Natural Theology

In this chapter, I provide a chronological survey of Plantinga's changing conceptions of the project of natural theology, and of the ways in which those conceptions of the project of natural theology interact with his major philosophical concerns. In his earliest works, Plantinga has a very clear and strict conception of the project of natural theology, and he argues very clearly (and correctly) that that project fails. In his middle works, Plantinga has a tolerably clear and slightly less strict conception of the project of natural theology, and he argues—in my view unsuccessfully—that this project succeeds. In his later works, Plantinga has a much less clear and less strict conception of the project of natural theology, and it is much harder to determine whether there is any merit in the claims that he makes for natural theology as thus conceived.

1. ***God and Other Minds*** **(1967)**

The central question that Plantinga seeks to answer in *God and Other Minds* is whether it is rational to believe that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition exists. At least *prima facie*, it seems that there are two ways of understanding this question. On the one hand, the question might be whether reason *requires* belief in the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition; on the other hand, the question might be whether reason *permits* belief in that God. I think that it is not entirely clear how this question is meant to be interpreted in this work (though, in the light of Plantinga's subsequent publications, I think that the best guess is that the key question is whether reason *permits* belief in God).

In *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga claims that the aim of natural theology is to show that the claim, that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition exists, 'follows deductively or inductively from propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly every sane man … together with propositions that are self-evident or necessarily true' (4). Moreover, Plantinga goes on to say that 'it is evident that if [the natural theologian] succeeds in showing that these beliefs do indeed follow from those propositions, he succeeds in showing that these beliefs are rational' (4). Consequently, on Plantinga's account of natural theology, it seems that the aim of natural theology must be something very close to establishing that reason *requires* belief in God: for it seems that if the natural theologian can succeed in carrying out the project that Plantinga sets for him, then almost any sane man is rationally required to believe that God exists (at least once he is apprised of the relevant chains of reasoning). However, it is worth noting that, while it might in some sense be overkill, the success of natural theology would also establish that reason *permits* the belief that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition exists: so we should not leap too quickly to the conclusion that the central question to which Plantinga seeks an answer is whether belief in God is rationally required.

In *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga argues that there are no successful pieces of natural theology: there is no known argument that establishes that the claim that God exists follows deductively or inductively from propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly every sane man, together with propositions that are self-evident or necessarily true. His argument for this conclusion has the following form: the most plausible candidates for successful pieces of natural theology are arguments X, Y, and

Z; but, upon examination, we see that arguments X, Y, and Z are not successful. So 'it is hard to avoid the conclusion that natural theology does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question [of whether it is] rational to believe in God' (111). I shall return to say more about the details of this argument in a moment.

In *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga characterises natural atheology as 'the attempt, roughly, to show that, given what we know, it is impossible or unlikely that God exists'. More exactly, it seems that natural atheology should be the project of showing that the claim, that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition does not exist, follows deductively or inductively from propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly every sane man, together with propositions that are self-evident or necessarily true. In *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga argues that there are no successful pieces of natural atheology: there is no known argument that establishes that the claim that God does not exist follows deductively or inductively from propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly every sane man, together with propositions that are self-evident or necessarily true. No doubt unsurprisingly, his argument for this conclusion has the following form: the most plausible candidates for successful pieces of natural atheology are arguments X, Y, and Z; but, upon examination, we see that arguments X, Y, and Z are not successful. So 'natural atheology seems no better than natural theology as an answer to the question [whether religious beliefs are] rationally justified' (183). (Indeed, Plantinga adds that 'if the answer of the natural theologian does not carry conviction, that of the natural atheologian is even less satisfactory' (268). But it seems to me to be highly doubtful that there is anything in his text that justifies this further claim.)

In the face of the (supposed) failure of both natural theology and natural atheology, Plantinga proposes to try 'a different approach' (183) to the question of whether belief in God is rational. Consider the perennial philosophical problem of 'other minds', i.e. the problem of whether and how we know the thoughts and feelings of other people. There is no doubt that the belief, that one does—at least some of the time—know the thoughts and feelings of other people, is rational (i.e. both rationally permitted and rationally required!). However, according to Plantinga, there is no satisfactory answer to the question of whether and how we know the thoughts and feelings of other people: the best argument that we can construct for the existence of other minds is the analogical argument, but this argument fails (in just the same way that the best argument for the existence of God fails). Since rational belief in other minds does not require an answer to the question of whether and how we know the thoughts and feelings of other people, it seems not unreasonable to suppose that rational belief in God does not require an answer to the question of why and how we know of the existence of God. 'Hence my tentative conclusion: if my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter' (271).

There is much that I find elusive in this 'different approach'. In particular, it is quite unclear why one should think that the considerations that Plantinga advances support the claim that, if belief in other minds is rationally permissible, then belief in God is rationally permissible, even if those considerations are independently plausible. On the one hand, there just is no intellectually serious dispute about the truth of the claim that, if there is at least one mind, then there are many minds. On the other hand, there is intellectually serious dispute about the claim that God exists. While we all agree

that it is a Moorean fact—a commonsense claim that is beyond serious dispute—that, if there is at least one mind, then there are many minds, we do not all agree that it is a Moorean fact that God exists. Consequently, there is a good *prima facie* reason to suppose that the claim that belief in other minds is rationally permissible—and, indeed, arguably, rational required—lends no significant support to the claim that it is rationally permissible—let alone rationally required—that one believe in God. Of course, one might also well wish to take issue with the claim that there is no satisfactory answer to the question of whether and how we know the thoughts and feelings of other people: but it would take us far beyond our current brief to try to explore *that* suggestion here.

If we agree that Plantinga's 'different approach' fails to provide a satisfactory answer to the question of the rationality of belief in God, then there are two courses of response that seem indicated. On the one hand, we might wish to look more closely at Plantinga's treatment of what he calls 'natural theology' and 'natural atheology', to see whether his assessment of these projects is accurate; on the other hand, we might cast around for other ways in which that question might be answered (and, in so doing, we might consider the question whether Plantinga provides an appropriate characterisation of 'natural theology' and 'natural atheology'). In the rest of this section, we shall focus on the first of these possible responses.

As I noted earlier, Plantinga's critique of natural theology in *God and Other Minds* proceeds by examining what he takes to be the most plausible arguments for the existence of God and showing that these arguments fail. There are thus two ways in which Plantinga's critique could fail: he could be wrong in his assessment of the arguments that he chooses to examine; and he could be wrong in his assumption that he has examined the most plausible arguments that are available to us.

The first argument that Plantinga examines—'the cosmological argument'—is Aquinas' third way. Plantinga's analysis of this argument is exemplary; I doubt that there are any people who would seriously defend the claim that Aquinas' third way is a successful piece of natural theology, given the criteria for success that are currently in play. However, there are other cosmological arguments that have come to prominence in more recent philosophical discussion, and it is a nice question whether Plantinga is now disposed to see any kind of merit in those other cosmological arguments. (In particular, it is interesting that only one of the arguments presented in Plantinga's much more recent 'Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments' is a cosmological argument; it is also interesting to note that this argument is, at best, a *very* distant cousin of Aquinas' third way.)

The second argument that Plantinga examines—'the ontological argument'—is presented in two forms: Anselm's famous *Proslogion II* argument, and Malcolm's very well known *Proslogion III* argument. Once again, Plantinga's discussion of these arguments is exemplary; once again, I doubt that there are any people who would seriously defend the claim that Malcolm's argument is a successful piece of natural theology. Interestingly, Plantinga's criticism of Anselm is tempered: while he maintains that the argument is unsuccessful, he allows for the possibility that there might be an interpretation of the argument upon which it succeeds. Moreover, he makes a strong case for the claim that no one has produced a compelling *general* argument against the possibility of successful ontological arguments—and, in

particular, he provides very effective criticisms of Kant's claim that ontological arguments fail because they rely upon the misguided assumption that existence is a predicate.

The third and final argument that Plantinga examines—'the teleological argument'—is cast in the following form:

1. Everything that exhibits curious adaptation of means to ends and is such that we know whether or not it is the product of intelligent design, is in fact the product of intelligent design.
2. The universe exhibits curious adaptation of means to ends.
3. (Therefore) The universe is probably the product of intelligent design.

About this argument, Plantinga says that Hume identified the fatal flaw: while the premises of this argument may provide some—'not very strong, perhaps, but not completely negligible' (109)—support for the claim that the universe is designed, they provide no support at all for the claim that the universe is designed by exactly one person, or the claim that the universe is created *ex nihilo*, or the claim that the universe is created by the person who designed it, or the claim that the creator of the universe is omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good, or the claim that the creator of the universe is an eternal spirit, without body, and in no way dependent upon physical objects. Given that the aim of natural theology is to prove the existence of the Judaeo-Christian God, it is plain—according to Plantinga—that this teleological argument is unsuccessful. It is a nice question whether we should suppose that the premises of the argument provide *enough* support for the conclusion to license the claim that it is rational to believe that the universe is probably the product of intelligent design. Alas, Plantinga did not take up this question in *God and Other Minds*. It is also a nice question whether Plantinga continues to suppose that the foregoing is the strongest type of argument for design; we shall have reason to return to this question later.

At the end of his discussion of the arguments mentioned above, Plantinga adds: 'Now of course these three are not the only arguments of their kind; there are also, for example, the various sorts of moral arguments for God's existence. But these are not initially very plausible and do not become more so under close scrutiny' (111). (There are various moral arguments mentioned in 'Two dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments', along with a slew of arguments that are plainly distinct from 'the teleological argument' discussed above. Again, it is a nice question whether any of these arguments are successful, given the criteria for success that are in play in *God and Other Minds*.)

The considerations that we have noted in connection with the arguments attributed to the natural theologian in *God and Other Minds* apply equally to the arguments attributed to the natural atheologian in that work. Plantinga considers only the standard (Mackie/McCloskey) logical arguments from evil, Mackie's argument that the concept of omnipotence is incoherent, Findlay's ontological argument for the non-existence of God, and critiques of religious belief founded in verificationist considerations. While Plantinga's critiques of these arguments are compelling—particularly given the criteria for success that are in play—it is a nice question whether there are more successful atheological arguments that have appeared on the scene since the publication of *God and Other Minds*.

2. *The Nature of Necessity* (1974) and *God, Freedom and Evil* (1974)

In *God, Freedom and Evil*—and in the relevant parts of *The Nature of Necessity*—the central topic of inquiry is, once again, the rationality of belief that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition exists. However, in these works, it seems that the conception of natural theology and natural atheology changes dramatically, in line with a corresponding change in the assessment of the success of the arguments under consideration.

In *God, Freedom and Evil*, Plantinga claims that natural theology is a response to the rejection of the belief that God exists, both by those who claim that the belief is false, and those who claim that the belief is irrational. While a natural theologian 'tries to give successful arguments or proofs for the existence of God …[he does not] typically offer his arguments in order to convince people of God's existence; and in fact few who accept theistic belief do so because they find such an argument compelling. Instead the typical function of natural theology has been to show that religious belief is rationally acceptable.' (2)

This characterisation of natural theology is very interestingly different from the characterisation of natural theology in *God and Other Minds*. In particular, on this characterisation of natural theology, it seems that the 'different approach' that Plantinga adopts in the last part of *God and Other Minds* is, after all, a piece of natural theology. For, plainly enough, the argument of the 'different approach' is intended to establish the conclusion that it is rationally permissible to believe that God exists—and, on the new account before us, *that* is the typical function of natural theology. It is a nice question whether Plantinga now supposes that the natural theologian offers his arguments in order to *convince* people of the rationality of the belief that God exists: talk of '*showing* that religious belief is rationally acceptable' neatly avoids any commitment on this point.

There is also a different characterisation of natural atheology in *God, Freedom and Evil*. 'Some philosophers …have presented arguments for the falsehood of theistic beliefs; these philosophers conclude that belief in God is demonstrably irrational or unreasonable. We might call this enterprise *natural atheology*'. (3) (Also: 'Natural atheology—the attempt to prove that God does not exist or that at any rate it is unreasonable or irrational to believe that He does' (7).) There is now a curious asymmetry between the definition of 'natural theology' and the definition of 'natural atheology'. Given that natural theology has the aim of showing that religious belief is rationally acceptable, it ought surely to be the case that natural atheology has the aim of showing that non-religious belief is rationally acceptable. Of course, one way of carrying out the aim of the natural atheologian would be to show that it is irrational to believe that God exists; but that is not the only way in which the project of the natural atheologian can be carried out. Moreover, when we come to consider the arguments of a natural atheologian, we should make sure that we evaluate them by the same standards that we apply when we are evaluating the arguments of the natural theologian: we can ask whether a given argument proves that God exists, and we can ask whether that same argument establishes that it is rationally acceptable to believe that God exists; equally, we can ask whether a given argument proves that God does

not exist, and we can ask whether that same argument establishes that it is rationally acceptable to believe that God does not exist.

In *God, Freedom and Evil*, under the heading of 'natural atheology', Plantinga considers various arguments from evil, an argument for the incompatibility of divine omniscience with human freedom, and the highlights of the discussion of verificationist arguments in *God and Other Minds*. His conclusion is this: 'There are arguments we haven't considered, of course; but so far the indicated conclusion is that natural atheology doesn't work. Natural atheology, therefore, is something of a flop.' (73/4). And, of course, what Plantinga means here is that these arguments do not establish that it is rationally impermissible to believe that God exists. But that does not rule out the possibility that these or related arguments do establish that it is rationally permissible to believe that God does not exist.

Under the heading of 'natural theology', Plantinga briefly rehashes the treatment of cosmological and teleological arguments from *God and Other Minds*, and then devotes considerable space to the discussion of ontological arguments and, in particular, to the development of a 'triumphant' modal ontological argument. This argument goes as follows:

1. It is possible that there is a maximally great being, i.e. a being that is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good in every possible world.
2. (Therefore) There is an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being.

About this argument, Plantinga says: 'It must be conceded that not everyone who understands and reflects on its premise … will accept it. Still, it is evident, I think, that there is nothing contrary to reason or irrational in accepting this premise. What I claim for this argument, therefore, is that it establishes, not the truth of theism, but its rational acceptability. And hence it accomplishes at least one of the aims of the tradition of natural theology' (112).

If we agree with Plantinga that this argument 'establishes the rational acceptability of theism', then, it seems to me, we have no choice but to agree that the following argument establishes the rational acceptability of atheism:

1. It is possible that there is no world that contains the amounts and kinds of evils that are present in our world and in which there is an omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good being
2. (Therefore) There is no omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good being.

Of course, it must be conceded that not everyone who understands and reflects on its premise will accept it. Still, it is evident, I think, that there is nothing contrary to reason or irrational in accepting this premise. So, if I follow Plantinga, I can claim for this argument that it establishes the rational acceptability of atheism—and hence accomplishes what ought to be one of the aims of natural atheology.

In his discussion of his 'triumphant' modal ontological argument, Plantinga makes the point that, even though theists are bound to suppose that the following argument is sound:

1. Either God exists or 7+5=14
2. It is false that 7+5=14
3. (Therefore) God exists

it is obvious that this argument fails to prove that God exists: ‘no one who didn’t already accept the conclusion would accept the first premise’ (112). However, it seems to me that it is equally obvious that this argument fails to prove that the claim that God exists is rationally acceptable: for no one who didn’t already accept this conclusion would accept that the first premise is rationally acceptable. But exactly the same point can be made about Plantinga’s ‘victorious’ modal ontological argument: since no (reasonable) person who doesn’t already accept that the claim that God exists is rationally acceptable will accept that claim that the premise in Plantinga’s argument is rationally acceptable, that argument fails to prove that the claim that God exists is rationally acceptable. Of course, all theists suppose that the claim that either God exists or 7+5=14 is rationally acceptable—and many theists suppose that the premise in Plantinga’s argument is rationally acceptable—but no one who denies (or doubts) that the claim that God exists is rationally acceptable will agree with theists in their assessment of these claims. Consequently, if the project of natural theology is to *convince* people of the rationality of the belief that God exists, then it seems that we are bound to conclude that Plantinga’s ‘victorious’ modal ontological argument is not a successful piece of natural theology.

Suppose we take seriously the idea that it is not part of the project of natural theology to *convince* people of the rationality of the belief that God exists, and insist that all that natural theology aims to do is to *show* that it is rational to believe that God exists. In that case, even if the foregoing remarks are correct, we might still claim that there is nothing partisan about Plantinga’s assessment of natural theology and natural atheology in *God, Freedom and Evil*. For, we might say, while the ‘victorious’ modal ontological arguments really does *show* that it is rational to believe that God exists, neither the corresponding atheological modal ontological argument nor any of the other atheological arguments *shows* that it is rational to believe that God does not exist. However, at the very least, one would like to have an account of *showing* that bears out the mooted differential treatment: if, for example, we hold that the ‘victorious’ modal ontological arguments show *to theists* that it is rational *for theists* to believe that God exists, why shouldn’t we also say that the corresponding ‘victorious’ atheological modal ontological arguments show *to atheists* that it is rational *for atheists* to believe that God does not exist?

3. ‘Reason and Belief in God’ (1983)

In ‘Reason and Belief in God’, Plantinga takes up a set of questions about the connections between faith and reason: Do believers accept the existence of God as a matter of faith? Is belief in God irrational, unreasonable, or otherwise contrary to reason? Must one have evidence in order to have reasonable or rational belief in God? Are there proofs of the existence of God? Why are Reformed and Calvinist thinkers hostile to the project of natural theology? Are Reformed and Calvinist thinkers right to take a jaundiced view of natural theology? In answer to these questions, Plantinga defends the view that the Reformed objection to natural theology ‘is best understood as an implicit rejection of classical foundationalism in favour of the view that belief in God is properly basic’ (17). According to Reformed and Calvinist thinkers, ‘it is

entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all; in this respect belief in God resembles belief in the past, in the existence of other persons, and in the existence of material objects' (17). Moreover, says Plantinga, the 'fundamental insights' of the Reformed and Calvinist thinkers are correct: classical foundationalism is 'both false and self-referentially incoherent' (17), and belief in God can be *properly basic*, i.e. such that the proposition that God exists is properly believed even though it is not believed 'on the basis of other propositions' (46).

Much of 'Reason and Belief in God' is taken up with the characterisation of classical foundationalism. In short, the classical foundationalist claims: (1) that in a rational noetic structure the believed-on-the-basis-of relation is asymmetric and irreflexive; (2) that a rational noetic structure has a foundation; (3) that in a rational noetic structure belief is proportional in strength to support from the foundations; and (4) that a proposition that p is properly basic for a person S iff p is either self-evident to S, or incorrigible for S, or evident to the senses for S. (A person's noetic structure is the set of propositions that person believes, together with certain epistemic relations that hold among that person and these propositions. An account of a person's noetic structure specifies: (a) which of that person's beliefs are basic and which are non-basic; (b) an index of the degree of belief, i.e. an indication of how firmly each belief is held; and (c) an index of depth of ingression, i.e. an indication of how much the giving up of a particular belief would reverberate through the rest of that person's noetic structure. A noetic structure is rational if it could be the noetic structure of a completely rational person.)

The core of the argument that Plantinga mounts against classical foundationalism concerns the standing of (4): 'If the classical foundationalist knows of some support for (4) from propositions that are self-evident, or evident to the senses, or incorrigible, he will be able to provide a good argument … whose premises are self-evident, or evident to the senses, or incorrigible, and whose conclusion is (4). So far as I know, no classical foundationalist has provided such an argument. It therefore appears that the classical foundationalist does not know of any support for (4) from propositions that are (on his account) properly basic. So if he is to be rational in accepting (4), he must (on his own account) accept it as basic. But according to (4) itself, (4) is properly basic for the classical foundationalist only if (4) is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for the classical foundationalist. Clearly, (4) meets none of these conditions. … But then the classical foundationalist is self-referentially inconsistent in accepting (4).' (60) While it seems to me that there is some wiggle room here for the classical foundationalist—in particular, with respect to the assumption that, if epistemic relations hold within a rational noetic structure, then those relations are *available* as items of knowledge to the person who possesses that rational noetic structure—it is not clear that there is much harm in the concession that Plantinga's argument inflicts mortal harm on classical foundationalism. For, if we allow that a classical foundationalist can claim that knowledge of the relevant epistemic relations need not be available to the person who possesses a rational noetic structure, then we block any straightforward argument from classical foundationalism to the irrationality of theistic belief amongst those who are unable to offer good arguments on behalf of the claim that God exists.

Of course, as Plantinga himself acknowledges, it is a very long step from the rejection of classical foundationalism to the rejection of the evidentialist critique of theism, i.e. to the rejection of the claim that (1) it is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons, and (2) there is no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists. However, for our purposes, it is more important to focus on the alternative viewpoint defended by those Reformed and Calvinist thinkers who denied the claim that, in a rational noetic structure, basic beliefs are either self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses. According to the view that Plantinga claims to endorse: (a) arguments or proofs are not, in general, the source of a believer's confidence in God; (b) arguments or proofs are not needed for rational justification: a believer is entirely within his or her epistemic rights in believing, even if he or she has no argument at all for the conclusion that God exists; and (c) the believer does not need natural theology in order to achieve rationality or epistemic propriety: the believer's belief in God can be perfectly rational even if the believer knows no cogent argument, and even if there *is* no cogent argument, for the existence of God. More strongly, some of the Reformed and Calvinist thinkers also maintained: (d) that we cannot come to knowledge of God on the basis of argument because the arguments of natural theology simply do not work; (e) Christian believers should start from belief in God rather than from the premises of an argument whose conclusion is that God exists; (f) that God has created us in such a way that we have a strong tendency or inclination towards belief, albeit one that is often overlaid or suppressed by sin; and (g) that belief in God relevantly resembles belief in the existence of the self, or the past, or other minds, in that, in none of these cases do we have, or have need of, proofs or arguments.

While Plantinga maintains, at least loosely speaking, that belief in God is properly basic, he does not maintain that it is *groundless*. In general, those beliefs that are properly basic—perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, beliefs about occurrent mental states, and the like—are so only in certain conditions that are the grounds for the justification of those beliefs. Similarly, Plantinga claims, there are conditions under which such beliefs as that God is speaking to me, or that God has created all this, or that God disapproves of what I have done, or that God forgives me, or that God is to be thanked or praised are properly basic: there are circumstances that properly 'call forth' (81) these beliefs. Strictly speaking, then, it is *these* kinds of beliefs that are properly basic; but it is a short inference from the content of any of these beliefs to the claim that God exists. Consequently, then, the belief that God exists is shown to be neither gratuitous nor groundless on the Reformed view: there are conditions that are grounds for the justification of particular beliefs whose truth entails that God exists.

Given the foregoing considerations, one might suspect that, on the Reformed view, there is no role left for the arguments of either natural theology or natural atheology. However, at the end of 'Reason and Belief in God', Plantinga does note that argument is not entirely *irrelevant* to basic belief in God. First, someone whose belief in God is properly basic may also have other more strongly held properly basic beliefs that entail that there is no God: when apprised of this fact—e.g. by way of an argument that takes those other beliefs as premises—that person might give up their properly basic belief in God. Second, someone who believes that there is no God might be brought to believe that God exists by an argument that appeals to other beliefs that are more strongly held, and which jointly entail that God exists. Third, as Plantinga emphasises, the justification conditions for properly basic beliefs can only be taken to

confer *prima facie* justification (rather than *ultima facie* or all-things-considered justification). Consequently, a person who holds a properly basic belief that God exists can be confronted by circumstances in which there is a potential defeater for this belief, e.g. presentation of an atheological argument from evil, or presentation of a Freudian account of the origins of religious belief, or the like. 'If the believer is to remain justified, something further is called for—something that *prima facie* defeats the defeaters.' (84) Perhaps, for example, one might discover a flaw in the presented atheological argument, or have it on reliable authority that someone else has discovered a flaw in that argument, or whatever. So, at the very least, the Reformed view that Plantinga defends leaves room for the suggestion that believers need to find 'defeaters' for the arguments of the natural atheologian (at least if they are placed in circumstances in which they encounter those arguments).

In closing this section, it is important to emphasise that, in 'Reason and Belief in God', Plantinga's primary objective is to defend the claim that the success of the arguments of natural theology is not *necessary* for rational belief that God exists. While I have noted that Plantinga seems to quote with approval the view of the Reformed thinkers that we cannot come to knowledge of God on the basis of argument—'the arguments of natural theology just do not work' (65)—it is not clear that this entails a negative verdict on the suitability of those arguments for other purposes. In particular, it is worth noting the following passage:

> [That there is no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists] is a strong claim. What about the various arguments that have been proposed for the existence of God—the traditional cosmological and teleological arguments for example? What about the versions of the moral argument as developed, for example, by A. E. Taylor and more recently by Robert Adams? What about the broadly inductive or probabilistic arguments developed by F. R. Tennant, C. S. Lewis, E. L. Mascall, Basil Mitchell, Richard Swinburne, and others? What about the ontological argument in its contemporary versions? Do none of these provide evidence? Notice: the question is not whether these arguments, taken singly or in combination, constitute proofs of God's existence; no doubt they do not. The question is only whether someone might be rationally justified in believing in the existence of God on the basis of the alleged evidence offered by them; and that is a radically different question. (30)

If we follow Plantinga in thinking that 'natural theology is the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God' (63), then it seems entirely reasonable to claim that the project of natural theology is a failure. Nonetheless, it can still be supposed that this does not settle the question whether the arguments of natural theology can be well used to some other end. Suppose that 'the alleged evidence' offered by the arguments of natural theology is all propositional in form; suppose, in particular, that $\{p_1, \ldots, p_n\}$ are the propositions offered by all of the arguments of natural theology—or, at any rate, that $\{p_1, \ldots, p_n\}$ is a maximal consistent set of such propositions. If someone is rationally justified in believing that God exists on the basis of $\{p_1, \ldots, p_n\}$, then won't it be the case that '$p_1, \ldots, p_n \vdash$ God exists' is a *proof* for that person of the claim that God exists? If other reasonable people can be reasonably brought to the belief that God exists by presenting them with the argument '$p_1, \ldots, p_n \vdash$ God exists', then why shouldn't we suppose that that constitutes a success for the arguments of traditional natural theology?

4. 'The Prospects for Natural Theology' (1991)

In 'The Prospects for Natural Theology', Plantinga considers the uses or functions that natural theology might have. Taking it that natural theology is 'the attempt to provide proofs or arguments for the existence of God' (287), Plantinga approves of some potential uses of natural theology, and disapproves of others.

If we suppose that the aim of natural theology is to show that the proposition that God exists follows from propositions that are self-evident to us, by way of arguments whose validity is self-evident for us—cf. the characterisation of natural theology that Plantinga adopted in *God and Other Minds* and in 'Reason and Belief in God'—then, according to Plantinga, 'it seems unlikely that natural theology can serve this function' (289). However, according to Plantinga, it should not be thought that this is to say anything against the traditional arguments of natural theology, since 'no philosophical argument of any significance measures up to those standards'. (Perhaps Plantinga overstates matters slightly here. I think that Godel's argument against the project of Russell and Whitehead's *Principia* does plausibly measure up to the standards in question; however, even if this is so, we can surely agree that it is *very rare* to find significant philosophical arguments that measure up to the standard in question.)

If we suppose that the aim of natural theology is to provide justification for theistic beliefs—i.e. to show that the belief that God exists is not 'somehow intellectually second-rate, intellectually improper, unjustified, out of order … [or otherwise the cause of] big doxastic trouble' (290)—then, according to Plantinga, this is not a task that *needs* to be undertaken. As we have already seen—in our discussion of 'Reason and Belief in God'—Plantinga does not accept that there is any good reason to suppose that someone who believes that God exists, but who fails to have any propositional evidence for that belief, is somehow going contrary to his or her epistemic duty. Of course, that's not to say that natural theology is not equal to the task of providing justification for theistic beliefs; the point here is only that those beliefs *may* be perfectly in order even if natural theology is not equal to the task. (Consequently, we should not be too quick in supposing that the claims currently under consideration from 'The Prospects for Natural Theology' are at odds with the claim—defended in *God, Freedom and Evil*, and *The Nature of Necessity*—that Plantinga's 'victorious' modal ontological argument accomplishes the task of establishing the 'rational acceptability'—the intellectual propriety—of the belief that God exists.)

If we suppose that the aim of natural theology is to 'transform belief into knowledge' (294) by providing *warrant* for belief in God—i.e. by adding to belief 'that quality, whatever exactly it is, that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief' (294)—then, according to Plantinga, whether you accept that the arguments of natural theology are needed in order for the belief that God exists to have warrant depends upon whether or not you think that God exists. On the one hand, 'from a non-theistic perspective … it will be natural to think that the arguments of natural theology [are] indeed needed for belief in God to have warrant' (311). On the other hand, from a theistic perspective, natural theology is not required in order for the belief that God exists to have warrant: since properly functioning human cognitive capacities produce

belief in God, and since the modules of the design plan governing the production of these beliefs are indeed aimed at truth, the natural view from the theistic perspective is that many people know that there is such a person as God without believing on the basis of the arguments of natural theology.

Even if we were to accept that natural theology is unable to show that the proposition that God exists follows from propositions that are self-evident to us, by way of arguments whose validity is self-evident for us, and that natural theology is not required either to provide justification for theistic beliefs or to provide warrant for theistic beliefs, it would not follow that there is nothing that natural theology can do. According to Plantinga, even if the arguments of natural theology are not the sole source of warrant for theistic beliefs, they may nonetheless 'play the role of increasing warrant, and significantly increasing warrant' (311). In particular, good theistic arguments might play the role of 'confirming and strengthening' (312) the belief that God exists when that belief is otherwise infirm and wavering. (It is interesting to note that, in his discussion of this point, Plantinga observes that it is unlikely that arguments for other minds can 'confirm and strengthen' belief in the existence of other minds: this is the kind of disanalogy between the case of belief in the existence of God and belief in the existence of other minds to which I adverted earlier, and which I think serves to disarm the 'different approach' of *God and other Minds*.)

Even if it is conceded that good theistic arguments might play the role of confirming and strengthening the belief that God exists, it might be denied that there are any good theistic arguments. However, Plantinga claims that, if theistic arguments are judged by reasonable standards, then there are many good theistic arguments, i.e. arguments that are 'good' in the same sense as 'Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation, or Kripke's argument against the Russell-Frege account of proper names, or Searle's oriental argument against functionalism' (312). That is, Plantinga claims that there are good arguments 'from the nature of sets, of propositions, of numbers, of properties, of counterfactual propositions, … from the nature of knowledge, from the nature of proper function, from the confluence of proper function with reliability, from simplicity, from induction … good moral arguments; good arguments from the nature of evil; from play, enjoyment, love, nostalgia; and perhaps from colours and flavours' (312) all of which can play the role of 'confirming and strengthening' theistic belief.

There are many questions that might be asked about the claims defended in 'The Prospects for Natural Theology'. In particular, there are questions to ask about the connections or relations that hold between the 'good arguments' for the existence of God that Plantinga mentions here and the traditional arguments of natural theology. It is interesting to note that the list of arguments that is given in 'The Prospects for Natural Theology' does not appear to mention any of the traditional arguments of natural theology (though, of course, moral arguments have always been one of the mainstays of natural theology, and, as we shall see in a moment, 'the argument from the nature of proper function' might plausibly be taken to be one of Aquinas' five ways). By contrast, the list of arguments given in 'Reason and Belief in God' that was mentioned earlier explicitly appeals to the traditional arguments of natural theology—cosmological arguments, teleological arguments, ontological arguments, and the like.

It is also worth asking questions about the alleged parallel to be found between, for example, Kripke's argument against the Russell-Frege account of proper names, and say, the argument from the nature of numbers to the existence of God. There is a sense in which more or less everyone recognises that Kripke's argument against the Russell-Frege account of proper names is good: Kripke raises a series of objections to the Russell-Frege account of proper names that are widely acknowledged to be both clever and difficult to defeat. However, it is, I think, hardly any less widely recognised that Kripke's objections to the Russell-Frege account of proper names can be overcome: there are descriptivist theories of names that avoid all of the legitimate objections that Kripke raises in the course of his discussion of the Russell-Frege account of proper names. Moreover, this is not an isolated case: many of those well-known philosophical arguments of which we are inclined to speak approvingly are arguments that we know how to evade. Of course, there are *some* arguments that are successful *tout court*: in particular, there are *reductio* arguments that succeed in showing that certain philosophical theories are simply inconsistent. (Perhaps, as I suggested earlier, Gödel's critique of Russell and Whitehead provides an example of this.) However, when it comes to arguments that have as their conclusions claims about perennially controversial philosophical matters, I do not believe that it is particularly sceptical to claim that there are very few successful philosophical arguments. We might say that Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation, or Searle's oriental argument against functionalism is good; but, when we do so, I think that we most likely mean that those arguments are interesting, and original, and insightful, and thought-provoking, and so forth … without in any way committing ourselves to the claim that those arguments are successful.

Moreover, even if we do suppose that there are successful philosophical arguments—say, for example, Kripke's arguments against the Frege-Russell theory of proper names—it is not clear that we should be prepared to allow that the various arguments for the existence of God to which Plantinga adverts should be placed in the same category as those successful philosophical arguments. If there are successful philosophical arguments, then those arguments are complicated and sophisticated; they involve long chains of reasoning, careful drawing of distinctions, and so forth. But the arguments of traditional natural theology—and, one might suspect, the arguments to which Plantinga adverts in 'The Prospects for Natural Theology'—are not obviously of this kind. Very often, arguments for the existence of God have a couple of premises, and involve a couple of inferential steps. It is, I think, very hard to believe that *those* kinds of arguments can be usefully or reasonably compared to 'Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation' or 'Kripke's argument against the Frege-Russell account of proper names'.

Finally, before we move on, it is worth noting that there are questions to ask about the very suggestion that good theistic *arguments* could play the role of 'confirming and strengthening' belief in God. Suppose that we accept—as least for present purposes—that belief in God can be strengthened by both testimonial and non-testimonial evidence. Then, of course, the propounding of an argument can confirm and strengthen belief in God in the case in which the propounding of the argument provides either testimonial or non-testimonial evidence that God exists to those to whom the argument is propounded. But, in this case, it is highly implausible to suppose that it is the *argumentative virtues* of the argument that are doing the important work: assertions in non-argumentative dress would surely do just as well.

However, once we set this kind of case aside, it is much less clear that it is plausible to suppose that there are good theistic arguments that can play the role of ‘confirming and strengthening’ belief in God, i.e. cases in which it is the argumentative virtues of the argument that play the crucial role in the ‘confirming and strengthening’. (In the case of Gödel’s objection to Russell and Whitehead, ordinary people would not discover the chain of reasoning for themselves, even if apprised of the premises and the conclusion. So, in this case, the argumentative virtues of Gödel’s argument do have a significant role to play. Perhaps the same is true in the case of Kripke’s objections to the Frege-Russell theory of proper names, or in the case of Kripkenstein’s private language argument—though here I think that matters are less clear cut. But, as I noted above, in the vast majority of cases, theistic arguments are much simpler than the arguments just mentioned.) At the very least, one would like to see a more clearly worked out account of exactly how it is that the argumentative virtues of the arguments to which Plantinga adverts can have a significant role in ‘confirming and strengthening’ theistic belief.

5. Warrant and Proper Function (1993)

In the last two chapters of *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga provides two arguments against naturalism, one of which, at least loosely speaking, is intended to show that naturalism is false, and the other of which, at least loosely speaking, is intended to show that naturalism is irrational. Before I can say what these arguments are, I need to fill in some background.

Very roughly, Plantinga defends the view that a belief has warrant for a person only if (1) the belief has been produced in that person by cognitive faculties that are working properly—functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive dysfunction—in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for that person’s kinds of cognitive faculties; (2) the segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief is aimed at the production of true beliefs; and (3) there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true. (46) He claims that this account of warrant is ‘naturalistic’ because ‘it invokes no kind of normativity not found in the natural sciences; the only kind of normativity that it invokes figures in such sciences as biology and psychology’ (194). Moreover—and more importantly—he holds that ‘naturalism in epistemology can flourish only in the context of supernaturalism in metaphysics’ (194): the correct theory of warrant must be ‘set in the context of a broadly theistic view of the nature of human beings’ (*Warrant: The Current Debate*, viii).

Plantinga’s argument for the falsity of naturalism in metaphysics turns on his claim that there is no acceptable naturalistic explanation or analysis of proper function. This claim, in turn, is ‘supported by a consideration of the main attempts to produce such an analysis’ (215) in the work of Hempel, Nagel, Wright, Boorse, Pollock, Millikan, Bigelow and Pargetter, Neander and Griffiths. In the face of the failure to find an acceptable naturalistic explanation or analysis of proper function, one might consider retreat to a position that treats talk of ‘proper function’ as a convenient explanatory fiction: but Plantinga suggests that any such retreat must involve ‘doublethink’ (214) and cannot aid in the achievement of ‘straightforward understanding’ (214).

So, if you are a metaphysical naturalist, and if you are convinced that there is no way to make sense of the notion of proper function from a metaphysically naturalistic perspective, and if you are unwilling to countenance a fictionalist interpretation of talk of 'proper function', then it seems that you must reject the very idea of proper function and (in consequence) the analysis of warrant that Plantinga defends. 'A high price, no doubt—but no more than what a serious naturalism exacts' (214). On the other hand, if you are convinced that there really are such things as warrant and proper function, and if you are convinced that there is no way to make sense of the notion of proper function from a metaphysically naturalistic perspective, and if you are unwilling to countenance a fictionalist interpretation of talk of 'proper function', then it seems that 'what you have is a powerful argument against naturalism' (214). Indeed, says Plantinga, given the plausible alternatives, what you have, more specifically, is a powerful theistic argument, 'a version of Thomas Aquinas' Fifth way' (214). For, according to Plantinga, when Aquinas says that 'whatever lacks knowledge cannot move towards an end, unless it be directed by some being endowed with knowledge and intelligence', we may interpret this as the claim that there is no naturalistic explanation or analysis of proper function.

In what sense does Plantinga suppose that this argument from the nature of warrant and proper function is 'a powerful theistic argument'? Is he merely claiming that this argument could play some role in 'confirming and strengthening' belief in God—i.e. is he merely claiming that this is a 'good theistic argument' in the sense of 'The Prospects for Natural Theology'? If so, why does he use the term 'powerful' in describing what he takes to be the standing of this argument? Is the thought, perhaps, that more or less anyone whose properly basic belief that God exists is neither firm nor unwavering should be able to shore up that belief by appeal to this argument from the nature of warrant and proper function? Or is Plantinga suggesting that this argument goes much further down the path of accomplishing the traditional aims of natural theology?

In Plantinga's discussion, he says that, *if one satisfies certain conditions*, then one has a powerful argument against naturalism, where the conditions to be satisfied are that one accepts the various premises of the argument in question. This is a very curious way of characterising the virtues of an argument: why shouldn't the defender of, say, an evidential argument from evil, take exactly the same kind of line? If you accept the premises of Rowe's evidential argument from evil, then why don't you have a very powerful argument against classical theism? Perhaps Plantinga might say that the key point is that the cost of rejecting the very notion of proper function and the analysis of warrant upon which it depends is so high: given that one accepts the premises of the argument from the nature of warrant and proper function, the price of denying his supernaturalist conclusion is very high. But surely the proponent of Rowe's evidential argument from evil is in an even stronger position here: given that one continues to accept the premises of that argument, one will be positively irrational if one does not go on to accept its conclusion. Perhaps, then, Plantinga might say that the cases differ because theists can reasonably reject one or both of the premises in Rowe's argument, whereas naturalists cannot reasonably reject the premises in the argument from the nature of warrant and proper function. But this contention is manifestly false (or so it seems to me). If one is strongly committed to naturalism, then the most that Plantinga's argument establishes is that either there is a naturalistic explanation or analysis of proper function that has not yet been found, or else there is an acceptable

fictionalist treatment of proper function, or else the notion of proper function has no respectable role to play in serious naturalistic theorising. Those naturalists who think that the notion of proper function has a respectable, realist role to play in serious naturalistic theorising, and who are persuaded by Plantinga's critiques of Hempel, Nagel, Wright, Boorse, Pollock, Millikan, Bigelow and Pargetter, Neander and Griffiths, can quite reasonably suppose that there is a naturalistic explanation or analysis of proper function that awaits discovery. Most philosophers accept that there are no fully satisfactory explanations or analysis of important philosophical concepts: no one has a *really* satisfying analysis of causation, or explanation, or dispositions, or artworks, or goodness, or rightness, or emotion, or belief, or truth, or … . The 'puncture and patch' industry that has been engaged in during the past half-century or so of analytic philosophy provides good grounds for supposing that new candidate naturalistic analyses or explanations of warrant and proper function will emerge. (Of course, some naturalists will dispute Plantinga's critiques of extant naturalist accounts of warrant and proper function; those naturalists can mount a far more straightforward response to Plantinga's argument from the nature of warrant and proper function.)

Plantinga's argument for the irrationality of naturalism in metaphysics goes roughly like this. Let R be the claim that our cognitive faculties are reliable, in the sense that they produce mostly true beliefs in the sorts of environments that are normal for them; let E be the claim that human cognitive faculties arose by way of the mechanisms to which contemporary evolutionary thought directs our attention; let C be the proposition that states what cognitive faculties we have—memory, perception, reason, and so forth—and what sorts of beliefs they produce; and let N be the claim that metaphysical naturalism is true. Then, says Plantinga, it is plausible to suppose either that Pr(R/N&E&C) is low or that no value can be assigned to Pr(R/N&E&C). But, in that case, anyone who accepts N&E has an 'undercutting defeater' for any belief that they hold, i.e. a reason to doubt or to reserve judgment about that belief. In particular, then, anyone who accepts N&E has a reason to doubt or to reserve judgment about the acceptance of N&E. Moreover, this reason to doubt or reserve judgment about the acceptance of N&E cannot itself be ultimately defeated, i.e. if you accept N&E, then you have an ultimately undefeated reason to reject N&E. So the rational thing to do is to reject N&E. Furthermore, if you also accept that if N then E, then you have an ultimately undefeated reason to reject N: the rational thing to do is to reject N. 'The conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that the conjunction of naturalism with evolutionary theory is self-defeating: it provides for itself an undefeated defeater. Evolution, therefore, presents naturalism with an undefeated defeater. But if naturalism is true, then, surely, so is evolution. Naturalism, therefore, is unacceptable.' (235)

If this argument is intended to persuade naturalists to give up their naturalism, then there are various criticisms that can be made of it. However, if this argument were intended to persuade naturalists to give up their naturalism then, one might think that, by Plantinga's lights, this argument must be a successful piece of natural theology, in something like the sense of success set out in *God and Other Minds*, 'Reason and Belief in God', and 'The Prospects for Natural Theology'. For, given the assumption that Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined, it is plausibly a straightforward matter of fact whether it follows—either deductively or inductively—that it is rationally required to reject N. If it does not follow, from the premise that Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined, that it is rationally required to reject N, then the argument is

entirely without merit (and shows nothing to anyone). If, on the other hand, it does follow, from the premise that Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined, that it is rationally required to reject N, then the only remaining question is whether Pr(R/N&E&C) *is* either low or undefined. But now, if we suppose that it is not obvious, nor necessary, nor self-evident, nor believed by every sane person, that Pr(R/N&E&C) is low or undefined—and, indeed, if we suppose that there is some sense in which reasonable naturalists can hold that Pr(R/N&E&C) is high—then we have no reason at all for thinking that this argument is capable of rationally persuading rational naturalists to give up on their naturalism.

Given that the argument is not intended to persuade naturalists to give up on their naturalism, then what purpose should we suppose it to have? Is it intended to show to theists that theists can reasonably believe that naturalists are irrational? I don't think so. Plantinga does not argue that one cannot reasonably suppose that Pr(R/N&E&C) is high; rather, what he argues is that it is plausible—i.e., I take it, plausible *by his lights*—that Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined. But then, plainly, the argument does not show *anyone* that naturalists are irrational, even if it shows *everyone* that any naturalists who accept that Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined are irrational.

Is it rather that this argument can play some role in 'confirming and strengthening' belief in God, and in 'increasing the degree of warrant' that belief in God has for given theists? Let's see. Suppose that you are a theist, and that you find yourself wavering on the question of the existence of God. You refer to Plantinga's argument, and note that, if you hold that Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined, then it would be irrational for you to be a naturalist. Even if you suppose that belief in the existence of God is the only serious alternative to naturalism, and even if you do hold that Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined, it seems—in light of these considerations—that, if you have good reason to be wavering on the question of the existence of God, then you have good reason to be wavering on the question whether Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined. Indeed, given that you are wavering on the question of the existence of God—and given that you hold that naturalism is the only serious alternative to belief in the existence of God—it seems that you *ought* to be wavering on the question of the truth of naturalism, and, moreover—if Plantinga's argument is any good—that you *ought* to be wavering on the question whether Pr(R/N&E&C) is either low or undefined. But, if that's right, then it isn't entirely clear how Plantinga's argument *could* play the role of 'confirming and strengthening' belief in God in reasonable believers. (Here, we return to the kinds of questions that were raised at the end of the last section.)

6. **'Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments' (1996)**

Before we turn to an examination of Plantinga's most recent pronouncements about natural theology, it will be worthwhile to have a look at some more of the arguments that he claims are 'good theistic arguments', and to see what else Plantinga says on behalf of those arguments, in 'Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments'. Plantinga has very similar things to say on behalf of these arguments in "Augustinian Christian Philosophy" (1992:294) and "Rationality and Public Evidence: A Reply to Richard Swinburne" (2001:217). I do not know of any more detailed discussion of these arguments than the one provided in "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments". Of course, it should be noted that 'Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments' has not been

officially published; it appears to be little more than a set of unpolished lecture notes. However, there are many places in which Plantinga adverts to ‘Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments’ in his published work.

About the two dozen (or so) theistic arguments, Plantinga says that they are ‘not coercive in the sense that every person is obliged to accept their premises on pain of irrationality. It may be just that some or many sensible people do accept their premises.’ (1) Moreover, he notes that these arguments are ‘probabilistic’ (1), and that ‘they can serve to bolster and confirm, and perhaps to convince’ (1). Finally he notes that ‘you or someone else might just find yourself with these beliefs; so using them as premises gets an effective theistic argument for the person in question’ (1), and that ‘perhaps in at least some of the cases if our faculties are functioning properly and we consider the premises we are inclined to accept them, and, under those conditions, the conclusion has considerable warrant on the premises’ (1).

I take it that there are many atheological arguments of which it is true that some or many sensible people do accept their premises. Moreover, I take it that if theistic arguments can serve to bolster and confirm and perhaps to convince, then so to can atheological arguments. Finally, I take it that people do just find themselves believing the premises of certain atheological arguments. So I take it that, in whatever sense Plantinga supposes that there are good theistic arguments, he ought to be prepared to allow that there are also good atheological arguments. Of course, as I have already indicated, I’m sceptical of the claim that the above-mentioned properties really do suffice to warrant the claim that an argument is good; but perhaps we do not need to go over that ground again.

Here, then, are (brief encapsulations of) some of the arguments that Plantinga claims are good theistic arguments:

Argument from Propositions:

1. Propositions cannot exist apart from the activity of minds: either they are thoughts, or they are the contents of thoughts.
2. There are far too many propositions for all of them to be thought of by human thinkers.
3. (Therefore) Propositions are thoughts—or contents of thoughts—in the mind of God.

Argument from Sets:

1. Sets have various properties that are well-explained if sets are the products of intellectual activity, e.g. that no set is a member of itself; that sets have their extensions essentially, and hence cannot exist if their members do not exist; and that sets form an iterated hierarchy.
2. There are far too many sets for all of them to be the products of human intellectual activity.
3. (Therefore) Sets are the products of the intellectual activity of God.

Argument from Natural Numbers:

1. Numbers are dependent upon—perhaps even constituted by—intellectual activity: if there were no minds, there would be no numbers.
2. There are too many numbers for them to arise as the result of human intellectual activity.
3. (Therefore) Numbers are ideas in the mind of God.

Argument from Properties:

1. Properties are reified concepts, and hence are dependent upon intellectual activity.
2. There are too many properties for them to all be dependent upon human intellectual activity.
3. (Therefore) Properties are God's concepts.

Argument from Counterfactuals

1. Counterfactual claims are objectively true or false.
2. The truth or falsity of counterfactual claims depends upon the weighting of similarities and differences between possible worlds.
3. No human mind can make objectively correct weightings of similarities and differences between possible worlds.
4. (Therefore) God makes objectively correct weightings of similarities and differences between possible worlds.

Argument from Cosmic Fine Tuning

1. Our universe is fine-tuned for life.
2. It is massively improbable that a randomly selected possible universe is fine-tuned for life.
3. (Therefore) God fine-tuned our universe for life.

Argument from Contingency

1. The existence of contingent beings can only be explained by appeal to the existence of a necessary being that is capable of causal activity.
2. The existence of contingent beings requires an explanation.
3. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from Simplicity

1. We hold that simplicity is a mark of truth.
2. If theism is true, then God created us, and our theoretical preferences, and the world; and it is reasonable to think that he would have adapted our preferences to the world.
3. If theism is false, then there is no decent reason to hold that simplicity is a mark of truth.
4. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from Induction

1. We accept inductive forms of reasoning.
2. If theism is true, then God created us, and our noetic capacities, and the world; and it is reasonable to think that he adapted our capacities to the world.
3. If theism is false, it is hard to find a decent reason to accept inductive forms of reasoning.
4. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from Colours and Flavours

1. Correlations between physical and psychical properties require explanation.
2. The only plausible explanation of correlations between physical and psychical properties is personal and non-scientific.
3. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from the Rejection of Global Scepticism

1. We know that we are not brains in vats.
2. Metaphysical realism is true.
3. If metaphysical realism is true, and it is not the case that God created the world, and us adapting the former to the latter, then we do not know that we are not brains in vats.
4. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from Truth and Justification

1. We should not take global scepticism seriously.
2. There is no conceptual—*a priori*—link between truth and justification.
3. If there is no link between truth and justification, then we should take global scepticism seriously.
4. If God created us and the world in such a way that we reflect something of God's epistemic powers by virtue of being able to achieve knowledge, then there is a link between truth and justification.
5. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from the Objectivity of Morality

1. Morality is objective.
2. Morality is not explicable in naturalistic terms.
3. Morality would be objective if God legislated moral facts.
4. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from Evil

1. There is horrific evil in the world.
2. If naturalism is true, then there isn't really any horrific evil in the world.
3. (Therefore) God exists.

Argument from Love

1. If theism is true, then love reflects the basic structure and nature of reality, since God himself is love.
2. If naturalism is true, then apparent manifestations of love are all to be explained in terms of adaptive mechanisms and evolutionary survival value.
3. There is love in the world.
4. (Therefore) God exists.

Synthetic Argument

1. The arguments listed above import a great deal of unity into the philosophical endeavour: the idea of God helps with a wide variety of problems in epistemology, ontology, axiology, theory of meaning, and the like.
2. (Therefore) God exists.

As I mentioned initially, all of these arguments are meant to be interpreted as probabilistic arguments: either the premises are likely to be true, or the probability of the conclusion on the premises is high, or both. And, of course, as I said before, Plantinga does not deny that reasonable atheists can have reasons to resist these arguments. However, it is very hard to know how to go on to discuss these arguments, particularly since Plantinga insists that the above are no more than brief encapsulations of arguments that must properly be developed at much greater length. It is very hard to believe that the arguments that I have presented above—in the form that I have presented them above—could play any serious role in 'confirming and supporting' Christian belief, or in 'moving [reasonable and thoughtful] fence-sitters', or in defeating potential defeaters for Christian belief. But, as things stand, we have nothing more than Plantinga's confident assertion that these argument sketches can be developed into fully-fledged arguments that are capable of playing these roles. At the very least, it seems clear that no good reason has been provided to move atheists to allow that there are any good arguments of the kind to which Plantinga here adverts.

More strongly, one might suspect that there are reasons for doubting that *these* 'argument sketches' are susceptible of development into fully-fledged arguments that are capable of playing the roles to which Plantinga appeals. Consider, for example, the Argument from Natural Numbers, which clearly builds upon the discussion of numbers in the concluding pages of *Does God have a Nature?* The view that Plantinga defends is that numbers are ideas in the mind of God, and that the possession of these ideas is part of God's nature, i.e. something that God has in every possible world. Even if we suppose that this is a defensible Christian account of the nature of numbers, it seems to me to be doubtful to think that this kind of consideration is really well suited to the task of confirming and supporting Christian belief, or of moving reasonable and thoughtful fence-sitters, or of defeating potential defeaters for Christian belief. For instance, I do not think that, if I were a fence-sitter, I would suppose that this Christian account of the natural numbers carries any significant weight; I do not think that, if I were a wavering Christian, I would suppose that this Christian account of the natural numbers is apt to bolster, or confirm, or support, my declining faith. At the very least, there is a large promissory note here on which payment remains to be made.

Even if—most implausibly—Plantinga were to agree that some—or many, or most, or all—of the two dozen (or so) theistic arguments are not fit for reasonable 'bolstering', or 'confirming', or 'convincing', and so forth, it does not follow that he would need to concede that there are no other arguments that are fit for reasonable 'bolstering', or 'confirming', or 'convincing', and so forth, with respect to the claim that God exists. If theism is true, it seems not outrageous to suppose that there are arguments—or chains of reasoning, or accessible propositions—that are fit to play these roles. Even if theism is false, it seems not outrageous to suppose that there are arguments—or chains of reasoning, or accessible propositions—that are fit to play these roles; indeed, it seems to me that, even if theism is false, there is probably good reason to suppose that there are arguments—or chains of reasoning, or accessible propositions—that can serve to 'bolster' or 'confirm' the beliefs of reasonable but wavering theists, and so forth (though I admit to some uncertainty about how exactly to conceive of the mental state of someone who is 'wavering' on the truth of a given proposition, and to holding serious doubts about the idea that *arguments* are the right kinds of entities to appeal to at this point).

7. **Warranted Christian Belief (2000)**

Warranted Christian Belief is the most recent extended discussion of Plantinga's views on most of the topics that have been mentioned in the foregoing discussion. The question that he seeks to answer in this book is '[whether] it is rational, reasonable, justifiable, warranted to accept Christian belief' and '[whether] there is something … foolish, or silly, or foolhardy, or stupid, or unjustified, or unreasonable [in so doing]' (3). And the answer that he provides is that there need be nothing irrational, or unreasonable, or unjustifiable, or unwarranted, or foolish, or silly, or foolhardy, or stupid, or unjustified in the acceptance of Christian belief.

A (very) basic outline of the structure of *Warranted Christian Belief* is as follows.

First, Plantinga discusses the suggestion that Christian belief is impossible because there is no way that our concepts could apply to God. Against Kant, Kaufman and Hick, Plantinga argues that no one has ever provided the slightest reason to think that it is impossible that our concepts apply to God; and, in particular, that Kant, Kaufman and Hick provide no reason at all to suppose that this is so. (These animadversions draw on earlier discussions in *Does God have a Nature?* and elsewhere.)

Second, Plantinga considers several different ways in which his question might be understood. If the question is understood to concern justification and doxastic propriety, then, according to Plantinga, it is entirely obvious that Christian belief can be justified and held with proper doxastic propriety. If the question is understood to concern rationality then, on any of the various ways in which 'rationality' might be understood, it is entirely obvious that Christian belief can be rational. If the question is understood to concern warrant—i.e. that quality or quantity enough of which sufficies to make true belief knowledge—then there is a genuine question to be addressed, and one which is plausibly taken to be raised in naturalistic challenges to Christian belief of the kind advanced by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

Third, Plantinga provides a 'model'—or, more exactly, a series of refinements of a 'model'—that is intended to establish that, if Christian belief is true, then it is highly

likely that Christian belief is warranted. According to this ‘model’, a person with proper cognitive function has a *sensus divinitatis*, i.e., set of disposition to form various theistic beliefs in various kinds of circumstances. While the operation of the *sensus divinitatis* is impaired by the consequences of sin, this shortcoming can be—and is—remedied by the inward instigation of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, according to the ‘model’, this inward instigation of the Holy Spirit explains how belief in the divine teachings of Scripture—and, hence, belief the particular Christian doctrines of the trinity, incarnation, resurrection, atonement, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and so forth—can be warranted.

Finally, Plantinga replies to various arguments for the conclusion that, while it is indeed possible that Christian belief has warrant, given that the ‘model’ that he presents is true, there are various reasons for supposing that Christian belief is ‘defeated’ by countervailing considerations. (Roughly speaking, a person acquires a ‘defeater’ for a belief B if they take on a belief D that rationally requires them to reject B, or, at any rate, to hold B less firmly (366).) Plantinga assesses scripture scholarship, postmodernism, religious pluralism, and the amounts and kinds of evils in the world as potential—but rationally rejectable—defeaters for warranted Christian belief.

While there is no systematic discussion of natural theology and natural atheology in *Warranted Christian Belief*, there are various points in this rich and lengthy work at which relevant considerations are advanced. In this remainder of this section, I shall point to some of the relevant material (without pretending that this treatment is in any way comprehensive).

In the course of his discussion of ‘justification’, Plantinga provides an interesting reassessment of the central arguments of *God and Other Minds*. He claims that, early in his career, he took it for granted that the right way to approach the question of the rational justification of theistic beliefs was to think in terms of evidence, or proofs, or good arguments: for example, does the evidence support Christian belief? (I think that it is one question whether the balance of *evidence* comes down in favour of Christian belief, and quite another question whether the balance of *argumentation* comes down in favour of Christian belief. However, it seems that Plantinga stills sees no need for any distinction of this kind.) Moreover, he claims that, when he assessed ‘the theistic proofs and arguments’ in *God and Other Minds*, he employed a traditional but wholly improper standard’ (69), failing to note that ‘no philosophical arguments of any consequence’ live up to the standards in question. These observations plainly clear the ground for subsequent declarations about the utility and success of ‘the theistic proofs and arguments’.

There are various places where Plantinga’s remarks suggest that he continues to hold an asymmetric conception of natural theology and natural atheology. On the one hand, natural atheology is in the business of ‘attacking theistic belief’ (191). In order to succeed, natural atheology has to convince Christian believers that Christian belief is false, or unwarranted, or irrational, or unjustified. On the other hand, ‘Christian philosophers have been for the most part responding to various kinds of attacks on the rational justifiability of religious belief’ (200). In order to be successful, natural theology has only to produce arguments that can play some role in defeating potential

defeaters of Christian belief, or in confirming and strengthening Christian belief, or in moving fence-sitters to adopt Christian belief, or the like.

I'm inclined to think that, as a matter of historical fact, there are many more works that seek to show that atheism is irrational than there are works that seek to show that theism is irrational. Consequently, I doubt that there is any good *de facto* reason for holding this asymmetrical conception of natural theology and natural atheology. On the other hand, Plantinga might insist that he has a good *de jure* reason for thinking of the terrain in the way that he does: because Christian belief seems to him to be true, and, indeed, to be 'maximally important truth' (499), he isn't interested in the other uses to which the arguments of natural atheology might be put by atheists and agnostics. Even if atheists and agnostics can use considerations about evil to 'confirm' and 'bolster' naturalistic beliefs, or to defeat potential defeaters to naturalistic belief, this is of no consequence to Christians. (Plantinga does say, for example, that new arguments from evil by Rowe and Draper 'give the person on the fence little if any reason to prefer atheism over theism' (481); but I don't see that he gives any reason at all to suppose that these arguments are, in this respect, any worse than the arguments of natural theology of which he approves.)

Perhaps it might be objected here that Plantinga supposes that theism differs importantly from naturalism (at least) in that it is not subject to an undefeated defeater. At one point, he says that 'the extended Aquinas/Calvin model … enables us to see what is most important about ourselves, and in so doing removes the defeater that is the Achilles' heel of naturalism' (281). This remark might be taken to suggest that he argues for the claim that belief in naturalism is, at the very least, unwarranted (if not unjustified or irrational). But I take it that all that Plantinga is claiming here is that, if theism is true, then naturalism is unwarranted. After all, if naturalism is true, and if you are a naturalist who rejects Plantinga's arguments on behalf of the claim that Pr(R/N&E&C) is not high, then—by Plantinga's lights—it's hard to see why it should be denied that your belief in naturalism could be warranted, and justified, and rational.

8. Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, Plantinga himself has given different accounts of 'natural theology' at different points in his career. When Plantinga supposes that 'natural theology' is the project of showing that the claim, that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition exists, follows deductively or inductively from propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly every sane man, together with propositions that are self-evident or necessarily true, he consistently takes the view that natural theology is a failure, and he also consistently takes the view that the reasonableness of belief in God is quite independent of the success or failure of natural theology. When Plantinga supposes that 'natural theology' is the project of showing that religious belief is rationally acceptable, his thought moves in two different directions. On the one hand, there are various places where he has given arguments whose conclusion *seems* to be that religious belief is rationally acceptable *tout court*—e.g. in the 'different approach' of *God and Other Minds*, and in the 'victorious' modal ontological argument of *God, Freedom and Evil* and *The Nature of Necessity*; on the other hand, there are places where he argues that religious belief is rationally acceptable *provided* that theism is true—e.g. in 'Reason and Belief in God' and in *Warranted Christian*

Belief. When he supposes that 'natural theology' is the project of providing arguments for the existence of God, then his view seems quite consistently to be that there are various senses in which there are numerous good arguments for the existence of God, i.e. arguments that can serve to 'bolster' or 'confirm' the beliefs of reasonable but wavering theists (and perhaps do other things as well).

By my reckoning, Plantinga is entirely right in his assessment of 'natural theology' on its strongest interpretation: there is no prospect of anyone's showing that the claim, that the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition exists, follows deductively or inductively from propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly every sane man, together with propositions that are self-evident or necessarily true. Moreover, Plantinga's analyses of the arguments of natural theology thus understood are models to be emulated, as are his analyses of the arguments of natural atheology when analogously understood.

By my reckoning, the arguments that Plantinga advances that seem intended to establish that belief in the existence of God is rationally acceptable *tout court* are not successful (for reasons that I have given above). Perhaps it might be suggested that a suitable modification of the synoptic argument ought to suffice to establish this conclusion; but it is not clear to me that this is so. In any case, *I'm* inclined to grant from the outset that belief in the existence of God is rationally permissible: some—but only some—of the smartest, most thoughtful, and most well informed people that I know are theists. On the other hand, the arguments that Plantinga advances on behalf of the claim that belief in the existence of God is rationally acceptable if theism is true seem to me to be plausible (though perhaps controversial from some *theistic* standpoints). But it seems unlikely that these arguments should cut any ice with those who are not disposed to grant that belief in the existence of God is rationally permissible—for, of course, none of those people is going to allow that theism is true.

By my reckoning, Plantinga's assessment of 'natural theology' on its weakest interpretation is seriously underdeveloped, at least in the materials that I have examined here. I think that we need to look much more closely at the theory of arguments and the theory of rational belief revision before we are in a good position to say whether there are arguments that can serve to 'bolster' or 'confirm' the beliefs of reasonable but wavering theists. When Plantinga analysed some of the traditional arguments under the strongest construal of 'natural theology', it was tolerably clear to what kinds of considerations one could appeal in arguing that a given argument is unsuccessful. But, when we turn to those same arguments under the weakest construal of 'natural theology', it is much less clear how we go about scrutinising and discussing the claim that a given argument is successful. (If we take seriously the idea that properly functioning human cognitive mechanisms automatically deliver the belief that God exists, then we might wonder how there could really be any point to the enterprise of 'bolstering' or 'confirming' the beliefs of wavering theists. Given, on this view, that 'wavering' in belief points to mechanical failure—breakdown in proper cognitive functioning—there is no evident reason at all to suppose that adopting the belief that God exists on the basis of argumentation is going to help to fix the broken mechanism. So the difficulties here don't just belong to the theory of successful argumentation; there are also difficulties that arise on the side of Plantinga's version of Reformed epistemology.)

Apart from consideration of Plantinga's views about natural theology, I have also had occasion to make some remarks about Plantinga's views on natural atheology and naturalism. While Plantinga's conception of natural theology has changed over time, his conception of natural atheology has not visibly altered (though, it must be said, he has less and less to say on this topic in his later works). I take it that this is a weakness in his discussion of natural theology, though I suspect that Plantinga may not see matters in this light. In "Reason and Belief in God", Plantinga writes:

> The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not accept his belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not theirs. (77)

Perhaps we might think that this attitude applies more generally: what matters to Plantinga is how things are for the theist, and non-theists can look after themselves. If this is right, then it does raise an interesting question about the audience that Plantinga is writing for. There are pragmatic reasons for supposing that Plantinga's books are addressed to philosophers in general, i.e. that he hopes that his books will be read by theist and atheist alike. (The books do not come with warnings to prospective atheist readers; indeed, in *Warranted Christian Belief*, he says that one of the two central projects of the book is addressed 'to everyone, believer and non-believer alike' (xiii).) But, if you're genuinely interested in the various disagreements between theists and atheists, then it seems to me that you should be prepared to try to understand how things look from the different sides of the fence. (Of course, it's not really a fence: there are many importantly different kinds of theists, and many importantly different kinds of atheists. But let's not worry about this point.) That said, it is worth repeating that Plantinga's analyses of the traditional arguments of natural atheology, on its strongest construal, are also models to be emulated.

As my earlier remarks about Plantinga's arguments against naturalism indicate, it is not entirely clear how these arguments stand in relation to Plantinga's views about natural theology and natural atheology. While there is some temptation to think that an argument for the conclusion that naturalism is irrational must go most of the way towards establishing that theism is rationally required, it seems to me that it is more accurate to take Plantinga to be claiming that his arguments against naturalism can contribute to the task of 'bolstering' or 'confirming' the beliefs of reasonable but wavering theists. However, it is perhaps safer simply to conclude that Plantinga might have done more by way of making clear the connections that he sees between natural theology (on any of its construals) and his arguments against naturalism.