

Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics

One of the frequent criticisms of Reformed epistemology is that it has done very little to promote the agenda of offering reasons for supposing that theism or Christian theism is true, so-called positive apologetics. An even stronger criticism is that it has actually been opposed to such an agenda. Various writers have claimed that the distinctive features of Reformed epistemology restrict it to a mere negative apologetic, simply answering objections against the faith. Therefore, Reformed epistemology offers a weak and inadequate form of Christian apologetics.

In this paper I want to subject this common and long-standing criticism of Reformed epistemology to more careful scrutiny. After briefly outlining the distinction between positive and negative apologetics, I will clarify the distinctly epistemological character of Reformed epistemology and its relationship to the task of Christian apologetics, especially positive apologetics. Although not constituting a school of apologetics, Reformed epistemology does entail a particular sort of apologetically useful philosophical argumentation, one that is neither identical with nor entails positive apologetics but nonetheless logically consistent with it. Moreover, I will show that several of the alleged arguments for the incompatibility of theistic arguments and Reformed epistemology are inadequate. None of the central claims of Reformed epistemology actually provides an adequate reason to favor negative over positive apologetics. Lastly I consider the prospects for an appreciation of theistic arguments given the claims of Reformed epistemology.

I. Positive and Negative Apologetics

It has been commonplace in literature in the philosophy of religion to distinguish between negative and positive apologetics. To understand this distinction it is helpful to begin by considering the concept of *defeaters*, and especially the distinction between undercutting and rebutting defeaters. A defeater is, broadly speaking, a condition or circumstance that undermines the positive epistemic of a belief (be it rationality, justification, warrant, or knowledge). In the present context we're interested in such conditions construed in an internalist sense (i.e., conditions to which the cognizer has special epistemic access, can tell whether or not they obtain just upon reflection).[\(footnote 1\)](#) So defeaters will be other beliefs or experiences of the cognizer. Defeaters come in (at least) two forms: rebutting and undercutting. Rebutting defeaters are overriding reasons for supposing that a belief (or proposition) B is false. These can be contrasted with undercutting reasons for supposing that the grounds of some belief (or proposition) are inadequate, i.e. do not provide the appropriate sort of support for B. Call these undercutting defeaters.[\(footnote 2\)](#) Of course, defeaters can defeat other defeaters, so there are also defeater-defeaters, defeater-defeater-defeaters, etc. For the purposes of the present paper (unless otherwise noted), we can regard defeaters as defeating the *rationality* of a belief.

Now there are many sorts of putative defeaters that have been brought against theistic belief. Among these are reasons for supposing that there is no God. Arguments from the alleged incoherence of theism and the problem of evil are two such examples. In contrast to these rebutting defeaters, there are also many undercutting defeaters, for example, Feuerbachian and Freudian projection theories of religious belief. (Both sorts of defeaters also contribute to distinctly epistemic objections to theistic belief, that it is irrational, unjustified, or unwarranted. I will discuss this in section 2). Given a rebutting defeater against theism, there are two moves one can make to defeat the defeater. One can either rebut the defeater or undercut it. An undercutting defeater-defeater here would be an overriding or sufficient reason for supposing that the premises of the atheological argument do not adequately support the conclusion that there is no God. Plantinga's free will defense against the logical problem of evil is such a defeater-defeater. However, one could also rebut the original rebutting defeater. If a defeater is a rebutting defeater against some proposition p, it will be a reason to think that not-p. But then a rebutting defeater-defeater will be a reason for thinking that **not** not-p, hence a reason for supposing that p.

The connection to Christian apologetics should now become clear. The distinction between negative and positive apologetics emerges from a consideration of how defeaters against theistic belief can themselves be defeated. One who attempts to rebut a rebutting defeater against theism is engaging in positive apologetics since a rebutter against not-p (there is no God) is equivalent to arguing for p (there is a God).

But one who simply attempts to undercut a rebutting (or undercutting) defeater against theism or Christian belief is engaging in negative apologetics by showing that some argument against theism is not a good argument. This understanding of the distinction between negative and positive apologetics has been widely adopted by philosophers of religion.[\(footnote 3\)](#)

Reformed epistemology has frequently been criticized on the grounds that it favors or is exclusively committed to negative apologetics. In "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited,"[\(footnote 4\)](#) George Mavrodes was one of the first philosophers to note this apparent liability of Reformed epistemology. According to Mavrodes, negative apologetics makes belief in God epistemically *permissible*, but it does not provide us with a reason for supposing that theistic belief is true. Not only might we want our beliefs to be rational in this stronger sense, but the task of Christian apologetics requires that Christians meet the charge of "insufficient evidence" for God head-on. Reformed epistemology does not provide us with the resources for this task. More recently, in *Five Views of Apologetics* (edited by Stephen Cowan) Gary Habermas as resurrected the Mavrodian criticism in relation to Kelly Clark's exposition of Reformed epistemology (in the same book).

Clark does encourage negative apologetics, and his colleagues at Calvin have done an excellent job arguing that crucial Christian doctrines can be defended against objections. But where is the positive defense? . . . My concern at this point, however, is that the efforts of Reformed epistemologists have not, to my knowledge, moved very far in the direction of actually establishing the truth of Christian theism. . . . Maybe there is a sense in which these scholars think the positive move cannot be made well. Or maybe some of them are not very interested in this step. In any case, I think [George] Mavrodes is right about the ambivalent status of positive apologetics in Reformed thought. But without it, I wonder how Reformed epistemologists establish Christian theism in terms of their apologetic methodology.[\(footnote 5\)](#)

But is this common criticism of Reformed epistemology accurate? More generally, what is the connection between Reformed epistemology and the dichotomy between negative and positive apologetics? To answer these questions, it will be important first to outline the project of Reformed epistemology. Owing to the centrality of Plantinga's work to Reformed epistemology, I will restrict my focus to the work of Alvin Plantinga, though much of what is said here is applicable to the philosophical contributions of William Alston and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

II. Alvin Plantinga and the Project of Reformed Epistemology

The seeds of Reformed epistemology were planted in the now well-known *parity argument* found in Plantinga's *God and Other Minds*. In it Plantinga examines several important arguments for and against God's existence (cosmological, teleological, and ontological), and then does the same with respect to arguments for and against belief in other minds. Plantinga argues that whilst the arguments for belief in God and other minds are far from conclusive, neither are the objections to such arguments very formidable. Arguments for God's existence and other minds have a similar dialectical structure. As proofs, they succeed and fail in similar ways. Hence, there is a dialectical parity between theistic belief and belief in other minds. These considerations support Plantinga's contention that if belief in other minds is rational, then so is belief in God. But, as Plantinga claims, belief in minds is rational. Hence, belief in God is also rational.[\(footnote 6\)](#)

In this early attempt at arguing for the rational justification of belief in God Plantinga assumed, like nearly everyone else at the time, that the question of the positive epistemic status of theistic belief was equivalent to the question of whether there was good evidence for it. Actually, he was assuming it but also implicitly bringing it into question. Nor did it occur to him to consider what exactly "rationality" or "justification" meant. Both of these points became the subject of critical analysis in "Reason and Belief in God" (1983) and several other papers from the early 1980s. In these papers Plantinga focused on classical evidentialism, his opaque target in *God and Other Minds*. There is first the *claim* that (a): theistic belief is rational only if supported by or based on propositional evidence. Secondly there is the widely

held view that that (b): theistic belief is not adequately supported by propositional evidence. Together (a) and (b) support the *objection* that (c): theistic belief is not rational. The importance of natural theology among many theists since the Enlightenment has been largely dictated by theists assuming (a) but wanting to respond to objection (c). Hence, their responses have typically challenged the truth of (b). Plantinga's main contribution at this juncture is to turn the critical focus from (b) to (a). He aims to dislodge the long standing and widespread assumption that the rational justification of theistic belief stands or falls on the success of theistic arguments or natural theology. Hence, his goal is to respond to a distinctly *epistemological* objection to theistic belief by challenging one of the fundamental epistemological presuppositions of the objection.

Plantinga's strategy, initially at any rate, is to undercut (c) by arguing that (a) is false. He does this by arguing that (a) is grounded in the epistemology of classical foundationalism and epistemic deontologism (what Plantinga now refers to as the "classical package"), neither of which is epistemologically plausible. First, classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent and has the rather implausible (if not absurd) implication that most of our commonsense everyday beliefs are unjustified. Secondly, deontologism provides no basis on which to argue that theistic belief is rational only if based on argument, as a person who holds theistic belief in a basic way does not necessarily violate any intellectual obligations or duties. So Plantinga ends up actually arguing that (c) is false. He argues that theistic belief can be (and is for *some* people, in the appropriate circumstances) deontologically justified, even in the absence of propositional evidence. It should be noted that Plantinga's focus on deontological justification and rationality was dictated by the terms of the evidentialist objection itself, which was apparently implicitly or explicitly framed in terms of intellectual rights and obligations.

What we have in the early phase of Reformed epistemology are arguments *against* epistemic objections to theistic belief as well as arguments in *support* of the claim that theistic belief can be properly basic with respect to deontological justification.

Hence, we find arguments for the following claims:

[P1] The evidentialist objection to the justification or rationality of theistic belief is based on inadequate grounds.

[P2] Theistic belief can be properly basic with respect to justification or rationality (deontologically construed).

[P1] undercuts (c) and [P2] rebuts both (a) and (c). Both of these moves represent the early efforts of Reformed epistemology to respond to the classical evidentialist epistemology of religious belief and argue for the rationality of theistic belief without propositional evidence. Similar efforts were put forward by William Alston and Nicholas Wolterstorff. ([footnote 7](#))

In his most recent *Warranted Christian Belief* (hereafter, *WCB*) Plantinga aims to demonstrate the failure of a broad range of *de jure* objections to theistic and Christian beliefs, objections to the effect that Christian belief is unreasonable, unjustified, unwarranted, intellectually sub-par, or otherwise epistemically challenged in some way. (The *de jure* objection is distinguished from the *de facto* objection that concerns the truth of Christianity.) The classical evidentialist objection turns out to be but one of a variety of *de jure* type objections, an element of the "classical package" that also includes classical foundationalism and the idea of rationality or justification construed deontologically. Plantinga does not think that the classical package provides grounds for a very sensible *de jure* objection to theistic belief. Unlike most of his earlier essays, Plantinga's main focus in *WCB* is warrant, the property that distinguishes true belief from knowledge. As he argued in *Warrant and Proper Function*, a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a congenial epistemic environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth. From the account of warrant emerges a distinctly externalist sense of rationality, a belief's being produced by truth-aimed, properly functioning (and unimpeded) cognitive faculties. (This contrasts with deontological rationality, a matter of being within one's intellectual rights). In *WCB* Plantinga argues that the *de jure* objection to theistic belief is most sensibly construed as the claim that theistic belief lacks external rationality or, more generally, lacks

warrant. Plantinga spends considerable time developing and responding to the objection that theistic belief is irrational in the sense that it is produced by something other than truth-aimed cognitive faculties (the Freud objection) or is the product of some sort of cognitive disorder (the Marx objection).

There are at least five general claims that Plantinga argues for in *WCB* relative to *de jure* objections. (1) He presents positive arguments in support of the claim that theistic and Christian belief is properly basic with respect to justification (*WCB*, pp. 99-102, 177-78, 203). Similarly, theistic and Christian belief is internally rational (pp. 203-204). (2) Plantinga argues that there is an epistemically possible model ([footnote 8](#)) according to which theistic (and Christian) belief has warrant in a basic way (*WCB*, pp. 168-177, chapters 8 and 9). (3) He argues that if theism is true, then it is likely that this model (or something quite close to it) is true (*WCB*, pp. 186-198). (4) He also argues that there is a set of objections to the truth of the model for which we have sufficient undercutting defeaters (*WCB*, chapter 10). (5) With respect to external rationality and warrant Plantinga rebuts the claim that Christian belief is irrational whether or not it is true.

III. *De Jure* and *De Facto* Apologetics

Prima facie, it is clear that the project outlined above is not concerned with establishing the truth of theism or Christianity. Nor is it an attempt to develop a full-blown religious worldview or theory of religious belief. And it is not, contrary to what some literature suggests, itself a view of Christian apologetics. Reformed epistemology in general, and Plantinga in particular, is engaged in an *epistemological* project, and like many such projects in general epistemology, the success and value of the project does not depend on establishing the truth of the beliefs the positive epistemic status of which it aims to discuss. Reformed epistemology aims to defend and support a variety of epistemic propositions, propositions about the epistemic status of theistic belief, as opposed to the truth of theistic belief. In fact, the project began with a narrowly circumscribed epistemological project, that of refuting the evidentialist claim that theistic belief is rational only if there is propositional evidence for it. To this extent Reformed epistemology, certainly in its early phase, has a rather modest goal, which should not be confused with a complete apologetic package. ([footnote 9](#)) Moreover, even when we consider the attempt of Reformed epistemology to provide positive arguments in support of the rationality of theistic belief (in addition merely to defending such a claim against objections), the goals remain carefully fitted to the contours of an on-going project in the epistemology of religious belief.

Hence, we can state the epistemological project of Reformed epistemology as follows:

[RE] Reformed epistemology aims to defend and support a range of second-order claims about the positive epistemic status of theistic (and Christian) belief, one of which is the contention that theistic (and Christian) can be properly basic.

Although not identical with a theory in Christian apologetics, the epistemological project of Reformed epistemology has something of value to offer in the area of Christian apologetics. After all, one of the goals of apologetics is to support and defend the positive epistemic status of theistic and Christian belief. We can refer to this kind of apologetic argument as *de jure* apologetics. What's the relationship between *de jure* apologetics and the dichotomy between negative and positive *de facto* apologetics? It would be tempting simply to argue that epistemological apologetics entails or is identical with negative apologetics. But this would be a mistake. If positive apologetics consists of arguments for the truth of theism or Christian belief, then clearly epistemological apologetics is logically independent of positive apologetics. But if negative apologetics consists of undercutting an objection to the truth of theism or Christian belief, then neither is epistemological apologetics equivalent to negative apologetics. Since supporting the truth of the rationality of theistic belief is in fact equivalent to offering a rebutting defeater against the denial of the rationality of theistic belief, epistemological apologetics can't be identified with undercutting defeaters.

The resolution to this difficulty requires recognizing a defect in the standard account of the distinction between positive and negative apologetics articulated in section I. If positive apologetics consists of rebutting some initial objection, this only entails offering evidence for the truth of theism if the initial

objection is an objection to the *truth* of theistic belief. But the initial objection might be against the *rationality* of belief in God; a reason to believe that theistic belief is not rational. In that case, a rebutting defeater (for this defeater) would be reason for supposing that theistic belief is rational (not necessarily that it is true). The standard account of positive and negative apologetics is actually two different, though related, accounts, one based on contrasting offering arguments for theism with simply answering objections, and the other based on the two ways a defeater can be defeated. I think it is helpful to begin by considering the kind of objection being made. Plantinga distinguishes between two kinds of objections to theism: *de jure* (epistemic) and *de facto* (factual). These two kinds of objections can each be rebutted or undercut. If rebutters are identified with positive apologetics, and undercutters with negative apologetics, then we should recognize negative and positive *de jure* apologetics and negative and positive *de facto* apologetics.

IV. Reformed Epistemology and *De Facto* Apologetics

As a project in epistemology, Reformed epistemology obviously entails *de jure* apologetics. But what is the connection between Reformed epistemology and *de facto* apologetics? It is usually argued that Reformed epistemology favors, either exclusively or by way of emphasis, negative apologetics. Although philosophers sometimes include under this category the support and defense of the rationality of belief in God, they usually refer to the attempt to answer *de facto* type objections, evidence against theism or Christian belief or arguments to the effect that such beliefs are based on inadequate grounds. Does the Reformed epistemologist's commitment to *de jure* apologetics imply either negative or positive *de facto* apologetics? What is the logical relationship between *de jure* and *de facto* apologetics?

It is quite easy to see how from the evidentialist's position the goal of showing that theistic belief is rational requires positive *de facto* apologetics.

[E] Theistic belief is rational only if there is adequate evidence in support of it.

Now if [E] is true, then I can only show that theistic belief is rational by marshalling evidence in support of the truth of theistic belief. In other words, given classical evidentialism showing that theistic belief is rational requires providing evidence for the truth of theism. So if evidentialism is correct, then showing the positive epistemic status of theistic belief requires positive apologetics. In this case, epistemological or *de jure* apologetics entails positive apologetics. (Of course, presumably defending the rationality of theistic belief would not require evidence for God's existence, but simply sufficient reasons for supposing that the charge of inadequate evidence is not based on a good argument). Here positive *de jure* apologetics depends on positive *de facto* apologetics. Hence, the critique of evidentialism by Reformed epistemologists actually prepared the way for arguing for the truth of second-order epistemic propositions without having to appeal to theistic arguments.

But there is nonetheless a relation between the *de jure* project and *de facto* objections. For Reformed epistemologists the connection to *de facto* apologetics stems from the relationship between rationality and defeaters. Although Reformed epistemology maintains that reasons are not needed for rational theistic belief, Reformed epistemology has rather consistently held that reasons can remove or negatively affect the rationality of theistic belief. In other words, properly basic theistic beliefs can be defeated by way of internalist type defeaters.[\(footnote 10\)](#) Reformed epistemology maintains what we can call an internalist no-defeater condition for rational theistic belief. This is true not merely with respect to deontological or internal rationality but also the externalist rationality associated with warrant. I simply consider it generally here.

[ND] Theistic belief is rational only if there is no undefeated defeater for it.[\(footnote 11\)](#)

Now it appears that the conjunction of [RE] and [ND] entails *de facto* (negative or positive) apologetics, given

[D] There is some putative *de facto* defeater against theistic belief.

Take the situation where the project of Reformed epistemology aims to *show* or *support* the contention that theistic belief is rational. In this case one aims to show or establish that the conditions for rationality obtain with respect to belief in God, but one of these conditions is the absence of any undefeated defeaters against theistic belief. So it looks like establishing the rationality of theistic belief requires providing good reasons for supposing that each putative defeater for theistic belief can be defeated. So take the case for the believer being deontologically rational in holding theistic belief. If a no-defeater condition is imposed upon being within one's intellectual rights (as Reformed epistemologists maintain), then showing that a believer can be within his intellectual rights in believing in God requires showing that putative or potential defeaters can be defeated. Hence, there will be a need to address the atheological argument from evil, Freudian projection theories, arguments from the incoherence of theism, and the like. If these defeaters cannot be defeated, then it will be quite difficult to maintain that anyone can be within his intellectual rights in believing in God.

Now take the case where the Reformed epistemology project is that of *defending* the rationality of belief in God against the epistemic objection that theistic belief is not rational. The atheist objector may take the conjunction of [ND] and the denial of its consequent as grounds for denying that theistic belief is rational. Now since this is a case of defending the positive epistemic status of theistic belief one will have to undercut the atheist's defeater. Since the reasons in question deductively entail the conclusion that theistic belief is not rational, and the Reformed epistemologist accepts [ND], defending the rationality of belief in God requires undercutting the epistemic objection by attacking the premise that states or involves a *de facto* defeater for theistic belief. One can attack this premise in one of two ways, either by rebutting it or undercutting it. Either way one is going to engage in *de facto* apologetics, one is going to defend the rationality of belief in God by showing that there is adequate evidence for theism or that the counter evidence against theism does not form an overriding reason for supposing that theism is false.

To put the matter more precisely, given the epistemic interpretation of *de facto* defeaters (i.e., that defeaters undermine the rationality of a belief), every putative *de facto* (rebutting or undercutting) defeater entails a *de jure* objection. If there is a defeater for a belief B, one has acquired a reason for supposing that it would no longer be rational to continue to hold B (at least not with the same degree of conviction). I see what appears to me to be a sheep in the field. The owner of the field, whom I regard as reliable, comes by and tells me that there is no sheep in the field but that he owns a dog that looks like a sheep from a distance. Here I acquire a rebutting *de facto* defeater for my belief that there is a sheep in the field. I acquire reasons for supposing that there is no sheep in the field. But under the epistemic interpretation of defeaters, such a defeater entails an epistemic proposition, namely that it is no longer rational to believe that there is a sheep in the field (or that it is rational to believe the negation of my former belief). The same holds true in the case of theistic beliefs. Alleged *de facto* defeaters entail *de jure* objections. [\(footnote 12\)](#) The defeat of *de facto* defeaters is thus crucial to both supporting and defending the rationality of theistic belief. [\(footnote 13\)](#) Call this the defeater-defeater requirement.

[DD] Given any defeater D against theistic belief, theistic belief is not rational unless there is a defeater-defeater D* that defeats D.

A potential objection to this argument that links *de jure* and *de facto* apologetics is Plantinga's contention that theistic belief itself can defeat defeaters against theistic belief. As he says, theistic belief can be an intrinsic defeater-defeater, a situation where a belief acts as its own defeater-defeater against some initial defeater. This is contrasted with extrinsic defeater-defeaters where a belief or experience *other than* the initial defeatee B (or what produced B) defeats the initial defeater D. If theistic belief can function as D*, there will be no need to even answer objections to the truth of theism or Christian belief. This need not entail a denial of *de jure* apologetics, for [RE] establishes the goal of defending the rationality of theistic belief. One would simply accomplish this by showing why theistic belief remains rational in the face of defeaters even if there is no extrinsic defeater-defeater to such defeaters. On this account, showing or defending the rationality of theistic belief does not require showing that, say, a particular atheological argument from evil is not a good argument, but that theistic belief would still be rational for the believer even if such arguments are good.

Plantinga's notion of an intrinsic defeater is an interesting one, but it does not undermine the present argument. First, even if a belief functions as an intrinsic defeater-defeater, this will be because it has a very high degree of warrant. But not all cases of theistic belief will satisfy this condition, even given Plantinga's own epistemological assumptions. According to Plantinga, degree of warrant is proportional to degree of belief, but then since some people certainly have a less than firm conviction regarding God's existence, it follows that their theistic belief will not have the required degree of warrant to defeat some defeaters to theistic belief. So in showing that theistic belief can be rational for those people, there remains the need to show that there exists the appropriate sort of extrinsic defeater-defeaters. But there is a more fundamental problem with the whole idea of beliefs being intrinsic defeater-defeaters. It seems that an intrinsic defeater-defeater is really not an instance of an acquired defeater being defeated at all. If a person holds a theistic belief, the degree of belief index (perhaps along with the degree of warrant) provides an initial degree of insulation from some range of possible defeaters. But this is not to say that the basic theistic belief held at t_1 is a defeater-defeater against a defeater acquired at t_{n+1} . It is only to say that theistic belief (or any belief for that matter) carries with it implications for what can or will in the future count as a defeater for the belief. Only beliefs with certain epistemic immunities (e.g., beliefs about one's mental states) will exclude all possibility of defeat. They will have maximal insulation from defeat. Theistic belief, though it will set certain limitations on the conditions under which a defeater can be acquired, does not rule out a person's acquiring a defeater for the belief. And if a person acquires a defeater, then the defeater must be defeated by some other belief (or experience), independent of the original belief (and its grounds). I think it must be said that no belief can act as an intrinsic defeater-defeater to an acquired defeater; rather, every belief sets constraints on the range of possible acquired defeaters. So *de facto* apologetics remains essential.

Of course, there are two ways of defeating *de facto* defeaters, one may either rebut them or undercut them. But then all that follows from the conjunction of [RE], [ND], and [D] is a *de facto* apologetic disjunction: either positive *de facto* apologetics or negative *de facto* apologetics. Since there are two ways to defeat a defeater, the defeater-defeater entailment in Reformed epistemology does not entail negative *de facto* apologetics. It only implies "one or the other." Some additional argument is necessarily to establish a Reformed preference for one over the other. Criticisms of Reformed epistemology typically assume or argue that, according to the Reformed epistemologist, the preference goes in favor of *de facto* negative apologetics. Is there a reason within Reformed epistemology to prefer one disjunct over the other?

V. Alleged Grounds for the Rejection of *De Facto* Positive Apologetics

The preference for or exclusive commitment to negative apologetics so frequently associated with Reformed epistemology is typically deduced from a rejection of theistic arguments. In other words, it is often argued that since Reformed epistemology rejects theistic arguments, it is left with only negative apologetics as a way of defending the faith. The argument in the last section would yield this very conclusion if a rejection of theistic arguments is intrinsic to the project of Reformed epistemology. Many reasons have been offered for thinking this to be the case. However, the arguments are less than satisfying and stem from some basic epistemological confusions.

1. The Negative Assessment of Theistic Arguments *qua* Philosophical Arguments

Plantinga was critical of theistic arguments and the project of natural theology in *God and Other Minds*. He says that "it is hard to avoid the conclusion that natural theology does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question with which we began: Is it rational to believe in God?"(footnote 14) This early reflection and negative verdict on natural theology gave many the impression that the sort of rational justification for theistic belief Plantinga was providing had little place for natural theology, except as part of the broader parity argument of the book. But as Plantinga has since pointed out,(footnote 15) at the time he was working with a rather stringent conception of natural theology. What he was calling into question were certain lofty claims for natural theology. Plantinga was critiquing the idea that theistic arguments constitute conclusive, coercive, certain, or logical demonstrations proceeding from premises that are self-evident or to which there is universal assent.(footnote 16) But this is not an objection to theistic arguments as such, only a rejection of their construal as demonstrative proofs.

2. Proper Basicity Eliminates the Need for Theistic Arguments

The proper basicity thesis itself suggests to many a downplaying of the importance of theistic arguments. If theistic belief can be properly basic, there seems little need for natural theology. But there is probably a certain epistemic level confusion here. Proper basicity is a thesis about the conditions required for *being* rational in holding a theistic belief, not what is permitted or for that matter required for *showing* that theistic belief is rational, much less showing it to be true. So the apologetic use of theistic arguments is not ruled out on the grounds that theistic belief can be properly basic. It is crucial to distinguish conditions involved in person's belief having some positive epistemic status from conditions needed to show that this is the case. Now, I have already argued that showing that theistic belief is rational does not require evidence for the truth of theism. But there's no reason why such evidence would not be sufficient to show that theistic belief is rational or to contribute in some way to this end.([footnote 17](#))

3. Proper Basicity is Logically Inconsistent with Basing Theistic Belief on Arguments

A particularly strong formulation of the proper basicity thesis implies that theistic arguments are *improper*.([footnote 18](#)) In "Reason and Belief in God" (1983) Plantinga says that one element in the Reformed objection to natural theology is the view that "belief in God *ought not* to be based on arguments."([footnote 19](#)) The idea is that the correct or proper way to believe in God is in a basic way, and it is incorrect or improper to believe in God on the basis of theistic arguments. The normativity here could be construed in two ways, as deontological, being within one's intellectual rights, or the normativity of proper function associated with Plantinga's later warrant theory. The implication would then be that a person who accepted theistic belief in nonbasic way is either violating some intellectual obligation or is subject to some sort of cognitive disorder or malfunction (i.e., not forming theistic belief in accordance with the cognitive design plan for human persons). Surely if this is correct, it would be quite wrong-headed to present arguments which could lead people to believe in God in either an irresponsible or epistemically unhealthy way. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga develops a model according to which theistic belief can have warrant in a basic way. According to this model, if a person's relevant truth-aimed cognitive faculties are functioning properly, then the person will hold a firm theistic belief. Since the model specifies the production of theistic belief in a basic way, this might also suggest that proper function requires holding a basic theistic belief.

I don't see this strong proper basicity formulation as very plausible, nor do I see any reason why a Reformed epistemologist should advocate it. It is quite hard to see what intellectual duties a person would be violating by holding theistic belief on the basis of theistic arguments. So basic theistic belief can't be normative in the deontological sense. On the other hand, why should proper function exclude holding theistic beliefs on the basis of argument? Even if the theistic design plan makes it likely that we should form belief in God, it is far from obvious why this design plan must exclude inferential modes of holding various truths about God. Perhaps the design plan specifies multiple grounds for holding theistic belief. In "The Prospects for Natural Theology," Plantinga admits that theistic arguments can increase the degree of warrant; but if so, the cognitive design plan must have specifications for holding theistic belief at least *in part* of the basis of propositional evidence.([footnote 20](#)) At best, the strong formulation would have to be restated as a prohibition against holding theistic belief *solely* on the basis of argument or evidence. Clearly this doesn't eliminate natural theology. It only clarifies the limits of its epistemic function. But lastly, suppose we accepted the strong formulation as originally stated. It isn't clear that theistic arguments must be eliminated either apologetically or epistemically. Even if a person ought not to believe *in God* on the basis of evidence, it would not follow that one ought not hold belief in *the rationality of one's belief* in God on the basis of evidence, including here the evidence drawn from natural theology. In fact, it might be argued that all such second-order epistemic beliefs require evidential support.([footnote 21](#))

4. Only Undercutting Defeaters are Necessary to Defeat Defeaters against Theistic Belief

Another consideration that would favor negative over positive *de facto* apologetics derives from Plantinga's claim that, given any defeater against theistic belief, only undercutting defeaters are

necessary to defeat a defeater. [\(footnote 22\)](#) If Plantinga's claim is true, there simply is no need to employ theistic arguments. Of course, even if Plantinga is correct here, it would not follow that the use of theistic arguments is logically inconsistent with Reformed epistemology, only that they are superfluous. But whether undercutting defeaters are sufficient in any particular case would seem to depend on the relative strength of the original defeater and the proposed undercutting defeater-defeater. Considerations that support the truth of theism would certainly add strength to any undercutting defeater in defeating some initial defeater for theistic belief. So what we must say here I think is that if one is in possession of an undercutting defeater-defeater of adequate strength, then an undercutting defeater-defeater can defeat an original defeater against theistic belief. But this is in itself not a sufficient ground for the rejection of theistic arguments.

5. The Noetic Effects of Sin Cause a Resistance to Theistic Arguments

Other Reformed thinkers have emphasized the importance of the noetic effects of sin in undermining the efficacy of natural theology. For instance, in "Is Reason Enough?" [\(footnote 23\)](#) Wolterstorff argues that the reluctance of many Reformed thinkers to engage in positive apologetics is based on a realization that admits that the unbeliever willfully ignores and suppresses the testimony of God in the natural world, from which arguments could be constructed. There is plenty of evidence of God's existence, but fallen human persons simply rationalize away this evidence. So natural theology *per se* is not defective but humans are defective and hence the force of theistic arguments in apologetics will be substantially reduced. But, as George Mavrodes has pointed out, this would also count as a reason to avoid engaging in negative apologetics. After all, the one who rationalizes away evidence that supports God's existence will also rationalize into consideration evidence against God's existence to reinforce heart rebellion. As he is disinclined to accept evidence for God's existence, surely he will be equally disinclined to accept arguments against his alleged counter evidence to God's existence. He will, apart from grace, remain obstinate in his projection theories of theistic belief and in various atheological arguments from evil. So this particular objection can't really support negative over positive apologetics since the very noetic effects of sin that would undermine the force of evidence for God's existence would also undermine responses to objections and counter evidence to God's existence. If the apologist writes off the objection "not enough evidence" on the grounds of the noetic effects of sin, he should also write off the objection "too much counter evidence" on similar grounds. [\(footnote 24\)](#)

But we need not give up on the project of apologetics, negative or positive, simply because there is a resistance toward God. Wolterstorff echoes the sentiments of Calvin and other Reformed theologians when he states that the unbeliever already knows that there is a God but refuses to acknowledge this. Similarly the unbeliever may indeed feel the force of theistic arguments but refuse to acknowledge it, especially in the apologetic encounter where pride or intellectual intransigence influences behavior. In fact, the inner workings of the *sensus divinitatis* (by which even the agnostic and atheist have an awareness of God) may allow theistic arguments to acquire what force they have. Theistic arguments may simply tap into the *sensus divinitatis* and bring that witness more powerfully to consciousness. Secondly, the Reformed thinker recognizes noetic renewal brought about by grace and regeneration. God may certainly use considerations drawn from natural theology in bringing some people to salvation, even if this is a rather elementary stage in the process of salvation.

6. Reason Operates according to Passions and Prejudices

Kelly Clark has criticized positive apologetics on the grounds that reason is not neutral. [\(footnote 25\)](#) Our passions and biases often inform our epistemic situation in a profound way. Deep-rooted metaphysical commitments prevent a dispassionate reflection on evidence. Now all of this is quite true. But it is not clear what the conclusion should be. Clark says that those positive apologists to whom he is responding (e.g., Bill Craig, Gary Habermas) somehow ignore this important fact about our epistemic situation. Perhaps they do, but positive apologetics itself does not require that one presuppose the neutrality of reason or otherwise ignore the role of our passions in the assessment of evidence. Some evidentialist apologists may do this, but I don't see that positive apologetics is inextricably woven to such Enlightenment based epistemological assumptions. People are certainly in different epistemic situations, with respect to the premises they accept and the forms of argument they find persuasive. But there are

lots of different theistic arguments. Based on the background beliefs people have, some theistic arguments will be more persuasive than other arguments. Some people will fail to be persuaded by any of them. So what? The situation is in principle true with respect to any argument, even arguments that attempt simply to remove obstacles to the faith, a project to which Clark gives whole-hearted endorsement. Like the resistance argument, this argument from the non-neutrality of reason is really a two-edged sword. Why should it slice through the giving of arguments for the truth of theism, but not slice through answering objections to theism? So it is hard to see why passions and prejudices should prevent a person from seeing the force of, say, the fine-tuning argument, but not prevent her from seeing the force of an argument against an atheological argument from evil. Many of the religiously relevant passions and prejudices are present in each case.

Clark's observation cuts in one of two ways. If overly stated, the point really undermines all apologetics, for all human reasoning is informed by the situational factors he cites. On the other hand, if the point is more modestly put (as Clark seems to be doing), then it is hard to see why what is good for the positive apologetic goose is not also good for negative apologetic gander. What we must say I think is that the apologist must recognize the limits of all argumentation, positive and negative, and proceed with this recognition. As indicated above, with reference to the resistance argument, I think the Reformed apologist can actually see the force of theistic arguments as rooted in the stirrings of the *sensus divinitatis*. Within the background beliefs of the unbeliever is the *sensus divinitatis*. Hence, in trying to persuade the unbeliever of theism, the apologist is not necessarily trying to produce some religious reality for the first time in the believer's mind. He is pouring epistemic water on an already present religious seed.

7. Positive Apologetics May Give the Wrong Impression that the Rationality of Theistic Belief Depends on Theistic Arguments

Clark has also emphasized that need "to eliminate the unjust impression that belief in God requires evidence or argument."[\(footnote 26\)](#) He says that offering theistic arguments may leave people with impression that such arguments are necessary for rational belief. In other words, using arguments to show that theistic belief is rational might mislead people into thinking that the rationality of their theistic belief depends on such arguments. It's not clear, however, why this must give us pause for positive apologetics anymore than it should for negative apologetics. Presumably, engaging in negative apologetics might leave people with the impression that the rationality of their belief in God depends on their being able to marshal evidence and argument against every objection that comes along.[\(footnote 27\)](#) Moreover, as we have seen, Reformed epistemologists are often willing to give reasons for supposing that belief in God is rational (even if these reasons are not natural theology type arguments). One might conclude from this second-order activity that one needs such evidence to hold a rational belief in God. But clearly both cases here are examples of epistemic level confusions. I think the thing to say here is that the apologist should simply make clear the distinction between the conditions that confer rationality on one's theistic belief and the conditions required to show that such conditions obtain. The desideratum of being rational is distinct from that of showing rationality.[\(footnote 28\)](#)

VI. A Positive Appraisal of Theistic Arguments

The seven grounds developed above for favoring negative apologetics over positive apologetics do not provide any good or overriding reason within Reformed epistemology to favor negative apologetics over positive apologetics. As we have seen, some of these arguments give us no more a reason to reject *de facto* positive apologetics than *de facto* negative apologetics. There is no good reason why the Reformed epistemologist cannot embrace theistic arguments, at least no reason that would not also be a reason against the employment of negative apologetics. But some sort of *de facto* apologetics follows from the goal of defending and supporting the rationality of belief in God since the latter depends on there being no undefeated defeaters for theistic belief. So in effect, Reformed epistemology either leaves itself open to theistic arguments or it must undermine its basic epistemological project (given that rationality depends on the absence of defeaters).

But there is a more direct argument here in favor of theistic arguments from the perspective of the Reformed epistemologist. We already noted that Plantinga's early objections to natural theology were

objections to such arguments as demonstrative proofs, but this is not to reject positive apologetics altogether.[\(footnote 29\)](#) In "Reason and Belief in God" Plantinga allowed an apologetic function for natural theology distinct from the believer's basing her belief in God on such arguments.[\(footnote 30\)](#) He adds that such arguments can be valuable "in moving someone from unbelief to belief."[\(footnote 31\)](#) In "The Prospects for Natural Theology" Plantinga says that theistic arguments may increase, even significantly increase, the warrant of theistic belief, so much so as "to nudge it over the boundary separating knowledge from mere true belief."[\(footnote 32\)](#) Here and elsewhere he explicitly states that "there are *many* good theistic arguments."[\(footnote 33\)](#) In "Christian philosophy at the End of the 20th Century," Plantinga specifies four tasks for Christian philosophy. One task is positive apologetics, to which he gives a whole-hearted endorsement. He says that: "There are really a whole host of good theistic arguments, all patiently waiting to be developed in penetrating and profound detail. This is one area where contemporary Christian philosophers have a great deal of work to do."[\(footnote 34\)](#)

In addition to offering a modal version of the ontological argument,[\(footnote 35\)](#) Plantinga has sketched a theistic argument on the basis of considerations drawn from the reliability of our cognitive faculties. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga argues that the probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable is either low or inscrutable given the conjunction of naturalism and evolution, but it is quite high given theism. But, if naturalism and theism are the two main alternatives, the claim that our cognitive faculties are reliable gives us evidence for the truth of theism, at any rate a reason to prefer theism over naturalism.[\(footnote 36\)](#) Take a second, related argument. Suppose our beliefs, many of them at any rate, have positive epistemic status. Plantinga believes that positive epistemic status is best construed in terms of proper function, but proper function involves the notion of design. If it could then be argued that theism better accounts for this than naturalism, we have yet another theistic argument. And there is a third argument here. If we believe that our cognitive faculties are reliable when they are functioning properly in the appropriate sort of environment, then there is an interesting confluence of reliability and proper function. Theism can certainly explain this fact, and if it can do so better than naturalistic accounts, then we have yet another theistic argument. All of these, of course, are epistemological arguments for God's existence that are rooted in and suggested by Plantinga. Far from trying to dodge the challenge of proposing theistic arguments, Plantinga has in fact sketched and partly developed several such arguments.[\(footnote 37\)](#)

It is important to note that these arguments actually emerge from Plantinga's epistemological work, his attempt to understand the nature of knowledge and to develop an account of knowledge on the basis of an externalist theory of proper function. Within the framework of this project Plantinga has emphasized that epistemology cannot be metaphysically neutral. Epistemological questions ultimately lead to metaphysics. The theistic arguments sketched above emerge from precisely this consideration. Some epistemological questions cannot be adequately resolved independent of theism. Also what sort of beliefs one takes to be the product of properly functioning, truth-aimed cognitive faculties will depend largely on how one thinks of the human person and the nature of reality. For instance, if one is a theist, then religious belief is naturally construed as being the product of properly functioning, truth-aimed cognitive faculties. If one denies theism (or is agnostic about it), then religious belief will naturally be viewed with epistemic suspicion.[\(footnote 38\)](#)

These observations suggest another way that theistic arguments can naturally emerge within the framework of Reformed epistemology, specifically in the context of Plantinga's externalist theory of warrant. As noted above, one of Plantinga's central claims in *Warranted Christian Belief* is that there is an epistemically possible model according to which theistic belief has warrant in a basic way. Plantinga also contends that something like this model is likely true if theistic belief is true; and on the other hand, the model is unlikely to be true if theism is false. This connection between the truth of theism and its positive epistemic status implies that the goal of showing theistic belief to be externally rational or warranted requires reasons for supposing that theism is true. Hence, although Plantinga's early work allowed him, independent of theistic arguments, to argue that theistic belief is rational, this epistemic desideratum cannot be achieved with respect to external rationality and warrant in the absence of a case for theism. Hence, if the epistemological desideratum articulated in [RE] is to be carried forward, there will be a need to develop theistic arguments as a condition of showing that theistic belief can be properly basic with respect to warrant.

I am not claiming that in order to know that theistic belief is warranted one must have evidence for the truth of theism. If one's theistic belief *is* warranted, one believes with warrant that <if theistic belief is true, then theistic belief is likely warranted>, and one sees the inferential connections here, then one's belief that <theistic belief is warranted>, if based on these propositions, will be warranted. The need for theistic arguments emerges when it comes to showing or persuading some other person that theistic belief is warranted. Assuming that showing x is a success concept and audience relative, for agnostics and atheists it will be necessary to establish the truth of the antecedent of the conditional, in addition to arguing for the truth of the conditional itself (which Plantinga actually does in *Warranted Christian Belief*). The basic argument form is that of *modus ponens*, but it will be crucial for additional arguments to support the premises. But in that case, theistic arguments become necessary for showing that theistic belief is warranted.

Hence, Plantinga has not only commended the development of theistic arguments, as well as emphasized the variety of epistemic and apologetic functions they could play, he has also developed some such arguments himself. Moreover, given the metaphysical foundations of epistemology, the attempt to show or argue (to unbelievers) that theistic belief is warranted will require arguing for the truth of theism. In the case of external rationality and warrant, the epistemological project articulated in [RE] will require the development and use of theistic arguments. Hence, the Reformed epistemologist has good reason to support and promote the project of natural theology.

VII. Conclusion

Is Reformed epistemology deserving of the criticism that it has restricted itself to negative apologetics and lacks any internal motivation for natural theology? I think not. First, Reformed epistemology is fundamentally a project in the epistemology of religious belief, not a distinct school of apologetics. Secondly, as a project in epistemology, Reformed epistemology engages in what I have called *de jure* apologetics, supporting and defending claims to the rationality of theistic belief. But this very project, owing to the relationship between rationality and defeaters, is also concerned with showing that putative defeaters to theistic belief can be defeated. Hence, Reformed epistemology entails some form of apologetics. Third, I have argued that there are no good reasons internal to Reformed epistemology for preferring negative to positive *de facto* apologetics. Hence, Reformed epistemology has no objection in principle to those schools of Christian apologetics that make use of natural theology. Lastly, I have noted how Plantinga's own work suggests not only the existence of interesting arguments for God's existence but why theistic arguments are necessary if one is to show that theistic belief is externally rational or proper function rational. Reports of the death of natural theology among Reformed epistemologists have indeed been greatly exaggerated.

Dr. Michael Sudduth

Saint Michael's College

April 16, 2000

1.) By contrast, externalist defeaters involve the obtaining of certain facts about the subject's environment or cognitive situation, where these are not mentally accessible upon reflection. For instance, defeasibility accounts of knowledge maintain that there can be true *propositions* that prevent over all justified true beliefs from counting as knowledge. For the distinction between internalist and externalist defeaters, see William Alston, "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology," in Alston, *Epistemic Justification* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 191-192; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 359-360; Michael Sudduth, "Proper Basicity and the Evidential Significance of Internalist Defeat: A Proposal for Revising Classical Evidentialism" in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. G. Bruntrup and R. Tacelli (Kluwer Academic Press, 1999).

2.) Thinking of defeaters as argument forms, John Pollock distinguished between reasons that attack a conclusion (rebutters) and reasons that attack the connection between the premises and the conclusion (undercutter). John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (1986), pp. 38-39. But there are also reasons that attack the premise of an argument. Here one gets a rebutter for one of the reasons R for some belief B, so B is defeated in such a way that it is not rational to continue holding at least one of the reasons R for B. We can call these reason-defeating defeaters. For this distinction I am indebted to Michael Bergmann's *Internalism, Externalism, and Epistemic Defeat* (University of Notre Dame, Ph.D dissertation, 1997), pp. 99-103. In this paper I am using "undercutting" defeater in such a way that it includes reason-defeating defeaters, as one might view the distinction as two ways in which a ground or reason could be *inadequate*.

3.) Plantinga, "Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy*, 3:3 (July 1986), p. 313; George Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited" in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga, and Wolterstorff, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), especially, p. 197; Dewey Houtenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 203; Gary Gutting, "The Catholic and the Calvinist: A Dialogue on Faith and Reason," *Faith and Philosophy*, 2:236-56 (1985), Paul Griffiths, "An Apology for Apologetics," *Faith and Philosophy* 5:399-420 (1988).

4.) George Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited" in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga, and Wolterstorff.

5.) *Five Views on Christian Apologetics*, ed. Stephen B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), pp. 296-97.

6.) See Plantinga's summary in *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 69-70. References will hereafter be given parenthetically in the text and designated by *WCB*.

7.) These positive epistemological arguments are also found in Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Religious Belief be Rational if it Has No Foundations" in *Faith and Rationality* (1983) and in William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

8.) As Plantinga notes, *epistemic* possibility is both weaker and stronger than broadly *logical* possibility. It is stronger since there are many obviously false propositions that are logically possible. It is weaker in the sense that there are propositions that are epistemically possible but logically impossible. See *WCB*, pp. 168-169.

9.) Nicholas Wolterstorff defends the modest character of the claims of Reformed epistemology in "What Reformed Epistemology is Not" *Perspectives* (November 1992), pp.14-16.

10.) See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Wolterstorff, pp. 82-87; *Warranted Christian Belief*, chapter 11; Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Religious Belief be Rational if it Has No Foundations?" in *Faith and Rationality*, pp. 164-172, William Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 79, 159, 189-194; C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 267-268, 293-295, 306.

11.) Here I ignore the technical qualification that defeaters for theistic belief, like defeaters in general, are properly speaking defeaters for *some particular person's* theistic belief. The philosophical arguments for the rationality of belief in God require addressing the rationality question at a general level. Establishing or defending the rationality of theistic belief in a general way does not imply that everyone's belief in God is *ipso facto* rational. What it establishes is that belief in God *can* be rational and *is* rational given that a person satisfies the appropriate conditions. The apologist attempts to show that such conditions can be satisfied. So, for instance, defeaters against theistic belief can be defeated. It doesn't follow from what the Christian philosopher or apologist does by way of defeating defeaters that someone else's defeaters for theistic belief have in fact been defeated. Defeaters and epistemic defeat are relative to each person's noetic structure.

12.) This is not to say, of course, that one cannot make a simple *de facto* objection to theism. Surely one can. The point here is that such objections carry with them implications for what is rational or not to believe. Perhaps it isn't always clear whether an atheological objection is intended to be merely *de facto* or also *de jure*. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 464.

13.) Actually, the idea is stronger than the "defeat" of defeater. It is *showing* by way of an argument that a defeater has been defeated. The defeat of a defeater, of course, is crucial for a person to remain rational in holding theistic belief. But a defeater can be defeated without showing that it has been defeated. We should not confuse the state of acquiring a defeater-defeater with the activity of showing that one has a defeater-defeater. The context of the discussion here has been the activity of presenting arguments.

14.) Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (1990, reprint; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 111.

- 15.) *Ibid.*, ix-x.; Cf. *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 69-70.
- 16.) Plantinga makes this point in "Belief in God", "Christian Philosophy at the end of the Twentieth Century," and "The Prospects for Natural Theology." More recently Bill Craig has pointed this out in "Classical Apologetics," in *Five Views on Christian Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, pp. 45-48. It is interesting to note that prior to the rise of Reformed epistemology, Reformed objections to natural theology were often simply opposition to the idea that theistic arguments could constitute proofs or logical demonstrations of God. These very Reformed thinkers left open a role for theistic arguments as confirmatory or probabilistic in nature. For instance, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 21; William Masselink, *General Revelation and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 117-120; Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (1979, reprint; Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907), p. 71.
- 17.) Although not accepted by Reformed epistemologists, there is the idea that a criteria for proper basicity is the availability of evidence in support of the truth of the belief, even if it is not required that a person actually have this evidence himself. If one were to take this view, then arguments for God's existence would go to showing that it is rationally accepted as properly basic.
- 18.) The strong formulation discussed in this paragraph has been recognized by Houtenga, *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 183, 209, 220-222; John Zeis, "Natural Theology: Reformed?" in *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 49; Patrick Lee, "Evidentialism, Plantinga, and Faith and Reason," in *Rational Faith*, p. 142; and Feinberg, "A Cumulative Case Apologist's Response," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, pp.302, 304.
- 19.) "Reason and Belief in God," p. 71; cf. pp. 72-73.
- 20.) "Prospects," *Philosophical Perspectives* (1991), pp. See Also *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 179, no. 16.
- 21.) For a development of such an argument, see Michael Sudduth, "Alstonian Foundationalism and Higher-Level Theistic Evidentialism" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (June 1994).
- 22.) Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (July 1986), pp. 309-310.
- 23.) Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Is Reason Enough?" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brandan Sweetman (New York: Oxford, 1992). Originally published in *The Reformed Journal* 31 (April 1981).
- 24.) In *Religious Epistemology and the Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (in progress) I develop a detailed case against natural theology on the grounds of the noetic effects of sin.
- 25.) Kelly Clark, "A Reformed Epistemologist's Closing Remarks" in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, pp. 365-366.
- 26.) *Ibid.*, p. 372; cf. p. 364.
- 27.) Dewey Houtenga develops this concern in *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology*, pp. 209-211.
- 28.) For this distinction, see Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, pp.71-73; Wolterstorff, p. 157; Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 71; C.S. Evans, *Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith* p. 220.
- 29.) Kelly Clark, though critical of positive apologetics, also makes this point repeatedly in his contributions in *Five Views on Christian Apologetics*, ed. Cowan. See pages 200, 273, 282, 365-66, 372.
- 30.) "Reason and Belief in God," p. 71.
- 31.) *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 32.) "Prospects," pp. 311-312.
- 33.) *Ibid.*, p. 312. See also Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments" (unpublished lecture notes) and "Belief in God" in *Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. R. Boylan. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 390-396.
- 34.) Plantinga, "Christian Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century," in *Alvin Plantinga: The Analytic Theist*, ed. James Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 339.
- 35.) See Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, chapter 10 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).
- 36.) Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 227-240. Of course, as Plantinga points out, the strength of this argument admittedly depends on the probabilities assigned to theism and naturalism given our entire background knowledge, not just the reliability of our cognitive faculties. Of course the same sort of restriction applies to atheological arguments from evil. Even if it were more probable than not that God does not exist, given the existence of evil, it would not follow that his non existence is more probable than

not given evil and our entire background knowledge. But there is an argument here nonetheless. By bringing additional evidence into consideration, we could strengthen this epistemological argument.

37.) These epistemological arguments (and others) are sketched by Plantinga in his "Two Dozen (or So) Theistic Arguments."

38.) Plantinga writes: "And here we see the ontological or metaphysical or ultimately religious roots of the question as to the rationality or warrant or lack thereof for belief in God. What you take to be rational, at least in the sense of warranted, depends on what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt. . . .the dispute as to whether theistic belief is rational (warranted) can't be settled just by attending to epistemological considerations; it is at bottom not merely an epistemological dispute, but an ontological or theological dispute." (*Warranted Christian Belief*, p. 190)