

WHERE THE CONFLICT REALLY LIES:
PLANTINGA'S REIDIAN DISCOURSE

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My aim in this paper is to show that crucial elements of Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies* are influenced by the philosophy of Thomas Reid. Plantinga's discussion of contemporary naturalist positions, as well as his discussion of the relation between science, religion and naturalism are original and important contributions. But central elements of his book are of a Reidian nature. Plantinga shares with Reid the overall objective of demonstrating the concordance between science and theism and the conflict between science and naturalism. Plantinga and Reid also share the same strategy on how to understand design and belief in an intelligent cause. Furthermore, they both espouse similar ways of defending the fact that our natural faculties are reliable, and they share similar views about the relation between psychology and morality (and psychology and religious belief).

1. *Introduction*

Among the historical philosophers whom Alvin Plantinga quotes or discusses in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, such as Aquinas, Augustine, and Hume, one figure particularly stands out, namely the philosopher Plantinga often calls "The Great Scottish Philosopher, Thomas Reid". It is not surprising that Plantinga often calls attention to Reid since, as I will try to show here, Plantinga is influenced by Reid's views at crucial points of *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. Therefore, my aim here is to bring to light the fact that Plantinga's work is deeply embedded in the historical context of the philosophy of Thomas Reid.

In this paper I will lay out four themes that are central to Plantinga's argument in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, and that are distinctively Reidian. The Reidian themes that are central to Plantinga's book are, first, the overall thesis that there is concord between theism and science but conflict between naturalism and science; second, Reidian design discourse; third, the view that human faculties are reliable; and fourth, the concord between psychology and moral (and religious) belief. These different points of convergence are central to the view that both Plantinga and Reid share, which is that a correct understanding of human nature and of reality (and of science) fails to imply the truth of metaphysical naturalism, and fits best in a theistic world view. However, my aim is not to evaluate the different Reidian themes, or the various arguments that both Reid and Plantinga develop in their own contexts, but to show that Plantinga's work is of a Reidian nature.

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2. *A Reidian Project*

The first Reidian aspect of Plantinga's *Where the Conflict Really Lies* is the two-tiered overall project of his book. Plantinga sets out to argue that there is great concord between science and theism, and that there is deep conflict between science and naturalism. The first aspect — that there is concord between science and theism — is also a central theme in Reid's works. The second — that there is conflict between science and naturalism — is also present in Reid's philosophy, although less clearly than in Plantinga's book.

According to Plantinga, science is

at bottom an attempt to learn important truths about ourselves and our world.

[It is] a disciplined and systematic effort to discover such truths, an effort with a substantial empirical involvement (Plantinga 2011, 267 and 268).

The aims of science, according to Plantinga, are completely in line with theism, since theism claims that human beings are created in God's image and are therefore created in such a way that they are able to know important truths about their world and about God. One important condition of the success of science, Plantinga points out, is the fact that our perceptions and observations yield mostly true beliefs. This condition is in line with theism since for theists our cognitive and intellectual faculties are created in a way that enables us to know something about reality. Humans thus possess science-forming capacities. Some theists and non-theists claim that science is sometimes at odds with theism. But Plantinga argues that the conflict in such cases is only superficial.¹ In fact, Plantinga points out, modern science originated and flourished in the bosom of Christian theism (Plantinga 2011, 266). The deep concord, and superficial conflict, between theism and science is thus one part of the overall aim Plantinga seeks to reach throughout his book.

The second, related aim concerns the relation between naturalism and science. The naturalist, according to Plantinga, holds that

All the wonders of the living world have come to be without the help of God or anything at all like God; all of this has happened just by the grace of a mindless natural process. Human beings and all the rest are the outcome of a merely mechanical process; they are not designed or planned for by God (or anyone else). More broadly, the idea is that mind, intelligence, foresight, planning, and design are all latecomers in the universe, themselves created by the unthinking process of natural selection. (Plantinga 2011, 32 - describing the views of Daniel Dennett)

Plantinga argues that contemporary science and various evolutionary theories do not imply the truth of naturalism (Plantinga 2011, Chapter 1). Furthermore, Plantinga argues that science is in fact in trouble if naturalism is true. The conflict between science and naturalism is deep, according to Plantinga. As we

¹ To reach this conclusion, Plantinga argues, for instance, that the theory of evolution does not imply lack of guidance or naturalism, that contemporary evolutionary psychology is not incompatible with theism, that historical Biblical criticism offers no defeater for Christian belief, etc.