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Does Reformed Epistemology Produce Rational Justification?

Introduction

The issue pertaining to religious justification is a thought-provoking endeavor that comprises multiple ramifications that inevitably follow depending where the person ends up standing on the issue. The further one travels down the path of religious justification, one cannot help but be struck by the many obstacles that are seemingly unresolved among the various philosophical camps; primarily, in determining what constitutes religious belief as being rational and justifiable.

My intent, therefore, is to highlight how the Christian philosophical landscape has and continues to ebb and flow with its practices and treatments involving religious justification and its relationship between reason and belief. In connection, I will focus and examine the philosophical approach of Reformed Epistemology. The hope is to demonstrate that Reformed Epistemology's treatment of religious justification appears legitimate so long as it holds and sticks to its own self standards. However, its standards may fall short. Therefore, one must possibly look elsewhere for solutions such as the professed Wittgsteinians. Granted, I'm personally not closed to either approach presently because I need more time to really think and read through these positions.

Natural Theology/Evidentialism

Throughout time there has been a continuous attempt among many of Christianity's brightest intellectual thinkers to justify and demonstrate their particular brand of Christian religiosity. One of the earliest Christian philosophers to do so was Thomas Aquinas who often

attempted to rationally justify his belief in God. This approach is called Natural Theology, and it stresses nature and ordinary reason to formulate justifiable defenses regarding ones belief in God.

However, its methodological practices have been met with resistance from both within and outside Natural Theology. Another way of defining Natural Theology is Evidentialism. Evidentialism argues that in order for a belief to be justified, then that particular proposition needs to be proportional to the evidence at hand. In the case of religious propositions, Evidentialism would require the believer to confirm or justify their beliefs through common accepted means of rationality. Evidentialists commonly conclude that religious arguments like that of Thomas Aquinas don't go far enough in rationally justifying religious beliefs.

Evidentialists will typically comb over all the religious arguments and will find weaknesses and flaws and will include their own set of arguments refuting the justification in God like the problem of evil. Conversely, there are practicing Christian believers who resent the Evidentialist approach and see it as a hopeless battle and disdain the idea of ever engaging on such grounds. Granted, the debate continues today and is stronger than ever due to current analytical approaches to philosophy of religion.

Fideism

As mentioned above there are also certain believers who reject the notion of Natural Theology. They are identified as Fideists. There are two groups of Fideists – one is called Radical Fideism and the other is Moderate Fideism. Radical Fideism maintains that whenever reason or logic resolutely calls into question the justification in God, then the Radical Fideist isn't required at all to defend or justify its beliefs on rational grounds. Reason and logic are designed to deliberately run against a person's faith, according to Radical Fideism. When reason

and faith do not correspond then their faith is all the more justified. In fact, Radical Fideism would state that certain particular Christian doctrines like that of the trinity are supposed to be non-rational so that the believer has to rely solely on their faith. Two of the most influential Fideists are Kierkegaard and Tertullian. Moderate Fideism on the other hand, does not go as far as believing that rationalism and faith are diametrically incompatible. However, it does maintain an attitude of indifference towards rationalism, thus avoiding any sort of argument for God's existence.

Reformed Epistemology

A fascinating expansion has taken place amid Moderate Fideism that seeks to sidestep Evidentialism while attempting to strengthen Moderate Fideism. This has become known as Reformed Epistemology. Alvin Plantinga, William Alston and William Wolterstorff are the primary leaders of Reformed Epistemology. Moreover, the title, "Reformed," comes from the various religious reformation sects such as Protestantism and Calvinism, and its philosophical approach appeals not just to their own creedal circles but also to independent Christians such as Mormonism. It maintains the position of avoiding traditional arguments for God. However, it does attempt to blend rationalism and faith together in what is called Complementarity Thesis.

In fact, Reformed Epistemologists are very concerned whether their religious claims are rationally justifiable. Reformed Epistemology defends and maintains that religious beliefs in God are indeed rationally justifiable, but their real focus and critique surrounds on discussing the traditional standards that define rational beliefs. This talking point permeates the writings of Reformed Epistemologist Alvin Plantinga, who currently writes on this topic and points out how the traditional standards of rational beliefs need remodeling and expansion.

Classical Foundationalism

For centuries, philosophers, scientists and the general public have chosen to base their system of beliefs on what is called Classical Foundationalism, which attempts to establish proper basic beliefs that are deemed certain and justifiably rational. Proper basic beliefs are based on two primary components. First, it must be self-evident. Second, it must be permanent or incorrigible. For example, Classical Foundationalism reasons that sense perception and memory are justified proper basic beliefs based on the two conditions from above. For example, whatever the physical object a person may be viewing at a given time is considered obvious or certain as long as the individual exhibits normal cognitive behaviors and capabilities such as eye sight.

However, Plantinga would disagree in that Classical Foundationalism doesn't really produce certain or obvious logical truths which aren't justifiable and self-evident. For example, there are times when there is memory conflict, especially during court testimonials. One person testifies that person (A) ran through the red light and hit person (B), while another testimonial purports that person (A) did not go through the red light but instead Person (B) went through the red light and in turn hit person (A).

Consequently, Classical Foundationalism leads to skepticism because there are conflicts like memory in this case that Classical Foundationalism takes for granted. Plantinga insists that we widen the way we define and judge proper basic beliefs because Classical Foundationalism/Evidentialism will always lead to skepticism not just with religion but even things like science, the past, other people's minds and one's personal identity, which all ends being a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Plantinga's Foundationalism

Therefore, Classical Foundationalism according to Plantinga should become more liberal in what constitutes proper basic beliefs. Granted, Plantinga agrees that there really are proper basic beliefs, but we should include religious belief as being properly basic even though it isn't self-evident and incorrigible, because everything becomes non self-evident and un-obvious when taken to the extreme. One of the reasons that Plantinga believes that it is possible that religious belief to be properly basic is because suppose that God exists and that God implants ideas in the mind such as God is love. Plantinga's calls this, "Sensus Divinitatis," or in other words, God has created within everyone the propensity to recognize and understand God's existence and that God created man and that God is love. Moreover, God also has given the gift of the Holy Ghost to people known as, "Internal Instigation." This ability or gift teaches fundamental Christian truths such as the nature of God, resurrection and eternal life. These beliefs are possibly reliable processes according to Plantinga, because if they are somehow unjustifiable then they are no more instable and unjustified as memory or sense perception. But things as sense perception and memory are reliable and justified processes according to Classical Foundationalism. Therefore religious belief could also possibly be the case even if a person is not entirely aware of it.

Criticisms/ Responses

Inevitably there are detractors to Plantinga's considerations, namely what about other religious beliefs outside Christianity, and even those within Christianity that differ from Plantinga's Calvinistic tradition. Anyone could really assert their own religious belief system and claim that they are properly basic and thus justified in maintaining such a belief. However, Plantinga claims that Reformed Epistemology isn't like a Fideist who believes that they don't have to question their faith. Also Reformed Epistemology is unlike a Classical Foundationalist that sees proper basic beliefs as being incorrigible. Rather, Reformed Epistemology wants to say

that proper basic beliefs, e.g. religious beliefs, are fallible and are subject to change. If evidence or logic does conflate then the person has the responsibility to have to change and re-think his/her proper basic belief structure.

If nothing does indicate otherwise, then the person should retain credulity towards his/her beliefs and are not therefore accountable for having to give an argument why his/her basic beliefs are justified. Even more we should expect that people are going to have a more pluralistic set of proper basic beliefs because we have gotten rid of such stringent standards that Classical Foundationalism subscribes to like that of incorrigibility. Furthermore, other people's proper basic beliefs isn't itself a defeater of one's own proper basic beliefs, and perhaps over time there may come a day of conformity through personal change with respect of our individual proper basic beliefs, thus rendering Reformed Epistemology as justified, at least to Plantinga.

However, another question arises as to whether anyone who is deeply devoted to his/her set of proper basic beliefs is willing to really change them. In other words, what would it take for someone like Plantinga, with respect to his version of proper basic beliefs, to actually admit he was wrong? Many are likely to say that someone like Plantinga would be highly unlikely to deny his set of proper basic beliefs, leaving the chances extremely low. Furthermore, critics like Evidentialists question its analytics whether proper basic beliefs, e.g., "God is love," are really definite propositions. Meaning, the statement must either be right or wrong for it to be a definite proposition. To highlight this, a person may press the point that if God were love, why would God allow a child to drown in a swimming pool with his parents within earshot? The believer is likely to rationalize by saying that God's love isn't the kind of love that we mortals associate love with.

Even more, if one of the parents was aware like God who knew the little child was drowning, and that particular parent didn't save the child, then that parent would be considered or labeled as morally and ethically reprehensible, but God somehow wouldn't be considered in the same light. Wherefore, many conclude that the statement God is love appears to be no longer a definite proposition, but instead an indefinite proposition rendering the statement meaningless and therefore not a proper basic belief.

Closing Arguments

I mentioned in the introduction that I believed that Reformed Epistemology may be justified as long as it kept to its own set of rules that Plantinga pronounces, which I attempted to display above. However, if I wasn't clear enough, I will try to point out how someone like Plantinga might be justified, particularly with respect to the written criticisms that were highlighted above, namely the doubt and suspicions that Evidentialists have regarding whether Reformed Epistemologists like Plantinga really discredit their own self-prescribed proper basic beliefs when proven wrong. Even more, the criticism that statements like, "God is Love," are not real propositions at all because believers will qualify their statements and thus they die the death of a 1,000 qualifications according to the philosopher Anthony Flew.

To answer these questions, I will do so emphasizing Evidentialist Anthony Flew's analogy regarding the Gardener. One of Flew's characters with respect to the Gardener was unwilling to dismiss his/her belief that there was indeed an actual Gardener even after all the elaborate tests indicated otherwise. The particular character who remained believing even after reducing the Gardener down to invisibility was intended to be synonymous with all religious believers, thus pointing the reader to think that all religious believers never deny or change their proper basic religious beliefs. However, Flew's description of the religious believer is a classic

mistake. First, to categorize or cast all religious believers as never denying or questioning their religious beliefs is just silly. Religious believers fall away regularly because what they once deemed their religious beliefs as being properly basic was no the longer case. Therefore, critics will often generalize believers as never adjusting their beliefs when in fact believers do.

Granted, some believers are less likely to change or deny proper basic beliefs because believers may really have good reasons for not doing so. For example, I will demonstrate by using a Wittgsteinian-like approach that shows how statements like “God is love” are really both propositions and, in my estimation, are properly basic beliefs. However, it should be noted this is where Plantinga may disagree and where I think he may fall short. In language terminology we use the terms Univocal and Equivocal. Univocal words mean the same thing in two different contexts. For example, Lions are carnivorous; Tigers are carnivorous. Equivocal words have the same word spelling have two different meanings. For example, Mike shot a buck; Mike spent a buck on candy. However, people fail to realize that when believers use religious language they are using an entirely set of language terminology. They often use what some Wittgsteinians call analogical terminology. This is a middle ground between Equivocal and Univocal terminology. For example, “God is love” isn’t necessarily univocal because the word “love” isn’t the same as someone associating the term love with husband, wife, child or friend. Furthermore, love in the analogical context isn’t quite equivocal either because love isn’t entirely separate in the way someone typically says or demonstrates their love to a wife or husband, etc. This widening of terminology is equivalent to Plantinga wanting to widen the way that people define Classical Foundationalism. Therefore, the term “God is love” is deemed justified even in unfortunate events like that of a child drowning. Hence, the believer isn’t just naively or ignorantly stating that God’s love is simultaneously different but similar to human love. If people do not recognize

how the believer is operating under certain forms of language contexts then the public will entirely miss the point of the believer's basic beliefs.

Overall, I find that Plantinga does lay out a pretty compelling case that religious belief is justifiably rational as long as people are honest with themselves as to when to let go of their proper basic beliefs when something in fact really does indeed disprove them. However, I wonder if Foundationalism is the right model to begin with, and if the whole model of Foundationalism needs to be thrown out altogether. Perhaps they are just blicks, according to Hare. Granted, my sensibilities are sympathetic towards Reformed Epistemologists who want to make the case that most people can rationally form proper religious beliefs that are properly basic. My sensibilities could very well be wrong and hopefully with more time and study, I will be able to give a better response on the issue.