

Are Causes Reasons for Belief? Silver on Evil, Religious Experience, and Theism

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In this paper I argue that there need be nothing circular in a Christian theist's defending herself against the potential defeater presented by Paul Draper's^[1] formulation of the problem of evil, nothing circular in defending herself by appeal to the fact that she believes as a result of the promptings of the *Sensus Divinitatis* (SD) or the Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS). David Silver^[2] has argued that there is an illegitimate circularity proposed for such a theist by Alvin Plantinga in *Warranted Christian Belief*.^[3] The way out of the circle, thinks Silver, would be by adopting a kind of evidentialism: making an appeal to evidence that is independent of the reasons she has for holding theistic belief in the first place. I think Silver's argument is unsuccessful, because he does not get Plantinga's thought right. Silver's confusion is in taking causes for belief as reasons for belief, where reasons are beliefs themselves.

My strategy is as follows. I will begin with an exploration and clarification of Silver's position. This will lead me to consider Draper's formulation, in order to consider whether it is compelling and to give alternative responses to it. For the purposes of argument, I will go on to suppose that Draper's formulation could be imagined to provide a potential challenge to the theist. I will ask then whether Silver is right: is the theist in the pickle of having to either become an evidentialist (and offer the right sorts of evidence—evidence that is not dependent upon the belief that is itself challenged, namely belief in God), or be guilty of illegitimately circular reasoning? I argue that Silver is not right, and explain why I think he makes the mistake. I show that his example of the believer in super-intelligent super-vain space-alien is not parallel to Plantinga's conception of the warranted Christian believer. It is not parallel because Silver confuses what causes a person's belief with reasons for that belief.

^[1] Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists" in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) 12-29.

^[2] David Silver, "Religious Experience and the Evidential Argument from Evil," *Religious Studies* 38 (2002) 339-353. References to Silver's article will be in-text; all other references will be in footnotes.

^[3] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Silver's Position

Silver's main thesis is very clear:

if the experiential theist does accept Draper's formulation of the problem, *and she is apprised of the arguments in this paper*, then she is threatened by a defeater for her theistic belief; that is, in the absence of further evidence for the existence of God, the problem of evil makes it irrational for her to continue to be a theist (340).

What Silver wants to point out is similar to what he shows in his paper on pluralism:^{4[4]} that the experiential theist's Plantingian defense of her theistic belief in the face of the challenge from evil is inappropriately circular and thus not worthy of our acceptance. Thus the *potential* defeater is not the problem of evil. The problem of evil is part of an extended bit of reasoning that leads to the potential defeater, only by the theist's attempt to respond to it in a certain way, the way Silver thinks Plantinga recommends for the theist to respond. The potential defeater has to do with the inappropriately circular feature of the Plantingian theist's continuing to maintain theistic belief in the face of the challenge presented by Draper's formulation of the problem of evil.

[T]he SIPE [sufficiently informed pure experiential] theist bases her belief in God on the belief that she has been so informed by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, and at the same time bases her belief that she has a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* on her supposition that God exists (349).

It is inappropriately circular (and thus the evidential problem of evil provides an *actual* defeater for belief in God) so long as the SIPE theist does not have independent neutralizing evidence: "it is illegitimate to appeal solely to (non-perceptual) religious experience to show that belief in God is nonetheless rational" (351).

Thus on Silver's reasoning, belief in God, especially for "a modern, intellectually sophisticated person—a person who aims to form beliefs in the light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection," is epistemically irresponsible (351). Belief in God, for such a person, would involve a moral failure to form beliefs only on the basis of the best information and according to the highest

^{4[4]} David Silver, "Religious Experience and the Facts of Religious Pluralism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 49 (2001) 1-17.

standards (352). One can avoid the actual defeater only on pain of epistemic irresponsibility—that is to say by “keeping one’s head in the sand” and ignoring serious epistemology or serious challenges to theistic belief, like that identified by Silver.

Draper’s formulation

Draper claims that the observation of the pervasiveness and vast amounts of pain and suffering are better explained (i.e. are more probable) on the hypothesis that the condition of sentient creatures (those creatures capable of pain or suffering) is not the result of non-human persons than on the hypothesis that the condition is the result of a non-human person like the God of Christianity. Should an experiential theist accept Draper’s formulation? One could, but I fail to see how acceptance of it is compelling. I offer two ways to resist the thought that his formulation is a compelling actual defeater for theism.

A) It seems that I could accept a Christian theodicy along the lines of the A/C model presented by Plantinga.^{5[5]} It might go as follows. God brought everything into existence in a very good condition, such that humans had a desire for God (a desire to be directed to their own good by God) and (nearly) direct knowledge of God. Due to something not very well explained, humans turned away from God; a result of that turning was a diminished knowledge of God, as well as loss of desire for God. Humans pursued lesser or diminished goods in place of ultimate good, with the result that the opportunities for pain and suffering increased dramatically (the chief suffering for a human person being total abandonment by God, apparently experienced only once, namely by Jesus on the cross).

B) I could accept a Christian theodicy which I derive roughly from a more precise view along the lines proposed by Richard Swinburne in *The Existence of God*.^{6[6]} Namely, God could not make free embodied human persons who acquire knowledge of the world by means of their senses and at the same time make it such that there could be no pain or suffering. To acquire knowledge (not just good guesses, or reliable beliefs) of the world requires regularity and order in the world. For example, I could not have knowledge of rocks if rocks did not possess stable properties (properties related to mass, durability,

^{5[5]} See WCB, especially chapters 6-7.

^{6[6]} Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 202-214. Perhaps I am also importing into the view I develop in this paragraph hints from John Hick’s soul-making theodicy from *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). I do not myself know where or how; but I have this vague feeling that something of Hick’s view is lurking.

hardness, gravitational attraction, and so on). In addition, humans acquire knowledge by means of senses: we observe, touch, measure. To do this we have sense organs, nerves, and brains. Thus if I (or even Adam in Eden) were to slip on a wet root, fall striking my knee on a rock, I would experience pain. As a result of that pain, I might fail to reach my intended destination, perhaps to discover a not-previously discovered lake and name it. That is to say, I might suffer a loss. Furthermore, I could use that knowledge of rocks, together with knowledge about gravity, mass, velocity, and force in order to throw a rock at someone and injure them just for kicks. That is to say, I might cause suffering. Were God to prevent such pains and sufferings to an embodied creature, God might have to ensure either that human persons not be free creatures, or that the world not have stable properties—perhaps that rocks on occasion have the hardness of jello or marshmallows, but not of rock-like minerals. But in such a case it would seem that humans could not acquire knowledge of rocks (I think one cannot have knowledge of objects with such unstable properties). On the other hand, God could make it that my sense organs sometimes do not record and transmit painful inputs. But in that case our knowledge of the world would also be compromised. How would we know when what seem to be sensory inputs are indeed reliable?

So I am not sure that Draper's formulation is worthy of my acceptance.

Nonetheless, let's suppose that a Christian theist accepts Draper's formulation. What should I think of her? I could believe that she is perfectly rational in accepting it. But if I informed her of my reasons for not accepting it (the above paragraphs) and she understood my reasons, should I think her rational in still accepting Draper's formulation? I could. I would likely think that I have provided her with a rationality (not an evidential) challenge, and might think her under an epistemic or rationality obligation to provide evidence or argument in support of Draper's formulation and against my reasons. Something very much like this strikes me as the situation that Silver sees the SIPE theist in, in the face of Draper's formulation of the problem of evil. The SIPE theist must respond to the evidential challenge by providing independent neutralizing non-circular evidence (or argument? Or testimony? But Silver does not entertain these possibilities) in support of theism.

Is Silver Right?

Do I think Silver is right? No I do not. Why? He confuses what *Plantinga argues* with a *theist might believe*. He also confuses what *causes* a belief with *reasons* for holding that belief.

Plantinga argues that (and here follows part of the A/C model^{7[7]}) if God exists and desires humans to know and love him, God might provide a way for humans to have that knowledge and devotion. So it makes sense to believe that there is a cognitive capacity that is part of our design plan, the *sensus divinitatis*, by which we acquire intimate knowledge of God. Plantinga does not offer as evidence for his belief that God exists a further belief of his, either his belief that there is a *sensus divinitatis* prompting that belief in him, or his belief that the *sensus divinitatis* is a reliable belief-producing mechanism. There would be circularity if he argued like that. Rather, he might be caused to believe that God exists as a result of the *sensus divinitatis* and the promptings of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. Or it might be (we'd have to ask him) that he believes that God exists as a result of looking at theistic and atheistic arguments, and assessing their various merits and demerits.

In either case, however he acquired that belief, we can imagine that because of this acquired belief, Plantinga reads Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, Kuyper, and others, and comes to have beliefs about a *sensus divinitatis*. It may well be that his acquired beliefs about the *sensus divinitatis* seem very strong and compelling to him, and seem to add confirmatory support to his belief that God exists. None of this seems to me to be inappropriately circular. He need not believe that God exists because he believes there is such a faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*, nor does he believe that there is such a faculty as the *sensus divinitatis* because he believes that God exists. The *sensus divinitatis* produces in him belief in the existence of God. As a result of that belief, he desires to learn more. In learning more he discovers that it is the *sensus divinitatis* that produced that belief in him. The cause of his belief in God need not be the reason for his belief that God exists. Compare a case of sense perception: I believe there is snow on the ground outside my window by virtue of perception (I see it), and given all my perceptual beliefs, form the belief that there is such a thing as perception and that it is reliable. I do not (apart from unusual circumstances) believe that there is snow on the ground outside my window on the basis of my belief that

^{7[7]} I am here especially following WCB, 172-186.

sense perception is reliable. In fact most people probably do not even have a belief to the effect that sense perception is reliable.

A theist might just find herself with the belief that God exists (I know this sounds very odd; imagine someone saying “I suddenly discovered that I believed that God exists”). She might believe that she came to that belief not on her own, but as a result of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. She might believe (or come to believe) that all along she had a *sensus divinitatis*, but it was rather dormant or she just never realized she had such a cognitive capacity (whatever promptings issued from it were largely ignored by her). Yet somehow the Holy Spirit renewed and brought to life and vividness her *sensus divinitatis*. A result of this enlivening was that the *sensus divinitatis* caused her to come to believe that God exists. At the same time it initiated her desire to acquire intimate, loving, devoted knowledge about God. She now seeks and develops a God-relationship.^{8[8]} Her belief in God’s existence (and God’s particular care for her), in the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*, and in the existence of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit become core beliefs for her. They are beliefs that form and inform her total world and life view.

As part of her interest in loving God with all her mind, she decides to acquire more knowledge. She studies epistemology. She studies Bayesian theory, probability theory. She reads books and journals. She comes across Draper’s article. Now I distinguish two possibilities.

Possibility i: She understands his formulation. She has not read Richard Swinburne, so she unwittingly accepts Draper’s formulation. She recognizes that she now has a potential defeater for her belief in God. As a careful thinker, she seeks a neutralizing belief. She reads Wykstra and Alston and VanInwagen (and stumbles onto Snider’s web page and reads the sketch of his views on Silver^{9[9]}) and says, “Yes; that is it! I’ve got it.” She sees the problem in her very acceptance of Draper’s formulation. So she has neutralized the potential defeater.

Possibility ii: She understands his formulation. However, she also reads Silver’s article and agrees with him that she needs to form her beliefs “in light of the best available information and the highest standards of reflection” (352). Given that her belief in God, in the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*, and in the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit are core beliefs for her, informing her total world and life view,

^{8[8]} I am summarizing the extended A/C model from WCB, 184-186, as well as chapters 7 & 8.

^{9[9]} See <http://homepages.utoledo.edu/esnider/onsilverevilcircle.htm>.

the force of the potential defeater presented by Draper's formulation is diminished significantly. She feels no obligation to provide a neutralizer, because the potential defeater does not for her have the status of demanding one. She agrees that potential defeaters are numerous and varied. A rational, informed, and epistemically concerned agent cannot and need not respond to all of them. Given that her set of beliefs is not self-referentially incoherent, she can ignore many of the potential defeaters. Further she can ignore this defeater because it is not neutralized by a belief that is dependent upon her belief in God. Thus does not violate the crucial principle (what Silver calls "the independence constraint on neutralizers") that Silver believes a Plantingian theist is guilty of violating: the illegitimate circularity of the defense of a sufficiently informed pure experiential thesis in the face of the evidential challenge from evil like Draper's formulation (349). The way she is different from, say, the naturalist in the face of a potential defeater (like the defeater that comes from naturalism itself, namely the low probability that our cognitive faculties are reliable) is that naturalism is self-defeating (and no one has shown that theism is anywhere near self-defeating).

Space-Alien Belief and Warranted Christian Belief

In order to illustrate Silver's principle that he calls "the *independence constraint on neutralizers*" (349), he develops a case of a person believing in super-intelligent super-vain space aliens (the SISVSA believer for short). Silver believes the SISVSA is parallel to a Plantingian theist defending herself in the face of an evidential challenge like that from Draper's formulation of the problem of evil. But I claim that there is a vast difference between the theistic believer facing a potential defeater like Draper's formulation and the believer in SISVSA facing a potential defeater for his belief.

The theistic believer need not believe that God exists because she believes that she has a *sensus divinitatis* that informs her of that belief. Nor need she believe that she has a *sensus divinitatis* because she believes that God exists. One need not be the reason for the other. She believes the one, she believes the other. Both are basic beliefs, and properly basic. Furthermore, it is the *sensus divinitatis* and not her belief in the *sensus divinitatis* which causes her belief in God; the *sensus divinitatis* is not her reason for belief in God.

In contrast, the SISVSA believer forms that belief "because he thinks that it is produced by what we might call a *vain-alien* faculty" (349). Further, he "thinks that he is warranted in his belief that he has a

vain-alien faculty because it reasonably follows from his belief that he was created by super-intelligent, super-vain space aliens” (349). The “because” is all-important. The SISVSA believer, as described by Silver, forms his beliefs because of further beliefs he has, because of what he thinks.

However, the theistic believer, as described by Plantinga, need not believe in God because she believes she has a *sensus divinitatis*. She comes to belief in God because of the *sensus divinitatis* and the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (and not because of *her beliefs in or about the sensus divinitatis* or the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit). It is entirely possible that she never comes to form beliefs about a *sensus divinitatis* (how many Christians have any such beliefs?) or the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (another one that does not seem to be anywhere near the forefront of Christian beliefs). Even if she does form such beliefs, she need not believe she has a *sensus divinitatis* because she has a belief in God. She believes one, she believes the other. How she comes to acquire that belief all depends. I would be surprised that she would come to that belief apart from reading Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Edwards, Kuyper, or Plantinga. Still, how she comes to that belief need not be the reason for her belief.

Conclusion: causes need not be reasons for belief

In contrast, and this is perhaps what confuses Silver, *Plantinga* argues that it makes good sense to believe that if God exists and desires humans to know about and love him, God might provide to humans as part of their design plan a *sensus divinitatis*, a natural ability to know about and love God. But there is no circle here, let alone an inappropriate one. There might be if Plantinga were first to argue that it makes good sense to believe that if humans have a *sensus divinitatis*, then indeed there is good reason to believe that God exists; and then on the basis of that belief he were to accept that humans have a *sensus divinitatis*. But Plantinga does not argue like that. I do not see a good reason why any other Christian should be inclined to argue that way either.

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