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## Dewey J. Hoitenga, FAITH AND REASON FROM PLATO TO PLANTINGA: AN INTRODUCTION TO REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

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(self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses) or meet an expanded set of criteria derived from “problem cases” (memory beliefs, for example). Problem cases have in common what Sennett calls “universal sanction,” that is, they are typically held by virtually all cognizers, are held as essential to normal living, and life without them is unthinkable. For example, life without memory beliefs is difficult even to imagine, let alone live. Since theistic beliefs do not enjoy universal sanction, there is good reason to accept modified foundationalism while rejecting theistic beliefs, and hence evidentialism can be accepted while rejecting classical foundationalism. Universal sanction provides, says Sennett, *prima facie* reason to accept evidentialism and to reject the Reformed epistemology project.

But why should universal sanction provide *prima facie* reason to accept evidentialism? Some of William Alston’s arguments are relevant here. Universal engagement in an epistemic practice may indicate reliability, and hence justification, but that says nothing about theistic practices. They may have their own internal accounts—spiritual development, for example—providing *prima facie* reason for taking the practices, and by extension, the beliefs, to be justified.

There is much more to discuss about Sennett’s fine book than I can do here. Despite the critical issues I raise, *Modality, Probability, and Rationality* is well worth reading. In fact, it is a must for anyone interested in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, particularly those interested in Plantinga’s contributions.

*Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology*, by Dewey J. Hoitenga, Jr. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991. Pp. xvii and 263. \$18.95 (Paper).

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For over a decade now, debate concerning the epistemology of religious belief has focused on the provocative arguments by Alvin Plantinga for the doctrine known as “Reformed Epistemology”—the doctrine that theistic belief may be fully justified without propositional evidence. The debate is well known. What is not so well known is that the historical roots of Reformed epistemology are deep, widespread, and dialectically healthy. This is the contention of Dewey Hoitenga, who presents an impressive and detailed investigation into what he sees to be the philosophical ancestry of the doctrine. While Plantinga claims to draw his ideas from the work of John Calvin and his interpreters, Hoitenga contends that Calvin is only the tip of the philosophical iceberg. Below the surface lie important contributions from Plato, the Bible, and Augustine as well.

Hoitenga begins by distinguishing two different doctrines of knowledge in Plato. The first he labels “knowledge as acquaintance”—*viz.*, “that which results from direct experience of an object” (p. 8). Hoitenga derives this doctrine from *The Republic* and contrasts it to that found in the *Theatetus*, which is a forerunner of the contemporary doctrine of knowledge as justified true belief.<sup>1</sup> It is the former doctrine—which I will call “the acquaintance doctrine”—that Hoitenga identifies as that which gives rise to the tradition that undergirds Reformed epistemology.<sup>2</sup>

Following his treatment of Plato, Hoitenga argues that the acquaintance doctrine has great affinities to the conception of faith in scripture. Faith is best understood biblically not as cognitive assent to a proposition (e.g., *God exists*) but as trust of God and commitment to his will. Of course this trust and commitment entail belief that God exists and belief of a number of theistic propositions about the character and will of God, but this cognitive element is not the central focus.

The biblical exegesis leads naturally into Hoitenga’s extensive treatment of Augustine. The center of this study is an examination of the Augustinian formula “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*).<sup>3</sup> The key point here is one that incorporates both the biblical conception of faith as trust and commitment and the Platonic acquaintance doctrine. Believers begin with a trust of and commitment to God, grounded in belief based on testimony—i.e., they begin with faith. This faith creates a desire to know God—not just know about him. That is, the believer seeks a knowledge that comes from direct acquaintance with God.

Thus Hoitenga interprets ‘understanding’ in the formula “faith seeking understanding” as knowledge by acquaintance. Such knowledge is made possible by the Augustinian doctrine of God as present in the human mind and directly accessible to reason. So “faith seeking understanding” expresses the spiritual and epistemic pilgrimage of one who comes to trust God through the preaching of the Word, then sets out through spiritual discipline and devotion to come to recognize and know God directly through pure reason.<sup>4</sup>

After developing the case that Reformed epistemology does indeed have a long and cherished heritage, Hoitenga turns to the two most prominent personages in the tradition: Calvin and Plantinga. Calvin stands apart from many modern and contemporary theologians and philosophers of religion in his insistence that knowledge of God is immediate and vital. “‘There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of the divinity’ (*sensus divinitatis*)” (p. 150; quotation from the *Institutes*, I, iii, 1). Calvin differs from Augustine in some important ways, but Hoitenga argues persuasively that they are in agreement on the most vital concern of Reformed epistemology—that knowledge of God is to be had directly, and not as the result of reasoned discourse or deliberative meditation.

Hoitenga's treatment of Plantinga identifies the two phases of his research and teaching. In his earlier work—epitomized in the paper "Reason and Belief in God," Plantinga concentrates on removing any significant objections to the claim that theistic beliefs might be "properly basic"—justifiably believed immediately and without propositional support. In his more recent work Plantinga constructs a positive epistemological theory on which the Reformed epistemology story is plausible and explainable. Hoitenga shows both the distinctive features of these two projects and the common thread between them that makes them both defenses of the Platonic-Biblical-Augustinian-Calvinist tradition he has traced.

In a final chapter Hoitenga addresses one of the most prevalent controversies in the current debate over Reformed epistemology—the proper role (if any) of natural theology and apologetics within the Reformed framework. Like Plantinga, Hoitenga sees a definite role for these practices—one that is not simply allowable but needed. I will address his position in this regard at the end of this review.

Hoitenga's book is impressive for the extent and quality of its historical research and exegesis—particularly in the treatment of Augustine. It is worth owning for this reason alone. There is a great wealth of information regarding some of the most important figures in the history of religious epistemology. Furthermore, it is my opinion that Hoitenga more than adequately defends his general thesis that the Reformed epistemological position is one with a deep, rich, and intriguing philosophical pedigree. He has taken a giant step toward removing the widespread misconception among contemporary philosophers and theologians that this position was born in 16th-century Geneva.

Nonetheless, there are several features that significantly weaken the book's effectiveness. I will list four.

First, despite Hoitenga's nearly one hundred pages on Augustine, I found myself more confused than enlightened by this portion of the book. Many different concepts are introduced and discussed in detail, and it is not always clear what the relations among them are. Moreover, Hoitenga seems to use critical terms like 'faith,' 'knowledge,' and 'understanding' in a variety of different ways without providing the needed disambiguation. The study would have been much more profitable had all the important senses of key terms been introduced in the beginning, given separate labels, and then consistently treated under those labels.

Second, Hoitenga's treatments of Calvin and Plantinga are disappointing in their brevity and sketchiness, especially when compared to the size and detail of his treatment of Augustine. Even if Hoitenga is right about the deep roots of the Reformed epistemology tradition, the fact remains that Plantinga explicitly credits Calvin as the primary historical influence on his doctrine. Unless Plantinga is simply ignorant about the major influences on his own

work—an hypothesis with at best dubious credibility—it would seem that an extended examination of Calvin's views would be in order in any volume that purports to be a history of Reformed epistemology. Yet the treatment of Calvin is one-third as long as that of Augustine and comprises just a little over ten percent of the entire volume.

Hoitenga's treatment of Plantinga—the undisputed champion of the Reformed epistemology cause—is even shorter than that of Calvin. That Hoitenga's combined treatment of both of these most central figures is barely half as long and nowhere nearly as detailed as his treatment of Augustine alone is puzzling at best.

Third, Hoitenga often appears less than careful in his philosophical explanation and argumentation. I cite two examples. First, the following two passages appear within seven pages of one another in the chapter on Plantinga.

The justification of properly basic beliefs...is *external*, not internal. [...]The latter implies that the knower has access to, and can therefore produce the justification of his or her belief.... The former, however, does not imply such access, for the reason that the justification of one's belief may be *external* to one's state of mind (189; emphasis his).

Internalist theories typically involve deontological ingredients such as duties, permissions, obligations, and rights—terms that appear...in Plantinga's account of the justification of properly basic beliefs. In his theory of knowledge as justified true belief, however, he moves away from these internalist notions toward more externalist ones, similar to those at the center of reliabilist theories (196).

Exactly what is Hoitenga saying about Plantinga's doctrine of proper basicity? Is it internalist or externalist? Of course, the first passage is not linked explicitly to the internalist-externalist debate described in the second. However, the context is one in which the debate and its ramifications are very close to the surface, and the use of these terms in that context is disruptive. Hoitenga is either contradicting himself or unnecessarily confusing his readers. This kind of carelessness is frequent enough in the book to be quite distracting.

Second, concerning the so-called "Reformed objection to natural theology" Hoitenga notes that it "is essentially twofold, that [natural theology] is unnecessary and that it is inappropriate." Hoitenga correctly spells out the first of these objections as the claim that the direct acquaintance theory of knowledge of God that is at the heart of Reformed epistemology renders any arguments for God's existence superfluous. However, when responding to this objection he makes a very puzzling move. "The limitation of this Reformed objection to natural theology should be obvious. It does not follow from the claim that we have, by our very nature, a direct acquaintance with God that natural theology is *impossible*" (219, emphasis his). He goes on to argue that it is indeed possible

to do natural theology from a Reformed standpoint. But this point has nothing to do with the objection he has stated. Certainly many things are possible but unnecessary. Yet Hoitenga never makes the slightest connection between the response he gives and the objection to which he is responding.

My criticisms of Hoitenga to this point have been largely procedural. I wish to close with one substantive objection that strikes at the heart of one of Hoitenga's primary motivations for his book. Hoitenga spends much time in the last chapter arguing that apologetics is an appropriate and necessary exercise for the church, even from the Reformed standpoint. Citing I Peter 3:15,<sup>5</sup> he argues that apologetics may be a requirement of the Christian duty to love his neighbor. Part of this love may involve answering the unbeliever's objections to Christianity in a way that will show the unbeliever that his lack of faith is inconsistent with his own commitments. "If, as a result of such a discussion, unbelievers give up their objections, the apologetic believers have done something good for them, which is what love requires" (216).

But it is unclear exactly what the "something good" is that has been done for the unbeliever. Has the believer given him *reasons to believe*, in the sense that he has given him a propositional argument to bring him to faith? If this is the case, then the believer has actually done a disservice to the unbeliever. Since genuine knowledge of God comes through acquaintance, and not through argument, the believer would do better to involve the unbeliever in exercises designed to introduce him to God—whatever those might be. It is at least clear that they cannot simply be the same exercises the evidentialist would take the unbeliever through to convince him of God's existence—i.e., the presentation of arguments; otherwise, the distinction between Reformed epistemology and evidentialism collapses.

Perhaps Hoitenga would respond that apologetics is not designed to convince the unbeliever, but only to remove his objections. But these objections would be in one of two forms: either reasons not to believe, or the complaint that there are no reasons to believe. If apologetics removes the latter, it is indeed an exercise in convincing and an affront to Reformed epistemology. If apologetics removes only the former, then the only legitimate form is what Hoitenga calls "negative apologetics"—the neutralizing of objections to Christianity without added arguments for its truth. But Hoitenga makes it clear that he is defending not just negative apologetics but natural theological arguments as well.

In summarizing his defense of apologetics, Hoitenga says:

It does not follow, of course, that the unbeliever will give up his objection or be converted by such reasoning, either by the arguments of natural theology or by the defenses of (negative) apologetics. Still, such arguments and such defenses can be part of the believer's *witness* to the unbeliever, and this is the main point (216).

But exactly what part of the believer's witness are the arguments? If they play a convincing role, then they represent either a mistreatment of the unbeliever or a compromise of the genius of Reformed epistemology. Perhaps they serve only to convince the unbeliever that the believer is not irrational in his commitments, even if the believer is not himself convinced of the truth of the claims. But what business has the believer worrying about such matters? Time spent defending the epistemic honor of the believer would be better spent introducing the unbeliever to the God known by acquaintance (again, whatever that amounts to). Hence, there is something seriously inappropriate about engagement in such exercises.

Perhaps Hoitenga thinks that it is possible for natural theology to play a vital role in the introduction of an unbeliever to the God known by acquaintance. But if he does he never makes it clear. Besides, as I intimated above, such a position would constitute a significant departure from the tradition he has taken great pains to explicate and defend. Suffice it to say that the legitimate place, if any, of natural theology and apologetics remains one of the more serious problems for the advocate of Reformed epistemology. Whatever merits Hoitenga's book has (and, as I have pointed out, it has many), his attempt to solve this problem is far from successful.

#### NOTES

1. Of course much of the current debate in epistemology is motivated by the question of whether or not knowledge is *only* justified true belief, or whether or not justification is even the right way to think about the property that converts true belief into knowledge. Nonetheless, most contemporary epistemologists agree, *contra* the alternative Platonic position of knowledge as acquaintance, that knowledge is a species of belief, and is distinguished from other true belief by some property that appropriately connects the belief with the fact believed. In this sense, if in no other, modern epistemologists are predominantly proponents of the justified true belief account of knowledge. See next note.

2. As mentioned in the above note, most contemporary epistemologists—Plantinga among them—stand in the justified true belief tradition. In fact, Hoitenga himself offers the beginnings of his own justified true belief theory at the end of the first chapter. Nonetheless, Hoitenga makes it clear that the gap between these traditions can be bridged so that a doctrine clearly opposed to Plantinga's provides the kind of historical support for Reformed epistemology that Hoitenga claims.

3. On the application of this formula to the work of Augustine Hoitenga says:

The formula is not to be found in these exact words in Augustine's writings; it first appears as the original title that St. Anselm gave to his *Proslogion*...over six hundred years after Augustine's death. Still, everyone agrees that the ideas captured in the formula not only originated in Augustine, but also characterize his thought" (57).

Though I am naturally wary of any view attributed glibly to "everyone," and while I am not sure what to make of the notion of ideas captured by a formula, I see little if any problem with accepting Hoitenga's claim to orthodoxy.

4. The similarity to Plato's notion of the philosopher seeking to recognize and know the Forms (particularly, the Good) directly through pure reason is unmistakable. Hoitenga notes frequently that Plato's "The Good" becomes Augustine's God. In fact, in his treatment of the acquaintance doctrine, Hoitenga points out that Plato treats knowledge this way primarily when dealing with knowledge of the Forms. Because of the mutability of all but the Forms Plato sees them to be the only genuine objects of knowledge.

5. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (New International Version).