Christian creeds (the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement etc.) – what he calls ‘the great things of the Gospel’. He argues that if there is a God (as depicted in the Christian creeds), then anyone’s belief that there is such a God is (very probably) warranted. This is because if there is a God, our cognitive faculties function properly if they function the way God designed them to function. It is natural to suppose that God created us in such a way that we would come to hold the true belief that He exists; and (in view of the poor prospects for inferential knowledge of God) to hold this as a basic belief, perhaps by way of response to the world of nature. This involves God giving us what Calvin called a *sensus divinitatis*, a sense aimed at producing in us in our present environment true theistic beliefs. And since such beliefs are always true, then – given that they are as strong as their design plan indicates that they ought to be (presumably very strong) – they will amount to knowledge on Plantinga’s account. On the other hand if there is no God, the belief that there is a God is unlikely to be the result of a design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs – it is more likely to be the result of a design plan helping us to cope with a hard life. So it will not have warrant.

While (if there is a God) it is, according to Plantinga, the *sensus divinitatis* which leads us to the belief that there is a God, it is a different operation (if there is a God as depicted by the Christian creeds) which leads us to believe that such credal claims as the doctrine of the Incarnation are true – the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit normally operates by producing in the person who reads the Bible, has a Christian upbringing or hears a Christian sermon, the basic belief that some Christian doctrine which he reads or hears is true. And by arguments similar to those given above concerned with the simple belief that there is a God, if the credal beliefs are true, the belief that they are will be warranted and – if properly strong – will amount to knowledge. If the creeds are false, the belief that they are true will not be warranted.

On Plantinga’s account the warrant given to a belief by the proper functioning of cognitive processes is defeasible. The believer may acquire beliefs which reduce the warrant of, and – if strong enough – ‘defeat’ an otherwise warranted belief B, and in that case it loses its warrant. They may do this either by rebutting B (that is, showing B to be very probably false) or by undercutting it (that is, showing that B very probably lacks the warrant which it initially appeared to have, because the

processes which produced it were very probably not such as to produce warranted beliefs). Plantinga considers a number of such possible defeaters to Christian belief – the theories of Freud and Marx on the genesis of religious belief, Historical Biblical Criticism, postmodernism and religious pluralism, and finally the problem of evil. Plantinga argues that none of these constitute successful defeaters to Christian belief if it is held as firmly as is warranted by the processes which produce it as a basic belief. And so if the belief is true, it is warranted. Plantinga affirms his own strong conviction that it is true; but he writes in his penultimate sentence that it is ‘beyond the competence of philosophy’ to show that it is true, any more – presumably – than it could show that there is an external world or a world which has existed for more than five minutes. Many people find themselves with Christian convictions, as they look at the night sky or read St John’s Gospel. Plantinga is concerned to show that there is no good reason for them not to continue to hold them.

This is a very clear and readable book. The points are hammered home, and most readers will have taken them well before the hammering stops. Some of the more technical arguments are put in smaller print and can be ignored by a reader concerned only to get the main sweep of the argument. And any tendency to dullness is removed by the occasional jokey example of a kind well familiar to readers of Plantinga. It is also a very thorough book (the result of a lot of very hard and rigorous thinking) and – given the results of the two earlier books about the nature of warrant – in most of its chapters almost impossible to rebut. There is no doubt that it will give a lot of comfort to those with strong Christian beliefs who hold them as basic beliefs (i.e. not on the basis of any kind of inference).

There is, however, a monumental issue which Plantinga does not discuss, and which a lot of people will consider needs discussing. This is whether Christian beliefs do have warrant (in Plantinga’s sense). He has shown that they do, if they are true; so we might hope for discussion of whether they are true. Now Christianity is a great world view; and of other world views we can ask whether there is any reason for believing that they are true, whether they are probably true and so whether it is rational (in some sense) to believe that they are true. Plantinga devotes chapters 3, 4 and 5 to considering how we are to construe the question whether Christian belief is rational. He thinks that we might mean: is it justified by the believer’s own lights? Has the believer given enough consideration to the question of whether it is true? And he responds that pretty often the answer is obviously, ‘Yes’. So that is not what the question concerns. He then considers a number of other meanings that the question about whether Christian belief is rational might have. All the ones which he investigates seriously analyse it in terms of whether the believer was ‘functioning properly’ when acquiring the belief; and he concludes that the real issue is whether Christian belief is warranted (in his sense). And so we are back again with the question which we can only answer with affirmation or counter-affirmation; we cannot in any interesting sense ask

whether it is rational to believe that Christian belief has warrant – he says, or seems to say.

It is a consequence of this that Plantinga seems not have much to say to those Christian believers whose beliefs are not of Plantinga's kind, and nothing to say to the adherents of other religions and of none. There are those believers whose Christian beliefs are weak – in Plantinga's terms (481) they believe 'that the warrant enjoyed by [their] theistic belief is minimal'. For these believers, a difficulty such as the problem of evil, Plantinga acknowledges, can constitute a defeater – not, he argues in chapter 14, much of a defeater; but if a belief is weak, it doesn't need much of a defeater to defeat it. And then there are those theists who believe 'that the warrant theism has for [them] depends just upon its explaining a certain ranges of phenomena' – they believe on the basis of arguments. Defeaters which constitute counter-arguments can certainly be a problem for them too, Plantinga acknowledges. But he doubts 'very much if the typical theist is in any such condition' as are theists of those two kinds. On this empirical issue, I differ strongly from Plantinga. It may be that not many theists believe on the basis of argument, though my view is that quite a number do believe on the basis of the crudest of arguments that theism 'makes sense of the world'. But I certainly think that a lot of Christian theists have some rather weak beliefs, which ought to be abandoned (even on Plantinga's account of warrant) in the face of objections from evil and from biblical criticism – unless arguments can be given to meet these objections (I'll come to Plantinga's response to these objections shortly.)

Despite what Plantinga seems to say, there is a clear and all-important question about whether a belief is rational (or justified) which has nothing to do with whether it is justified by the believer's own lights or with whether it is produced by 'properly functioning' processes. In a strong internalist sense, a belief of a person S is rational if it is rendered (evidentially) probable by S's evidence. Evidently – scientists, historians, judges and juries ask this question about their hypotheses. They have criteria for when evidence makes one hypothesis more probable than some other hypothesis or more probable than its negation (i.e. probable *simpliciter*). These criteria can be drawn out from reflection on particular cases (where an hypothesis has the relation in question to its evidence). A person's evidence consists of the contents of his basic beliefs (weighted by his degree of confidence in them) – that is, the contents of those beliefs which seem to him obviously true and those beliefs which seem less obviously true but whose status is basic (e.g. the belief that I saw Jones at the scene of the crime – when I am not completely sure that I did).

The question which worries the atheist and many a theist is not, I suggest, Plantinga's question about whether Christian belief is warranted in his sense, but my question about whether it is rational in the above sense – whether it is probably true, given our evidence – and it would have been good if Plantinga had considered that question. A problem here is that not all people have the same

evidence – some have had experiences apparently of God, and others have not. The latter have the evidence that the former claim to have had such experiences, and that is important evidence – though clearly it will not count for quite as much as the evidence of the apparent experience itself. And, as Plantinga urges, some believers have as apparent deliverances of experience or reason, not the belief merely that there is a God but such beliefs as that He became incarnate in Christ. Those contents too will be among their evidence; but only evidence that those believers have such basic beliefs will be among the evidence of others. But as well as such evidence, there is a lot of totally public certain evidence – that there is a world, that is governed by scientific laws, that humans are conscious etc. etc. And now there is then a clear question about whether any or all of these somewhat (but not totally) different evidence sets make it probable that there is a God; and a clear question about whether any or all of the evidence sets make it probable that the Christian creeds are true. Not all basic beliefs will have their content (e.g. that God became incarnate in Christ) proven probable on the total evidence. For more or less any belief, however convinced you are of it initially, other evidence of which you are equally convinced could render it overall improbable.

Whether various sets of evidence (some public, some private) make it probable that Christian beliefs are true is the question that Plantinga does not discuss. A positive answer – say, that Christian beliefs are probably true on the evidence available to all – would have enabled him to tell us not merely that if they are true, Christian beliefs have warrant; but that (probably) they have warrant. And he would have had a message of reason – which in my view the Christian religion has usually claimed that it can provide – for the weak believers and for those outside the field. Or, of course, if he had reached a negative answer to the evidential question, then he would show us that Christian beliefs probably don't have warrant. And, if true, that too would be useful to know.

Despite his apparently limited views about kinds of rationality, Plantinga does talk in the book quite a lot about 'probability' and 'evidence'. And he says that he now thinks that there are many good arguments for the existence of God. He refers to an as yet unpublished paper 'Two dozen or so good theistic arguments', all of which – he claims – have 'at least a bit of force'. It will be very interesting to see these arguments in due course, and see in what sense he thinks that these arguments have this limited 'force'. All this leads to the suspicion that Plantinga does think that there is a different kind of rationality from the kinds which he discusses. And in a very interesting private communication to me, he 'of course' agrees that 'there is more than one variety' of 'internal rationality' – i.e. not merely the sense in which a belief is rational if it is justified by the believer's own lights, but also 'a more stringent kind' of rationality. (He spells out a belief being rational in this sense as it being 'upon reflection, clearly or nearly probable with respect to the deliverances of reason taken broadly'.) But he is simply not mainly concerned to discuss in this book whether Christian belief is rational in this sense.

Fair enough, but it is a pity that this was not made sufficiently clear. His remarks about 'good arguments' do however suggest that he may well think that the belief that there is a God is rational in the sense which I have been discussing.

It is because Plantinga thinks that the question which worries theists and atheists is whether religious beliefs have 'warrant' in his sense, that he makes a sharp distinction between this question – a *de iure* question about religious beliefs (whether people are 'warranted' in having religious beliefs) and the *de facto* question (whether those beliefs are true). This sharp distinction will puzzle those not steeped in Plantinga's theory of warrant. For in what I regard as a more normal sense of such a term of epistemic appraisal as 'rational', there is a pragmatic contradiction in giving (or at any rate in seeking to make plausible) different answers to the two questions. I will not be convincing if I seek to tell you that there is a God, but that all the evidence (public and private) shows that probably there isn't; or that there is no God, although all the evidence shows that probably there is. But the two questions are not so closely connected if the *de iure* question concerns a 'warrant' in Plantinga's sense, and the distinction can be demonstrated, as it is so very thoroughly by Plantinga in this book.

That probabilistic arguments cannot get very far in showing the more detailed claims of Christianity to be true, is however shown, Plantinga claims, by the fact that any attempt to argue for them from public evidence on Lockean lines is subject to 'the problem of dwindling probabilities'. And here he criticizes my own Lockean argument, which he represents as being something like the following. In *The Existence of God*² I had argued that, given background evidence about the world (a), it is probable that there is a God (b). In *Revelation*³ I argued that given that there is a God (b), it is probable that He would reveal things about Himself (c). Given that there is a God, and that He revealed things about Himself, it is probable that He would authenticate them by a miracle such as the Resurrection (d). Given the latter and some detailed historical evidence, it is probable that the Resurrection occurred (e). (That is, given that a Resurrection of a prophet is the sort of event we would expect in history, there is enough by way of detailed historical evidence in the New Testament to suppose that it occurred to Jesus.) So it is probable that what Jesus taught about God is true. But there are enough problems raised by Historical Biblical Criticism to lead to considerable doubt about what that was. However, it is probable that, given all the above, God would provide a Church which would continue to teach what Jesus taught (f). Given all that and the biblical evidence, it is probable that Jesus did found a Church thus authenticated (g). And given all that, it is probable that the central claims which mainstream Christianity (such as that the prophet who rose from the dead was God incarnate) teaches today (h), are true. But Plantinga urges, in a chain of inference in which each step is made probable by the previous one, you have to multiply the probabilities together in order to get the probability of the final conclusion on the basis of the starting point. If given X, Y is probable to degree 0.9; and given Y (and X), Z

is probable to degree 0.9; then, given X alone, Z is probable only to degree 0.81. (Or perhaps a bit more than that, if there is also a small probability that Z, even if not-Y.) And so on. So, even if each of the steps in my inferential chain conveys an 0.9 probability, the final step would give to central Christian claims a rather low probability on the basis of the evidence about the world and the historical evidence found in the New Testament, say 0.2. Not enough for the conviction which Plantinga thinks we need and God has undertaken to give us!

Against this important argument, I have two responses. The first is that the probabilities do not diminish even as rapidly as Plantinga in his more generous estimates suggests. The fundamental reason for this is that when I reached the conclusion, which Plantinga quotes, in *The Existence of God* that it 'is more probable than not' that there is a God, my discussion of the historical evidence for God arising from the foundation events of the Christian tradition was, as I wrote explicitly, extremely brief. Hence I suggested that (on 243 of that book) for the purposes of the argument of that book, we should regard those events as providing only a weak contribution to a cumulative case for the existence of God; and I left open the possibility that fuller consideration of that historical evidence might show that it can make a much stronger contribution. I believe that fuller consideration does have that effect. There is a lot more relevant evidence and a lot stronger evidence from those foundation events, and from the subsequent history of the Church, than I discussed in that book (and I discussed only some if it in *Revelation*), or than Plantinga acknowledges. This historical evidence is such as is to be expected if there is a God and if (as is quite likely, given His character) He sought to provide a revelation, to provide an atonement for our sins, and to identify Himself with our suffering; and not otherwise. Its occurrence, therefore, need not diminish the initial probability which I ascribed to the proposition that there is a God, and will increase the probability that, if there is a God, various Christian claims about His action in Christ are true. (Plantinga considers only the need for revelation as motivating God to bring about the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. There are other reasons motivating God to bring about such events, and they increase the prior probability that such events would happen.)

This further evidence includes, to start with, a lot of evidence from the Gospels themselves as to what Jesus taught (more than the average biblical commentator might allow) and so we do not depend too much on what the Church said he taught – though we do depend on it quite a bit. The former evidence indicates that by and large there is continuity of doctrine between the Church which Jesus founded and a body constituted by continuity of organization with the former, and so a body on which the twin tests for the Church of continuity of doctrine and organization coincide. That provides reason to believe what that body teaches on matters where we do not have enough independent evidence about what Jesus taught. (So, contrary to the implied suggestion of Plantinga's chapter 8, n. 70, we can sometimes use the twin tests to determine which Church teaching is true.) Further

reason to believe the Church is provided by the evidence that it taught the doctrine of the Trinity, very hard for humans to discover for themselves though possible for them to recognize as true on a priori grounds when it is presented to them (as I argued in *The Christian God*).⁴

Then there is the evidence that there is no other candidate for a super-miracle which was the foundation event of a religion, for which there is quite a bit of normal detailed historical evidence. Mohammed, for example, performed no miracles, apart (it is often said) from writing the Koran; and however great a work is the Koran, to write that work is in no way evidently beyond ordinary human power. So if we have any reason at all to believe that God would intervene in human history for the stated reasons and provide evidence of His intervention by a super-miracle, that is evidence that this happened in Jesus. Then, I believe, there is a lot stronger detailed historical evidence for the Resurrection than Plantinga acknowledges – not enough without theism but quite enough with it, to make it probable that the Resurrection occurred.

My claims of the last two paragraphs about the force of certain kinds of evidence are largely promissory. In criticizing me, Plantinga was extrapolating my argument from *Revelation*; and I am bound to admit that that book did not articulate the stages of the argument with sufficient clarity, and perhaps I was not sufficiently clear about them myself. And I have not written at any length about the historical evidence for the teaching of Jesus and about the Resurrection; I have simply made explicit assumptions which Plantinga reasonably thinks need adequate defence. I hope to defend these assumptions at considerable length in due course. I believe, however, contrary to Plantinga, that many Christians believe ‘the great things of the Gospel’, because they too have heard primitive versions of the strands of argument mentioned above. They too have heard arguments from the pulpit that if God is love, He must be Triune, or that there were many witnesses who saw the risen Christ; and they believe that these arguments work and fit together to yield a coherent Christian understanding of the world. A rationalistically minded philosopher who purports to give a probabilistic argument is only trying to justify that belief.

My second response to Plantinga’s argument that the problem of dwindling probabilities leaves central Christian claims with a low probability on public evidence is, however, one which I have, I hope, made clearly elsewhere. I argued in *Faith and Reason*⁵ that the faith needed for religion is basically a commitment to seek a goal by following a way; it does not require the belief that the goal is there to be attained nor that the way will attain the goal – it requires only the beliefs that there is quite a chance that the goal is there and can be attained, and that if it can be, the way in question is the one which will most probably attain it. If you really want the goal enough, that’s all the belief you need to direct your steps. If you want the love of God for yourself and your fellows enough, you need to believe that there is quite a chance that there is a God and that it is more probable that you

and your fellows will reach Him by following the Christian way (and *assuming*, not necessarily believing, the claims of the Creed) than by following any other way. Even if we were to grant to Plantinga everything he says about dwindling probabilities, these latter contentions can in my view be shown true by argument from public evidence; and they suffice for faith. It would be better for us if our knowledge of God on Earth was a lot stronger than that, but for some Christians, alas, it isn't; yet even for them there is enough light to show them where they should walk.

When Plantinga comes (in chapters 10 to 14) to deal with purported defeaters to Christian belief, he deals well with the (to my mind) easy targets of Freud and Marx, postmodernism and religious pluralism, but I don't think he takes either Historical Biblical Criticism or the problem of evil nearly seriously enough. Let's begin with biblical criticism. Plantinga urges rightly that reading Scripture (perhaps guided by the Church) may lead to warranted belief (in Plantinga's sense) that what is recorded there (understood in a certain way) is true. But we need to be reminded that many a Christian of the past took many biblical passages (e.g. the six days of Creation) in very literal ways in which most Christians would not take them today. Yet the Christians of the past felt just the same conviction of the truth of what they took literally (and the same conviction that the Holy Spirit was leading them to see that truth) as a more modern Christian has when he takes the biblical account of the Resurrection literally. And many Christians have derived mutually incompatible convictions from the same passages of Scripture. We need argument and guidance from church theologians as to how interpret Scripture – that Plantinga acknowledges. But once that point is admitted, we need to note that much such argument takes the form 'Scripture cannot mean so-and-so, because by mundane standards on public evidence so-and-so is probably not true'. Origen and Augustine both denied a literal six days of Creation on those grounds. (As well as argument of that form, there is the appeal to Church tradition to settle the correct interpretation. But that too involves historical argument about what the Church tradition is, and historical argument as to which bodies of past and present have the best claim to be the Church. Yet such argument also involves mundane standards and public evidence.) But then any argument to show that some present-day interpretation of Scripture is false is an (in principle) discussible argument, to be judged by the Christian for how well it meets mundane standards. So if the biblical critic says that the biblical account of the Resurrection ought to be understood in a totally metaphorical way, on the grounds that all our mundane evidence (including the text of the New Testament) shows that the Resurrection probably did not happen in a literal sense, we need to take his argument seriously. I believe that we should do this, and can show that the argument does not work. Plantinga might urge that our internal convictions as to how Scripture should be interpreted should be given great weight in this process, and no objection should be entertained which goes against those. But then since so many of us have

different internal convictions, we would be left with the unpalatable conclusion (which Origen and Augustine would not have accepted) that the Holy Spirit provides no help for the Christian community in sorting out its differences of conflicting convictions. Such clashes can only be sorted out by appealing to neutral evidence and mundane criteria. Of course refuting a modern argument to show that the Resurrection probably didn't happen is not the same thing as giving a positive argument to show that it did. I certainly think that we need the latter; but my point here is that even Plantinga ought to admit that we need the former, and that providing that involves taking the details of modern biblical criticism seriously.

Plantinga is also too quick in judging that evil (in a wide sense that includes physical and mental suffering) does not constitute a defeater to Christian belief. He begins by repeating a well aired claim that there is no valid deductive argument from the existence of the evil that is evident on Earth to the non-existence of God. That may be so, but it needs showing. For if one takes the view that the most general moral truths are logically necessary (and my view is that there could not be any moral truths at all, unless the most general ones were logically necessary), then maybe there are logical truths of the form 'it is always morally wrong for anyone who can prevent it to allow children to suffer'. In that case there would be a valid deductive argument from the evil of children suffering to the non-existence of God. I don't endorse this argument nor do I endorse any probabilistic version of it; but we do need counter-arguments.

Plantinga then proceeds to endorse the argument of Wykstra and others that the fact that the evil we observe seems to us to serve no greater good is no reason for supposing that it doesn't serve a greater good, and so no reason for supposing that a God would not have allowed it to occur. It is no reason, the argument goes, because a God would know so many possible goods and evils and logical connections between them of which we have no knowledge; and so it is only to be expected that we should observe evils which seem to us to serve no greater good, but really do serve a greater good. Hence our observation of them, the Wykstra argument goes on, is no reason to suppose that there is no God. The trouble with this argument is that the most it shows is that if there is a God, it is to be expected that we should observe evils which seem to serve no greater good but really do serve such a good. But in considering a possible defeater, we must not assume in advance the truth of the possibly warranted belief (that there is a God). If we don't assume this, the argument is simply an appeal to possible moral ignorance – a recommendation to be sceptical about moral issues. But then it is just as likely that the goods we see around us serve greater evils, as that the evils we see around us serve greater goods. No Christian can adopt an attitude of total scepticism about all moral issues – both because it is intrinsically totally implausible, and also because there would then be no content to the Christian claim that God is good. And on the assumption that we can get quite a lot of our moral judgments right, the

odds are that at least some of the evils around us which seem to serve no greater good really serve no greater good. In that case, plausibly, a good God would not have allowed them to occur. True, as Plantinga urges, a probabilistic defeater may be insufficient to defeat a strong belief; but as he acknowledges, it will deprive it of some of its warrant. And it will deprive a weak belief of its warrant altogether. Evil does constitute a defeater and it needs a theodicy to defeat the defeater. That is not provided in this book.

Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1993). *Idem* *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1993).
2. Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God* rev. edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
3. *Idem* *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
4. *Idem* *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).
5. *Idem* *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).