

The Relation between Subjective Experience and Belief in Objective Truth in the Religious Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga

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Abstract

This article examines Alvin Plantinga's religious epistemology, focusing on the intricate relationship between subjective experience and belief in objective truth. Plantinga challenges the naturalistic and evidentialist paradigms by proposing that religious belief can be rational and properly basic without reliance on external evidence. His concept of "warrant" clarifies what makes a belief count as knowledge, emphasizing those properly functioning cognitive faculties—such as the *sensus divinitatis*—permit individuals to form true beliefs about the divine through subjective experiences. These experiences, ranging from personal encounters to communal rituals, serve as foundational epistemic sources, bridging personal perception and the recognition of objective divine realities. Plantinga argues that such subjective experiences are not merely personal or relativistic but are cognitively reliable, grounded in the divine design of human faculties. The article explores how subjective religious experiences can lead to knowledge claims about divine truths, while also considering critiques that warn against epistemic relativism. It emphasizes that subjective experiences, when mediated by reliable faculties and communal traditions, contribute to a rational pursuit of objective religious truths, such as the existence of God. Plantinga's modal ontological argument further exemplifies how objective divine realities can be inferred from subjective experiences within a logical framework. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that, for Plantinga, subjective experience and belief in objective truth are mutually reinforcing, fostering a holistic understanding of faith where personal encounters and rational inquiry coalesce in the quest for divine knowledge.

Keywords: Plantinga, *Sensus divinitatis*, Subjective experience, Objective truth, Cognitive faculties.

1. Introduction

Religious epistemology explores the nature and justification of religious beliefs, searching the ways in which individuals acquire knowledge of the divine and understand spiritual truths. In this branch of philosophy clashes with questions concerning the rationality and justification of religious belief, especially in a modern context that often prioritizes empirical verification. Within this discourse, Alvin Plantinga stands out as a key figure, whose work has significantly shaped contemporary discussions in the philosophy of religion. Plantinga's contributions include his defense of reformed epistemology, which posits that belief in God can be rational without the necessity of traditional evidential support. His theories, including the concepts of "warrant" and the "*sensus divinitatis*," offer fresh perspectives on how subjective experiences can substantiate belief in objective truths.

This article aims to examine the complex relationship between subjective experience and belief in objective truth in Plantinga's thought. By investigating how personal and communal experiences can inform and encourage a believer's confidence in objective religious claims, we can better understand Plantinga's defense of the rationality of faith. Ultimately, this exploration reveals that, for Plantinga, subjective experiences are not merely personal notion; rather, they can serve as credible pathways to grasping an underlying objective reality.

2. Contextualizing Plantinga's Philosophy

Alvin Plantinga's work emerges from a rich history of epistemological inquiry that has evolved significantly over the past centuries. Prior to Plantinga, epistemology, particularly in the modern era, was dominated by a foundationalist approach that sought to establish certain knowledge bases for various beliefs. Philosophers like Descartes and Locke struggled with the problem of skepticism but often yielded to a naturalistic framework that minimized or excluded religious beliefs as rational foundations for knowledge. In keeping with philosophical positions generally, skepticism comes in many different versions. Skeptics have doubted the reality of the external world, (other) minds, abstract objects, physical objects, history, the future, causation, God (of course), evil, goodness, and so on (Moser 29). As naturalism gained prominence in the 20th century, it presented significant challenges to theistic belief, positing that knowledge derives solely from natural phenomena and observable evidence, thereby marginalizing metaphysical claims, particularly those relevant to religion. Naturalism denies that there are any spiritual or supernatural realities. There are, that is, no purely mental substances and there are no supernatural realities transcendent to the world; or at least we have no sound grounds for believing that there are such realities or perhaps even for believing that there could be such realities (Taliaferro et al. 519)

In this situation, Plantinga emerged as a critical voice, drawing from various influences, including the works of John Calvin and philosophers like Thomas Reid and Kant. His major works, notably "Warranted Christian Belief," offer a forceful defence of the rationality of religious belief through the concept of "warrant," which distinguishes between justified belief and warranted belief. Plantinga argues that warrant is what makes a belief not only justified but also factually true, thereby providing a metric that accommodates divine beliefs outside the empirical constraints of naturalism. "In the first of those books (Warrant: The Current Debate) I introduced the term 'warrant' as a name for that property- or better, quantity- enough of which is what makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief" (Plantinga 6)

Plantinga's primary aim in religious epistemology has been to justify belief in God as rational and grounded, especially against the backdrop of skeptical challenges. He addresses foundationalism critically, arguing that belief in God can be properly basic and thus rational without needing to rest on the kind of evidential groundwork demanded by naturalistic approaches. Belief in God for Plantinga, like Calvin's natural awareness of God and testimony of the Holy Spirit, is entirely rational and proper for human beings not only because it is, like some other important properly basic beliefs, immediate and based on no other beliefs that offer evidence for it, but also because, like them, it is not arbitrary and groundless (Hoitenga 186). By reinstating subjective experience and properly basic beliefs within logical structures, Plantinga has offered a forceful framework that serves to reconcile faith and reason.

3. Subjective Experience in Plantinga's Framework

In Alvin Plantinga's epistemological framework, the concept of subjective experience is crucial, particularly in the context of religious belief. Subjective experiences refer to personal perceptions, feelings, and interpretations that an individual derives from their interactions with the world, including spiritual encounters or moments of religious significance. . Plantinga's claims about properly basic belief crucially involve an appropriate relation between certain experiences and the beliefs they invoke (Beilby 52). In religious contexts, these experiences can range from private moments of prayer to transformational collective worship events. Plantinga crucially distinguishes between individual experiences—where personal encounters with the divine shape one's beliefs—and communal experiences that reflect shared religious phenomena amongst a group.

Plantinga posits that personal experiences serve as foundational elements for belief formation by offering a counterbalance to purely evidentialist approaches. He introduces the notion of the *sensus divinitatis*, or "sense of the divine," which refers to an innate capacity to recognize the existence and presence of God. This faculty enables individuals to perceive divine reality in their lives, validating their religious beliefs without necessitating external evidence. For Plantinga, these experiences not only help individuals affirm their faith but also provide a legitimate epistemic basis for belief in God, arguing that just as sensory perception provides knowledge of the physical world, the *sensus divinitatis* provides knowledge of the divine. 'My belief that I had breakfast this morning is basic and reliable for me as long as my memory functions well. Similarly, faith is produced, according to Plantinga, by a normal functioning of *sensus divinitatis* that triggers religious belief in various circumstances, such as seeing the beauty of the world. Thus, faith in God follows from experiences of God, which we are *prima facie* justified in accepting, as long as they are delivered by a reliable faculty of *sensus divinitatis*' (Kalmykova 991)

Though Plantinga's treatment of subjective experience has garnered support, it has not been without critique. Critics argue that reliance on subjective experience can lead to epistemic relativism, where competing beliefs based solely on personal experience claim equal validity, complicating objective truth assessments. According to Michael Martin, 'Plantinga's reformed foundationalism should be rejected since his arguments against classical foundationalism are weak, the logic of his position leads to a radical and absurd relativism, and foundationalism in general has serious problems' (Martin 278). However, Plantinga addresses these critiques by asserting that the *sensus divinitatis* is not merely subjective notion; rather, it serves a cognitive function enhancing one's grasp of actual divine realities.

Plantinga contends that while subjective experiences may vary widely, the reliability of the *sensus divinitatis* is grounded in the belief that God has equipped humans with this faculty so they can accurately perceive His presence. Thus, subjective experiences, rather than undermining epistemic claims, can provide a vital pathway to understanding deep spiritual truths. Moreover, Plantinga's thesis is that believing an argument that includes 'atheistic propositions' does not require one to abandon belief in God. Plantinga's understanding of properly basic beliefs in no way suggests that when the person in question becomes aware of this epistemologically inauspicious state, they are within their rights in ignoring the arguments, evidence, or beliefs which contradict their belief in God (Beilby 51)

The role of subjective experiences in the context of religious belief becomes particularly significant under Plantinga's framework. Many individuals report transformative personal experiences, understood as encounters with God or the divine, which they interpret as deep affirmations of their faith. Plantinga explains that some of these experiences play an important role in belief formation.

Calvin recognizes, at least implicitly, that other sorts of conditions may trigger this disposition. Upon reading the Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief God disapproves of what I have done. Upon confession and repentance I may feel forgiven, forming the belief God forgives me for what I have done (Plantinga and Wolterstorff 80).

Various examples illustrate how subjective experiences can lead to knowledge claims about religious truths. Consider the testimony of an individual who undergoes a deep spiritual experience during prayer or meditation. This experience might be perceived as an intimate communication with God, instilling a belief that serves as a foundation for their faith. In this case, the belief that God is present and actively engages with believers originates from a direct, personal encounter and does not require external validation or rational argumentation. "By claiming that an awareness of God is conditioned by inwardness, Kierkegaard certainly means that experiences such as guilt and gratitude, which Plantinga refers to as "justifying circumstances," can give rise to religious knowledge. But he does not mean to exclude experiences of the vastness or complexity of nature. He merely wants to insist that such experiences lead to an awareness of God only when they are mediated by the proper kind of subjectivity" (Evans 34).

4. Objective Truth in Plantinga's Religious Epistemology

The concept of objective truth refers to the existence of realities that are independent of individual perceptions, beliefs, or emotions. In the religious context, this notion asserts that certain truths—such as the existence of God, the nature of divinity, or the moral imperatives defined by sacred texts—are universally valid, regardless of personal experience or subjective interpretation. Knowing these objective truths is seen as essential for grounding religious beliefs and practices, as they provide a stable foundation upon which individuals and communities can build their spiritual lives.

Alvin Plantinga's religious epistemology offers a refined understanding of objective truth, fundamentally distinguishing it from subjective belief. Objective truth, within his framework, refers to realities that exist independently of individual perceptions and beliefs. This distinction is crucial, as subjective beliefs—though deeply felt and personally significant—may not necessarily align with or reflect objective reality. Plantinga emphasizes the necessity of objective truth in grounding and validating belief systems, arguing that without such grounding, beliefs, particularly those of a religious nature, risk becoming arbitrary or relative.

Plantinga often referred to the objective existence of God or divine reality in his epistemological works. According to Plantinga, if theism is true, then God would want to reveal himself to created persons. Toward this end he implanted in them as part of their original cognitive equipment, along with the cognitive faculties in the standard package, a *sensus divinitatis* that would enable them to form true non-inferential beliefs about God's presence, nature, and intentions upon having certain experiences, such as reading the Scriptures, hearing the choir sing, seeing a beautiful sunset, feeling guilt, and so on (Baker 62).

In articulating his perspective on the rationality of religious beliefs, Plantinga introduces the concept of warrant, which he defines as that quality that transforms a belief into knowledge. Warrant is essential to Plantinga's argument for the legitimacy of faith claims, suggesting that if a belief is warranted, it can be considered rational regardless of empirical evidence typically sought by naturalism. Plantinga says "I

think, has a great deal of warrant for me: I hold it with near maximal firmness, and (so at any rate I believe) it is formed by my faculties working properly in a congenial epistemic environment, with the triples of the design plan governing its production both aimed at truth and successfully aimed at truth” (Plantinga, Warrant and Proper Function 49). Thus, while faith may often be portrayed as irrational or non-evidential, Plantinga contends that properly basic beliefs—including belief in God—are warrantable via the *sensus divinitatis*, aligning subjective experiences with an objectively understood divine reality. Belief in objective truth in Plantinga’s epistemology leads to the objective existence of God. He suggests the modal ontological argument for the existence of God. Plantinga’s argument can be briefly articulated through a series of steps. He begins with the definition of a “maximally great being,” which possesses characteristics such as omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection. He then argues that if it is possible that such a being exists, it necessarily exists in all possible worlds. This modal logic framework suggests that existence in every possible world is a property of necessary beings. Therefore, if the existence of a maximally great being is possible, it must exist in the actual world. ‘According to Alvin Plantinga, for example, the maximal greatness of God implies that he displays maximal excellence in every possible world. This requires of God that he exists in every possible world. On this account, God cannot possibly fail to exist, since this would deprive him of his maximal greatness. What sets Plantinga’s argument apart from classical ontological arguments is its reliance on modal logic, which provides a rigorous logical structure for understanding existence’ (Wahlberg 133).

An essential aspect of Plantinga’s framework is the interplay between subjective experience and objective truth. He posits that subjective experiences of the divine are not only valid but are reinforced by corresponding objective truths. For instance, the communal and individual experiences of the divine can be viewed through a lens of broader theological claims that yield an objective understanding of God’s existence.

5. The Interrelation of Subjective Experience and Belief in Objective Truth

The relationship between subjective experience and belief in objective truth forms a critical axis in the study of religious epistemology. Within this dynamic, subjective experiences frequently activate an individual’s pursuit of objective truths, particularly in the religious context. Such experiences—ranging from personal encounters with the divine to communal rituals—often prompt individuals to question the nature of reality and seek to understand underlying objective truths. For instance, an inexplicable moment of enlightenment during prayer may lead an individual to explore the philosophical and theological foundations of their faith, thereby bridging subjective experience with a quest for objective verification.

According to Plantinga religious experiences are analogues to sense experiences. He called it as doxastic experience. In a common sense experience, we can comprehend an objective reality of external world like a tree or a horse through a subjective perception. Here my perceptioin is a subjective experience and the objective reality the tree immediately present in my mind without any inferential process. In this manner, a believer can be understood the objective reality, God through his subjective doxastic experience. Here we should know one thing is that, the doxastic experience means religious experience like God is speaking to me, the overwhelming experience that, when we see the different parts of this world or the beauty of this world, God has disapproved what I have done etc. ‘There is also doxastic experience. When I perceive a horse, there is that sensuous and affective experience, but also the feeling, experience, intimation with respect to a certain proposition (that I see a horse) that that proposition is

true, right, to be believed, the way things really are. This doxastic experience plays a crucial role in perception' (Plantinga 273).

The role of community and tradition cannot be underestimated in this interplay. Religious communities provide a historical context and shared narratives that shape individual beliefs, guiding followers toward specific interpretations of both subjective experiences and overarching objective truths. Within these communities, traditions promote collective understanding by offering varying ways to validate individual experiences against shared beliefs. This network of relationships contributes to a rich tapestry where purely subjective experiences are framed within the broader context of communal beliefs and practices. Thus, while subjective experiences ignite personal inquiries into objective truth, they are often mediated through the lenses of tradition and community, reinforcing the idea that belief is, in many ways, a relational construct.

Plantinga's insights into religious pluralism further complicate the relationship between subjective experience and objective truth. He acknowledges that diverse traditions yield differing subjective experiences that must be examined within their cultural and historical contexts. This recognition poses the question of whether a belief in objective truth necessitates a universal religious experience. Plantinga posits that while experiences may vary significantly across religions, they need not negate the potential for underlying objective truths common to these experiences. Instead, a plurality of religious experiences could reflect the richness of an ineffable divine reality—an idea that invites deeper theological and philosophical explorations.

However, this interrelation brings with it particular philosophical implications, especially concerning the problem of evil and suffering. Religious believers often grapple with reconciling their subjective experiences of the divine with the objective reality of suffering in the world. Plantinga's free will defense offers a framework for understanding how genuine free will may lead to moral evils, helping believers manage their experiences of suffering without abandoning their belief in an omnipotent and benevolent God. This relationship of experiences and beliefs expands the discussion of faith, suggesting that faithful responses to suffering may affirm one's commitment to a larger objective truth, even when subjective experience seems to present contradictions.

Additionally, the interplay between subjective experience and objective truth reinforces discussions around the role of faith in relation to evidence and experience. While contemporary secular perspectives emphasize empirical evidence as the hallmark of rational belief, Plantinga suggests that faith grounded in subjective experience can be rational in its own right—where subjective validation of belief meets the criterion of warrant. Therefore, while the empirical search for objective truths remains vital, Plantinga champions a more nuanced understanding of belief that honors both subjective experience and the quest for objective truth. This inclusive framework encourages an honest exploration of faith that transcends simple binaries, embracing a rich complexity of human experience.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Alvin Plantinga's exploration of the relationship between subjective experience and belief in objective truth within his religious epistemology offers a refreshing perspective on the nature of faith. His argument asserts that subjective experiences—stemming from personal encounters with the divine—are essential in forming and affirming religious beliefs, allowing believers to engage with truths that transcend empirical verification. Plantinga's concept of the *sensus divinitatis* serves as a cornerstone for

understanding how innate human faculties enable individuals to recognize and affirm the presence of God, thereby reaffirming the rationality of faith without reliance on traditional evidential constraints. Moreover, Plantinga's insistence on the interplay between subjective experience and objective truth encourages a holistic view of belief, where faith is seen as both deeply personal and intrinsically communal. Through shared narratives and traditions, religious communities shape the way experiences are interpreted, creating a rich tapestry of beliefs that simultaneously honours diverse personal journeys while searching for universal truths. This relational construct of belief fosters a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate the complexities of faith among philosophical challenges, including the problem of evil and the tension between subjective perceptions and the reality of suffering.

Despite critiques regarding the potential for epistemic relativism, Plantinga's framework effectively demonstrates that subjective experiences do not weaken the search for objective truths; rather, they augment it, offering plausible pathways to understanding a divine reality. By juxtaposing individual experiences with broader theological claims, Plantinga legitimizes religious belief as a rational pursuit shaped by factors beyond mere empirical evidence.

In a world where skepticism frequently questions the validity of religious claims, Plantinga's work stands as a reminder that the search for truth is as much about experiences and relationships as it is about objective realities. His integration of subjective experience into the discourse of religious epistemology not only challenges the naturalistic paradigm but also provides fertile ground for a nuanced engagement with faith. Ultimately, Plantinga invites both philosophers and believers to appreciate the complex interplay of experience and belief, suggesting that the quest for divine truth is not merely an intellectual endeavour, but a profound journey of the heart and spirit, interwoven with the wonder of human existence itself.

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