

## Are causes of belief reasons for belief? Silver on evil, religious experience, and theism

ERIC SNIDER

*Department of Philosophy, Bethel University, St Paul, MN 55112*

**Abstract:** David Silver has argued that there is an illegitimate circularity in Plantinga's account of how a Christian theist can defend herself against the potential defeater presented by Paul Draper's formulation of the problem of evil. The way out of the circle for the theist, thinks Silver, would be by adopting a kind of evidentialism: she needs to make an appeal to evidence that is independent of the reasons she has for holding theistic belief in the first place. I shall argue that Silver's argument is unsuccessful, mainly because he does not get Plantinga's thought right. Silver's confusion is in taking causes of belief as reasons for belief, and in failing to account for the impact of belief holism and our web of beliefs on the very hope for independent reasons.

In this paper I shall argue that there need be nothing circular in a Christian theist's defending herself against the potential defeater presented by Paul Draper's<sup>1</sup> formulation of the problem of evil: nothing circular, that is to say, in defending herself by appeal to the fact that she believes as a result of the promptings of the *sensus divinitatis* (SD) or the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IHS). David Silver<sup>2</sup> has argued that there is an illegitimate circularity proposed for such a theist by Alvin Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief*:<sup>3</sup> The way out of the circle for the theist, thinks Silver, would be by adopting a kind of evidentialism: she needs to make an appeal to evidence that is independent of the reasons she has for holding theistic belief in the first place (what he calls the independence constraint on neutralizers, 349). I think Silver's argument is unsuccessful, mainly because he does not get Plantinga's thought right. Silver's confusion, I shall argue, is in taking causes of belief as reasons for belief, where reasons are beliefs themselves. Silver's argument is also unsuccessful because given some common-sense views about belief holism and our web of beliefs, and given that belief in God is what I call a 'wide-ranged impact belief', the independence constraint on neutralizers cannot be met.

My strategy is as follows. I will begin with an exploration and clarification of Silver's position. This will lead me to consider Draper's formulation, in order to consider whether it is compelling and to give alternative responses to it. For the purposes of argument, I shall go on to suppose that Draper's formulation could be imagined to provide a potential challenge to the theist. I will ask then whether Silver is right: is the theist in the bind of having to either become an evidentialist (and offer the right sorts of evidence – evidence that is not dependent upon the belief that is itself challenged, namely belief in God), or be guilty of illegitimately circular reasoning? I shall argue that Silver is not right, and explain why I think he makes the mistake. I shall show that his example of the believer in super-intelligent super-vain space-alien is not parallel to Plantinga's conception of the warranted Christian believer. It is not parallel because Silver confuses what causes a person's belief with reasons for that belief.

### **Silver's position**

Silver's main thesis is clear:

... if the experiential theist does accept Draper's formulation of the problem, *and she is apprised of the arguments in this paper*, then she is threatened by a defeater for her theistic belief; that is, in the absence of further evidence for the existence of God, the problem of evil makes it irrational for her to continue to be a theist. (340)

What Silver wants to point out is similar to what he shows in his paper on pluralism<sup>4</sup>: that the experiential theist's Plantingian defence of her theistic belief in the face of the challenge from evil is inappropriately circular and thus not worthy of our acceptance. Thus, the *potential* defeater is not the problem of evil. The problem of evil is part of an extended bit of reasoning that leads to the potential defeater, only by the theist's attempt to respond to it in a certain way, the way that Silver thinks Plantinga recommends for the theist to respond. The potential defeater has to do with the inappropriately circular feature of the Plantingian theist's continuing to maintain theistic belief in the face of the challenge presented by Draper's formulation of the problem of evil.

Silver's interpretation of Plantinga's strategy for responding to Draper's formulation is as follows: '[T]he SIPE [sufficiently informed pure experiential] theist bases her belief in God on the belief that she has been so informed by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, and at the same time bases her belief that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* on her supposition that God exists' (349). It is inappropriately circular (and thus the evidential problem of evil provides an *actual* defeater for belief in God) so long as the SIPE theist does not have independent neutralizing evidence: 'it is illegitimate to appeal solely to (non-perceptual) religious experience to show that belief in God is nonetheless rational' (351).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, on Silver's reasoning, belief in God, especially for 'a modern, intellectually sophisticated person – a person who aims to form beliefs in the light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection', is epistemically irresponsible (351). Belief in God, for such a person, would involve a moral failure to form beliefs only on the basis of the best information and according to the highest standards (352). One can avoid the actual defeater only on pain of epistemic irresponsibility – that is to say by 'keeping one's head in the sand' and ignoring serious epistemology or serious challenges to theistic belief, like that identified by Silver. Thus, according to Silver's view, a SIPE theist in the face of the challenge presented by Draper's formulation of the problem of evil, if she wishes to remain rational and epistemically responsible, must cease being a pure experiential theist. She now, to maintain epistemic responsibility, must become a rational evidentialist theist whose evidence for maintaining belief in God is independent of the belief in God itself.

To me, there is a difficulty in trying to understand what this might mean. Since the evidence that would support maintaining the theistic belief should, it seems, be related causally or inferentially to the theistic belief, 'independent' cannot mean 'unrelated'. For Silver, belief X is independent of Y if the warrant for X does not depend on an acceptance of Y. Minimally in the case at hand, Silver believes that the SIPE faced with a potential defeater from Draper's argument would not be appealing to independent evidence should she appeal to the *sensus divinitatis* or the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit in defence of her theistic belief.

I shall argue that Silver's argument is unsuccessful because he has misunderstood Plantinga, and because he confuses causes of belief with reasons for belief. But for the moment, let me suppose Silver were right; the SIPE theist who accepted Draper's formulation of the problem of evil, was apprised of Silver's argument, and responded in the way Plantinga recommends in *WCB*, chapter 14 would be reasoning in an inappropriately circular manner and so her defeat of the defeater would not be worthy of acceptance. Could Plantinga concede, and at the same time appeal to resources in his thought from *WCB* to formulate a better non-circular response? I believe so.

The SIPE theist who accepted Draper's formulation of the problem of evil and was apprised of Silver's argument could respond, not by making an evidential appeal, but by making a testimonial appeal. For example, she could say: 'Look, I sense the challenge from Draper's formulation and understand Silver's argument, and I do not know how to respond with independent evidence and defeat the potential defeater. But I hear that Al Plantinga has independent evidence that would defeat the potential defeater. He seems a pretty good thinker and reasoner. He also reports that he has an unpublished paper on "Two dozen or so good theistic arguments" (*WCB*, 463, n. 5). So I accept his testimony as my defeater defeater. Draper's formulation together with Silver's argument isn't conclusive and thus I believe that I am still warranted in my theistic belief'. Does she have

the evidence and argument? Certainly not. Can she rely on testimony? Rational people do.<sup>6</sup> If she is an externalist, must she become an internalist in order to overcome Silver's charge of illegitimate circularity? I think not. Her warrant is based on testimony, not on reasons and evidence. Her warrant is not based upon inference from other propositions she accepts.

### Draper's formulation

Draper claims that the observation of the pervasiveness and vast amounts of pain and suffering are better explained (i.e. are more probable) on the hypothesis that the condition of sentient creatures (those creatures capable of pain or suffering) is not the result of non-human persons (he calls this the hypothesis of indifference or HI) than on the hypothesis that the condition is the result of a non-human person like the God of Christianity (he calls this the hypothesis of theism or HT). Should an experiential theist accept Draper's formulation? One could, but I fail to see how acceptance of it is compelling. I offer four ways to resist the thought that his formulation is a compelling actual defeater for theism.

(A) I could object to Draper's starting assumptions. He assumes that theism is a theory or hypothesis whose role is to explain a range of phenomena. He defines theism as the statement: 'There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect person who created the Universe'.<sup>7</sup> In other words, theism is the statement 'God exists'. This may seem petty, but I am unsure how a statement explains phenomena. I could see how some event, fact, or phenomena explains some other event, fact, or phenomena. Perhaps he means by 'statement' what others call a 'proposition' or 'state of affairs'. Perhaps he is right that the statement, understood as the 'state of affairs', 'God exists' fails to explain the state of affairs 'there are extensive and apparently gratuitous pains in this world'. But to that I say 'So what?' Less petty and more to the point, most believers in God do not hold the statement 'God exists' as a hypothesis meant to explain a range of phenomena. As Plantinga says:

Belief in God, however, is clearly not a result of *postulation*; believers in God do not ordinarily postulate that there is such a person, just as believers in other persons or material objects do not ordinarily postulate that there are such things. Postulation is a process that goes with scientific theories; one postulates entities of a certain sort (e.g. quarks or gluons) as part of an explanatory theory. Christians, however, do not ordinarily propose the existence of God as an explanation of anything at all. (WCB, 370)

Only if theism were a hypothesis meant to explain a range of phenomena, then it might be 'subject to an evidential challenge, a challenge that is *prima facie* a defeater for theistic belief and a reason for giving it up' (WCB, 481). Draper's formulation would be an evidential challenge only for theists who take their theism as a hypothesis.

(B) Let's suppose that HI explains better than theism some of the features of sentient creatures. Does it follow that one should reject theism? I can imagine many cases where HI explains better than theism some phenomena. For example, HI might better explain why personal bankruptcy filings were down 20 per cent in Ohio in 2006 compared to 2005. It might better explain why a workplace smoking ban passed in the most recent election. It might better explain why rainfall in northwest Ohio was up 25 per cent in 2006 compared to the average over the past 50 years. That is to say, there seems to be much that theism as a hypothesis is not meant to explain, so that HI's explaining it better is no mark against theism.<sup>8</sup> It would be a mark against theism only if I thought theism was supposed to explain those phenomena. Does or must a theist think that 'God exists' is supposed to explain the pain and pleasure conditions of sentient creatures?

(C) It seems that I could accept a Christian theodicy along the lines of the A/C model presented by Plantinga.<sup>9</sup> It might go as follows.<sup>10</sup> God brought everything into existence in a very good condition, such that humans had a desire for God (a desire to be directed to their own good by God) and some perceptual knowledge of God. Due to something not very well explained, humans turned away from God; a result of that turning was a diminished perceptual knowledge of God, as well as loss of desire for God. Humans pursued lesser or diminished goods in place of ultimate good, with the result that the opportunities for pain and suffering increased dramatically (the chief suffering for a human person being total abandonment by God, apparently experienced only once, namely by Jesus on the cross). Thus certain features of sentient beings are explained well by theism.

(D) I could accept a Christian theodicy, derived roughly from a view along the lines proposed more precisely by Richard Swinburne in *The Existence of God*.<sup>11</sup> Namely, God could not make free embodied human persons who acquire knowledge of the world by means of their senses and at the same time make it such that there could be no pain or suffering. To acquire knowledge (not just good guesses, or reliable beliefs) of the world requires regularity and order in the world. For example, I could not have knowledge of rocks if rocks did not possess stable properties (properties related to mass, durability, hardness, gravitational attraction, and so on). In addition, humans acquire knowledge by means of senses: we observe, touch, measure. To do this we have sense organs, nerves, and brains. Thus, if I (or even Adam in Eden) were to slip on a wet root and fall, striking my knee on a rock, I would experience pain. As a result of that pain, I might fail to reach my intended destination, perhaps to discover a not-previously discovered lake and name it. That is to say, I might suffer a loss. Furthermore, I could use that knowledge of rocks, together with knowledge about gravity, mass, velocity, and force, in order to throw a rock at someone and injure them just for kicks. That is to say, I might cause suffering.

Were God to prevent such pains and sufferings to an embodied creature, God might have to ensure either that human persons not be free creatures, or that the world not have stable properties – perhaps that rocks on occasion have the hardness of gelatin or marshmallows, but not of rock-like minerals. But in such a case it would seem that humans could not acquire knowledge of rocks (I think one cannot have knowledge of objects with such unstable properties). On the other hand, God could make it that my sense organs sometimes do not record and transmit painful inputs. But in that case our knowledge of the world would also be compromised. How would we know when what seem to be sensory inputs are indeed reliable? We'd have a standing defeater for any of our empirically based beliefs.

So I am not sure that Draper's formulation is worthy of my acceptance.

Nonetheless, let's suppose that a Christian theist accepts Draper's formulation. What should I think of her? I could believe that she is perfectly rational in accepting it. But if I informed her of my reasons for not accepting it (the above paragraphs) and she understood my reasons, should I think her irrational in still accepting Draper's formulation? I could. I would likely think that I have provided her with a rationality (not an evidential) challenge, and might think her under an epistemic or rationality obligation to provide evidence or argument in support of Draper's formulation and against my reasons. Something very much like this strikes me as the situation that Silver sees the SIPE theist in, in the face of Draper's formulation of the problem of evil. The SIPE theist must respond to the evidential challenge by providing independent neutralizing non-circular evidence (or argument? or testimony? But Silver does not entertain these possibilities) in support of theism.

### **Is Silver right?**

Do I think Silver is right? No, I do not. Why? He confuses what *Plantinga argues* with what a *theist might or must believe*. He also confuses what *causes* a belief with *reasons* for holding that belief.

Plantinga argues (and here follows part of the A/C model<sup>12</sup>) that if God exists and desires humans to know and love Him, God might provide a way for humans to have that knowledge and devotion. So it makes sense to believe that there is a cognitive capacity that is part of our design plan, the *sensus divinitatis*, by which we acquire intimate knowledge of God. Plantinga does not offer as evidence for his *belief* that God exists a further *belief* of his, either his belief that there is a *sensus divinitatis* prompting that belief in him, or his belief that the *sensus divinitatis* is a reliable belief-producing mechanism. There would be circularity if he argued like that. Rather, he might be *caused* to believe that God exists as a result of the *sensus divinitatis* and the promptings of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (if this were the case, he would not be caused to believe in God by

his belief that there is a *sensus divinitatis*). Or it might be (we'd have to ask him) that he believes that God exists *as a result* of looking at theistic and atheistic arguments, and assessing their various merits and demerits. Still, there is no circular reasoning.

In either case, however he acquired belief in God, we can imagine that because of this acquired belief, Plantinga was then motivated to read Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, Kuyper, and others, and as a result *came to have* beliefs about a *sensus divinitatis*. It may well be that his acquired beliefs about the *sensus divinitatis* seemed very strong and compelling to him, and seemed to add confirmatory support to his belief that God exists. Further, he might not have come to believe that there is such a cognitive faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*, unless he believed in God. None of this seems to me to be inappropriately circular. He need not *believe* that God exists because he *believes* there is such a faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*. Nor need he *believe* that there is such a faculty as the *sensus divinitatis* because he *believes* that God exists.

Perhaps we might say, and his autobiography might state, that he came to believe that there is a *sensus divinitatis* much later, that initially he believed in God because that is the way things seemed to young Al. They might have seemed that way by means of his parents' testimony and sincere devotion, by means of teachers and friends, by means of his own reading of Christian scriptures, and so on. Later on, because of his belief in God and his study of scripture and Augustine, Calvin, Edwards, and so on, he comes to believe that there is such a faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*. So of course he most likely would not or could not believe there indeed was a *sensus divinitatis* unless he believed there was a God. But he does not believe there is a God because he believes there is a *sensus divinitatis*. He believes there is a *sensus divinitatis* at least in part because he believes there is a God (together with other beliefs; believing there is a God would not suffice for believing there is a *sensus divinitatis*). So very possibly he initially believes in God just because that is the way things seem to him.

Would the fact (if it is a fact) that one came to believe that there is a *sensus divinitatis* as a result of reading Augustine, Calvin, and Edwards entail that or lead one to assume that there being a *sensus divinitatis* depends on the premise that God exists? I feel confident that statistically speaking, very few people who believe that there is a cognitive function (the same as or like the one) called the *sensus divinitatis* do not believe in God. To believe that I have a *sensus divinitatis*, I would likely also believe in God. But I do not think the *sensus divinitatis* is premised on belief in God.

Consider SETI (search for extra-terrestrial intelligence) researchers. They set up large apparatus to try to detect the minutest bits of energy in the hope of finding patterns that would indicate attempts at communication from extra-terrestrials. Is their belief that these large apparatus are extra-terrestrial message detectors

premised on their belief in extra-terrestrials? For some researchers it probably is; for others it is not. But there is no requirement that a SETI researcher must believe that there are extra-terrestrials. Perhaps most are sceptics, but hopeful sceptics. Likewise, there is no requirement that those who believe humans have a cognitive function called the *sensus divinitatis* need believe there is a God. Belief in a *sensus divinitatis* does not depend on belief in God, nor even on the existence of God.

There would be circularity if he believed in God on the basis of a belief – the belief that the *sensus divinitatis* was reliable, for example – and then accepted that belief (that the *sensus divinitatis* was reliable) on the basis of belief in God. He would not fall into circularity if (a) he believes in God because of the promptings of the *sensus divinitatis* (not because of any beliefs he has about the reliability of the *sensus divinitatis*), and (b) then believes that there is a *sensus divinitatis* and that it is reliable on the basis of belief in God. The *sensus divinitatis* produces in him belief in the existence of God. As a result of that belief, he desires to learn more. In learning more he discovers that it is the *sensus divinitatis* that produced that belief in him. The *cause* of his belief in God need not be the *reason* for his belief that God exists.

Compare a case of sense perception: I *believe* there is snow on the ground outside my window by virtue of *perception* (I see it), and given all my perceptual beliefs, form the belief that there is such a thing as perception and that it is reliable. I do not believe that there is snow on the ground outside my window because I believe that there is perception. I believe because of perception, but not because I believe there is perception. Nor do I (apart from unusual circumstances) *believe* that there is snow on the ground outside my window on the basis of my *belief* that sense perception is *reliable*. In fact most people probably do not even have a belief to the effect that sense perception is reliable.<sup>13</sup>

Let me return to and analyse Silver's interpretation of Plantinga's strategy for responding to Draper's formulation. Silver says: '[T]he SIPE [sufficiently informed pure experiential] theist bases her belief in God on the belief that she has been so informed by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, and at the same time bases her belief that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* on her supposition that God exists' (349). Let S be the SIPE theist. Silver seems to be suggesting the following:

- (1) S believes that she has been informed about God by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*.
- (2) Therefore, S believes in God.
- (3) As a result of (2), S believes that God has designed humans with a *sensus divinitatis*, which, when properly functioning, allows humans to become aware of God.
- (4) S believes that she has a *sensus divinitatis*.



- (5) Given (2) and (4), S believes that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*.

My claim, and I believe it is Plantinga's too, is that:

- (6) S believes in God as a result of (i.e. is caused by) a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*.

But for this to be the case, S need have no beliefs at all about a *sensus divinitatis*, need not be aware that it is part of her cognitive equipment. The *sensus divinitatis* causes her belief, but it is not her reason for belief. S's belief in God may have as its source of warrant the *sensus divinitatis*, while that source of warrant need play no role in S's reasons for her belief in God (WCB, 464). So S is not engaged in circular reasoning. She would be if she held (1)–(5) above. But I know of no theists in that position, and I suspect there are very few who might be.

A theist might just find herself with the belief that God exists; (I know this sounds very odd; imagine someone saying, 'I suddenly discovered that I believed that God exists'). Somewhere down the road she reads Calvin or Edwards or Plantinga, and then might believe that she came to that belief not on her own, but as a *result* of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. She might come to believe that all along she had a *sensus divinitatis*, but it was rather dormant or she just never realized she had such a cognitive capacity (whatever promptings issued from it were largely ignored by her). Yet, somehow the Holy Spirit renewed and brought to life and vividness her *sensus divinitatis* before she ever came to belief that there is a *sensus divinitatis*. A result of this enlivening was that the *sensus divinitatis* *caused* her to come to believe that God exists. At the same time, it initiated her desire to acquire intimate, loving, devoted knowledge about God. She now seeks and develops a God-relationship.<sup>14</sup> It was that new desire that motivated her to read Calvin, Edwards, and Plantinga, a result of which is her coming to the belief that, previously unbeknownst to her, she all along had a *sensus divinitatis*. Her belief in God's existence (and God's particular care for her), in the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*, and in the existence of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit become core beliefs for her. They are beliefs that form and inform her total world and life view.

As part of her interest in loving God with all her mind, she decides to acquire more knowledge. She studies epistemology. She studies Bayesian theory, probability theory. She reads books and journals. She comes across Draper's article. She becomes a SIPE theist. Now I distinguish two possibilities.

Possibility (i): She understands his formulation. She has not read Richard Swinburne, so she unwittingly accepts Draper's formulation. She recognizes that she now has a potential defeater for her belief in God. As a careful thinker, she seeks a neutralizing belief. She reads Wykstra and Alston and Van Inwagen (and

stumbles onto the present paper and reads the account of my views on Silver) and says, 'Yes; that is it! I've got it'. She sees the problem in her very acceptance of Draper's formulation. So she has neutralized the potential defeater.

Possibility (ii): She understands his formulation. However, she also reads Silver's article and agrees with him that she needs to form her beliefs 'in light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection' (352). Given that her belief in God, in the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*, and in the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit are core (what one might call 'grand metaphysical') beliefs for her, informing her total world and life view, the force of the potential defeater presented by Draper's formulation is diminished significantly. She feels no obligation to provide a neutralizer, because the potential defeater does not for her have the status of demanding one; it is not an actual defeater. As oddly as this sounds, it is a potential defeater (for someone) that has no defeating potential for her.<sup>15</sup> Her only possibility for seeking a neutralizer would involve overturning her grand metaphysical beliefs and replacing them wholesale with a new set of grand metaphysical beliefs. On what basis could she do that?

To clarify what I mean by the notion of a grand metaphysical belief, and why I think there is a heavy onus on any potential defeater to have any defeating potential, consider the following. I find something suggestive and informative about a Davidsonian notion of belief holism and a Quinean notion of the web of belief.<sup>16</sup> Davidson at one point calls it 'the holism of the mental', namely,

... the interdependence of various aspects of mentality. Within any one dimension of mentality, such as belief, it seems clear that it is impossible to take an atomistic approach, because it is impossible to make sense of the idea of having only one or two beliefs. Beliefs do not come one at a time: what identifies a belief and makes it the belief that it is is the relationship (among other factors) to other beliefs. ... the content of each belief depends on its place in the nexus of further beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

The holism of the mental, or belief holism, is also a factor that seems to me to underlie Socrates' efforts at cross-examining interlocutors. For Socrates, when an interlocutor responds to a 'What is X?' question with 'X is alpha', Socrates typically follows up with several other related questions, questions about various concepts related to alpha. In order for Socrates to understand what the interlocutor means by 'X is alpha', he needs to understand what the interlocutor understands by beta, gamma, delta, and epsilon. That is to say, beliefs are not isolable such that I could understand 'X is alpha' independently of understanding how and where that belief is situated in the interlocutor's mind in relation to other beliefs.

I also think that some beliefs have a close-ranged impact on surrounding beliefs. My belief that my neighbour's dog is named Kasey has a close-ranged impact. What I mean is that were I to find out I was wrong about that belief and had to give it up, I could jettison that belief without major adjustments in

the rest of my beliefs, without it having much of an impact on many of my other beliefs.

However, other beliefs we hold have wide-ranged impact on surrounding beliefs. My belief that testimony is highly reliable has wide-ranged impact. Were I to find out I was wrong about that belief and had to give it up, I could not jettison that belief without major adjustments in the rest of my beliefs, without it having a major impact on many of my other beliefs. My beliefs about who my parents are depend upon the testimony contained in various documents (like birth certificates, hospital records), as well as the testimony of relatives who visited my mother in the hospital and were there when they named me. My beliefs about Socrates depend upon testimony of Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and others. My belief that testimony is highly reliable reaches widely throughout my web of beliefs. Were my belief in the reliability of testimony shown to be wrong and in need of jettisoning, that would require numerous major adjustments throughout much else of what I believe.<sup>18</sup>

So, what I find sensible about belief holism and the notion of our web of beliefs is the thought that our beliefs are not isolable, some much less so than others. I add to that a distinction between beliefs that have close-ranged and those that have wide-ranged impact. Related now to the issue of this paper, evidential challenges to close-ranged impact beliefs might more easily be seen as potential defeaters of those beliefs, and have defeating potential for me. Whether they actually defeat the belief, or whether one can find a defeater to the potential defeater, may be a hard task. And it might well be a task that any intellectually sophisticated person interested in believing in the light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection ought to pursue. However, evidential challenges to wide-ranged impact beliefs bear a much heavier burden of proof in order to even merit the honorific title of being a potential defeater, and so deserving of having one search for a defeater of the potential defeater.

I believe that belief in God is a very wide-ranged impact belief. One could not easily jettison that belief without it impacting much else of what one believes. And given belief holism and the web of our beliefs, it may well be that one cannot simply take belief in God alone as a single belief that might face an evidential challenge, and then consider the impact of that challenge on that one belief alone. So the burden of proof for being an evidential challenge, and for the evidential challenge being a potential defeater that a believer in God must – in order to remain rational – find a rebutting or defeating defeater, is very high indeed.<sup>19</sup> The believer in God who believes in a basic way is rational, internally and externally, in maintaining her belief in the face of an evidential challenge like Draper's, even if she neither produces nor attempts to produce a defeater to the evidential challenge. Further, Silver's independence constraint on neutralizers (349) makes good sense in dealing with challenges to close-ranged

impact beliefs, but may be an impossible criterion to meet with wide-ranged impact beliefs that penetrate throughout one's web.

Given the distinction between close-ranged impact beliefs and wide-ranged impact beliefs, the consequences of jettisoning one or the other, and thus the impact that has on the force a potential defeater might have for a person, let me return to possibility (ii) on Silver's view of a SIPE coming across Draper's article. This SIPE agrees that potential defeaters are numerous and varied. A rational, informed, and epistemically concerned agent cannot and need not respond to all of them, at least not to those that are only potential but not actual defeaters. And given that her belief in God is a wide-ranged impact belief, Draper's evidential challenge does not become an actual defeater for her, even though she does not provide a rebutting or defeating defeater to the alleged potential defeater. Says Plantinga:

With respect to most of what I believe, being evidentially challenged does not threaten to serve as a defeater for the proposition in question, and neither does my knowing, if I do, that it is evidentially challenged. Neither the challenge nor the knowledge, in the case of the propositions mentioned, puts me in a condition where, if I continue to believe the challenged proposition, I am irrational or in some other way out of line, epistemically speaking. And that is because the propositions in question get warrant from such sources as perception, memory, sympathy, testimony, *a priori* intuition, and the like; they do not depend, for their warrant, on their relation to such propositions as those furnishing the evidential challenge. (*WCB*, 478)

Similarly for theism:

You point out that theism is evidentially challenged for me: I agree that that is so and continue to believe as firmly as before; if Christian belief and hence theism *do* have significant warrant for me, my continuing so to believe is wholly rational and remains warranted. It is perfectly rational, internally, because it still seems obviously true to me; it is perfectly rational externally, because the belief in question is held under the conditions of warrant. If it had sufficient warrant for knowledge before you made your point about its being evidentially challenged, it still has sufficient warrant. (*WCB*, 479)

My belief in God gets its warrant from the outputs of the *sensus divinitatis*, not from my belief that I have a cognitive ability called the *sensus divinitatis*. The *sensus divinitatis* gives my belief in God warrant, similarly to perception (not my belief that I have a cognitive ability called perception) giving my belief that there is snow on the ground warrant.

When I consider my belief that there is snow on the ground, if challenged and asked for my warrant, I might not know what to say; it is just obvious to me. I might say, 'I look, and there it is'. I would not say, 'Well, I have perceptual functions, and mine have been tested by advanced laboratories and shown to be reliable, etc.' Likewise for belief in God. If challenged and asked for warrant, I might say, 'When I consider belief in God, it is just obvious to me'. I might have no idea how or why it is so obvious. I need not appeal, and might not even be able to appeal to the *sensus divinitatis*, even if – according to expert testimony by

Calvin, Edwards, and Plantinga – there very likely is that cognitive capacity which, when functioning properly, enables me to form belief in God. ‘There is of course no cognitive malfunction involved in my continuing to hold a belief with significant warrant from such sources as memory, perception, IHS, and the like, even when I learn that the belief is subject to an evidential challenge’ (WCB, 479). Note that Plantinga does not say there is no cognitive malfunction involved in continuing to hold a belief *that I believe* has significant warrant from those other sources. This is the extent to which Plantinga is an externalist and a non-evidentialist, and the extent to which his epistemology has analogs to reliabilist and causal theories.

Suppose that I am playing cards, and in a fair deal receive four jacks. I believe that there are four jacks in my hand even though the probability of that happening is incredibly low (not forgetting that whatever set of four cards I am dealt has precisely the same probability as being dealt four jacks). The facts of probability, a potential defeater, do not overturn my belief that I am holding four jacks. Further, I believe I am holding four jacks independently of my belief in the reliability of sense perception, and even independently of my belief that I have a cognitive faculty of sense perception. If someone challenged my belief by appeal to the incredibly low probability of it happening, would I violate the independence constraint on neutralizers if I responded, ‘I look, and I see four jacks’. My belief that I have four jacks is not independent of my looking and seeing (the cause, but not necessarily the reason for my belief that I have four jacks)? The independence constraint on neutralizers, it seems to me, need not (and sometimes cannot) be met in such cases.

Playing cards with my young nephew Levi, when he holds four jacks he believes he is holding them even though – as best as I can tell from asking him – he has no beliefs about his having a cognitive faculty of sense perception, and consequently no beliefs about its reliability. Similarly for the theist I am describing; she holds that given that her set of beliefs is not self-defeating, and that her belief in God is a wide-ranged impact belief, the potential defeaters do not have defeating potential for her. Further she is not irrational in neutralizing Draper’s potential defeater (that pain and pleasure are better explained by HI than by HT) by claiming that it has no defeating potential for her. For her, it is not neutralized by a *belief* that is dependent upon her *belief* in God. Thus, she does not violate the crucial principle (what Silver calls ‘the independence constraint on neutralizers’) that Silver believes a Plantingian theist is guilty of violating: the illegitimate circularity of the defence of a sufficiently informed pure experiential thesis in the face of the evidential challenge from evil like Draper’s formulation (349).

And even if she were to neutralize it by appeal to ‘it is how things seem to me’, which Plantinga might gloss as ‘it is due to the outputs of the *sensus divinitatis*’, the independence constraint on neutralizers, it seems to me, need not (and

sometimes cannot) be met in such cases. She is not epistemically irrational or in some other way a failure. The way she is different from, say, the naturalist in the face of a potential defeater (like the defeater that comes from naturalism itself, namely that if naturalism is the way things are, there is great reason to accept the very low probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable) is that naturalism is self-defeating (and no one has shown that theism is anywhere near self-defeating).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Draper's formulation has it that the observations of human and animal pain and suffering is *better explained* on the hypothesis of indifference (that neither our nature nor our condition is the result of a benevolent person – of God) than on the hypothesis of theism. Thus, this is a claim about comparative probabilities, not certainty. There is no obvious rational failure in continuing to hold theism even if the hypothesis of indifference is more probable given the evidence.

That a hypothesis is more probable than another does not rationally compel belief in the more probable hypothesis. Two alternative hypotheses could both have very low probabilities (say, both less than a 0.1 probability), yet one be vastly more probable than the other (say one has a probability of 0.005, the other a probability of 0.095). Given that both are so low, is it clearly irrational to accept the hypothesis with a probability of 0.005? Suppose in three hands in a row in my card game with Levi I am dealt four jacks. The probability of that happening in three fair deals in a row is very low. The probability of that happening by a set of fixed deals is much more probable, but still low. Such knowledge does not make my belief in the strangeness of three straight hands of four jacks by fair deal irrational and defeated. In this case, the higher probability of that happening by a fixed deal is neutralized by the fact that Levi is not skilled enough to be able to fix the deal.

### **Space-alien belief and warranted Christian belief**

In order to illustrate Silver's principle that he calls 'the *independence constraint on neutralizers*' (349), he develops a case of a person believing in super-intelligent super-vain space aliens (the SISVSA believer for short). Silver believes the SISVSA is parallel to a Plantingian theist defending herself in the face of an evidential challenge like that from Draper's formulation of the problem of evil. But I claim that there is a vast difference between the theistic believer facing a potential defeater like Draper's formulation and the believer in SISVSA facing a potential defeater for his belief.

The theistic believer need not *believe* that God exists because she *believes* that she has a *sensus divinitatis* that informs her of that belief. Nor need she *believe* that she has a *sensus divinitatis* because she *believes* that God exists. One need not be the reason for the other. She believes the one, she believes the other. Her belief in God may well be a basic belief, and properly basic. I cannot see

how her belief that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* is a basic belief. That to me seems a derived or inferred belief, derived or inferred from reading Calvin, Edwards, or Plantinga. Furthermore, it is the *sensus divinitatis* and not her *belief* in the *sensus divinitatis* or its reliability which *causes* her belief in God; the *sensus divinitatis* is not her *reason* for belief in God. She does not *base* her belief in God on her 'belief that she has been so informed by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*' (349). By contrast, the SISVSA believer forms that belief 'because he thinks that it is produced by what we might call a *vain-alien* faculty' (349). Further, he 'thinks that he is warranted in his belief that he has a vain-alien faculty because it reasonably follows from his belief that he was created by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens' (349). The 'because' is all-important. The SISVSA believer, as described by Silver, forms his beliefs because of further *beliefs* he has, because of what he *thinks*.

However, the theistic believer, as described by Plantinga, need not believe in God because she *believes* she has a *sensus divinitatis* or because she *believes* in the reliability of the outputs of her *sensus divinitatis*. She comes to belief in God *because* of the *sensus divinitatis* and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (and not because of *her beliefs in or about the sensus divinitatis* or her beliefs in or about the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit). It is entirely possible that she never comes to form beliefs about a *sensus divinitatis* (how many Christians have any such beliefs?) or the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (another one that does not seem to be anywhere near the forefront of Christian beliefs). Even if she does form such beliefs, she need not believe she has a *sensus divinitatis* because she has a belief in God. She believes one, she believes the other.

How she comes to acquire that belief all depends. I would be surprised that she would come to that belief apart from reading Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, Kuyper, or Plantinga. Still, how she is *caused* to acquire that belief need not be the *reason* for her belief. Indeed, she might have no reason that she can cite. I look out my window, I see snow on the ground, and I believe there is snow on the ground. My seeing the snow on the ground is not my reason for my belief that there is snow on the ground. My seeing is my believing. Granted, I am caused to have that belief by my looking. I might not have that belief unless I looked.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, the SIPE believer who might accept Draper's formulation of the evidential challenge from evil need not defeat it by arguing that nonetheless God exists because she has been so informed of God's existence by her god-given *sensus divinitatis*, and that she has a God-given *sensus divinitatis* because there is a God who exists to give her the *sensus divinitatis*. That would be egregiously circular, so evidently so that I have a hard time imagining any sufficiently informed theist thinking in such a dimwitted way. The notion of a sufficiently informed dimwit seems too internally incoherent.

### **Conclusion: causes of belief need not be reasons for belief**

In conclusion, and this is perhaps what confuses Silver, *Plantinga* argues that it makes good sense to believe that if God exists and desires humans to know about and love Him, God might provide to humans as part of their design plan a *sensus divinitatis*, a natural ability to know about and love God. But there is no circle here, let alone an inappropriate one. There might be if *Plantinga* were first to argue that it makes good sense to *believe* that if humans have a *sensus divinitatis*, then indeed there is good reason to *believe* that God exists; and then on the basis of that *belief* he were to accept that humans have a *sensus divinitatis*. But *Plantinga* does not argue like that. I do not see a good reason why any one else, even a SIPE theist who accepts Draper's formulation of the problem of evil and is aware of Silver's arguments, should be inclined to argue that way either. And given a common-sense view of belief holism and the web of our beliefs, and given that belief in God is a wide-ranged impact belief, the independence constraint on neutralizers cannot be met. The SIPE theist under consideration is neither irrational nor at epistemic fault.

Recall Silver's 'independence constraint on neutralizers': 'Z cannot neutralize X as a potential defeater for Y if Z is evidentially dependent on Y' (349). Given that belief in God is a wide-ranged impact belief, it will be very difficult, in the face of an evidential challenge, to satisfy the independence constraint on neutralizers. Much else that a SIPE theist believes is not independent, for the SIPE theist, of such a theist's belief in God. Of course some of those beliefs are more immediately dependent on belief in God, some more mediately dependent. So the SIPE person who believes in God, whose belief in God was caused by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, when presented with an evidential challenge like Draper's, can neutralize the potential defeater by her strong belief in God coming from her *sensus divinitatis* (note that I did not say from her belief in the *sensus divinitatis*). She is not engaged in circular reasoning.

And even if she did come to believe that there were such a cognitive faculty as a *sensus divinitatis* which, when functioning properly, yields belief in God, she would not (or should not) identify that as her reason for belief. It was the cause of her belief. She did not have a reason, in the sense of some other belief from which she inferred belief in God. The inputs of her *sensus divinitatis*, functioning properly, prompted belief in God. Similarly when I look out my window I form the belief that 'there is snow on the ground'. I might say, though I think it inaccurate and non-literal, that my *reason* for belief is my seeing it. More accurately and literally, my seeing is the cause of my belief. I am not believing that there is snow on the ground because of other beliefs, other reasons, I have.

To be sure, in order to believe that I have a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, I would likely have to believe that there is a God (not necessarily; consider the SETI researchers example above). So probably belief in a properly



functioning *sensus divinitatis* is dependent for most people on their belief in God. But a SIPE theist can believe in God, and believe that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, without thinking that the latter is her reason for the former. The former might be a reason for the latter belief, but the latter belief is the cause, not her reason, for the former belief.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

1. Paul Draper 'Pain and pleasure: an evidential problem for theists', *Nous*, 23 (1989), 331–350.
2. David Silver 'Religious experience and the evidential argument from evil', *Religious Studies*, 38 (2002), 339–353. References to Silver's article are in-text.
3. Alvin Plantinga *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), referred to in text and notes as *WCB*.
4. David Silver 'Religious experience and the facts of religious pluralism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 49 (2001), 1–17.
5. Silver may be confusing here being rational and being warranted. Belief in God is proper function rational, internally and externally, even if I am aware that belief in God is evidentially challenged (parallel the Maynard the cat example in Plantinga *WCB*, 480). In contrast, 'a belief has warrant if and only if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a congenial epistemic environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief' (Plantinga *WCB*, 498; cf 153–161).
6. See C. A. J. Coady *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
7. Draper 'Pain and pleasure', 331.
8. See Plantinga *WCB*, 476; the data that is alleged to be a challenge to belief in God must be the sort of data that theism is in the business of explaining.
9. See *ibid.*, especially chs 6–7.
10. Here I follow a type of Augustinian account.
11. Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 245–257. Perhaps I am also importing into the view I develop in this paragraph hints from John Hick's soul-making theodicy from *Evil and the God of Love* (New York NY: Harper and Row, 1966). I do not myself know where or how; but I have this vague feeling that something of Hick's view is lurking in my account.
12. I am here especially following Plantinga *WCB*, 172–186.
13. The thoughts in the second half of this paragraph were suggested to me from e-mail correspondence with Alvin Plantinga.
14. I am summarizing the extended A/C model from Plantinga *WCB*, 184–186, as well as chs 7–8.
15. This way of putting it was suggested to me by Silver in comments on a draft of this paper.
16. I am not claiming to endorse all the details of Davidson's holism or of Quine's conceptions of beliefs. I am exploiting their thoughts for notions that seem rather common sense to me.
17. Donald Davidson 'The emergence of thought', in his *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 123–134; quotation from 124, 127. Also in the same volume 'What is present to the mind', 53–67, see 65, and 'Rational animals', 95–105, see 98.
18. For a bit of levity, what should I do if my belief in the reliability of testimony was shown wrong by expert psychologists? Accept their testimony, or reject it?
19. Imagine a contemporary scientist, much of whose work is shaped by a naturalist perspective; hardly any potential defeaters are going to have defeating potential, and so be taken with much seriousness. The onus is very high indeed.
20. Alvin Plantinga *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) ch. 12.
21. I could have it now without looking now. Two hours ago when I looked, there was snow on the ground. I am aware of the weather report not expecting a major warm-up today, and so on. So I have the belief without looking. But in this latter case my belief is based upon other beliefs I have. Of course when I look out the window and believe there is snow on the ground, that belief itself might warrant someone

in inferring various other beliefs I seem committed to: that my window is not a *trompe l'oeil* painting, that the stuff on the ground is not flour or fine Styrofoam, that I am a thing that thinks, and on and on. But none of these other beliefs that I might be committed to are my reasons for my belief that there is snow on the ground.

22. I am grateful to Alvin Plantinga and David Silver for generous and penetrating comments and criticism on early drafts of this paper.