Proper Function, Reliability and Warrant

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Warrant: The Current Debate and *Warrant and Proper Function* constitute Alvin Plantinga's recent effort to refute contemporary theories of warrant and to establish his own.[1] The assault against the current theories in *Warrant: The Current Debate* is undertaken by using bizarre counterexamples such as the Case of the Epistemically Serendipitous Brain Lesion or of the Epistemically Inflexible Climber, as well as forays into Alpha–Centaurian worlds which include Cartesian demons turned Star Trek and middle–aged radioactive invisible elephants. The majority of these creative counterexamples are produced to show that the standard accounts of warrant fail because they wither when confronted with abnormalities and malfunctioning cognitive faculties. While I am not in complete agreement with Plantinga's consequent theory in *Warrant and Proper Function*, I do think that both his attack on the other theories of warrant and his own formulation are very illuminating and might provide some useful insights into the nature of warrant. By discussing what I take to be the shortcomings of his proper function theory, I hope to show the general direction in which we might find a fair initial approximation of warrant. The resulting theory will be largely descriptive, rather than normative, but it is difficult to keep a strict distinction between the two in these matters.

Plantinga's positive theory is laid out in *Warrant and Proper Function*:

> a belief has warrant for me only if (1) it has been produced in me 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 my kinds of cognitive faculties,

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[1] Since they are still forthcoming, all citations will be of the form "*WPF*, II,I,C, p. 31," denoting chapter, section, subsection and page number of the manuscript version.

> (2) the segment of the design plan governing the production of the 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 (*WPF*, II, II, p. 58).

Although the above cited formulation of warrant states that I am warranted "only if" (1), (2) and (3), I think that the rest of the book makes it clear that he intends these criteria to be not only individually necessary, but also jointly sufficient (or very nearly so) for warrant.

I do not think, however, that they are either individually necessary nor very nearly jointly sufficient for warrant. Criterion (3) nearly makes the first two seem superfluous, for as long as there is a high probability that the belief-producing mechanism functioning under a certain set of circumstances yields true beliefs, what difference could it make whether they are in the right environment, or that they are properly designed or properly functioning, or that they are designed with the intention of producing true beliefs? Provided that we grant (3), what need is there for us to struggle with (1) and (2)? This, I think, is the question that must be addressed.

If we consider Plantinga's Case of the Epistemically Serendipitous Lesion, it seems that a minor alteration will show that proper function does not contribute to warrant in the manner that he has suggested. In this instance, a person has a brain lesion that makes her believe all sorts of ridiculous things, and one of those beliefs is that she has a brain lesion. Surely she does not know that she is suffering from a brain lesion, even though it is true. Thus, she is not warranted in believing it (*WCD*, IX, II, B, p. 256, ff.). This case is invoked to show that a causal type of reliabilism (such that I am warranted in the belief that s is F iff s's being F causes or sustains that belief) is false.*

However, we need only change this to the Case of the God-Given Epistemically Serendipitous Lesion to show that proper function is also false. In this case, however, the brain lesion does not produce a large number of beliefs; it only produces one, that the person has a brain lesion. Further, if we stipulate that God gives someone that lesion *so that* she would truly believe that she has a brain lesion, then

* Throughout this paper the term "iff" will be used to designate "if and only if" in logical propositions. —ed.

Plantinga must concede that she has knowledge, even though it is clear to the rest of us that she does not. None of her other faculties are disrupted by the lesion; it adds to her cognitive apparatus without taking anything away. God, working in mysterious ways as he does, designs a brain lesion that will always produce this one true belief. This is the purpose of the lesion, and God creates a faculty, rather than a deformity.

Since this new lesion–sensing faculty was devised and implanted by God, it is clear that (1) the belief in question is the result of a properly functioning faculty in an appropriate environment (God took environment into consideration when devising the lesion), (2) the relevant segment of the design plan is aimed at true belief and (3) the design is a good one (the belief it produces is always true). This case fits perfectly with Plantinga's notion of warrant, yet surely this person is not really warranted in believing that she has a brain lesion.[2] What relevant difference would it make if the lesion were produced by God and not by some injury?

A similar example can be borrowed from an old episode of *The Twilight Zone.* In this episode, a man tosses a coin and it lands on its edge. For the rest of the day he is able to read people's minds. By the end of the day it would seem as if he might have some warrant for the beliefs produced by this new and amazing faculty, since he would have the opportunity to check what he "hears" with other sources, conferring with people he could trust, and so forth. An important point to note, however, is that whether we decide that his beliefs are warranted or not, we do so before discovering whether his new faculty is a gift from God or the result of some freak accident.

We can modify this scenario a bit and suppose that God gives our coin–tosser his mind–reading faculty, but that this faculty works only once every six hours and 42 minutes. Two or three times a day our friend hears a voice in his head which seems to be coming from someone else's head and he believes that he is hearing someone

[2] Even if the lesion also produces a vast number of ridiculously false beliefs (as in Plantinga's original case), this counterexample should still hold, for Plantinga stipulates that only the relevant *segment* must be aimed at the production of true beliefs. If the lesion's recipient *infers* that she has a brain disorder because she notices that she suddenly has a large number of ridiculous beliefs, then we are suddenly dealing with a different cognitive means (inference rather than the lesion). For Plantinga's theory to hold, she must be warranted prior to inference, since proper function etc. is supposed to be *sufficient* for warrant.

else's thoughts. However, the faculty works only for the duration of a single thought, and he is not around anyone with whom he can speak in order to test the verity of his new faculty. Once again, God has designed a splendid, truth-yielding, cognitive faculty, even if it is not always at the disposal of the subject's will (Plantinga does not claim that it must be); the faculty does exactly what God intended it to do, in the environment for which God intended it.

Six hours and 42 minutes after tossing that fated coin, our protagonist accidentally bumps into a scowling old biker and "hears" his first thought: "Watch where you're going, you silly and brutish oaf." But our friend certainly does not *know* that "silly and brutish oaf" was the precise appellation that the biker had formulated in his mind; surely he is not warranted in believing that. (In fact, given the subject's past experience with scowling old bikers, he is probably warranted in believing that "silly and brutish oaf" was *not* the appellation used in this particular case).

As time progresses, our friend may learn that these voices come to him exactly every six hours and 42 minutes, and he may sit down and test this faculty with his wife or a friend, thereby learning that it does in fact yield true beliefs. It would seem that at this point (and not until this point) our protagonist may be warranted in his beliefs. But if we stipulate that this faculty is the result of some freak accident and not the work of God or evolution, then we are forced to choose between our coin-tosser's warrant and Plantinga's theory, for Plantinga would have to hold that the man's beliefs are not warranted, since proper function, etc. is a necessary condition for warrant. Until our friend has somehow ascertained the reliability of his new faculty, it would seem that he is not even nearly warranted. Whether he is a fortunate recipient of a divine gift or a hapless individual who just stepped into the Twilight Zone, the beliefs produced by this brand-new faculty simply are not warranted.

Examples like this can be easily multiplied. We can imagine any number of adventitious faculties that simply defy explanation. In every case, I think, we will say that the recipient is not (at least not immediately) warranted in believing what these faculties induce her to believe, no matter where they have come from. The mere fact that they are new and bizarre implies that they are not to be trusted prior to investigation.

What I think these thought experiments show is not only that

there is something wrong with proper function theory but also just what is missing from simple reliabilism. What hinders warrant in these cases, the God–Given Lesion and the Part–Time Mind Reader, is that although the cognitive apparatus is completely reliable and functioning in a proper environment, the cognizer has little or no reason to believe that it is. Reliability is an extremely important aspect of warrant, but not just any reliability will suffice, it must be reliability *that is recognized as such by the cognizer.*

This seems to invite immediate problems, but it need not. Reliability as I conceive it is an objective, external property of a cognitive faculty or process. I think that Plantinga is right in thinking that an externalist account of warrant is more promising than an internalist one. I may be doing my very best to believe all and only propositions that are true, but if I am suffering from some type of cognitive malfunction I will not be warranted in many of these otherwise responsibly formed beliefs. However, as my intended counterexamples to proper function theory show, this alone is not sufficient. The cognizer must also have some reason to believe—some assurance—that this faculty or process is, in fact, reliable.

Before I try to explain how this might be had, though, I should like to set out a perfunctory explanation of what a faculty or a process is, as this has caused some problems in the past. First of all, I would like to lump them together under the title "cognitive means." (The way in which I use this term should obviate any objections; for the present purposes, the difference between a faculty and a process will not be significant). A cognitive means is anything that will suffice as a reasonable answer to the question, "How do you know that?" There will be unreasonable answers like, "A little bird told me," but these should be fairly easy to weed out without a great deal of controversy. Reasonable answers would include such responses as, "I remember it," or "I saw it," or "I multiplied the numerator and the denominator of the second fraction by two and added the numerators of both fractions," or "I read it in the newspaper." Perhaps we could even say, "Every six hours and 42 minutes I have the ability to read minds for the duration of a single thought, and I 'heard' you think that." In any case, the mere fact that we use the label "cognitive means" does not entail that we automatically assume reliability.

Simply answering the above question will not always give us a clear–cut delineation of cognitive means, but it is not obvious that a

clear–cut delineation is always necessary. We can and should, however, make more precise distinctions where there is a difference in reliability between different species of the same generic means.

For example, we might initially want to view memory *simpliciter* as a cognitive means, until we have some assurance of differences in reliability between different kinds of memorial functions. I might have some strange memorial disorder which prevents me from remembering things that happen on Mondays. In this event, the rest of my memorial cognitive means might be reliable, although when it comes to things occurring on Mondays, I cannot be warranted in believing that I remember them. By way of comparing reliability we come to distinguish different cognitive means. Thus the distinctions can and should vary from person to person, as far as concerns the individual's assessment of her own equipment. All instances of seeing are not the same for a person with poor night vision. For this reason it is neither necessary nor desirable that we always make these distinctions clear–cut.[3]

Having touched on this, I think I can explain my conception of warrant in slightly more concise terms:

> S is warranted in believing p iff (1) the cognitive means (c) that produces or sustains S's belief in p is reliable, and (2) S has some *proper assurance* that c is reliable.

As my objections to Plantinga are intended to show, mere reliability (or as Plantinga calls it, "a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true"), whether produced by God or not, is not enough. The cognizer must also have what I call proper assurance that the relevant cognitive means is reliable.

If proper assurance were merely warrant under a different name

[3] Although perhaps not always clear–cut, the distinctions will have to be very narrow when it comes to Gettier cases, my response to which will be to suggest that certain very particular cognitive means in very particular circumstances are not reliable. I think I can do this because I have included within the designation "cognitive means" both faculties *and* processes. In normal circumstances the inferences made may be completely reliable, but in these rare situations they are not (just as vision is not reliable under certain lighting conditions); even though we may be warranted in thinking that the inference is reliable, it might be the case that the inference itself is not reliable and that it is therefore not warranted.

it would be very difficult for us to know anything, for this would yield an infinite regress. Instead, I mean to include something like a particular, weaker form of justification which applies only to beliefs concerning the reliability of cognitive means. This should become more clear as I continue.

In the above examples, I indicated that the adventitious faculties did not produce warrant but that they could and often would if the agent were given enough time to test their reliability. How we determine this reliability can be seen by observing how we do this with the faculties we already possess, how we come to some feeling of assurance concerning our normal faculties. This seems to be accomplished through coherence.

The type of coherence I have in mind here is very similar to that which David Hume invokes to explain the origin of our ideas of an external reality. Hume's theory is that we come to believe in the endurance of objects beyond our immediate perception, because to do otherwise would fly in the face of our experience. When we sit and watch objects, we consistently find that they do not simply disappear and reappear.

> [My] observations are contrary, unless I suppose that the door still remains, and that it was open'd without my perceiving it: And this supposition, which was at first entirely arbitrary and hypothetical, acquires a new force and evidence by its being the only one, upon which I can reconcile these contradictions (Hume, p. 196–7).

I think that Hume is right in believing that the only evidence we can find for the reliability of our senses is some degree of coherence.[4] We cannot directly perceive objects without the interposition of our faculties, and so we cannot simply compare the sense impressions to the things themselves.

A foundationalist might want to claim that the evidence of our

[4] I do not want to draw Hume as a coherentist, although I think that his contribution here to coherentism is often neglected. Hume certainly does not think that this argument entailed a proof that we have sensory knowledge (in his senses of the terms, "proof" and "knowledge"). He does, however, seem to think that this comprises a justification in some broadly deontological sense.

senses is properly basic, but I hardly think any philosopher would believe that the cognitive productions of my intermittent mind-reading capacity are. We must be skeptics here, in regards to these supposed adventitious faculties, and if skepticism is to be taken seriously, the only reasonable resolution I can conceive is some form of coherence.

This will not be an unmitigated and egalitarian coherentism. There will be certain beliefs that *must* enter into the equation, beliefs about simple necessary truths and about our experience, a "foundation," if you will.[5] Our psychological/epistemic goal here is to reduce incoherence, at least enough so that it does not bother us. To contradict the facts that a thing cannot be red and green all over at the same time or that I am currently appeared to redly cannot ease any of the tension between my beliefs, for these beliefs cannot and should not be gotten rid of. At every turn, necessary truths and truths of appearances will force themselves upon us.

Therefore, my idea of proper assurance can be stated as follows:

> S has proper assurance of the reliability of *c* iff: S is warranted by some other, previously established cognitive means (c_n) in believing that *c* is reliable, *or* (1) S's assessment of *c* takes into account the purported testimony of *c*, (2) S's belief in the reliability of *c* does not contradict any obvious necessary truths or truths of appearances for S and (3) S's experience with regard to *c* has been fairly regular and coherent and fits with the information given S by his other faculties.

The first conjunct above implies only that S need not rely upon personal experience to test the reliability of the cognitive means in question. Provided that S is warranted in, say, believing a doctor's testimony that his (S's) hearing is working perfectly well, he will then have proper assurance of the reliability of his hearing (if he did not already). It is also important to note that this is only one possible way

[5] This is to protect us from cases like Plantinga's Epistemically Inflexible Climber, who suffers from a cognitive malfunction that inhibits the production of new beliefs such that he still (coherently) believes that which was true several hours ago but is now false. If we did not hold that belief in appearances was mandatory, our cognitive agent could simply devise coherent but ridiculous belief systems out of sheer perversity or a misguided effort to relieve the tension of incoherence.

of achieving proper assurance; if it were the *only* way, proper assurance would lie forever beyond our grasp.

Implicit in this definition of proper assurance is the notion that S is aware of the cognitive means that produces or the sustains a particular belief. Therefore, victims of the machinations of some Cartesian demon (or Plantingan Alpha–Centaurian) would not be warranted in the beliefs thus produced, for typically we would think that these people do not know that their beliefs are being produced in this manner. These people cannot assess the reliability of this particular cognitive means (the demon or Alpha–Centaurian), for they are not even aware of its existence.

I feel that my description of proper assurance captures the way in which we do assess our faculties. I use the term "assurance" in order to imply that this is internal. Thus, my theory is a combination of internalism (proper assurance) and externalism (reliability). Just as Plantinga causes a great deal of problems for internalism by providing cases in which a person is doing everything right but whose cognitive faculties are malfunctioning, so too, I think, have I made things more difficult for the pure externalist by suggesting adventitious but veridical faculties. Pure internalism seems better suited for epistemic obligations than for knowledge, while pure externalism seems better suited for consistently true beliefs than for knowledge. I hope that this theory can enjoy the better aspects of each of the other two.

There are several consequences of this theory, and I would like to take note of a few of them. First of all, in the case of the God–Given Brain Lesion, its recipient could never be warranted in the belief that this lesion produces. The lesion functions as a perfectly reliable faculty, but since it only produces a single belief there is nothing else with which that true belief can cohere. It is difficult to see how she could ever gain any assurance of reliability. Also, she could not possibly fulfill my criteria as she has no idea why she has the beliefs she has. She cannot answer the question, "how do you know that?".[6]

With the Part–Time Mind Reader we will see a very different case. In this instance our protagonist will not at first be warranted in

[6] As I mentioned in footnote 2, above, the belief that one has a brain lesion could also be produced by other means, means that are warranted. If the victim's doctor tells her that she has this lesion, she could, of course, be warranted in that belief, but the lesion alone still does not produce warranted belief.

beliefs produced by these new and untested cognitive means. However, with time and experience, he might come to have warrant if he can recognize (through introspection perhaps) the workings of discrete faculties and can achieve some assurance of the reliability of these faculties through the type of coherence mentioned above. Our Part-Time Mind Reader can subject himself to experiments, relying a great deal on the testimony of others ("You're right! That is exactly what I was thinking!"), or the coherence of his readings with other facts, perhaps one day achieving warrant.

A consequence of this theory is that babies and Adam (if we could bring him into the world fully rational but without any experience, as God and the Early Moderns are wont to do) would not be warranted in believing anything, except perhaps truths of appearances and some obvious (to them) necessary truths. Experience is necessary for warrant, since it is needed to provide assurance of the reliability of our cognitive means. But this seems to work for the present theory rather than against it. Babies probably *do not* know anything; even small children, sometimes, close their eyes in the hope that something frightening will therefore go away, seemingly not fully aware yet of the endurance of external objects. It seems plausible that Adam would be like an infant (as far as knowledge is concerned) who, lacking only the requisite experience, would grow up very quickly in this respect.

Obviously more work will have to be done to thoroughly flesh this theory out. I have tried to give a rudimentary approximation of warrant and to show why it might be initially plausible. It seems that this theory, in combining reliabilism with elements of coherentism and foundationalism, as well as externalism and internalism, might avoid some of the pitfalls of its component theories.

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