Apologetics

Southwestern
Journal of Theology

Southwestern Journal of Theology • Volume 60 • Number 2 • Spring 2018

The Role of Evidence for Christian Belief

Travis M. Dickinson
Associate Professor of Philosophy and Christian Apologetics
Scarborough College

Faith and evidence have, at times, had a tenuous relationship in the history of Christian thought. It has not been uncommon for Christians to take a rather low view of evidence as it relates to the faith. Evidence may of course play a role in one's coming to Christian faith, on this sort of view, but it is often thought to be an incidental and non-necessary one. Recently, *evidentialism*, the view that the epistemic status[1] of one's belief is wholly a matter of the evidence one has, has been making a comeback as a general epistemology. But evidentialism as a religious epistemology[2] remains largely unexplored. The thesis of this paper is that evidence, understood broadly, is necessary, and when had in a sufficiently high degree, is sufficient for rational Christian belief.[3]

Faith and Reason

Discussions about evidence and the role it plays in our Christian beliefs is a modern one. There is a much more ancient discussion about the relationship between faith and reason.[4] There are some, like Tertullian, who claimed the Christian faith was absurd and reason was irrelevant for arriving at faith.[5] There are others, such as Augustine, who see a more or less significant role for reason to play.[6]

The problem with this historical discussion is that the term "reason" is often used in a variety of ways without its precise meaning being made

[1] By "epistemic status," I mean the reasons one has in holding a belief.

[2] Religious epistemology is the area in philosophy that considers the epistemology of having the knowledge of God and other religious claims. If one considers what it means to claim to *know* Christianity is true, one is doing religious epistemology.

[3] It is important to note this is a condition only on *rational* Christian belief, not necessarily a condition on Christian belief *per se*. So I'm not weighing in on what it takes to be saved, only on what it takes to hold rationally to Christian beliefs.

[4] For a good introduction to the topic, see Paul Helm, ed., *Faith and Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[5] In his *Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian famously asked rhetorically, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" He also claimed, "I believe because it is absurd." Though there is perhaps some inconsistency to Tertullian's project, he is widely cited as thinking Christian faith is above and, in some ways, against human reason.

[6] See Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* for a discussion of the role of pagan thinking for interpreting Scripture.

clear. Sometimes the term seems to refer only to Greek philosophy or philosophical views that are traceable to the Greek philosophers. Here one is not rejecting reason *per se*, but the philosophical views (and extrapolations) of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, et al. At other times, it seems "reason" refers just to the deliverances of the empirical senses. Here when one is rejecting reason, one is, in effect, rejecting the experiences of the five senses as not necessary, or perhaps not even relevant for faith. This person may emphasize that "faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1, NKJV). But whether we agree with these understandings of reason, the point is they are idiosyncratic. It will prove very helpful to get specific about how to understand reason to see its role in Christian belief. The view defended below is broadminded about evidence. Roughly speaking, anything that indicates the truth of one's belief will, for me, count as evidence.

Authority Issues

One driving factor for why the relationship between faith and reason has been tenuous is because Christians are extremely wary of holding anything as an authority over faith, and especially holding anything as having authority over Scripture. As Robertson McQuilkin has said:

> Since God is the author, the Bible is authoritative. It is absolute in its authority for human thought and behavior . . . For Christ and the apostles, to quote the Bible was to settle an issue.[7]

This, on my view, is absolutely true. But we should notice this is true *for* Christ and the apostles. This is also true for us who are evangelicals (and especially Baptists!), but this, it seems, is because of certain epistemic commitments already in place. The Bible is decidedly not seen as authoritative to those who do not believe God is its principal author. For the unbeliever, to merely quote the Bible is not to settle virtually any issue. There is, it seems, an epistemological need to come to know that Scripture is the authoritative word of God and this is logically prior to Scripture operating as an authority in our lives.

Let's be clear. The Bible has authority because of its divine source. Full stop. This fact gives it its ontological status *as divine revelation*. Just because one may not recognize it as divinely authoritative, it doesn't follow that it is not authoritative (denying the police officer's authority as he or she writes you a ticket also isn't going to work out well!). However, unless one comes to concede its authority (i.e., come to the belief that it is authoritative), it will not, for one, be authoritative for one, or at least function in an authoritative way in one's life. Again, coming to the belief that it is authoritative is simply recognizing the authority it already has.

[7] Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 20.

What does it mean to say that Scripture is authoritative? Roughly speaking, Christians appeal to Scripture as a normative standard for how we should live and what we should believe. Minimally, this means if one of our beliefs is out of step with Scripture, then so much the worse for our belief. For many Christians, the authority of Scripture goes even further than the mere need of consistency. We all have views about a variety of things that Scripture doesn't directly address. That is, we make claims about, say, political issues, auto mechanics, football, chemistry, mathematics, bioethical issues, good career paths, etc., that are not *directly* addressed by Scripture. Can Scripture play an authoritative role in these areas? Yes! In sorting out one's views, the Christian ought to be able to ground his or her view in the worldview Scripture provides. Scripture may not weigh in on a certain bioethical issues such as, say, human cloning. But it does provide a framework and worldview for thinking through and forming one's belief about this bioethical issue. So the view is, our belief shouldn't only be merely consistent with Scripture, but it should be grounded in the Christian worldview derived from Scripture.

But recognizing that Scripture is authoritative in this way does not fall out of the sky. People who believe that Scripture is authoritative seem to do so because they have *reasons* to believe it is the Word of God. That is, there is an epistemology that goes into us recognizing Scripture as a supreme authority.

Not everyone agrees. Wayne Grudem has said:

> Since the words of Scripture are "self-attesting," they cannot be "proved" to be God's words by appeal to any higher authority. If we make our ultimate appeal, for example, to human logic or to scientific truth to prove that the Bible is God's Word, then we assume the thing to which we appeal to be a higher authority than God's words and one that is more true or more reliable. Therefore, the ultimate authority by which Scripture is shown to be God's words must be Scripture itself.[8]

Though it is not an uncommon phrase, it seems difficult to know exactly what is meant by thinking of Scripture as "self-attesting." Grudem himself goes on to explain this as the persuasiveness of Scripture in the actual experience of life. He clarifies, "the Bible will be seen to be fully in accord with all that we know about the world around us, about ourselves, and about God."[9] But if this is right, then it is not self-attesting; at least, not purely self-attesting. The world around us seems to be, in his description, attesting to its truth. That is, we are using the world around us, at least in part, to know that Scripture is true. But Grudem's argument was that if we appeal to some-

[8] Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 37.

[9] Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 38.

thing outside of Scripture, then we make that thing a higher authority. Why doesn't the accordance with the world around us become a higher authority than Scripture? He says:

> This is not to say that our knowledge of the world around us serves as a higher authority than Scripture, but rather that such knowledge, if it is correct knowledge, continues to give greater and greater assurance and deeper conviction that the Bible is the only truly ultimate authority.[10]

I would agree. But saying this seems to be inconsistent with what he said above about Scripture's being simply self-attesting. It looks like he is suggesting here that we can appeal to the knowledge of the world in order to come to know that Scripture is our authority. This seems to concede that something can play an epistemological role in believing and recognizing a thing's authority without itself becoming the ultimate authority. That is, evidence and reason can point us to Scripture's ultimate authority, given its ontological status, without usurping the authority of Scripture.

Take, as an analogy, our U.S. legal code.[11] There are laws we, as citizens, are obliged to obey. But in order for the U.S. law code to play that authoritative role for us, we have an epistemological need. We must, by some means, come to *know* what the U.S. legal code is. It's also possible that there would be a variety of imposter law codes that all lay claim to being the U.S. legal code. This makes our epistemological need even more pronounced. We need to know whether one set of laws is authentic vis-à-vis other sets of laws. These are all epistemological issues that are logically prior to us recognizing the U.S. legal code authority for us. Now let's say I go to someone whom I have good reason to believe is an authority on U.S. law and she identifies a series of volumes entitled *The Code of Law of United States of America* (abbreviated *United States Code* or *U.S.C.*) as the U.S. legal code. For the sake of argument, let's assume that I'm rational in believing the testimony of this expert. On the basis of her testimony, I thereby have reasons to believe the *U.S.C.* is binding law on me as a citizen of the U.S. But notice, by appealing to the expert, I don't thereby make her or her testimony my ultimate authority. Her testimony is simply an epistemological reason for thinking that the *U.S.C.* should be recognized as my legal authority.

Likewise, Scripture is, for Christians, a supreme authority. But the epistemological issue we face is what we do when the question is "Is the Bible a supreme authority?" or "Is the Bible the Word of God?" This question, it seems, can't be answered merely by looking to the claims of Scripture attesting to this fact, at least not without vicious circularity. To avoid circularity, we'll need to use reasons and evidence to come to the belief that Scripture

[10] Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 39.

[11] This example is really only a loose analogy since the authority had by U.S. law is fundamentally different from the authority of Scripture.

is authoritative. The point of the example above is that our coming to know that Scripture is God's revealed word doesn't take away from its authority in our lives. Once we come to know that it is God's word, then we recognize and submit to its authority (again, the authority it possessed all along).

Consider another example. Suppose Al is standing before a complete library of the world's great religious texts. The Bible is there alongside the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, Book of Mormon, the Upanishads, etc. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that each of these claim, in effect, to be divine revelation. Standing there before all of these options, how could Al decide which one is correct? It can't be the mere fact that the Bible claims to be God's word. This is because, again, they all make this claim. How is Al going to decide? Let's suppose someone, whom Al has reason to think is trustworthy, tells him that the Bible is God's divine word. Al now has one (i.e., a preacher) testifying to the Word of God (Rom 10:14). Let's also suppose the Holy Spirit stirs in Al's spirit, confirming that the Bible is God's divine word. In this, Al hears and recognizes the voice of God (John 10:27). Al now, it seems, has epistemological reason to think the Bible is God's authoritative word. Though Al now has reasons to believe, he can and should improve the epistemic status of his belief. He can engage in an intentional study of the text itself and begin to see how Scripture accords with the world. He will also no doubt notice the consistency and harmony of the message throughout the biblical text. Let's also suppose he begins to read Scripture as a guide and, as he internalizes its claims, it begins to change his heart and life. Al now possesses an even stronger epistemological basis for his belief in Scripture's authority.

He might also turn to topics in apologetics related to the authenticity and authority of Scripture.[12] Many people do not avail themselves of this material, but I would suggest it can be quite helpful for further expanding the epistemological basis of our belief. One should come away with the distinct impression from this study that this is no ordinary book. None of this, as I've argued, should take away from the authority of Scripture. Indeed, one has reason upon reason to yield one's life to its authority.

Many don't think of the preacher or the Holy Spirit as providing epistemological reasons. But it is unclear why we shouldn't. Many will appeal to the testimony of others that they heard and what the Holy Spirit was doing in their hearts in the process of coming to believe. Again, I am employing a notion of reason in an extremely broad sense. This, as I shall argue, is as it should be. As knowing subjects, we use a great variety of facts to ground our beliefs epistemically, especially when they are as important as the beliefs of the Christian faith. In the next section, I will characterize reasons as evidence and defend an evidentialist epistemology.

[12] See Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder, *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013).

Evidentialism

In the contemporary epistemological literature, the term "evidence" is a more specific notion than the term "reason." The term "reason" is used in many different ways, some of which are not epistemic. For example, one may use the term "reason" to mean the causal reasons for one's beliefs. Take, for example, the following sentence: "The reason Smith believes he's being followed is a chemical imbalance in his brain." Here, the reason is the *cause* of the belief, but it isn't an epistemic reason. For something to be epistemic, it has to do with the rational justification of the belief. Said differently, for a reason to be epistemic, the reason puts the believer in a good position to believe truly. If Smith is delusional in thinking he is being followed, then he may lack any reason to believe it is true despite the fact that there is a causal reason for his belief (i.e., the chemical imbalance).

The term "evidence," by contrast, seems to always connote something epistemic and always truth-connected. Jaegwon Kim has said:

> the concept of evidence is inseparable from that of justification. When we talk of "evidence" in an epistemological sense we are talking about justification: one thing is "evidence" for another just in case the first tends to enhance the reasonableness or justification of the second. And such evidential relations hold in part because of the "contents" of the items involved, not merely because of the causal or nomological connections between them.[13]

When one has evidence for a belief, one necessarily has a reason for thinking one's belief is true no matter how the belief was caused. As Kevin McCain says, "evidence is good reasons that are indicative of the truth concerning the proposition that is the object of the doxastic attitude."[14] McCain's statement is a mouthful, but it makes clear the relation of evidence to truth.

There is a growing number of philosophers who see the epistemic status of one's belief as entirely a matter of one's evidence. This view has come to be known as *evidentialism*. The philosophers who coined the term and who are still the most widely read defenders of evidentialism are Earl Conee and Richard Feldman. They characterize evidentialism with the following thesis that they call EJ:

> EJ: Doxastic attitude D toward proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t.[15]

[13] Jaegwon Kim, "What is Naturalized Epistemology?" in James Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives 2, Epistemology* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1988), 390.

[14] Kevin McCain, *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 10. The term "doxastic attitude" is a more technical way to speak of a belief.

[15] Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 83.

They go on to give three examples illustrating this thesis:

> [Case 1] . . . when a physiologically normal person under ordinary circumstances looks at a plush green lawn that is directly in front of him in broad daylight, believing that there is something green before him is the attitude toward this proposition that fits his evidence. That is why the belief is epistemically justified.[16]

> [Case 2] . . . suspension of judgment is the fitting attitude for each of us toward the proposition that an even number of ducks exists, since our evidence makes it equally likely that the number is odd.[17]

> [Case 3] . . . when it comes to the proposition that sugar is sour, our gustatory experience makes disbelief the fitting attitude. Such experiential evidence epistemically justifies disbelief.[18]

Generally speaking, evidentialists have characterized evidentialism as a supervenience thesis. That is, the epistemic status of one's belief supervenes on the evidence one has. This has the upshot of making the epistemic status of a belief an objective feature of one's evidence since if any two individuals are identical in terms of the evidence they possess, then the epistemic status of their beliefs is likewise identical.[19]

The Evidentialist Intuition

There exists a very basic evidentialist intuition that makes sense of much of our inquiry. In fact, Conee and Feldman admit being amazed that anyone would deny the general thesis of evidentialism when they first started their work on the view.[20] The fact is, when we reflect and evaluate what we should or should not believe, we look to the evidence. When we find there is no good evidence for a belief, we tend to drop the belief. Or if, it turns out, there is good evidence after all, we change our mind and believe. In fact, we will believe things for which we have evidence even if we wished it wasn't true. And we will sometimes give our very lives to things we believe, especially when there is strong evidence in its favor. In short, evidence plays a crucial role for our inquiries, especially in the formation and evaluation of our beliefs. Although John Locke does not use the term evidence, he is often cited as an early proponent of evidentialism. Locke once said:

[16] Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*, 83.
[17] Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*, 83.
[18] Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*, 83–84.
[19] See "Internalism Defended" for a discussion. Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*, 53–82.
[20] Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*, 1.

> He that believes, without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due his maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him, to keep him out of the mistake and error.[21]

Perhaps the most famous maxim related to the importance of evidence is W.K. Clifford's. He said, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."[22] Clifford's claim seems to make believing without evidence a moral wrong. Not everyone agrees that there's a specific *moral* obligation to believe on the basis of evidence. But the general sentiment is that proper belief formation is based on good evidence.

Trent Dougherty has made the point that it is very difficult to avoid the use of evidence even if we are not evidentialists. He says:

> Evidence, it seems, is a central concern of epistemology. There are a number of reasons why this is so. First, consider this. If reliabilism were true and you wanted to know if the new health care bill was going to be good or bad, what would you do to find out? If contextualism were true, and you wanted to know if a prospective neighborhood was safe, what would you do? If some kind of virtue epistemology were true, and you wanted to know whether diet soda caused cancer, what would you do? In all cases, the answer is obvious: you'd seek out evidence.[23]

We might add to this that if one wished to critique evidentialism, one would also have to proffer evidence against the view. This unavoidability of the use of evidence seems to, at best, betray the prime importance of evidence in adjudicating these sorts of issues and, at worst, suggests that to deny evidentialism is self-refuting. It looks as if one must use evidentialist considerations in order to reject the view. Evidentialism is plausible, on its face, given that it seems practically unavoidable and it makes sense of our epistemic appeals to evidence.

Having Evidence

One of the biggest issues facing the evidentialist is what it means to say that "S has evidence." It can't be that some evidence merely exists. It must be that the believing subject *has* that evidence. It seems most plausible to understand the *having of evidence* as being aware of some fact that makes the

[21] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.C. Fraser (New York; Dover, 1959), IV.xvii. 24, 413–14.

[22] W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. L. Stephen and F. Pollock (London: Macmillan, 1886), 346.

[23] Trent Dougherty, ed., *Evidentialism and Its Discontents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

belief we hold rational. The idea is that it is not enough for a subject to have a belief that has something going for it, in an epistemic sense. One must be, in some sense, aware of this epistemic virtue. If the believing subject is unaware of what the belief has going for it, then, from one's subjective perspective, the belief's being epistemically virtuous will be merely accidental and will provide no rational justification. Michael Bergmann explains his understanding of this sort of awareness requirement as follows:

> S's belief B is justified only if (i) there is something, X, that contributes to the justification of B—e.g. evidence for B or a truth-indicator for B or the satisfaction of some necessary condition of B's justification—and (ii) S is aware (or potentially aware) of X.[24]

By having an awareness requirement, this places evidentialism squarely within the broader category of internalism. What is internalism? Robert Audi, in distinguishing the internal, says:

> The internal, in the relevant sense, is what we might call the (internally) *accessible*. . . . The accessible includes what is actually in consciousness—such as thoughts and visual and other sensory impressions . . . To have (internal) access to something is either to have it in consciousness or to be able . . . to become aware of it.[25]

Similarly, Laurence BonJour characterizes internalism as the "idea that the justifying reason for a basic belief, or indeed for any belief, must somehow be cognitively available to the believer himself, within his cognitive grasp or ken."[26] Thus, for our purposes, internalism is the view that one has justification if and only if there are epistemic facts of which one is aware (or potentially aware). Evidentialism then characterizes the relevant epistemic facts of which one is aware as evidence.[27]

The motivating considerations for internalist evidentialism are easily turned into an objection to any view that calls a belief rationally justified, where one is unaware of any evidence of its truth. When so-called externalist theories of justification posit external factors that are, by definition, ones of which the subject is unaware, the evidentialist (and the internalist, in gen-

[24] Michael Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

[25] Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 238.

[26] Laurence BonJour, "A Version of Internalist Foundationalism" in Laurence BonJour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 24.

[27] An example of an internalist view that is not evidentialist is deontologism, according to which one is justified if and only if one satisfies certain epistemic virtues (or fulfills one's epistemic duties or believes in an epistemically blameless way).

eral) is poised to object that if the person has no idea these external factors obtain, the belief will be from his or her perspective no more reasonable than a stray hunch.

BonJour's case of Norman the Clairvoyant is a paradigmatic objection of this sort. BonJour's primary target was process reliabilism, which says if S's believing p at t results from a reliable cognitive belief-forming process (or set of processes), then S's belief that p at t is justified.[28] After employing various thought experiments involving clairvoyants, BonJour gave the following as a decisive problem for process reliabilist. He says:

> Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact, the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.[29]

BonJour goes on to make the point that we, as epistemologists, know that the belief has something going for it in the sense that it will non-accidently turn out true (or at least is likely to be true). BonJour says, "But how is this supposed to justify Norman's belief? From his subjective perspective, it *is* an accident that the belief is true."[30] Norman has no reason at all to think his belief has anything at all going for it.

Though BonJour's argument was directed at process reliabilism, it seems easy enough to generalize the point to any purely externalist theory. Bergmann gives a generalization of this sort of objection and calls it the *subject's perspective objection* (hereafter, the SPO). The idea is one points out a way in which a subject may satisfy the proposed conditions of justification and yet fails to possess assurance of what the belief has going for it from the subject's perspective. Bergmann says:

> If the subject holding a belief isn't aware of what that belief has going for it, then she isn't aware of how its status is any different from a stray hunch or an arbitrary conviction. From that we may conclude that from her perspective it is an accident that her belief is true. And that implies that it isn't a justified belief.[31]

[28] Alvin Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?" in G.S. Pappas, ed., *Justification and Knowledge* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), 1–25; reprinted in A.I. Goldman, *Reliabilism and Contemporary Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 29–49.

[29] Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 41. BonJour does not in this work identify himself as an evidentialist.

[30] BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 43–44.

[31] Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness*, 12.

Given these considerations, we may say, for any view of justification, if the view calls a belief justified and the subject has no idea from his or her subjective perspective what his or her belief has going for it (i.e., lacks all evidence), then it falls prey to the SPO, and the view should be rejected.[32] This simultaneously provides motivation for internalist evidentialism and an objection to all externalist theories.

But, alas, there is a problem.

Bergmann's Dilemma

Michael Bergmann, who is himself an externalist, has argued that all internalists with an awareness requirement, including the evidentialist as I've defined it, face a dilemma. The internalist must say what sort of awareness is in view when a believing subject is justified. Bergmann says the awareness either "involves *conceiving* of the justification-contributor that is the object of awareness as being in some way relevant to the justification or truth of the belief or it won't."[33] The former is what he calls *strong awareness* and the latter is *weak awareness*. If we imagine a subject who believes that p on the basis of a vivid visual experience, strong awareness would require the subject to not merely be aware of having this experience but to conceive of the experience *as relevant to the truth or justification of the belief that p*. If the subject does not conceive of it in this particular way, then this would be weak awareness.

This is a dilemma. So, according to Bergmann, there are fatal problems for accepting either horn of the dilemma. The consequence for accepting the strong awareness horn is that it leads to a vicious regress, since conceiving of the justification-contributor as relevant to the truth or justification of the relevant belief is itself a judgment that will in turn need to be justified. Said differently, strong awareness requires one to include in the analysis of justification a further judgment. This is because strong awareness requires one to conceive of the justification-contributor as being a particular way, and to conceive is judgmental. But if there is a judgment, then it will itself need to be justified by something further. But if strong awareness is required for every justification-contributor, then there will always be a need for further justification. This would generate an unending regress.

If this were not already problem enough, Bergmann argues that the regress is one of ever-increasing complexity.[34] Since being strongly aware

[32] It is important to note that there is a modal operator at work in typical SPOs. The claim is that if there is even a *possible* state of affairs such that a subject satisfies all of the proposed conditions of justification and yet fails to be aware of what the belief has going for it, the view is open to this objection.

[33] Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness*, 13.

[34] Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness*, 16. The idea is that, on strong awareness, for a belief B to be justified for S, S must conceive of some justification-contributor, X1, as relevant to the truth of B. But in order for the judgment in X1 to be justified, S would have to be strongly aware of some X2 that's relevant to the judgment in X1 that X1 is relevant to B. This will continue to iterate with ever increasing complexity.

involves a judgment that will require further justification, one would also have to be strongly aware of whatever one posits as justification for this judgment. This is a regress that is not stopping, and, as the judgments iterate, what must be justified increases in complexity. This will quickly outstrip human ability to even hold the proposition in one's mind, much less justify it. Thus, the regress is doubly vicious. It is infinite and one of ever-increasing complexity.

Given that this is a significant problem, it is to the other horn we now turn. The consequence for taking the weak awareness horn, according to Bergmann, is that one is no better off than the externalist with respect to the SPO. That is, he claims that unless the subject conceives of the justification-contributor as being epistemically relevant to the belief, then it will be possible to come up with a case where the subject satisfies the proposed conditions of justification and yet, from the subject's perspective, the belief is no better than if it were based on a wishful hunch.

To see this, consider the fact that it is possible for one to be in pain and fail to conceive of the pain-state as relevant to the truth or justification of the belief that one is in pain. If that's right, then one could have no idea the belief has anything going for it even if it happens to be the case one is aware of the pain-state. This might be hard to imagine given the fact that pain often gets our attention. But we should notice that we are all weakly aware of a variety of facts right now that are not, for us, epistemically relevant given that we haven't even noticed them. One should consider a patch of color in the periphery of one's visual field (or the buzzing of lights or of an electrical device), which one has not (until just now) noticed, though it has been there all along as an object of awareness.[35] Bergmann's claim is that one must conceive of these facts (e.g., being in pain or experiencing the buzzing of lights) as relevant to the belief we may form about them (e.g., the belief that I'm in pain or that I'm experiencing the buzzing of lights) for one to be justified in this way. If one doesn't so conceive, then we are not necessarily in positive epistemic situation. We may be no better off than the externalist despite these facts being objects of (weak) awareness.

Thus, the internalist, who only requires weak awareness, likewise falls prey to the SPO. The only way to block the SPO with an awareness requirement, according to Bergmann, is to conceive of the experience as epistemically relevant, but that would put us back on the strong awareness horn of the dilemma. Either way, the internalist with an awareness requirement has a big problem.

Though I do not have the space to give a full articulation of a solution to this problem, I think the way forward is to require the direct awareness (which is a form of weak awareness) of not only an epistemically relevant fact, but also the direct awareness of the epistemic relevance relation that

[35] Ernest Sosa calls this "experiential awareness." This is when one is aware just in virtue of having an experience. He contrasts experiential awareness with "noticing awareness," which involves constituent belief states. See Sosa and BonJour, *Epistemic Justification*, 120.

holds between the belief and the fact.[36] So in the case of the pain, S must be directly aware of three objects: (1) her belief that she is in pain, (2) the fact of her being in pain and (3) the relation of correspondence that holds between her belief and the fact. Being directly aware of a belief's correspondence with a fact entails the truth of that belief and puts one in an ideal epistemic situation. However, we are not often in that ideal epistemic situation. That is, we are not often directly aware of whether our beliefs stand in the correspondence relation. There are, on my view, other relations of epistemic relevance that make likely our beliefs without entailing their truth. That is, a belief can be made likely by a fact of which one is aware without having to be aware of the truthmaker of the belief. By being directly aware of a belief's likelihood, on the basis of a fact, one is in a positive epistemic position even if one is not in the ideal epistemic situation. There is much work to be done in spelling this view out. The point here is to give a bare bones sketch of what I take would amount to an adequate response to Bergmann's dilemma and make way for an adequate evidentialist theory.

Reformed Epistemology

In philosophical circles, the main alternative to evidentialism, in terms of a religious epistemology, is a view called *reformed epistemology*, defended by one of the most prominent living Christian philosophers, Alvin Plantinga. Reformed epistemology says Christian beliefs can be rational despite the lack of evidence. A belief in God (as an example of a Christian belief) is rational, the reformed epistemologist thinks, when it is produced by a properly functioning cognitive faculty. What cognitive faculty produces the belief in God? Plantinga (after John Calvin) asserts that we have the *sensus divinatatis*, a sense of the divine. He argues that so long as this faculty, in producing this belief, satisfies certain other conditions (e.g., it is functioning according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth), then it is a warranted Christian belief.[37]

Plantinga begins his project by recognizing that a common objection to Christian belief is that there is insufficient evidence for these beliefs. Perhaps, so goes the objection, there is some evidence (e.g., theistic arguments) to believe there is a largely uninvolved creator/designer deity. But that is

[36] Direct awareness is sometimes called "acquaintance." See Ali Hasan and Richard Fumerton, "Knowledge by Acquaintance vs. Description," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/knowledge-acquaindescrip/. For a critique of Bergmann's dilemma, see Ali Hasan "Classical Foundationalism and Bergmann's Dilemma," *Journal of Philosophical Research* (2011) 36:391–410; and John Depoe, "Bergmann's Dilemma and Internalism's Escape," *Acta Analytica* 27 no. 4 (2012): 409–23.

[37] Alvin Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 30–44. Plantinga defines "warrant" as the property, enough of which, turns a merely true belief into knowledge. Thus, if rationality and justification find a place in Plantinga's epistemology, it will be in the category of warrant.

not the God of the Bible—not by a long shot. The Christian makes a much stronger claim, and these stronger claims require significantly more evidence than the classical arguments provide. Thus, just as Bertrand Russell is said to have once declared about what he would say if he were to stand before God, the answer: "Not enough evidence."

So the Christian is faced with a decision. If one thinks Christian beliefs are rational, then one must show that Christianity does have sufficient evidence after all, or one should concede that evidence is not necessary for rational Christian belief. The evidentialist of course says it is the former. However, Plantinga concedes the lack of evidence (especially for typical non-academic persons) and, therefore, affirms the latter option.

But Plantinga has to overcome the very plausible intuition that evidence is necessary for rational belief, which I've outlined above. To do so, Plantinga, first of all, zeroes in on how we should think of evidence. When pressed to offer the evidence one has for his or her beliefs, one will typically present an argument. This provides, what Plantinga calls, "propositional evidence" in that an argument will be a series of stated propositions.[38] He goes on:

> But obviously you can't have propositional evidence for everything you believe. Every train of argument will have to start somewhere, and the ultimate premises from which it starts will not themselves be believed on the evidential basis of other propositions; they will have to be accepted in the *basic* way, that is, not on the evidential basis of other beliefs.[39]

Plantinga claims that evidentialism seems to assume what's known as *classical foundationalism*. The classical foundationalist says a belief is rational if and only if it is properly basic or it is inferred from something properly basic. What is it for a belief to be properly basic? A properly basic belief is one whose epistemic support is not some other belief from which it was inferred. Rather, as Plantinga says, a proposition is properly basic, for a person S, if and only if it is held by S with certainty, in either being self-evident for S or incorrigible for S.[40] A self-evident belief is one in which we can simply "see" the truth of a claim because of understanding the claim. Examples would be simple mathematical and logical claims. When one understands the relevant concepts involved in, say, "2+3=5" or in "it's not the case that (A and not-A)," one can just see that these are necessarily true. They are self-evident.

An incorrigible belief is one that is directly based on the awareness of one's own mental states. If I believe I am in pain, on the basis of being in

[38] Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 13.

[39] Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 14.

[40] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84. He also says "evident to the senses" as a distinct disjunct in this analysis. In *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, however, he subsumes this disjunct into the notion of incorrigibility.

pain, then this is a belief about which I enjoy certainty. Given your subjective access to your pain, it seems very difficult (if possible at all) to be wrong about being in pain. And when I'm having a visual experience as of a tree, I can be certain that I am having a visual experience as of a tree. This isn't to be certain about there being a tree, since this could be a hallucination. However, I am certain about the content of the mental experience given its incorrigibility.

The Christian, beholden to classical foundationalism, has a problem, Plantinga thinks. This is because the claims of Christianity are not, in large measure, self-evident or incorrigible. Thus, for the classical foundationalist, they must be accepted on the basis of more basic propositions that are, at some point, self-evident or incorrigible. But, again, it is not clear this is the case. So if classical foundationalism is true, Christian belief is largely unjustified. If one thinks Christian belief is rationally justified, then Plantinga's argument is that we'll need to look to anti-evidentialist account.

Moreover, Plantinga claims that classical foundationalism (and, thus, evidentialism) is problematic in its own right. He says colorfully:

> But classical foundationalism itself has serious problems. First, it seems to shoot itself in the foot; it is hoist on its own petard; it is in self-referentially hot water. For according to classical foundationalism . . . you are within your epistemic rights in believing a proposition only if you believe it on the evidential basis of propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible.[41]

Classical foundationalism itself, he thinks, is not believed on the basis of propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible. So classical foundationalism should be rejected by its criterion.

Plantinga's next move is to point out that there are a variety of beliefs we commonly take to be rational, but are neither self-evident or incorrigible nor based on anything that is self-evident or incorrigible. These include beliefs about the physical objects in our environment, the states of affairs of our past, the existence of other minds, etc. Though these all fall short of the criterion of the classical foundationalist, they are all seemingly rational. What makes these rational? Plantinga suggests these are rational insofar as they are produced by properly functioning cognitive faculties that are aimed at truth and that operate in appropriate environments. I will spare the reader some of the (well worth reading) technicalities. But the basic move Plantinga makes is that belief in God and the great truths of the gospel are rational like these others not because of the evidence we have, but because there is a belief-producing process that is functioning properly. Why does God not make it such that all of our beliefs are produced by properly functioning faculties? Our problem is our cognitive faculties, including the aforementioned

[41] Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 15.

sensus divinatatus, has been marred by the noetic effects of the fall. So we, on our own, don't form Christian beliefs. But there's good news (i.e., the gospel). The Holy Spirit can overcome our damaged state and produce in us Christian beliefs. Plantinga says:

> These beliefs do not come to the Christian just by way of memory, perception, reason, testimony, the *sensus divinitatus*, or any other of the cognitive faculties or processes with which we human beings were originally created; they come instead by way of the work of the Holy Spirit, who gets us to accept, causes us to see the truth of these great truths of the gospel. These beliefs don't come just by way of the normal operation of our natural faculties; they are a supernatural gift.[42]

It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that is designed to produce these sorts of beliefs, and insofar as these beliefs are produced in us in the way Plantinga's account requires, then he claims Christian beliefs are warranted, rational, and justified for us.[43] Though we may often have evidence for these beliefs, the evidence is not necessary for their rationality.

A Critique of Plantinga's Account

In response to Plantinga's influential account, the first thing to point out is that much of his argument turns on whether evidentialism is necessarily tied to classical foundationalism. One could very well concede that he has shown classical foundationalism to be self-defeating, in some sense, but argue that evidentialism does not presuppose classical foundationalism. Most evidentialists these days are, in fact, not classical foundationalists. Many defend what's come to be known as *moderate foundationalism* (or sometimes *modest foundationalism*), according to which a belief may be properly basic without being certain. The moderate foundationalist thinks a properly basic belief can be based on some fact that makes it probably true and, thus, rational to believe. Plantinga's argument doesn't engage this sort of view.

One prominent form of moderate foundationalism makes the seeming state the primary evidential fact upon which we base our beliefs.[44] On this sort of view, if it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of any defeaters to the contrary, S has justification for believing that p. The thought is that when we believe that p, this is often because it seems to us that p. The seeming state is distinct from the belief state since, it is argued, that it can seem to us that p when we don't believe that p. The stick half submerged in water

[42] Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 56.

[43] Plantinga, *Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 56.

[44] See Earl Conee, "Seeming Evidence," in Chris Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

can seem bent even though we may (accurately) believe it is not. So when I look out my office window and I have an experience as of a tree, it seems that there is a tree outside of my window. This seeming state, it is claimed, makes my belief that there is a tree rational. Could I be wrong? Could I be hallucinating the experience? Yes, of course I could be hallucinating, but this fact alone does not make the belief irrational. In fact, even if one is hallucinating this tree-experience, it still seems rational for one to believe on the basis of the seeming experience. The situation changes of course if one were to have reason to believe one is hallucinating. That is, one could have a defeater that would render the belief unjustified. However, the thesis is, in the absence of defeaters, if it seems to one that p, then one is rationally justified in believing that p.

I'm not here endorsing this view, since it is certainly not without its challenges.[45] However, the point is that this is a prominent view that does not require a properly basic belief to be incorrigible or self-evident.

A more fundamental problem with Plantinga's account (and, frankly, all externalist accounts) is that it attempts to secure rationality without securing the subject's assurance. That is, a believing subject can satisfy Plantinga's account and still have no idea what the belief has going for it. This is to raise the SPO. From the subject's perspective, a belief satisfying Plantinga's account can be no different than some blindly irrational conviction.

To see this, consider the following thought experiment. Suppose Jones has a Christian belief at time t but lacks all evidence of any kind for this belief at t. Call this belief C. He believes C, at least at t, *not* on the basis of anyone's testimony, from reading Scripture, or from any kind of apologetic argument. From Jones's perspective, C merely popped into his head, and he is finding himself assenting to it at t. Despite lacking all evidence, let's suppose C is produced by the Holy Spirit and satisfies all of Plantinga's conditions. Keep in mind, one can satisfy Plantinga's conditions without having any evidence at all. Suppose further that Jones, at t, also has the belief that he will compete in the next summer Olympics running the 100-meter dash. The problem with this belief is that Jones is out of shape, middle-aged, and never competed in any athletics before. Call this belief O. O also has no evidence (and, for the sake of the argument, we can suppose Jones does not possess any defeaters at t for the belief that O), but it is caused in Jones by an intense feeling of wishful thinking. As far as Jones is concerned, both of these beliefs, C and O, are equally without internal evidence at t. By hypothesis, C satisfies Plantinga's account. But O, we would all agree, is an epistemically deficient belief. But why should C, especially from the perspective of Jones, not get the same diagnosis? If we are talking about the rationality of Jones, it seems

[45] On my own view, not just any seeming will do the trick. It can seem to one that one's favorite sports team will win the big game when this is an objectively irrational belief. As I say above, one must be directly aware of the epistemic relation that holds between one's belief and a relevant fact. This state may be phenomenologically characterized as its *epistemically seeming* to S that p.

that both of these beliefs are epistemically deficient despite the different causes of these beliefs. Again, Jones has no idea of anything epistemic going for either belief.

Having a belief produced by the Holy Spirit while at the same time lacking any internal evidence is, to be sure, a highly unusual situation. In fact, my own view is that the Holy Spirit always uses some internal indicator when producing Christian belief. Even though that may be how it goes, the point is that Plantinga's account allows for this sort of hypothetical case. And this makes Plantinga's account fall prey to the SPO and, thus, is unsatisfying as an epistemological account. Plantinga is making a point about a belief's causal origin, the environment, the reliability of the process, etc. But none of these necessarily helps the believing subject unless he or she is aware of these facts. When it comes to epistemology, we want, as believing subjects, some reason to think our beliefs are caused in the appropriate sorts of ways. The fundamental epistemological concern is simply not addressed in Plantinga's account. It is certainly good to have beliefs that are produced in appropriate ways and to be in appropriate environments. It's just not necessarily an epistemological good unless these provide the believing subject evidence for their beliefs.

Christian Belief

If evidentialism is a plausible epistemological theory, then it should, I suggest, apply to Christian belief. In this closing section, I will argue that Christian belief is not fundamentally different from belief, in general. This is something Plantinga and most contemporary epistemologists seem to assume in the area of religious epistemology. If this is right, then we should be evidentialists about Christian belief as well.

Here is the argument:

1. Beliefs, in general, require evidence to be rational.
2. Christian beliefs are not fundamentally different from beliefs in general.
3. Therefore, Christian beliefs require evidence to be rational.

Premise 1 follows from the thesis of evidentialism for which I have argued above. Premise 2 simply says that when we talk about the beliefs we form in assenting to the claims of Christianity, the notion of "belief" is not some unique cognitive state vis-à-vis other beliefs we hold.

We should note that all that is in view, in this discussion of Christian beliefs, is the intellectual assent to the propositions of Christianity. We are not specifically talking about saving faith. Intellectual assent is necessary but not, I'd suggest, sufficient for saving faith. This can be seen in the fact there are very many who assent intellectually to the truths of Christianity but have never entered into a genuine saving relationship with Jesus Christ It seems possible to assent to intellectually, for example, the claim that God exists,

that the Bible is true, and that Jesus rose from the dead, and yet not yield one's life to Christ as Lord. There seem to be very many "religious folks" who are in this precise epistemic situation. They do not have intellectual problems, at least with the broad sweep of the Christian view, but do in fact have a spiritual problem. They may intellectually believe, but even the demons believe, as James tells us, and they shudder (Jas 2:19). These religious folks may believe and may even rationally believe, but they do not know Christ in a saving way. So if the intellectual beliefs of the Christian are not fundamentally different from beliefs in general, then, given premise 1, they need evidence to be held rationally.

What sort of evidence is there for our Christian beliefs? As was mentioned above, Christians will typically source their Christian beliefs in Scripture. Scripture is rightly understood as evidence for the truth of our Christian beliefs. Scripture, it seems to me, is best understood as a kind of divine testimony. Testimonial evidence is a very important form of evidence. We believe many, many things for no other reason than the trusted testimony of others. This includes the testimony of our parents, teachers, friends, authors, and other trusted sources. It is possible to be led astray either intentionally or unintentionally by the testimony of others. But the rational support of testimony all depends on the trustworthiness and accuracy of the one who is testifying. This is why it is so important for Christians to come to see Scripture as divine revelation and rely upon it rather than the testimony of any merely human work. There is no more trustworthy testimony, on the Christian view, than the very words of God.

Other Christian evidences would include such things as direct religious experiences of God, specific answers to specific prayers, and being transformed and seeing others who are transformed by the power of God in our lives. We will also look to history (e.g., in justifying claims about the resurrection), archaeology (e.g., to justify claims about biblical figures, events, and places), philosophy (e.g., to justify claims about the goodness and power of God in the face of evil), and other academic disciplines.

Can those who have never studied academic areas such as theology, history, and philosophy be rational in their Christian beliefs? Do they have good evidence? Yes, it is my view that the Christian believer typically has good reasons for his or her Christian beliefs. Again, seeing Scripture as divine testimony means that the evidence for Christian truths is widely accessible. Young children can read (or be read to) and base their Christian beliefs on this testimonial evidence. This is why it is so important for parents to teach Scripture to their children from a really young age. Becoming familiar with this divine testimony fills out the evidential basis for the child's Christian beliefs. It is also very common for people to have experiences of God in various ways. People may, at a certain point, have doubts about whether Scripture is God's word and whether they should trust their experiences. They may even be faced with evidence that calls these things into question.

In this case, they will need to investigate further, and the more studied areas may prove extremely helpful.

Now, I have argued that Christian beliefs are not fundamentally different from beliefs in general and that they, therefore, require evidence to be believed rationally. But let's be clear. The object of our Christian beliefs is certainly different than regular, everyday beliefs. Indeed, our Christian beliefs are beliefs about the eternal God of the universe and the plan of salvation for those who would place their faith in Christ. They are, in this respect, special—indeed, infinitely so!