PLANTINGA'S RELIABILISM BETWEEN TELEOLOGY AND EPISTEMIC NATURALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this contribution is to demonstrate that reliabilism is the theoretical basis that draws Plantinga to a moderate Goldmanian naturalization as well as to teleological assumptions that imply metaphysical supernaturalism.

Keywords: Plantinga, Goldman, warrant, proper function, reliabilism, epistemology. In the seventies and eighties, Reformed Epistemologists influenced the debate about the rationality of religious belief, by drawing their inspiration from the reformed theological tradition as well as by reconsidering the whole theory of knowledge on the basis of poskhunian suggestions and recent reliabilist views. Among the Reformed Epistemologists Alvin Plantinga is certainly the most important thinker. The fundamentals of his work are represented by a trilogy on the warrant theme: Warrant: The Current Debate¹, Warrant and Proper Function², Warranted Christian Belief³.

Plantinga's strongest and most debated claim is that in reality the most plausible way of considering warrant from a theistic point of view is in terms of naturalistic epistemology. In *Warrant and proper function*, Plantinga states: "naturalism in epistemology flourishes best in the context of a theistic view of human beings" (Plantinga 1993a, p. 46).

¹ Plantinga 1993a.

² Plantinga 1993b.

³ Plantinga 2000.

The aim of this contribution – far from debating Plantinga's naturalism in a detailed fashion – is to highlight the relevance of reliabilism in Plantinga's theory of knowledge. We will demonstrate that reliabilism is the theoretical basis that draws Plantinga to a moderate Goldmanian naturalization as well as to teleological assumptions that imply metaphysical supernaturalism.

Warrant and proper function certainly is the most relevant amongst Plantinga's contributions to the contemporary debate about the theory of knowledge. In this work Plantinga defines warrant as the property that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief.

Following the central and paradigmatic definition of warrant, in *Warrant and proper function*, a belief *B* has warrant if and only if:

(1) it has been produced in me by cognitive faculties that are working properly [...] in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for my kinds of cognitive faculties,
(2) the segment of 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 (Plantinga 1993a, p. 46).

Applying the concepts of proper function and design plan to artefacts is quite easy, but it is not so if we apply them to natural organisms and their parts. On this issue Plantinga's epistemology meets teleology: from a theistic point of view there is a conscious and intentional Designer that projected and created all the organisms, first of all human beings. God is not the architect of the Paley's cosmos of marvellous correspondence. As the Designer, God is the first source of human cognitive faculties. This characterization is, obviously and necessarily, integrated in a huge and complex epistemological project. God becomes one of the fundamental bases of Plantinga's theory of knowledge. He stands as a guarantor for knowledge. At the same time, the process, that thank to the warrant leads from belief to knowledge, seems to become a proof – also conceivable in Aquinas' way – of the existence of God.

Once he has clarified the warrant model, Plantinga deals with some consequences. Particularly, he wonders if it is feasible to suppose that natural organisms were not designed by God but by the Darwinian "blind process", and in this case if we can adequately use the concept of proper function in epistemology. If, as a matter of fact, the noetic equipment of the subject were not designed, it makes no sense to apply to them the notions of proper function and design plan. To claim that some beliefs can be warranted in Plantinga's epistemological proposal implies theism. At this point the main question is: which are our possibilities of knowledge? Plantinga suggests considering this problem as if it were linked to the value of the following conditional probability

P(R/(N&E&C))

where

- N is metaphysical naturalism
- *E* is the theory upon which the human cognitive faculties arose by mechanism proposed by contemporary evolution thought
- *C* is a complex proposition that claims what are our cognitive faculties and what kinds of belief they produce.
- *R* "is the claim that our cognitive faculties are reliable [...] in the sense that they produce mostly true belief in the sorts of environments that are normal for them." (Plantinga 1993a, p. 220).

Plantinga wishes to establish the probability that a belief produced by human cognitive faculties is true, given (N&E&C). In order to provide an answer, he creates a debate between a position attributed to Darwin and Churchland, and one attributed to Popper and Quine. Based on Darwin's and Churchland's point of view this probability would be rather low, while based on Popper's and Quine's it would be quite high. What is the position of a theist concerning this kind of doubts and in relation to the value of this probability? Plantinga claims that the traditional theist has no reason neither to doubt the fact that his cognitive equipment produces true beliefs nor to presume that the probability of R/(N&E&C) is low, since if he accepts a kind of evolutionism it will be, in any cases, a form of evolutionism planned by God. In order to be more precise about this point, as Professor Plantinga underlies reading this paper,⁴ the theist will think that the probability is low. From a theistic point of view, the probability of R, given the conjunction of theism and evolutionism.

The main subject of debate in the formula suggested by Plantinga was the conjunction of (N&E&C). But I will rather focus on R – that is "the claim that our cognitive faculties are reliable [...] in the sense that they produce mostly true belief in the sorts of environments that are normal for them" (Plantinga 1993a, p. 220) – since, in a certain way, this clarifies the reliabilist characterization of Plantinga's theory more so than in previous criticisms was be highlighting. Reliabilism is not a simple instrument or merely a theory that is functional to the consolidation of the central role of God in relation to the possibility of knowledge of human beings. Reliabilism is basic, fundamental and also chronologically one of the main sources from which the concept of proper function rises.

Warrant: the Current Debate, the first book in the trilogy on the warrant theme, analyses the contemporary epistemological scenario in which Plantinga will insert his new definition of warrant concept. Essentially, this detailed analysis is focused on the dichotomy between internalism and externalism. Great attention is dedicated to the internalist model as a prevailing but not as a suitable paradigm. According to Plantinga, internalism is:

⁴ I will always express my gratitude to Professor Plantinga for accepting to read and comment my work.

[...] a congeries of analogically related ideas centering around access – special access, of some kind, on the part of epistemic agent to justification and its ground. (Plantinga 1993b, p. 182)

These ideas are connected by deontology, from which the motivation towards an internalistic point of view arises. According to internalism, in order to have warrant it is necessary and sufficient to satisfy epistemic duty and meet epistemic regulation. Plantinga's assault against the role that epistemic duties and obligations have in internalism, could be misunderstood as a form of rejection of the normative component. Actually, Plantinga considers warrant to be a high normative notion. However, he wishes to mark a deep distinction between a normative and a merely deontological approach to warrant. As a matter of fact, according to Plantinga, satisfaction of epistemic duties and obligations is absolutely not sufficient for warrant. At this point Plantinga elects the externalist perspective, not as contrary but rather as complementary to internalism. Oppositions, if there are any, are more historical than theoretical. Actually, Plantinga underlines that externalism represents a strong point of view in all the pre-Cartesian history of philosophy. As a matter of fact, as it is widely understood, externalism can be based on the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. In turning his attention to the externalist perspective, Plantinga leaves the pure critical analysis, which is overlapped by the philosophical ground that underlies the construction of the proper function.

Externalism is defined in a negative way, as a theory that does not require an epistemic privileged access of the subject neither to warrant nor to its ground. Given the vagueness of this broad definition, Plantinga opts to dedicate his analysis to a particular form of externalism that is, in his definition, "the original and exciting reliabilist and quasireliabilist view" (Plantinga 1993b, p. 183), in particular he takes a detailed look at the theories proposed by William Alston, Fred Dretske and Alvin Goldman. As the purpose of this paper is to attempt showing that Plantinga's view is essentially reliabilist, it might seem appropriate to delve into a juxtaposition between Plantinga and Alston, as the later one is also a reformed epistemologist and has a metaphysical framework similar to Plantinga's one. However, it is fundamental to keep in mind that, according to Plantinga, Alstonian reliabilism has its grounds in a kind of justification concept that is no way sufficient in order to have warrant. There is another type of relationship between Plantinga's point of view and the reliabilism proposed by Goldman. This is undoubtedly a problematical but also rich debate; even if it doesn't lay its foundations, it determines the choice of reliabilism as a point from which the correct theorization of warrant becomes possible.

We will now analyse Plantinga's criticism toward Goldman, in order to demonstrate that the introduction of the concept of proper function arises as necessary from this very criticism. Plantinga distinguishes two forms of reliabilism proposed by Goldman in different phases and in different works. The oldest form is presented by Goldman in *What is Justified Belief?*⁵. In general terms, in this paper Goldman defines the justification degree as function of reliability. Therefore it becomes legitimate to connect the concept of justification to the matter of how much the belief formation process could be reliable so that the beliefs that come from it are reliable in turn. The question lacks a precise answer, a circumstance which Goldman puts down to a vagueness which in this case he claims to be part of our concept of justification. What is clear is that perfect reliability is not required, since a belief formation processes, that occasionally produce mistakes, can however originate warrant. Goldman characterizes justification processes as those which have a *tendency* to produce true rather than false beliefs. Concerning the meaning of this tendency, once again we are facing indeterminateness due to the vagueness of the concept of justification. The tendency can be understood in terms of a real long period frequency as well as a penchant.

It is necessary to pinpoint two concepts that are fundamental in Goldman's epistemology. Those are the concept of "process" intended as the operation that produces the belief, and the reliability of which produces in turn the reliability of belief, and the concept of "type" – delineated in opposition with the concept of "token" – since the property of producing true beliefs is mostly a type property.⁶ Which types of belief formation processes, built as functional operations, are basic in Goldman's proposal? For instance, we have the reasoning process where inputs include previous beliefs and raise hypothesis. Another example of these types of belief formation processes is constituted by those kinds of functional processes that include emotional states of various kinds along with previous beliefs.

In Plantinga's words "Goldman's first version of reliabilism is reliabilist indeed" (Plantinga 1993b, p. 197). Goldman's reliabilism is the best framework for developing the concept of warrant, moreover Goldman's theories are based on a concept of justification that is the most suitable in order to achieve Plantinga's aims. Goldman talks about justification more than warrant. Nevertheless, Plantinga claims that Goldman uses that term not to indicate *sensu strictu* justification, but as warrant's *quasi-synonymous*. However, a number of problems also arose concerning Goldman's reliabilism, some of which are discussed in *Warrant: the Current Debate*, while others have already been analysed in *Positive epistemic status and proper function*. In this paper published in 1988, Plantinga states that the more problematic feature of this kind of reliabilism is the fact that, according to Goldman, only types and not their tokens are reliable or otherwise. This is the basis of all of Plantinga's doubts, but in this context this issue remains in the background. On the other hand, in *Warrant: the Current Debate* he tries to

⁵ Goldman 1979.

⁶ In the simple, but clear and effective explanation of Nicla Vassallo, ♥ is a type of which ♥, ♥ are two tokens (Vassallo 1999, p. 65n).

explain this point, claiming that a cognitive process results from the token of a number of processes and this is the motivation of his disagreement with Goldman's proposal. In Plantinga's view, there is a reversal of the preponderance of the role of type and token, so that each concrete cognitive process is a token of many different types of processes, each with its own different degree of reliability.

According to Plantinga, in Goldman's proposal the degree of reliability of each type of process determines the reliability degree. If this is so the typology of the type of cognitive process must be narrowed down. Its main characteristic should be that all the derived beliefs have the same degree of warrant. That is in conflict with the basic features of Plantinga's warrant. Indeed many processes, built in a such stringent way, could be reliable, but the resulting belief will be irrelevant in order to have warrant.

Goldman's theory of knowledge meets "his maximum of expression and elaboration", as Vassallo points out, in *Epistemology and Cognition*. Goldman's aim is ambitious, since he wants to "redirect and restructure the field of epistemology" (Goldman 1986, p.1). In his view, epistemology is a multidisciplinary matter and not an emanation, more or less autonomous, of the pure a priori philosophy:

Though philosophy is the chief conductor or orchestrator of epistemology, many other disciplines – including empirical disciplines – are important parts of the ensemble. (Goldman 1986, p. 1)

The important idea in Goldman's proposal is the normative dimension of epistemology. The value of these statements is especially understandable when comparing them with the theories of Quinean inspiration that consider epistemology essentially descriptive, and connect it to psychology. On the contrary, using a purely descriptive conception can lead to the high risk of making philosophy lose its role of "conductor" and at the same time could subdue epistemology to psychology, to the point that there would be no difference between the two disciplines. In Goldman's view, the task of the epistemologist is to establish if our beliefs are justified or warranted and if we are rationally entitled to have these beliefs. A normative vocation rises from this, which is already present in the evaluative meaning of the terms justified, warranted and rational. Clearly enough, matters connected both to the status of knowledge and the possibility of knowledge depend on the justification. According to Goldman, no single concept of justification is detectable in the usual and common way of thinking and speaking about justification. Nevertheless, he identifies a central thread that links together all the common uses and leads to a central idea that his theory wishes to capture. Goldman analyses justification in terms of the construction of a structure or a rule system, as claiming that a belief has warrant implies that there is an adequate doxastic attitude to which the subject has an epistemic right or duty. Furthermore, he claims that the formulation of a set of structured rules contributes to the clarification of theories of knowledge. A system of rules would actually be an extremely important instrument. This system would create

a neutral structure within which it would be possible to articulate, compare and, in a certain fashion, evaluate competing theories. However, the need for normativeness, which leads Goldman to create a system of rules, does not require the subject to have a privileged epistemic access. In this way Goldman remains distant from all forms of internalism. A first step toward the construction of a system of justificatory beliefs is based on a principle that Goldman defined as follows:

(*P*1) *S*'s believing *p* at a time *t* is justified if and only if: *S*'s believing *p* at a time *t* is permitted by a right system of justificational rules (*J*-rules). (Goldman 1986, p. 59)

In Goldman's opinion this principle can be generalized to any kind of doxastic attitude, and not only to beliefs. (*P*1) must be taken as a purely formal and totally neutral principle, since it is not meant to identify any specific factual standard for justified belief.

The importance of the neutrality of (*P*1) in relation to what should be the J-rules is connected to the fact that a *J*-rule allows the transition from a previous cognitive state to a belief. Finding a definition for a satisfying rightness criterion, Goldman defines the *J*-rules as rules which do not simply specify the mere transitions of cognitive states but rather cognitive processes, where processes are meant as a specific kind of causal chain. Goldman believes it is necessary to determine a criterion which establishes an acceptable true relationship, without considering the resources of the type of cognitive system we are dealing with. In this way he reaches the formulation of (*ARI*), that is *the absolute resource-independent criterion*:

(*ARI*) A *J*-rule system *R* is right if and only if *R* permits certain (basic) psychological processes, and the instantiation of these processes would result in a truth ratio of beliefs that meets some specified high threshold (greater than .50). (Goldman 1986, p. 106)

In Goldman's point of view, (*ARI*) is an evidently reliable criterion, because, as it doesn't determine any specific threshold, it becomes a real criterion scheme. The vagueness of (*ARI*) is accepted thanks to the fact that the common concept of justification is equally vague. Obviously enough, Goldman claims that the theory cannot be applied prior to choosing a specific threshold of values. Plantinga had considered Goldman's reliabilism in *What is Justified Belief?* of extreme interest, but with even greater attention he turns to what he defines as the "significantly different account of warrant" (Plantinga 1993b, p. 199) proposed in *Epistemology and Cognition*. He fully underwrites the incipit of Goldman's text, in which, as we have seen, the later highlights the normative dimension of the epistemological enterprise.

According to Plantinga, Goldman sees this normativeness essentially as a matter of compliance with rules and therefore his concept of warrant is analogically related to a deontological view, even if this is not deontological by itself. But here Plantinga's main interest is the association of this concept of compliance with both the notion of warrant and the Goldmanian justification. According to Goldman, first a belief is justified for a person if this fact is authorized by an appropriate justification rule. Second, a justification rule is in turn appropriate if it is an element of a right set of justification rules. Finally, a set of rules is right if it is properly reliable – this means to have quite a high truth ratio.

In Plantinga's opinion, Goldman's theory is based on a system of rules rather than simply on rules. As a matter of fact, it is quite possible that some processes are quite reliable themselves, but that their combination with other processes makes them unreliable. In these cases it is possible to have processes that assume beliefs as input and produce other beliefs as output and even if a belief formation process O may be reliable, the belief formation process I on which it is based can be not reliable, invalidating O justificational status. This kind of motivation leads Goldman to sustain that J-rules must be set not in terms of cognitive status transitions, but rather in terms of "cognitive processes". This is a particular kind of causal chain. The basic issue, however, is given when we come to define under which conditions a *J*-rule system is appropriate. Therefore, the (ARI) criterion becomes fundamental, and before such criterion Plantinga questioned a series of points, the main one being once again related to the differences between type and token. The rules on which Goldman's analysis is based, in Plantinga's view, have the form of authorization processes: a rule authorizes some processes that concern a belief or a kind of belief. Furthermore, Goldman considers the above processes as types of processes, since only the types of cognitive processes, and not their tokens, can be defined reliable or otherwise. So J-rules can be applied to specific kinds of processes. However, as Plantinga underlines, every concrete process will be a token of many different types, with a wide range of degrees of reliability. What brings Plantinga to claim that Goldman's proposal, as it is formulated, is not sufficient for warrant? The possibility of having belief accidentally true, that is in no way acceptable in order to have warrant. The most classical example of this case, and even the most debated, is the cerebral damage. A subject has some kind of cerebral damage due to a form of cancer or a lesion, but because of a diagnostic error, he is unaware of it. The damage leads him to have, along with a number of false beliefs, the belief of having cerebral damage. Plantinga claims that, from a Goldmanian point of view, this belief is not accidentally true, but, according to him, it is totally accidentally true. That brings Plantinga to emend Goldman's theory with a further condition that is:

The main point, I think, is this: contrary to Goldman's suggestion, what determines whether the output of a process has warrant is not simply the truth ratios of the *J*-rule system set permitting it. To confer warrant or positive epistemic status, the process in question must meet another condition. It must be non-pathological; we may say that the process in question must be one that can be found in cognizers whose cognitive equipment is working properly [...]. (Plantinga 1993b, p. 208)

The critics are no way unanimous about the relationship between reliabilism, in particular Goldmanian reliabilism, and Plantinga's theory of warrant. Peter Klein, for instance, claims, concerning the example of the subject with cerebral damage, that "reveals a stark clash between the reliabilist's and proper functionist's intuitions regarding what constitutes an accident from the cognitive point of view." (Klein 1996, p. 103) According to Klein, there are two distinct reactions facing the test case:

- 1. the reliabilist point of view, according to which the subject with cerebral damage has knowledge, since the belief is true, and cognitively not accidentally true;
- 2. the proper functionalist point of view, according to which this subject has no knowledge, since the belief is cognitively accidentally true

and those reactions are so strongly in conflict with each other that they create a narrow gap between the two theories. Therefore, Klein claims that Plantinga reacts to the test case is considering it as a clear counter-example for reliabilism.

Comparing reliabilism with the theory of warrant, Nicla Vassallo claims that "the difference between proper functionalism and reliabilism is slight, since the cognitive faculties that function properly are usually reliable and since, even from a reliabilist point of view, the cognitive processes considered are those that bring to truth" (Vassallo 1999, p. 131). In order to have an adequate evaluation of the relation that links Plantinga and Goldman, we must consider another of Vassallo's remarks. She sustains that with appropriate modification – essentially renouncing to the concept of proper function – Plantinga's theory of warrant would be "compressed in Goldman's sophisticated reliabilism". This could bind the outcome of Plantinga's naturalization with the outcome of a Goldmanian naturalization, in which epistemology preserves the central role of "conductor" defended by Goldman, even though the task of analysing our cognitive faculties is entrusted to science. However, realizing both Goldman and Plantinga's naturalistic ambitions is not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, Vassallo claims that the role of science, particularly psychology, is guaranteed only if the role of the cognitive process is also guaranteed.

Plantinga himself binds the realization of his naturalistic ambitions to Goldman's ambitions, claiming that if naturalizing epistemology must be such that it does not imply a person as God; this drives his theory out of a number of naturalizing epistemologies. Furthermore, this should be the destiny of all the theories of knowledge allowing the existence of God. Among these theories, Plantinga chooses Goldman's reliabilism as the paradigmatic theory that is, in his words, "clearly compatible with the existence of God" (Plantinga 1996, p. 356). Bringing back to subject my purpose to imply that Goldmanian reliabilism is one of the basis of the theory of warrant, this becomes extremely significant.

In addition to the above, Ernest Sosa focuses his attention on the role played by the relationship between proper function and design plan. He tries to emend Plantinga's theory splitting the notion of proper function and design plan, broadly intended either

as divine design or as evolutionistic design (Sosa 1996, p. 261). According to Sosa, what is left is just a simple form of reliabilism. However, Sosa cannot come to terms with Plantinga's proposal. Even if he agrees with Plantinga on many aspects, he strongly disagrees on the necessity for a project – upon which it is possible to evaluate the proper functioning and the truth value of the belief – and clearly enough, all the religious implications that derive from it.

If the reliabilism of the belief formation processes were consequential to the epistemological application of the concept of proper function of cognitive faculties, which functions in accordance with the divine project, reliabilism in Plantinga's view would be a purely incidental feature in a theory of knowledge formed and shaped by a supernatural metaphysics. If so, Plantinga's contribution, would perhaps be remarkable in a theological context, but surely would be of trivial importance from an epistemological point of view. As we have seen while we were trying to carry out an exegetical analysis of the proper function concept, in Plantinga's view there are strong supernatural metaphysics. However, these metaphysics do not lead, as much as they underlie the construction of Plantinga's theory of knowledge, a theory with strong and substantial epistemic grounds. Plantinga claims that Goldmanian reliabilism is the best starting point, in order to develop a satisfying analysis of warrant. Klein's criticism, that introduces these two point of view as totally opposing, does not seem to be totally convincing; naturally enough, I agree with Vassallo's view, both in terms of the boundaries in which she carries on the analysis of the relationship between Plantinga's and Goldman's proposal, and in terms of accepting - as Plantinga himself does - the theory upon which the naturalization on the concept of warrant, as it is described in this paper, is a naturalization of Goldmanian character.

At the end of this excursus it should be clear that Plantinga's proposal, even if his personal faith stands as motivational ground, results also from a strong reliabilist characterization that constitutes his epistemological ground. The acceptance of the reliabilist point of view brings Plantinga to the introduction of the concept of proper function that, in turn, implies an explanation that lies outside the naturalistic boundaries. It is important to keep in mind the distinction - often underlined by Plantinga himself between his epistemology and the metaphysics that underlie to it. At this point I can claim that in Goldman's reliabilism we have the grounds for two fundamental components of Plantinga's theory, often considered distant if not incompatible: on one hand we have epistemic naturalization which is developed by entrusting biological and psychological sciences in relation to the proper functioning, with a descriptive role, as well as by preserving the traditional normative role to epistemology; on the other hand we have a new kind of teleological argument arising from the need of the concept of proper functioning, defined as based on the design plan, introduced by Plantinga to emend the reliabilist proposal. In order to accept Goldmanian reliabilism, Plantinga needs to take it to a higher level of reliability, for once in a Cartesian fashion, as only the Christian God can offer such level of warrant.

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