

A Critical Review of Brynna Gang's “In Defense of the Unbeliever”

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In the course of “In Defense of the Unbeliever,” Brynna Gang sets out to develop an alternative to Plantinga’s model of how a belief in the Christian God could be rationally justified, due to its perceived undesirable consequences of condemning the unbeliever as morally and epistemically irresponsible (12). Gang desires to make room for responsible, conscientious unbelief and an attitude of tolerance for both unbelievers and believers. I believe that Gang misunderstands Plantinga’s model and mistakenly infers from it that unbelief is always irresponsible. Specifically, Gang misunderstands what Plantinga means by “warrant,” and “rational,” by mistakenly connecting it to deontological concepts like “justification,” “obligation,” and “responsibility.” In the end, Plantinga’s model will be shown to successfully achieve Gang’s desire to make room for conscientious unbelievers, justified unbelief, and an attitude of tolerance towards the faithful and unfaithful alike.

Gang construes Plantinga’s account of rational belief as having to do with the fulfillment of moral and epistemic duties, such that agnostics and atheists must be condemned as moral and epistemically irresponsible people (12). However, Plantinga’s account of rational

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belief is essentially *not* an account of how to fulfill certain duties and obligations. Plantinga rejects this model of rational belief, which he calls “classical deontologism” (77). The question of whether Christians are rational or not, “can’t be the Lockean, deontological question whether Christian believers are or can be epistemically responsible, within their epistemic rights, flouting no epistemic duties, in believing as they do” (Plantinga 108). Instead, Plantinga claims that rationality, “has to do with *proper function*, the absence of dysfunction or pathology: you are rational if not subject to such pathology” (110). Rationality and deontological justification are two distinct and unrelated concepts in Plantinga’s model for rational belief. For Plantinga, one can fail to fulfill one’s epistemic duties, thus forming an unjustified belief, and still be rational in holding that belief if it was formed by properly functioning faculties, with the appropriate design plan, and in the appropriate environment (189). Conversely, one can hold beliefs that are simultaneously justified and irrational by fulfilling one’s epistemic duties with improperly functioning faculties. The question of whether a belief is justified and the question of whether a belief is rational, are two different questions. Warranted belief is rational belief because it is formed by properly functioning faculties, with the appropriate design plan, and in the appropriate environment, *not* because it is “justified” or believed in a responsible manner. Gang inadvertently conflates the deontological and proper-functionalist senses of rationality. For example, she sketches out a case of unbelief that is not irresponsible in the following manner: “Perhaps they [the unbeliever] are woefully dysfunctional instead. They are *not to be blamed for shirking their duty*, because they are not capable of fulfilling it because of how *deeply irrational* they are [emphasis added]” (Gang 18). Here, Gang is using the word “irrational” in the proper-functionalist sense. She describes the unbeliever as suffering from a cognitive dysfunction that makes them deeply irrational, and thus not blameworthy for failing to fulfill their epistemic duties. However, Gang continues to write that this proposed sketch of conscientious, rational unbelief, “does not leave any room for the *careful and epistemically responsible* unbeliever we were looking for [emphasis added]” (18). Here, Gang is describing the rational unbeliever in a deontological sense. She describes the unbeliever as being not blameworthy for shirking their duty (rational in the deontological sense) because of cognitive dysfunction making them deeply irrational (irrational in the proper-functionalist sense). The misunderstanding of the concept of rationality that Plantinga is deploying in his model leads Gang to mistakenly believe that to be irrational in the proper-functionalist sense is to be irrational in the deontological sense, thus precluding the possibility of responsible, conscientious unbelief.

Luckily for Gang, a more precise understanding of Plantinga's proper-functionalist model of rational belief does make room for the conscientious believer. For Plantinga, an unbeliever can be epistemically responsible and fulfill her epistemic duties. An unbeliever can assess the evidence, be sufficiently critical of all sides, and come to the sincere conclusion that God does not exist. In fact, an unbeliever can even make an attempt to believe in God, fulfill all her epistemic duties, be conscientious, and yet fail to believe in God while still being justified in her unbelief. Plantinga understands faith in God as a sometimes difficult and lengthy process for many reasons, and as ultimately a gift from God which we are not responsible for (249-252). However, the unbeliever would still be irrational and unwarranted in their unbelief in Plantinga's proper-functionalist sense. Unbelief is irrational and unwarranted because it is produced by a dysfunction in the *sensus divinitatis* due to being in sin or "original sin." Original sin is something that all human beings are born into and are not responsible for. We inherit original sin from Adam, not from any of our own culpable wrong-doings (Plantinga 207). An unbeliever can fail to believe in the Christian God because she suffers from original sin, not because of any particular culpable act of sin. The most important consequence of the noetic effects of original sin is the dysfunction of the *sensus divinitatis* causing one to not believe and place one's faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, a malfunctioning *sensus divinitatis* does not imply that a person is a morally or epistemically irresponsible person. Neither does it mean that an unbeliever is unable to have knowledge. The *sensus divinitatis* is but one cognitive faculty of many. Other faculties such as memory, perception, and introspection, are all able to function properly while the *sensus divinitatis* fails to. An unbeliever is also able to do many morally praiseworthy actions even if she does not believe in God. Understanding unbelief as being partly due to the noetic effects of original sin ought to encourage the sense of compassion and tolerance towards unbelievers from believers that Gang aspires towards. Rather than viewing unbelievers as harboring malicious intent for their unbelief, believers can tolerate, be charitable, and be forgiving towards unbelievers, "for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Works Cited

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