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NATURALISM AND SELF-DEFEAT: PLANTINGA'S VERSION

'... the whole process of human thought, what we call Reason, is... valueless if it is the result of irrational causes. Hence every theory of the universe which makes the human mind a result of irrational causes is inadmissible, for it would be a proof that there are no such things as proofs. Which is nonsense. But Naturalism, as commonly held, is precisely a theory of this sort.' Thus C. S. Lewis, in the first edition of *Miracles*.¹ Forceful objections from Elizabeth Anscombe led Lewis to drop this passage from the second edition of his book.² But even there he still clung to the general idea that while theism involves no such difficulty Naturalism somehow defeats itself: '...our conviction that Nature is uniform... can be trusted only if a very different Metaphysic is true. If the deepest thing in reality, the Fact which is the source of all other facthood, is a thing in some degree like ourselves – if it is a Rational Spirit and we derive our rational spirituality from It – then indeed our conviction can be trusted. Our repugnance to disorder is derived from Nature's Creator and ours.'³ Similar claims have frequently been made by Lewis's supporter Stephen Clark. In a typical passage Clark insists that 'if we are to be able to trust our seeming capacity to understand the world, we must suppose that our minds mirror or share in the pattern and life which is the foundation of the world'.⁴ And now, in the last chapter of his *Warrant and Proper Function*, Alvin Plantinga has endorsed and developed what he duly acknowledges to be Lewis's idea. Plantinga does not pretend to have formulated a totally cogent argument for Naturalism's self-defeat. But he does think that he has said enough to indicate 'a promising research program'.⁵ In what follows I scrutinize the argument which he sketches out.

As exponents of Naturalism Plantinga numbers Armstrong, Quine, Russell and the later Darwin; the doctrine itself he does not fully describe. But he does at any rate make it clear that Naturalism entails that 'there is no such person as the God of traditional theism',⁶ and he also insists that if Naturalism is true 'so is Evolution'.⁷ To bring out the nature of the Naturalist's difficulty, Plantinga focuses on what he refers to as the probability of R on

¹ Lewis (1947), p. 28.

² Anscombe (1981).

³ Lewis (1960), p. 109.

⁴ Clark (1984), p. 47. Holding as he does that only if God exists is there such a thing as moral obligation (1989), pp. 39–41), and that 'p is true' entails that it is morally obligatory to believe that p ((1984), pp. 199–200), Clark seems in fact to be committed to the yet more radical doctrine that only if God exists are there any true propositions at all.

⁵ Plantinga (1993), p. 194.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 220.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 236.

N & E, where N stands for Naturalism, E for the evolutionary explanation of the origin of our cognitive faculties, and R for the proposition that these faculties are reliable, in the sense that they produce mostly true beliefs in the environments that are normal for them.⁸ Some philosophers would say that the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ is very low. And then from the further assumption that R is true, they would infer that the probability of N & E is very low, and hence, given that if N then E, that the probability of N is very low. Plantinga does not definitely repudiate this train of thought. But mainly he explores the consequences just of believing that it is irrational to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$. And his conclusion is that while the theist can believe this with equanimity, it is self-destructive for the Naturalist to believe it. If the Naturalist believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then whether or not his Naturalism is true, it is irrational for him to believe that it is. The theist, by contrast, can perfectly well believe that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, and yet still be rational in his theism. What do ‘rational’ and ‘irrational’ mean here? In an earlier chapter Plantinga makes it clear that the rationality of your believing that p is not in this context a matter of whether your belief-state is or isn’t conducive to your chosen ends. It is a matter of whether or not you would believe that p if your rational or cognitive faculties were ‘functioning properly’.⁹ In developing his argument, Plantinga often talks of what it is right or proper or reasonable to believe. I don’t think it is unfair to assume that this is just another way of talking about what in the sense indicated it is rational to believe.

Plantinga’s argument has two parts. In barest outline, Part One amounts to this.

- (1) If someone believes N & E and believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for him to believe R.
- (2) If it is irrational for someone to believe R then for any proposition p which he believes, it is irrational for him to believe that proposition.
- (3) If N then E.
- (4) If someone believes N & E and believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for him to believe N & E. (From (1) and (2)).
- (5) If someone believes N and believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for him to believe N. (From (3) and (4)).

⁸ Actually, he focuses on the more complex probability $P(R/(N \& E \& C))$, where C ‘states what cognitive faculties we have – memory, perception, Reason, Reid’s sympathy – and what sort of beliefs they produce’ ((1993), p. 220). But, as he has subsequently acknowledged ((1995), p. 438n12), the extra complexity is unnecessary.

⁹ Plantinga (1993), p. 165.

Part Two has for its conclusion that if someone believes not *N* but rather theism then even if he believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, he may still be rational in his theism. I shall concentrate on Part One.

I won't question the deductive validity of Part One, though the inference of (5) from (3) and (4) is not entirely straightforward. Nor will I question premise (2). I will, however, question premise (1), and after that I will consider whether a Naturalist should abandon his Naturalism even if he accepts the whole of Plantinga's argument, and further accepts that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$. It is perhaps worth noting, before I come to these criticisms, that if you do accept the soundness of both parts of Plantinga's argument then you are likely purely on that account to feel a certain unease about the reasoning I earlier mentioned in which the low probability of *N* is inferred from *R* and the low value of $P(R/(N \& E))$. If (1)–(5) is sound then anyone who thinks it irrational to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ must be a theist if he is to be rational in believing *R*. But then the same presumably goes for anyone who thinks that the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ is very low. But if anyone who believes that the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ is very low must be a theist if he is to be rational in believing *R*, then an argument for theism, whose premises include both *R* and the proposition that the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ is very low, will be an argument with premises not all of which you can be rational in believing unless you already accept its conclusion. Such an argument may of course convince you of its conclusion. But it oughtn't to convince you, if your beliefs ought to be rational.¹⁰

Here is what Plantinga has to say in support of premise (1). 'Someone who accepts *N* & *E* and also believes that the proper attitude toward [$P(R/(N \& E))$] is one of agnosticism clearly enough has good reason for being agnostic about *R* as well. She has no other source of information about *R*... but the source of information she does have gives her no reason to believe *R* and no reason to disbelieve it. The proposition in question is the sort for which one needs evidence if one is to believe it reasonably; since there is no evidence, the reasonable course is to withhold belief.'¹¹ What I do not see is why we should suppose that 'she has no other source of information about *R*'. Why should believing that *N* & *E* and having no belief as to the probability of *R* just on *N* & *E* prevent you from having other information relevant to the ration-

¹⁰ According to Clark '... the real existence of the Spirit-world constitutes a good, perhaps the best or only explanation of our epistemological success (and a good reason to believe that we are successful' (1984), p. 92). This raises a similar problem. Would Clark say both that (i) the atheist can have no good reason to believe that we are epistemologically successful, and (ii) our epistemological success is a good reason for believing theism? If (i) is true, why should someone who is not initially a theist accept (ii)? When Ralph Walker (1989) argues for God's existence as the best explanation for our epistemological success he explicitly dissociates himself from the 'idea that only if we first prove the existence of a God who is not a deceiver can we justifiably be confident in the rest of our beliefs' (p. 222).

¹¹ Plantinga (1993), p. 229.

ality of your believing R ? Even if we require that this other information be consistent with $N \& E$ I do not see why you shouldn't have it. Under what conditions is it rational for you to believe R ? Should we assume that it is sufficient just that there is evidence for R , or rather that it is also necessary that you believe some proposition which is evidence for R , or even that you must believe some proposition which is evidence for R and also believe that this proposition is evidence for R ? The passage I quoted does not settle the matter, but let us for the sake of argument make the most demanding of these three assumptions. And let us further require that evidence for R is compatible with $N \& E$, thus for example excluding as evidence the proposition that there is a benevolent and non-deceiving God. R says that your cognitive faculties are reliable, and these faculties, for Plantinga, are 'memory, perception, Reason, and Reid's sympathy'.¹² Take memory, and consider the proposition (M) that our seeming memories have been reliable in the past. M is compatible with $N \& E$. What is the objection to saying that because M is evidence for the general reliability of memory even someone who believes $N \& E$ and believes that it is irrational to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ can be rational in believing that memory is reliable by virtue of believing M and believing that M is evidence for this reliability? And if this is possible in the case of memory, why isn't something similar possible in the case of our other cognitive faculties? Plantinga may say that it is irrational for our person to believe M unless she has and believes she has evidence for M in turn. But why shouldn't she have and believe she has such evidence? At this point, a vicious infinite regress may seem to loom: she will also need evidence for her evidence for M , and so on. But that is a different problem. Plantinga himself believes that evidence can be non-propositional: experience can be evidence for a proposition.¹³ On that principle, experience can be the ultimate regress-stopper, when it comes to evidence for the reliability of memory, and likewise when it comes to evidence for the reliability of our other cognitive faculties. This may or may not be a good solution to the regressive difficulty. But if there is no solution to this difficulty, then rational belief will be beyond even the theist's power.

My other question about Plantinga's argument is whether, even if the Naturalist accepts it, and further accepts that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, he should forthwith destroy his belief in Naturalism. In fact I have two separate doubts here. The first turns on some general considerations which apply to the destruction of any existing belief. And the second and rather more complicated doubt turns on Plantinga's notion of conditional epistemic probability.

Suppose you are a Naturalist who believes that it is irrational for you to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, and that Plantinga has convinced you that

¹² *Ibid.* p. 220.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 185.

- (5) If someone believes N and believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for him to believe N .

Which of your beliefs are you supposed to destroy? Maybe you aren't in fact able to destroy any of them. But suppose that there is just one of them that you can destroy, and it is your belief that N . The question now is, Why should you destroy it? N , as we are supposing, is indeed something that you believe. So if you ask yourself whether, were you to go on believing N , you would be believing the truth then of course your answer will be affirmative. A negative answer would be evidence that, contrary to our supposition, N isn't something that you believe. But suppose that true belief is what above all you want. Whether or not your belief that N is in Plantinga's sense rational, you will naturally believe that your continuing to believe that p is conducive to that end of having true belief. Why then should you be troubled by the irrationality? For Plantinga it is neither necessary nor sufficient for your belief that p to be rational that your having it is conducive to your chosen ends. Rational belief is a matter of the proper functioning of your faculties. There is indeed a complex connection for Plantinga between proper functioning and the production of true belief. But if you actually start from the position of believing that N , you can hardly deny that to destroy your belief that N would be to destroy a true belief, and this may well console you for the irrationality by which with Plantinga's help you see yourself to be afflicted. Does Plantinga's evidentialism distort the nature of rationality? Not a good question. Better to give Plantinga his concept of rationality, insist on the overriding value of true belief, and recognize that if you do indeed believe that N you are in no position to deny that you believe the truth. *You* can deny the truth of what *I* believe. But you can't deny the truth of your own beliefs, except by pretending that they aren't actually yours at all, like the girl in Sartre's example who pretends to herself that the hand which the man has taken isn't her own hand.

There is a possible objection to this faintly 'existential' line of resistance to Plantinga's argument. As well as wanting to have true beliefs, most of us want others to agree with us. And it may seem that if your beliefs are rational in the sense of produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties then you are that much more likely to find or even secure agreement with the properly functioning sector of the public at large. But once we remember why it is that the Naturalist is supposed to be irrational in believing his Naturalism, the objection loses its force. The Naturalist's problem is supposed to stem from its being irrational for him to believe that R . But, like most of us, he already believes that most of us already believe that R . How then if there is already a consensus in favour of R can the rationality of his own belief that R do anything to improve the chances of such a consensus? Certainly the Natu-

ralist won't believe that almost all of us are already Naturalists. But the chances of a consensus in favour of N will not be diminished by the irrationality of his own belief in Naturalism if that is a product merely of the irrationality of his belief that R.

My remaining doubt about the practical import of Plantinga's argument turns on his notion of conditional epistemic probability. Suppose, absurdly enough, that you accept a conditional of the form

- (X) If someone believes p and believes that it is irrational for him to believe that if he believes p then it is irrational for him to believe p, then it is irrational for him to believe p.

And suppose that your only basis for believing that your belief that p is irrational is that you believe this conditional and believe that you meet the condition given by its antecedent. This wouldn't be much of an incentive for you to destroy your belief that p. If you destroyed your belief that p because you believed it irrational, and believed it irrational only because you believed that it was irrational to believe that it was, then you would still in a way be acting on what you believed to be an irrational belief. And I think that you will be similarly hesitant about destroying your belief that p if your only basis for believing it irrational is that you believe, and believe you satisfy the antecedent of, a conditional of which you believe that if it is true so is a conditional of form (X). But now suppose that your only basis for believing that your belief that N is irrational is that (i) you believe

- (5) If someone believes N and believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for him to believe N,

and (ii) you believe that you meet the condition given by (5)'s antecedent. So far as I can see, Plantinga is committed to an interpretation of $P(R/(N \& E))$ on which, if his whole argument is sound, (5) is true only if a form (X) conditional is true. Given Plantinga's interpretation of $P(R/(N \& E))$ does entail a conditional of Form (X), the Naturalist should accordingly hesitate before abandoning his Naturalism in the face of Plantinga's argument.

According to Plantinga we can take $P(R/(N \& E))$ 'in two ways: as a conditional *epistemic* probability, or as a conditional *objective probability*.' Either, he says, will serve for his argument, but 'the better way to think of it would be as an objective probability; for in this sort of context epistemic probability, presumably, should follow known (or conjectured) objective probability'.¹⁴ The distinction here drawn is explained in an earlier chapter, according to which a conditional epistemic probability normally has two components, one normative and the other 'objective'. The 'objective' com-

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 220n7.

ponent is a probability explicable in terms of logical probability. And the normative explicable in terms of logical probability. And the normative component of the conditional epistemic probability of A on B is ‘the interval containing the degrees of belief a rational person could have in A, provided she believed B and was aware that she believed B, considered the evidential bearing of B on A, had no other source of warrant for B or its denial, and had no other defeater for the warrant, if any, accruing to A or its denial by virtue of being thus believed on the basis of B’.¹⁵ There are, however, some judgements of epistemic probability in which ‘objective probability drops out, leaving just the other element’. For example, ‘My judgement that Goldbach’s Conjecture is probable with respect to our evidence... doesn’t involve a judgement of objective probability’.¹⁶ When Plantinga says that in the present context epistemic probability should follow objective probability I think he means that it is a context in which objective probability does not drop out. The upshot, it seems, is that to be irrational in having any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ is to be irrational in having any belief as to the degree of belief that a rational person could have in R, provided he believed N & E. So if it is irrational for you to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$ then it is irrational for you to believe that if you are rational and believe N & E then you could have zero degree of belief in R. Or in other words, if it is irrational for you to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for you to believe that if you believe N & E then it is rational for you not to believe R. And from this it seems to follow that if it is irrational for you to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for you to believe that if you believe N & E then it is irrational for you to believe R.

In the light of all this, consider again

- (5) If someone believes N and believes that it is irrational for him to have any belief as to the value of $P(R/(N \& E))$, then it is irrational for him to believe N.

If you accept it, with Plantinga’s interpretation of $P(R/(N \& E))$, you are committed to believing

- (5a) If someone believes N and believes that it is irrational for him to believe that if he believes N then it is irrational for him to believe R, then it is irrational for him to believe N.

But Part One of Plantinga’s argument has among its premises

- (2) If it is irrational for someone to believe R then for any proposition p which he believes, it is irrational for him to believe that proposition, and
 (3) If N then E.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 167–8.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 163.

So if you accept Plantinga's argument you will be prepared to move from 'If someone believes N & E then it is irrational for him to believe that R' to 'If someone believes N then it is irrational for him to believe N.' And so you are further committed to

- (5b) If someone believes N and believes that it is irrational for him to believe that if he believes N then it is irrational for him to believe N, then it is irrational for him to believe N.

But (5b) is a conditional of form (X). So even if he accepts Plantinga's argument and thinks that he satisfies the antecedent of (5), and accordingly believes that his belief that N is irrational, the Naturalist should still hesitate before abandoning his belief that N on the grounds of its irrationality.

This last objection is, even if valid, just *ad hominem*: it depends on taking Plantinga's own interpretation of P(R/(N & E)). Perhaps there is some other interpretation of that formula on which the objection does not hold. But the question remains of whether there is any interpretation of the formula on which (1) comes out true. And so does the question of why, even if the Naturalist's belief in the reliability of our cognitive faculties does not meet the demands of Plantinga's kind of rationality, that should oblige him, as a lover of agreement in true belief, to destroy his belief in their reliability, and hence to destroy his Naturalistic convictions.

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