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# PLANTINGA'S RELIGIOUS EPISTEMOLOGY, SKEPTICAL THEISM, AND DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS

Andrew Moon

Alvin Plantinga's religious epistemology has been used to respond to many debunking arguments against theistic belief. However, critics have claimed that Plantinga's religious epistemology conflicts with *skeptical theism*, a view often used in response to the problem of evil. If they are correct, then a common way of responding to debunking arguments conflicts with a common way of responding to the problem of evil. In this paper, I examine the critics' claims and argue that they are right. I then present two revised versions of Plantinga's argument for his religious epistemology. I call the first a *religion-based argument* and the second an *intention-based argument*. Both are compatible with skeptical theism, and both can be used to respond to debunking arguments. They apply only to theistic beliefs of actual persons who have what I call *doxastically valuable relationships* with God—valuable relationships the goods of which entail the belief that God exists.

## I. Introduction

Alvin Plantinga, reflecting on his days as a young philosopher at Wayne State University, writes,

[George] Nakhnikian was our chairman; he thought well of my powers as a budding young philosopher, but also thought that no intelligent person could possibly be a Christian. He would announce this sentiment in his usual stentorian tones, whereupon Robert Sleight would say, "But what about Al, George? Don't you think he's an intelligent person?" George would have to admit, reluctantly, that he thought I probably was, but he still thought there had to be a screw loose in there somewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Developmental psychologist Paul Bloom writes,

Recently psychologists doing research on the minds of infants have discovered two related facts . . . One: human beings come into the world with a predisposition to believe in supernatural phenomena. And two: this predisposition is an incidental by-product of cognitive functioning gone awry.<sup>2</sup>

These quotes challenge the claim that theistic beliefs are formed by reliable, properly functioning faculties. They are examples of what Plantinga

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<sup>1</sup>Plantinga, "A Christian Life," 64.

<sup>2</sup>Bloom, "Is God an Accident?"



calls *de jure* objections to theistic belief, which claim that theistic belief lacks a valuable epistemic property. *De jure* objections are distinct from *de facto* objections, which claim that theistic belief is false. Arguments that often support *de jure* objections are now popularly called *debunking arguments*, which criticize a belief on the basis of how it was formed.

Alvin Plantinga's religious epistemology in *Warranted Christian Belief* has been used to respond to many *de jure* objections (or debunking arguments) against theistic belief.<sup>3</sup> However, critics have claimed that Plantinga's religious epistemology conflicts with *skeptical theism*, a view often used in response to the problem of evil.<sup>4</sup> If they are correct, then a common way of responding to debunking arguments against theistic belief conflicts with a common way of responding to the problem of evil. In this paper, I examine in detail both whether there is any such conflict and also whether there are feasible ways to resolve that conflict. I argue that the prospects are bleak. I then present two revised versions of Plantinga's argument for his religious epistemology. I call the first a *religion-based argument* and the second an *intention-based argument*. Both are compatible with skeptical theism, and both can be used to respond to debunking arguments. They apply only to theistic beliefs of persons who have what I call *doxastically valuable relationships* with God—valuable relationships with goods that entail the belief that God exists.

Although skeptical theists have obvious reasons to be interested in this paper, here is one reason worth making explicit. It is common to think that skeptical theism conflicts with many arguments for God's existence.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the skeptical theist might be tempted to embrace *reformed epistemology*, which says that theistic belief can be warranted or rational even if it is not based on argument.<sup>6</sup> But the most influential version of reformed epistemology is Plantinga's. Hence, such a skeptical theist should be interested in whether her view conflicts with the most influential version of reformed epistemology.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>For some illustrations of the influence of Plantinga's religious epistemology on the religious debunking literature, see White, "You Just Believe That Because . . ." 583; Clark and Barrett, "Reidian Religious Epistemology," 21–22; Dawes and Jong, "Defeating the Christian's Claim"; Murray and Schloss, "Evolutionary Accounts of Religion," 251–252; Moon, "Recent Work," 881–882; Braddock, "Debunking Arguments," 280–282; Wielenberg, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments," 89–90; McNabb and Baldwin, "Divine Methodology"; and Law, "The X-Claim Argument."

<sup>4</sup>See Fales, "Critical Discussion" and McBrayer and Swenson, "Skepticism About the Argument from Divine Hiddenness," which will be discussed later in the paper.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism," 389; Lovering, "On What God Would Do"; O'Connor, "Theistic Objections"; Wilks, "The Structure"; and Wilks, "The Global Skepticism Objection."

<sup>6</sup>Lovering ("On What God Would Do," 97) says that his argument for the inconsistency of skeptical theism and arguments from natural theology does not pertain to reformed epistemology.

<sup>7</sup>It might not conflict with all versions of reformed epistemology. See Tucker, "Phenomenal Conservatism."

## II. *Skeptical Theism*

Following Michael Bergmann, let *skeptical theism* consist in the conjunction of theism with three claims:

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.<sup>8</sup>

Suppose that ST1 is true. It could be that the goods we know of *just are* all the possible goods, *or* they are just a tiny sample. We don't know. But if we do not know that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are, then we do not know that the possible reasons God has for acting that we know about are representative of the total set of reasons God might have for acting. ST2 and ST3 similarly describe more ways in which we might be ignorant about God's reasons.

To be clear, ST1–ST3 do not imply that we do not know *any* of God's reasons. For example, the skeptical theist can endorse ST1 and still affirm that *some* things are good, and hence, as goods, they can figure into God's reasons. (Plausibly, something's being good is *a* reason, albeit a defeasible one, for God to instantiate it.) What she cannot know is whether the known possible goods are representative of the total set of possible goods. Thus, it is possible that God has reasons unknown by us.

Here is a way to apply ST1–ST3 to a version of the problem of evil. Suppose someone argues that since we cannot think of a reason for why God would allow a particularly horrendous event, there likely is no such reason; therefore, God probably does not exist. Skeptical theism implies that the first inference is illicit since we might not be privy to the total set of reasons God has for acting.<sup>9</sup> Again, skeptical theism is not saying that we cannot know that the horrendous event was evil or that, since it was evil, God didn't have *a* reason to stop it. Skeptical theism simply implies that since we do not know if the goods and evils we know of are representative of the possible goods and evils there are, we may not infer that God had an *all-things-considered* reason to stop it.

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<sup>8</sup>See Bergmann ("Skeptical Theism," 376–381) for a detailed explanation of these theses and how they represent the skepticism expressed by many skeptical theists. In that reference, as well as in Bergmann, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism," 11–12, Bergmann also adds an ST4 to the definition of "skeptical theism." I do not include it for the sake of brevity, and nothing in this paper depends on its addition.

<sup>9</sup>See Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism," 389 and Bergmann, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism" for the application of ST1–ST3 to other formulations of the problem of evil.

It is worth noting that there are other definitions of “skeptical theism” besides Bergmann’s. I picked his definition because he is a prominent skeptical theist, and his version is at least as clearly defined and well defended as any other in the literature. Furthermore, I suspect that any claims I make about Bergmann’s skeptical theism could be made about other versions of skeptical theism. Lastly, I only need ST1 to make the claims I wish to make about skeptical theism and its relation to Plantinga’s religious epistemology; skeptical theists who do not accept all of ST1–ST3, but accept *at least* ST1, should agree with my conclusions.<sup>10</sup>

### III. Plantinga’s Religious Epistemology

#### III.A. Background

In this subsection, I explain Plantinga’s theory of warrant and his view about how people often form theistic beliefs. Plantinga technically defines “warrant” as whatever it is that makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief. He then defends his proper functionalist theory of warrant, which says,

[A] belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.<sup>11</sup>

For example, my belief that *there is a plant in front of me* is warranted if and only if the belief was formed by properly functioning visual faculties, in an environment appropriate for my visual faculties (good lighting conditions), and the design plan of my visual faculties is successfully aimed at truth.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, if I had Capgras Syndrome and thereby believed that my mother is an imposter, then this belief would not be warranted because the mechanisms forming this belief were disordered.

I will assume that Plantinga’s proper functionalist theory is correct. This is a controversial assumption since every theory of warrant is controversial.<sup>13</sup> Even still, I will assume it is correct so that I can focus on other interesting issues, and it is best to focus on one thing at a time. Furthermore, even if it is incorrect, it is still an interesting question whether

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<sup>10</sup>For discussion of many definitions of “skeptical theism,” see Rea, “Skeptical Theism,” 484–486. Although Rea does not specifically include ST1–ST3 into his definition of skeptical theism, he does say that they are “an important part of a typical *defense* of skeptical theism” (485). If he is correct, the skeptical theist should still be interested in this paper since it assesses whether Plantinga’s religious epistemology conflicts with a typical *defense* of skeptical theism, even if it doesn’t assess whether Plantinga’s religious epistemology conflicts with skeptical theism *tout court*.

<sup>11</sup>Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 156.

<sup>12</sup>The quote only states necessary conditions, but for the purposes of this paper, we can take them to be sufficient. The additional conditions are caveats to ward off Gettier cases, which are irrelevant here.

<sup>13</sup>For recent defenses of proper functionalism, see Boyce and Plantinga, “Proper Functionalism” and Boyce and Moon, “In Defense of Proper Functionalism.”

theistic beliefs can meet these proper functionalist conditions. Note that in the above quotes, neither Nakhnikian nor Bloom explicitly denied *warrant* to theistic belief. They only claimed either that it was the result of a "loose screw" or "a cognitive mechanism gone awry," i.e., not the result of proper function or reliable belief formation.

Plantinga thinks that many theistic beliefs are not formed on the basis of an argument. Rather, he takes the view that "there is a kind of faculty or cognitive mechanism, what Calvin calls a *sensus divinitatis*, or sense of divinity, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God."<sup>14</sup> The following example from Jean-Paul Sartre in his autobiography might be an example of the workings of the *sensus divinitatis*:

Only once did I have the feeling that [God] existed. I had been playing with matches and burnt a small rug. I was in the process of covering up my crime when suddenly God saw me. I felt his gaze inside my head and on my hands. I whirled about in the bathroom, horribly visible, a live target. Indignation saved me. I flew into a rage against so crude an indiscretion. I blasphemed. . . . He never looked at me again.<sup>15</sup>

Here is another example from C. S. Lewis:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.<sup>16</sup>

Sartre formed the belief that *God sees me*, and Lewis formed the belief that *God is approaching*. The beliefs do not seem to have been formed on the basis of inference or argument. The question, now, is whether such beliefs can be warranted.<sup>17</sup>

### III.B. Plantinga's Argument and De Jure Objections

A central part of Plantinga's religious epistemology is his claim that if God exists, then theistic beliefs are probably warranted. Here is Plantinga's argument for this claim:

[I]f theistic belief is *true*, then it seems likely that it *does* have warrant. If it is true, then there is, indeed, such a person as God, a person who has created us in his image (so that we resemble him, among other things, in having the capacity for knowledge), who loves us, who desires that we know and love him, and who is such that it is our end and good to know and love him. But if these things are so, then he would of course intend that we be able to be aware of his presence and to know something about him. And if that is so,

<sup>14</sup>Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 172.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Bering, *The Belief Instinct*, 41.

<sup>16</sup>Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 228–229.

<sup>17</sup>For discussion of whether there is any such thing as a *sensus divinitatis*, see §5 of Moon, "Recent Work" and the references therein.

the natural thing to think is that he created us in such a way that we would come to hold such true beliefs as that there is such a person as God, that he is our creator, that we owe him obedience and worship, that he is worthy of worship, that he loves us, and so on. And if *that* is so, then the natural thing to think is that the cognitive processes that *do* produce belief in God are aimed by their designer at producing that belief. But then the belief in question will be produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth: it will therefore have warrant.<sup>18</sup>

Here is a reconstruction of his argument:

- 1) If God exists, then God created us in his image, loves us, desires that we know and love him, and is such that it is our end to know and love him.
- 2) If God created us in his image, loves us, desires that we know and love him, and is such that it is our end to know and love him, then God is probably such that he would intend that we be able to be aware of his presence and know something about him.
- 3) If God is probably such that he would intend that we be able to be aware of his presence and know something about him, then God probably created us in such a way that we would come to hold certain true beliefs about God (e.g., that God exists, is our creator, and loves us).
- 4) If God probably created us in such a way that we would come to hold certain true beliefs about God (e.g., that God exists, is our creator, and loves us), then belief in God is probably produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth (and is thereby probably warranted).
- 5) If God exists, then belief in God is probably warranted.<sup>19</sup>

Note that Plantinga is not arguing that theistic belief is warranted; he is only arguing that it is probably warranted *if* true.

Before delving into the premises of this argument, it is worth noting its dialectical power to respond to *de jure* objections. Earlier, I cited Bloom as stating that psychologists have discovered that belief in God is the result of cognitive mechanisms “gone awry.” Nakhnikian seemed to think that theistic belief was the result of a “loose screw in there somewhere.” Armed with Plantinga’s religious epistemology, the theist can now say,

Well, your *de jure* objection might succeed if you assume God does not exist. However, if God does exist, then theistic belief is probably not a result of cognitive systems gone awry or a loose screw. Rather, it is likely to be formed

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<sup>18</sup>Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 189–190.

<sup>19</sup>This reconstruction is based on the one in §3 of Moon, “Recent Work,” although I do not there mention the “God created us in his image” part.

by properly functioning, reliable faculties. So, you need a good *de facto* objection against theistic belief to get your *de jure* objection off the ground.

Such a response can be given to the many *de jure* objectors who do not have a good argument for atheism. In Plantinga's words, "This fact by itself invalidates an enormous amount of recent and contemporary atheology; for much of that atheology is devoted to *de jure* complaints that are allegedly independent of the *de facto* question."<sup>20</sup> Plantinga's response has played an important role in the literature on religious debunking arguments.<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. Plantinga's Argument and the Conflict with Skeptical Theism

##### IV.A. The Conflict

In the following, I examine the work of Fales and McBrayer and Swenson, who claim that skeptical theism conflicts with Plantinga's religious epistemology. When I say that they conflict, I am not saying that any one of the premises in Plantinga's argument is *logically inconsistent* with any of ST1–ST3. I am saying that endorsing ST1–ST3 *gives one a reason to doubt* a premise of Plantinga's argument.<sup>22</sup>

Evan Fales asks, "Plantinga argues that an all-loving, omnipotent being like God, who created us in his image, would *want* us to know that he exists. But is it so clear that we can know what God wants for us?"<sup>23</sup> Fales's question might be aimed at premise 1, which states, "If God exists, then God created us in his image, loves us, desires that we know and love him, and is such that it is our end to know and love him." To address Fales's question, I will first note an ambiguity in the word "desires." The consequent of (1) could be saying merely that God has *some* desire for us to know him or that God *overall* desires it.<sup>24</sup> For example, I might desire more chocolate cake but not overall desire this, given my stronger desire for good health.<sup>25</sup> The latter desire certainly does not imply that I do not have *some* desire for the chocolate cake! I will thereby take "desire" in (1) to just refer to some desire, not overall desire.

Here is an argument for an affirmative answer to Fales's question. On Plantinga's understanding of "God," God has "knowledge, power, and love . . . to the maximal degree."<sup>26</sup> As such, God would love intrinsically

<sup>20</sup>Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 191.

<sup>21</sup>See the references in n. 3.

<sup>22</sup>The discussion in this section is a more in-depth version of a discussion in Moon, "Recent Work," 883.

<sup>23</sup>Fales "Critical Discussion," 360.

<sup>24</sup>I mention this ambiguity in Moon, "Recent Work," 883, although there I used "all-things-considered desires" and here, I use "overall desires." I now prefer "overall desires" because, strictly speaking, *considerations* are not necessarily present in all the relevant sort of cases. Thanks to Mike Rea for a helpful comment.

<sup>25</sup>Moon, "Recent Work," 883.

<sup>26</sup>For more on what he means by "God" and "theism," see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, viii.



valuable persons and desire their good. Furthermore, knowing and loving God would be a great good, perhaps a person's greatest good. (Justification: it is a great good to come to know and love exemplary persons, such as God, who love you and desire your good.) It follows that God would have at least some desire for this great good for us.<sup>27</sup>

But perhaps Fales is really wondering how we could know what God *overall* wants. He writes,

Many theists—Plantinga among them—have expressed skepticism concerning the possibility of an adequate theodicy. What are the chances that we can know what God wants, when he allows Bambi to roast in a forest fire? For God's purposes—indeed his morally significant purposes—may transcend our understanding. . . . But indeed, if we are deficient in the way just suggested, then presumably we *don't* have any knowledge of God's purposes.<sup>28</sup>

Typically, if one wants X, then one will intend to bring about X; the exception is if one has other reasons to not bring about X. Fales is suggesting that God might have such reasons. They will be morally significant reasons (or purposes) that transcend our understanding, so that what God intends (and overall wants) to do is outside of our ken.

Justin McBrayer and Philip Swenson make a similar point:

What a sceptical theist is committed to, though, is a general scepticism about our knowledge of what God would do in any particular situation. We don't think that atheists or theists can say with any serious degree of confidence why God does what he does or why he would or wouldn't do a certain thing. But such a scepticism is healthy. . . . Alvin Plantinga assumes that if God exists it is obvious that our belief-forming faculties are reliable. . . . Given our scepticism, we are not sanguine about [this] inference (God might well have other interests, motives, etc. than the few that we are able to decipher). And this seems entirely appropriate.<sup>29</sup>

We can see how their affirmation of skeptical theism in the first part of the quote leads them to be skeptical about whether God might have unknown reasons (i.e., "other interests, motives, etc."). This in turn leads them to be skeptical about what God would overall want or intend. It seems that the criticisms of Fales and of McBrayer and Swenson should be aimed at premise 2, which states, "If God created us in his image, loves us, desires that we know and love him, and is such that it is our end to know and love him, then God is probably such that *he would intend* that we be able to be aware of his presence and know something about him."

The connection between ST1–ST3 and premise 2 is this. ST1–ST3 imply that we have no good reason to think that we are not in the dark about some of God's reasons. Hence, even if we could know that God desires for

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<sup>27</sup>Thanks to Emily Bingeman for helping me spell out this argument. For some reasons to doubt this argument, see Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*.

<sup>28</sup>Fales, "Critical Discussion," 360.

<sup>29</sup>McBrayer and Swenson, "Skepticism About the Argument from Divine Hiddenness," 145.

us to know him, this desire could conflict with God's desire to bring about other unknown goods or prevent some unknown evils. Therefore, we are in the dark about whether God would intend for us to know him. This gives us reason to doubt (2). Call this the *skeptical theist objection*.

It is worth distinguishing this objection from a related one that some have raised in discussions of this paper. Against (2), some have noted that many people do *not* believe in God, are not aware of God's presence, and do not know and love him. This gives us reason to deny the consequent of (2), that God would intend these things. This further gives us reason *either* to deny the truth of the antecedent of (2) (via *modus tollens*), or to deny the truth of the conditional. If we take the first option, then we also have reason to deny the antecedent of (1), and hence, an argument that God does not exist.<sup>30</sup> The second option is to deny (2). So, either we have an argument that God does not exist or an argument against (2).<sup>31</sup> Neither is a good option for a skeptical theist who wants to endorse Plantinga's argument. I will call this the *absence of belief objection*.<sup>32</sup>

#### IV.B. Addressing a Potential Misunderstanding

In this section, I will block a potential misunderstanding of the skeptical theist objection. Robert Lovering distinguishes between two views:

(*Broad Skeptical Theism*) In every case, we cannot know what God would do.

(*Narrow Skeptical Theism*) In some cases, we can know what God would do and, in some cases, we cannot.<sup>33</sup>

One might think that the skeptical theist objection is the following: since skeptical theism implies Broad Skeptical Theism, we cannot know that God would intend anything in the way described in premise 2.

That is not the objection. First, skeptical theism does not imply Broad Skeptical Theism. Here is an example from Bergmann to support this claim.<sup>34</sup> I know that I exist and that there is a past. Therefore, if God exists, then he did not intend to permanently annihilate me before now. Hence,

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<sup>30</sup>Put this way, assuming the argument for premise 1 was sound, the first option resembles the sorts of arguments in Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument* and Marsh, "Darwin and the Problem of Natural Nonbelief." For a non-skeptical theist response to Marsh, see Braddock, "Theism, Naturalism, and the Problem of Natural Nonbelief."

<sup>31</sup>However, note that it is not obvious that nontheists will never know God. The original premise (2) was ambiguous because it was not time-indexed. One could add the words "right now" to the end of (2), and the objection sticks. That is how I have been interpreting (2). But if we add the words "at some point of time" at the end, then the objection will not stick. People's not knowing about God right now does not entail that God has not intended that they will eventually come to know about God.

<sup>32</sup>Thanks to Robert Adams and Chris Tucker for conversation that helped to clarify this objection and its application to the argument. The other premises also raise interesting issues, which are beyond the scope of this paper. See Moon, "Recent Work" for more discussion.

<sup>33</sup>Lovering, "On What God Would Do," 90.

<sup>34</sup>Bergmann, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism," 15.

I can know that God did not intend to permanently annihilate me before now.<sup>35</sup> ST1–ST3 does not conflict with this argument. In general, I can use my commonsense knowledge to infer that God did not intend to make certain propositions false.<sup>36</sup>

The skeptical theist objection *is* saying that, given ST1–ST3, we are not in a position to know that God would intend for us to know him in the way described in premise 2. Yes, perhaps we *can* know that God did not intend to permanently annihilate us yesterday, and we can infer this from our commonsense knowledge. But it seems that we cannot similarly infer from our commonsense knowledge that God would intend for us to be able to know him. So, even if Narrow Skeptical Theism is true, skeptical theism still conflicts with Plantinga's argument.<sup>37</sup>

### V. What Can We Infer About What God Intends?

In the previous section, I showed how accepting skeptical theism gives one a reason to doubt premise 2. Someone might think that all we have to do is tweak the premise to strengthen Plantinga's argument. In this section, I show why any such attempts are likely to fail.

#### V.A. Principles for Deriving God's Intentions

How are we to know, of any event, that God intended that it occur? We saw in the previous section that if we know that an event has occurred, then we can know that God did not intend to *prevent* its occurrence. However, it is more difficult to know, even of events that we know have already occurred, whether God intended for them *to* occur.

Perhaps one can reason in the following way. For any event that has occurred or will occur, God knew that it would occur.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, for any event that has occurred or will occur, God played some causal role in its occurrence (by being the creator and sustainer of all things). We might then affirm the following principle,

(*Knowledge-Intention Principle*) If God knew that his actions would result in E's occurring, then God intended for E to occur,

and conclude that if an event has occurred, God intended for it to occur.

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<sup>35</sup>This example answers the charge in Lovering, "On What God Would Do" (104) that Narrow Skeptical Theism is *ad hoc*.

<sup>36</sup>See Bergmann, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism," 14–16 for other things we could know that God would do, even if skeptical theism is true. See also his technical definition of 'commonsense knowledge.'

<sup>37</sup>Rea ("Skeptical Theism," 485), a skeptical theist, suggests that he can have knowledge of God's reasons for action via scripture. This could, in principle, help Plantinga's argument, but adding propositions from scripture would make the argument more like the one to be given in §VI, which is what I call a *religion-based* argument. I will postpone that discussion until then. Also, whether divine revelation conflicts with skeptical theism is itself very controversial, cf. Wielenberg, "Skeptical Theism and Divine Lies" and Segal, "Skeptical Theism and Divine Truths."

<sup>38</sup>This assumes that open theism is false. I will assume this for the sake of my interlocutor.

But the Knowledge-Intention Principle is false. Suppose God intends to make a bush look like it is on fire. God might also *know* that this event will cause a nearby plant to cast a shadow. But the casting of the shadow might not have been God's intention, despite God's knowing that his actions would result in its occurrence. God could have been completely indifferent to the shadow.

The problem, one might think, is that God did not have any desire for the casting of the shadow. Perhaps the principle just needs to be slightly revised,

*(Desire-Intention Principle)* If God has some desire for E to occur and God knew that his actions would result in E's occurring, then God intended for E to occur.

Returning to the burning bush example, God might have known that burning a bush would cause a nearby plant to cast a shadow, but since God did not desire it, God did not intend it. However, if we grant that God did want there to be a shadow, and that God knew that burning the bush would cast the shadow, then it is very plausible that God also intended it.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, the principle still has a counterexample.<sup>40</sup> Consider, first, a counterexample to a *generalized* version of the Desire-Intention Principle, one that applies to any agent and not just God. Suppose that before Isaac's death, Esau promises him that he will not take revenge on Jacob for his wrongful deeds. Esau still *wants* Jacob to suffer for his wrongdoings, which is what Jacob deserves, but Esau promises to not act on this desire. Later that day, Esau sees a trolley headed toward five children. Esau also happens to see that if he pulls a switch to divert the trolley from killing the five children, then the trolley will hit Jacob instead, which will hurt him. Esau decides to pull the switch with the intention of saving the five children. Esau knows that his actions will result in Jacob's suffering. Esau also happens to desire for Jacob to suffer, but in keeping with his promise, the desire is not his reason for acting; he is acting solely with the intent of saving the children. In this case, Esau did not in fact intend for Jacob to suffer. After all, he had promised not to take revenge on Jacob, and he wanted above all to honor his promise to Isaac. The counterexample utilizes the well-known fact that we sometimes have a reason to cause X (i.e., a desire for X) that is not the *reason why* we cause X, which makes it possible for us to have not intended to cause X.

I will now provide a counterexample to the Desire-Intention Principle that is also relevant to Plantinga's argument. Imagine a possible scenario in which God desires for some person, Fred, to be in a relationship with him, and that God knows that his actions will result in Fred's being in this relationship with him. We can add the following to the case:

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<sup>39</sup>Thanks to Kenny Boyce and Josh Smart for help here.

<sup>40</sup>I thank Philip Swenson for the core idea behind this counterexample. Thanks also to Brian Cutter for helpful, clarifying discussions.

- a) God has a reason not to use his desire for a relationship with Fred as his reason for action.

This reason would be analogous to the promise-making in the earlier example. The reason need not be God's having made a promise. It could just be some other good that would be attained by God's not using his desire for relationship as his reason for action. It seems metaphysically possible that there could be such a good.

We could then add,

- b) There is some good that God intends to instantiate, such that the relationship with Fred is only a known byproduct of that intention.

The good mentioned in (b) would be analogous to the saving of five lives in the earlier example. Again, this good need not be the saving of five lives. It just needs to be some good, the achieving of which will happen to meet God's desire to have a relationship with Fred. All of this seems metaphysically possible. Furthermore, it seems that God will not have intended Fred's being in relationship with him. So, the Desire-Intention Principle also has a counterexample.

#### *V.B. The Counterexample and Skeptical Theism*

I could imagine the following reply. "Yes, that is a nice metaphysically possible counterexample to the Desire-Intention principle. But let us suppose that Fred is a real person in the actual world who has a relationship with God. Are you saying that the sort of state of affairs described by (a) and (b) obtains in the real world? That seems unlikely!" I will argue that we cannot know that it is unlikely, *if* skeptical theism is true.<sup>41</sup>

Suppose that ST1 is true. Then we do not have a good reason to think that the goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are. We should then suspend judgment about whether, on a cosmic scale, there are great goods to be gained if God simply refrains from using his desire for relationship with Fred as a reason for action. Hence, we should suspend judgment about whether, in the actual world, (a) is true. Furthermore, given ST1, we have reason to suspend judgment about whether, on a cosmic scale, there is a great unknown good to be gained, so that God's relationship with Fred is a mere known byproduct of God's intention to actualize that great unknown good. So, we should suspend judgment about (b).

Hence, if skeptical theism is true, then we should suspend judgment about whether the goods under discussion actually exist. To help drive in this point, recall how the skeptical theist uses ST1 to respond to the problem of evil. Just as ST1 is supposed to justify withholding judgment about whether there is a good that justifies horrendous evils (despite our

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<sup>41</sup>See Pruss, "Omnirationality," 5, where he says that it is probably rare for God to be in this situation. However, he gives no reason for thinking that this would be the case, *given* skeptical theism.

being unable to think of any such good), so it should justify withholding judgment about whether the goods described by (a) and (b) exist. It might initially *seem* probable that there are no such goods, just as it initially *seems* probable that there is no good that could justify God's allowing the evils of the Holocaust. But if the skeptical theist is right, then we are not in the position to make such probability judgments.

In §IV, the previous section, I argued that skeptical theism undermines premise 2 of Plantinga's argument; given skeptical theism, inferences about God's intentions from God's desires are unjustified. In this section, I have gone further by showing how attempts to tweak premise 2 are likely to fail. Even if we also stipulated that we knew quite a bit about God's desires, causal activity, and knowledge, it would still be difficult to properly infer anything about God's intentions, given skeptical theism.<sup>42</sup> So, I conclude that the conflict between skeptical theism and Plantinga's argument is a deep one that is extremely difficult to overcome.

## VI. New Versions of Plantinga's Argument

### VI.A. Religion-Based Arguments

Call Plantinga's argument a *bare-theism-based argument*. It moves from the bare existence of God, to claims about God's intentions, and finally to the claim that theistic belief is warranted. I showed that such an argument is very likely to conflict with skeptical theism. I will now argue that what I call *religion-based arguments* can both be consistent with skeptical theism and also have the resources to block *de jure* objections. These arguments do not make inferences about God's intentions just from God's bare existence, but from substantive claims about God's intentions already made or implied in an established religion.

The religion-based argument I discuss in-depth will be based on Christianity.<sup>43</sup> The first premise is

- (1\*) If Christian belief is true, then God intended for the cognitive faculties of theists who have a "doxastically valuable relationship" to form true, theistic beliefs.

I will explain what I mean by "doxastically valuable relationship" and "true, theistic beliefs." S has a *doxastically valuable relationship* with T only if S and T have a valuable relationship that exemplifies goods that entail that S believes that T exists.<sup>44</sup> Plausibly, one can have a relationship with God without believing that God exists. For example, someone might suspend judgment about God's existence but still throw out a hopeful prayer now

<sup>42</sup>However, see n. 37.

<sup>43</sup>Thanks to Kenny Boyce and Mike Rota for convincing me that this is a feasible way to go.

<sup>44</sup>Notice that I avoid referring to those theists who *know God*, as Plantinga does, because this might imply knowledge that God exists, which would take away the point of the argument.

and then. This might be sufficient for *some* degree of meaningful relationship.<sup>45</sup> However, consider the comfort one experiences from believing that *God is watching over me*, or the joy one experiences from believing that *God loves me*, or the thankfulness one experiences from believing that *a beautiful sunset is a gift from God*.<sup>46</sup> Intuitively, the comfort, joy, and thankfulness are all *good things*, and this is at least partly because they all involve *true beliefs* (given that Christianity is true). A doxastically valuable relationship with God is one that exemplifies these types of goods, goods that entail the presence of these theistic beliefs. Furthermore, these beliefs are examples of the “true, theistic beliefs” mentioned in (1\*).

A doxastically valuable relationship is, by definition, a valuable thing. The comfort, joy, and thankfulness are also valuable, and it is plausible that having the true beliefs about God that engender these goods is also valuable. As we have seen, God would desire these valuable things, and for anybody who has them, God would have known ahead of time that his causal activity would bring them about. But would it follow that God *intended* those goods? As we saw in section V, the Desire-Intention Principle is false; God’s knowingly causing a desired outcome does not entail his intending the outcome.

But suppose *Christian belief* is true. Now, as Plantinga writes, “the term ‘Christian belief,’ like most useful terms, is vague.”<sup>47</sup> He then goes on to note that even if a precise line cannot be drawn, such a line is not required for his purposes. A precise line is not necessary for my purposes either. I firstly need the plausible claim that on the Christian story, God loves humans, has special plans (or intentions) to redeem humans and bring about relationship with them, and intends for himself to be glorified among them. These claims are plausible on both liberal and conservative readings of the Old and New Testaments. Given these divine plans for the humans, it is plausible that doxastically valuable relationships with humans—and the possession of correct theistic beliefs that partly constitute those relationships—are among God’s intentions. On the Christian story, God’s desire for such relationships is not a reason that God, for some unknown reason, decided not to use as his reason for action; the relationships are not mere unintended byproducts of some other great unknown cosmic good. This makes it plausible that human cognitive faculties forming those true, theistic beliefs are part of God’s intentions.

Note that the consequent of (1\*) refers only to a certain type of *actual* theist: one with a doxastically valuable relationship with God. Unlike Plantinga’s original argument, this one makes no claims about what God

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<sup>45</sup>Thanks to Allison Thornton for pressing me on this. See also the *tapping case* and *fortuitous money case* in Poston and Dougherty, “Divine Hiddenness,” 190–193 and the *Turing chat rooms* and the *hallucination scenario* in Cullison, “Two Solutions,” 120–121 for more developed examples of meaningful relationship without belief.

<sup>46</sup>For a defense of the superiority of “doxastically valuable relationships,” see Schellenberg, “On Not Unnecessarily Darkening the Glass,” 201.

<sup>47</sup>Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 202.

would intend for humans generally. This restriction allows my argument to avoid the *absence of belief objection*, since the argument is not about those who have no theistic belief.<sup>48</sup> The theist also does not need to be Christian.<sup>49</sup> For example, if Christianity is true, then God was obviously intending to have doxastically valuable relationships with Moses and the Israelites. Similarly, given the truth of Christianity, a non-Christian theist who thanks God in the morning for the day and turns to God in prayer during hard times will likely have a doxastically valuable relationship with God. If Christian theism is true, then such relationships—and the true, theistic beliefs that partly constitute them—are also likely part of God's intentions.<sup>50</sup>

Some might object by saying it does not follow from Christianity that God intends the doxastically valuable relationships (and the relevant beliefs) that (1\*) ascribes.<sup>51</sup> For example, perhaps on some versions of Christianity, God only intends for doxastically valuable relationships with a small group of elect Christians and not with anybody else. If they are right, then (1\*) is false.

However, as Plantinga notes, terms like "Christianity" and "Christian belief" are vague. I concede that if one uses the terms differently than I do, then (1\*) will be false. On the other hand, if one uses "Christian belief" as I do, then given my above argument, (1\*) will likely be true. And that's how I mean "Christian belief" to be understood in the current religion-based argument under discussion.<sup>52</sup>

The next premise states,

- (2\*) If God intended for the cognitive faculties of theists who have a "doxastically valuable relationship" to form true, theistic beliefs, then belief in God is probably produced in such persons by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth in the environment for which those faculties were designed.

It makes the connection between God's intentions for the cognitive faculties to produce the true, theistic beliefs and the proper functionalist

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<sup>48</sup>The question remains whether God intends for all people, including nontheists, to have a doxastically valuable relationship with him. This raises issues about *divine hiddenness*, which are beyond the scope of this paper. See the references in nn. 30, 45, and 46.

<sup>49</sup>Thanks to comments from a referee of this journal, which led to this clarification and the rest of this paragraph.

<sup>50</sup>Note that this religion-based argument is not defending specific Christian beliefs, such as beliefs in the Trinity, Incarnation, Resurrection, and more. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine how Plantinga's *Extended A/C Model*, which centrally includes the claim that if Christian belief is true, then Christian belief is warranted, applies to the argument here.

<sup>51</sup>Thanks to Domingos Faria for helpful conversation about this objection.

<sup>52</sup>Furthermore, such a person might formulate her own religion-based argument with a version of (1\*) that restricts the doxastically valuable relationships to only the elect. The rest of the argument could then be adjusted accordingly.



conditions for warrant. Why believe (2\*)? Suppose its antecedent is true and that God did intend for cognitive faculties to produce the relevant, true, theistic beliefs. Given that God is also the ultimate designer of human cognitive faculties and their environments, it is plausible that when those cognitive faculties produce these true, theistic beliefs according to God's intentions, those faculties are functioning properly according to a reliable, truth-aimed design plan in the appropriate environments.

From (1\*), (2\*) and Plantinga's theory of warrant, we conclude:

(3\*) If Christian belief is true, then such theists' belief in God is probably warranted.

Can this new religion-based argument still play the same role of deflecting *de jure* objections that the original bare-theism-based argument did? Let's see how the dialectic might work. Suppose a Christian skeptical theist encounters a debunking argument against theistic belief. She could make the following sort of reply, which is similar to the one the theist gave in section III:

Well, your *de jure* objection might succeed if you assume Christian belief is false. However, if Christian belief is true, then theistic belief is probably not a result of cognitive systems gone awry or a loose screw. Rather, it is likely to be formed by properly functioning, reliable faculties. So, you need a good *de facto* objection against Christian belief to get your *de jure* objection off the ground.

Such a response can be given to the many *de jure* objectors who do not have a good *de facto* argument against Christian belief.

This response is dialectically weaker than the one based on the bare-theism-based argument in the following way. Admittedly, it is *easier* to provide a good *de facto* objection to Christian belief than to bare theistic belief. The former is a much stronger claim, and so there are more ways it could turn out to be false. However, so long as the objector has no good *de facto* argument against Christian belief, such a skeptical theist is on good ground and can make use of this response.

A religion-based argument need not be Christianity-based. To formulate an alternative, we just have to replace the antecedent of (1\*) with a religion that still implies (1\*)'s consequent. In other words, it must be a religion that we could plausibly substitute for X in the following premise:

(1\*\*) If religion X is true, then God intended for the cognitive faculties of theists who have a doxastically valuable relationship to form true, theistic beliefs.

(2\*) would remain the same, and then (3\*) would be altered to say,

(3\*\*) If religion X is true, then such theists' belief in God is probably warranted,

so that its antecedent matches the antecedent of (1\*\*). There might also be Muslim or Jewish religion-based arguments of this form. However, just as the success of the above Christian-based argument depends on the relevant version of Christianity, so might Muslim or Jewish religion-based arguments depend on the relevant versions of Islam or Judaism.<sup>53</sup>

### VI.B. *Intention-Based Arguments*

Bare-theism-based arguments move from God's mere existence to claims about theistic beliefs. Religion-based arguments move from a religion to claims about certain theistic beliefs. *Intention-based* arguments move from claims about both God's existence *and intentions* to claims about certain theistic beliefs. These arguments can be used by theists who do not hold to a major monotheistic religion but simply believe that God intended for theists to have the true, theistic beliefs that partly constitute a doxastically valuable relationship with God.<sup>54</sup>

To formulate such an argument, one can just skip (1\*), or any instantiation of (1\*\*), and simply *start* the argument with (2\*):

- (2\*) If God intended for the cognitive faculties of theists who have a "doxastically valuable relationship" to form the true, theistic beliefs, then belief in God is probably produced in such persons by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth in the environment for which those faculties were designed.

And from Plantinga's theory of warrant, it follows that

- (3\*\*) If God intended for the cognitive faculties of theists who have a "doxastically valuable relationship" to form the true theistic beliefs, then such theists' belief in God is probably warranted.

As with the religion-based argument, since it *starts* with assumptions about God's intentions, there is no good reason to think it conflicts with skeptical theism.

Here is how one would use the intention-based argument in a reply to a *de jure* objection:

Well, your *de jure* objection might succeed if you assume that God doesn't intend for theists who have a "doxastically valuable relationship" to form true, theistic beliefs—that, either God doesn't exist, or that even though he exists, he lacks that intention. However, if God exists and does have such an intention, then theistic belief is probably not a result of cognitive systems gone awry or a loose screw. Rather, it

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<sup>53</sup>Examining whether this style of argument is open to other religions is beyond the scope of this paper. Considerations by Baldwin and McNabb, "An Epistemic Defeater for Islamic Belief" might cast doubt on whether there could be a Muslim-based argument of this form.

<sup>54</sup>Thanks to Tyler McNabb and Brian Cutter for helpful discussion that led to my formulating an intention-based argument.

is likely to be formed by properly functioning, reliable faculties. So, you need a good *de facto* objection against my theistic belief to get your *de jure* objection off the ground.

Such a response can be given to the many *de jure* objectors who do not have a good argument for atheism or a good argument that God did not intend as such. And many do not have any such argument.

This reply is also dialectically weaker than the reply based on the bare-theism-based argument. It is *easier* to provide a good *de facto* objection to *theism + X* than to *theism*. The former is a stronger claim, and so there are more ways it could turn out to be false. So, like the religion-based argument, this new response is dialectically weaker. Fortunately, so long as the objector has no good *de facto* argument against *theism+X*, such a skeptical theist can still make good use of this response.

Here is an objection.<sup>55</sup> Suppose the *de jure* objector has no particular good *de facto* objection to theism. Even so, since I am now adding a very particular claim about God's intentions, doesn't that make the *de facto* claim *unlikely*? If so, then perhaps that itself is a good *de facto* objection to my *theism + X*.

In response, I do not think it is unlikely.<sup>56</sup> Compare the claim that God intended the faculties of those with doxastically valuable relationships to produce their true, theistic beliefs with the claim that God intended the ears of philosophers to be homing devices for bees. The latter claim *does* seem unlikely (even if God exists). We already know about the functions of ears, and we know that they have none of the mechanisms that would even come close to qualifying as homing devices for bees. On the other hand, it is unclear—or at least there is significant disagreement about—which cognitive mechanisms give rise to theistic beliefs and what the functions of those various mechanisms are.<sup>57</sup> Now, suppose that God exists. Then it does not seem unlikely that God is the ultimate designer of human beings' cognitive faculties. Given that many humans around the world have doxastically valuable relationships with God, it also does not seem unlikely that God's *intention* was for their cognitive faculties to form the true, theistic beliefs that partly constitute the doxastically valuable relationships. We have nothing parallel to the bee case here. So, I think that the above *de facto* objection fails.

I conclude that believers from different religions, as well as many theists who do not have a background religion, have at least two Plantinga-inspired options by which to respond to *de jure* objections in the spirit

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<sup>55</sup>Thanks to Mark Murphy for this objection.

<sup>56</sup>Thanks to Brian Cutter for helpful conversation.

<sup>57</sup>For literature on this topic, see Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe*; Bering, *The Belief Instinct*; Clark and Barrett, "Reidian Religious Epistemology"; Thurow, "Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to be Irrational?"; Braddock, "Debunking Arguments"; Braddock, "An Evidential Argument for Theism"; and the references in n. 31 of Moon, "Recent Work."

captured by the mantra: "Your *de jure* objection requires a *de facto* objection . . . a *de facto* objection that you don't have."

### VII. Conclusion

I have argued that skeptical theism conflicts with one of the premises of Plantinga's argument for the claim that if God exists, then belief in God is probably warranted. It follows that a prominent way of responding to the problem of evil is in conflict with a prominent way of responding to popular *de jure* objections to theistic belief. This might seem to either leave skeptical theists without one of the most influential responses to *de jure* objections, or leave proponents of Plantinga's religious epistemology without a prominent response to the problem of evil. This needn't be *such* a bad thing; not all theists like skeptical theism, and there are other ways to respond to *de jure* objections.<sup>58</sup> However, it still gives theists fewer options by which to defend their beliefs.

Fortunately, instead of appealing to Plantinga's *bare-theism-based* argument, I have shown that one can appeal to *religion-based* arguments or an *intention-based* argument, both of which are in the spirit of his religious epistemology. They do not conflict with skeptical theism, and they have a similar ability to deflect *de jure* objections. I conclude that even though skeptical theists cannot hold to Plantinga's exact religious epistemology, they can still consistently hold to religious epistemologies that are in its spirit.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Perhaps this is why in the later part of his career (e.g., Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism"), Plantinga started depending more on his *O Felix Culpa* theodicy. Also, see Thurow, "Does Cognitive Science Show Belief in God to be Irrational?"; and Braddock, "Theism, Naturalism, and the Problem of Natural Nonbelief" for alternative responses to theistic debunking arguments.

<sup>59</sup>I received help from many people on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks to two anonymous referees of this journal and especially to the editor, Mark Murphy, for helpful comments. Thanks to Louise Williams for helpful editing. Thanks to Michael Bergmann, Hugh Burling, Domingos Faria, Blake McCallister, Kenny Pearce, Michael Rota, and Christine Wu for helpful conversations. For numerous, helpful extended conversations, thanks to Emily Bingeman, Brian Cutter, and Philip Swenson. Thanks to Klaas Kraay, Michael Rea, and Chris Tucker for thorough and helpful written comments and conversation. Thanks to the audience at the 2016 Eastern Society of Christian Philosophers meeting; to the Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion reading group (including Dustin Crummett, John and Lorraine Keller, Chris Menzel, Joe Milburn, Sam Newlands, and Michelle Panchuk); to the Toronto Works in Progress Philosophy of Religion reading group; to Mark Baker and Dean Zimmerman at our cognitive science of religion reading group; to the audience at the 2015 Midwest Society of Christian Philosophers meeting (including Rebecca Chan, Liz Jackson, Jonathan Reibsam, Allison Thornton, and Chris Tweedt); to the Pepperdine University philosophy club (including Paige Massey and Tomas Bogardus); to Kenny Boyce, Wesley Chambers, Chris Gadsden, and Joshua Smart at a University of Missouri reading group; and to Dalhousie University's weekly colloquium (including Kaleb Earl, Scott Edgar, Duncan Macintosh, Stephen Maitzen, Letitia Meynell, John Schellenberg, Katie Stockdale, and Sheldon Wein).

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