Reforming Reformed Epistemology: 
A New Take on the Sensus Divinitatis

Abstract: Alvin Plantinga theorizes the existence of a sensus divinitatis—a special cognitive faulty or mechanism dedicated to the production and non-inferential justification of theistic belief. Following Chris Tucker, we offer an internalist-friendly model of the sensus divinitatis whereon it produces theistic seemings that non-inferentially justify theistic belief. We suggest that the sensus divinitatis produces these seemings by tacitly grasping epistemic support relations between the content of ordinary experiences and propositions about God. Our model boasts numerous advantages such as eliminating the need for a sui generis religious faculty, harmonizing the sensus divinitatis with prominent theories in the cognitive science of religion, and providing a superior explanation of how nature reveals God.

§1 Introduction

Let us stipulate that a sensus divinitatis is a (broadly speaking) cognitive faculty or mechanism by which one may gain non-inferential justification for theistic beliefs.\(^1\) As standardly conceived, this faculty will be triggered in certain characteristic kinds of cases—e.g. seeing a beautiful sunset, feeling guilty for some wrong, marveling at the extent of the universe or at the intricacy of the human eye. As a result, the agent comes to believe in God’s existence (or some suitable proposition epistemically supporting that God exists). Let us assume

\(^1\) For our purposes, theistic beliefs can be thought of as those whose content bears relevant relations to the proposition that God exists, such as (obvious) entailment.

\(^2\) One might think testimony counts as a form of non-inferential justification. We bracket that debate and any further discussion of testimonial justification for religious belief. Testimony does not count as a cognitive faculty in our sense. Also, it is no part of our thesis that the sensus divinitatis is the only source of non-inferential justification.
that humans have a sensus divinitatis (which, being ours, we shall call ‘the’ sensus divinitatis).³⁴

In the most prominent model of the sensus divinitatis, Alvin Plantinga’s Aquinas/Calvin model (see 2000, 168-186), the sensus divinitatis is a special religious faculty. It is “special” in that “if there is no such person as God, of course, then there is no such thing as a sensus divinitatis.”⁵ The fact that the sensus divinitatis is obviously absent if God doesn’t exist suggests that it’s not “standard equipment” in our rational package. In this paper, we argue for a quite different model, one related to a tradition far older than Calvin,⁶ on which the sensus divinitatis is nothing more than a sub-function of standard rational faculties that is capable of immediately justifying theistic belief. There are, we will argue, advantages to modeling the sensus divinitatis in this way. As a result, if one’s interest in the sensus divinitatis is primarily driven by its ability to explain non-inferentially justified theistic belief, then one should favor our model over the other available models.⁷

In §2 we give the necessary details on current models of the sensus divinitatis, establishing the context for our own model, which we develop in §3.

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³ We will assume that some, but not all, have non-inferential justification for theism.
⁴ The scope of the sensus divinitatis, absent special intervention by the Holy Spirit, is traditionally limited to matters of general revelation: e.g. God’s existence, his divine attributes, his role as creator, our guilt before him, etc. Non-inferential justification in matters of special revelation should be explained through other means.
⁵ Plantinga 2000, 187.
⁶ Chisholm 1966, 67, notes that Hugh of St. Victor’s doctrine of the occulis contemplationis could be captured in the form of one of his epistemic principles. The view considered below, phenomenal conservatism, is reasonably considered to be in the tradition in which Chisholm places himself, which extends back to the Stoics.
⁷ There may well be dimensions of evaluation along which Plantinga’s model is preferable. We are only considering ability to model non-inferential justified theistic belief.
§2 Current Models of the *Sensus Divinitatis*

Plantinga uses the *sensus divinitatis* to model non-inferentially warranted theistic belief—warrant being that which, in sufficient quantity, makes the difference between knowledge and mere true belief.\(^8\) Our discussion is focused on the different but related positive epistemic status *epistemic justification*. Thus, we will reframe Plantinga’s model in terms of justification. This is fair since Plantinga thinks warrant implies justification,\(^9\) and the model is arguably no less plausible for the swap.\(^10\) Furthermore, Plantinga’s model is often used to explain the justification of theistic belief, whether he intended it to serve this purpose or not. So it is worth assessing its merits in such a role. For convenience, we will speak as though Plantinga intended for his model to be used in this way (referring to it as “Plantinga’s model”).

According to Plantinga, the *sensus divinitatis* is “a kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism, … which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God.”\(^11\) He continues, “we can think of the *sensus divinitatis*, too, as an input-output device: it takes the circumstances mentioned above [experiences of flowers, sunsets, the starry skies above, the moral law within, etc.] as input and issues as output theistic beliefs.”\(^12\) On a proper functionalist theory of justification, these theistic beliefs are justified if they result from the proper

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\(^8\) Plantinga 2000.
\(^9\) Plantinga 1993, 192-3. See also Bergmann 2006 who repurposes Plantinga’s proper-functionalist theory of warrant into a theory of justification.
\(^10\) Plantinga seems to think that justification for theistic beliefs is far easier to get than warrant (2000, Ch. 3 and 177-9).
\(^12\) Plantinga 2000, 174-5.
functioning of a faculty reliably aimed at truth in circumstances in which it was designed to operate. So assuming God exists and created the faculty at work to reveal his existence, these theistic beliefs are justified.

Recently, Chris Tucker has suggested several amendments to Plantinga’s original model. These changes are a substantial step in the right direction and we incorporate them into our own model. We’ll focus on two of Tucker’s revisions: 1) the outputs of the *sensus divinitatis* are seemings about God (as opposed to beliefs about God); and 2) one’s theistic beliefs are formed on the basis of these seemings and non-inferentially justified by the evidence they provide.

The “seemings” Tucker refers to are the kinds of experiences one has when something *seems* true. Seemings are mental states with propositional content and a distinctive phenomenology (variously) called “forcefulness”, “assertiveness”, and “felt veridicality”. Tolhurst describes this phenomenology as, “the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are.” While this is the most prominent characterization of seemings, it is also contested. Our model is compatible with all major accounts of seemings, though it is not indifferent between them (the epistemic principle introduced momentarily is more plausible on the experiential characterization of seemings.

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13 Tucker 2011.
14 Evans 2010, 182, discusses the possibility of a model with these features.
15 The term “forcefulness” comes from Huemer 2001. Tucker 2010 prefers the term “assertiveness” to designate this phenomenology, but this usage can be misleading since beliefs are often talked about as “assertive mental states” but do not possess the distinctive phenomenology at issue. Tolhurst 1998 uses “felt veridicality”.
17 See Tucker 2013a for an overview of the debate. The above characterization falls into the “Experiential View” of seemings.
than any other). We will continue to speak of seemings as experiences whose content feels true.

Implementing Tucker’s second suggestion requires that we adopt a view on which seemings provide evidence. We will use a view called reasons commonsensism:\(^{18}\)

*Reasons Commonsensism (RC):* If it seems to S that p, then S thereby has a *pro tanto* reason for believing p.\(^ {19}\)

After implementing both of Tucker’s suggestions, we get the following picture: The *sensus divinitatis* inputs an experience and outputs a theistic seeming. This seeming gives the subject a pro tanto reason to believe the theistic content of that seeming. Potentially (if the seeming is strong enough and one’s total evidence does not include stronger reasons that oppose the content of the seeming), one can form a non-inferentially justified theistic belief on the basis of this seeming. Notice that the justification is indeed non-inferential, stemming immediately from the experiential evidence of the seeming.

There are serious advantages to Tucker’s framework. Plantinga’s proper functionalist model allows any experience to evidentially support a theistic belief as long as forming that belief on the basis of that experience results from reliable,

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\(^{18}\) There are more moderate epistemic principles that could also serve here. All we need is that the particular kinds of seemings produced by the *sensus divinitatis* provide *pro tanto* reasons to believe their content; not that *all* seemings provide such reasons.

\(^{19}\) This principle is taken from Dougherty 2011. Tucker 2011, 55, uses a fairly standard formulation of phenomenal conservatism. We take RC to be a version of phenomenal conservatism. There are reasons to prefer RC to the standard formulation of phenomenal conservatism, but describing them goes beyond the scope of this paper. For more on phenomenal conservatism begin with Huemer 2001, 2006, 2007, Tucker 2010, and the essays in Tucker 2013b. See also Moretti 2015 for an overview of recent work. Others defend views that are plausibly forms of phenomenal conservatism and certainly in the spirit of it. See Pryor 2000, Swinburne 2004, Lycan 1988, and Chisholm 1977.
truth-aimed, properly functioning faculties operating in the right sort of environment. (For convenience, “proper functioning” will be used as a catch-all term to signal that all of the proper functionalist conditions for warrant are met.) A consequence is that our theistic beliefs can be evidentially supported by experiences that seem completely unrelated to whether God exists. The experience of sneezing, for instance, can be strong evidence that God exists—even if the subject can’t appreciate any connection between sneezing and God’s existence—so long as it is proper function for theistic belief to arise as a result of sneezing. In contrast, on Tucker’s model our theistic beliefs are supported by theistic seemings, which are clearly evidentially relevant to those beliefs.20

§3 The Reductive Model

Like Tucker, we model the sensus divinitatis as a cognitive mechanism producing theistic seemings that, in accordance with RC, provide evidence for theistic belief, but we go beyond Tucker in at least two principal ways. First, we simplify our model by not positing any special religious faculty. Second, we fill out our model by developing an account of how these seemings are produced. We call our model “the reductive model” since it reduces the sensus divinitatis to a sub-function of an already existing cognitive faculty.

The reductive model represents the sensus divinitatis as functioning when we glimpse the logical or epistemological relations that exist between the content of the occasioning experience and the resulting seeming. The process looks like

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this. We take in an experience with propositional content; for instance, it seems that you have violated a moral law. Through the *sensus divinitatis* we intuitively grasp a necessary epistemic support relation between this triggering proposition and a proposition about God; for instance, you tacitly recognize that violating a moral law implies that there *is* a moral law, the existence of a moral law supports the existence of a moral lawmaker, the only plausible moral lawmaker is God, and, hence, that a violating the moral law makes you guilty before God. The *sensus divinitatis* then produces a seeming with this theistic propositional content—e.g., that you are guilty before God—the strength of which corresponds to both the probability of the triggering proposition and the strength of the perceived epistemic support relation existing between the two propositions.  

A couple of quick clarifications are in order. First, when we say that the *sensus divinitatis* “perceives” or “recognizes” epistemic support relations, we are not using these as success terms. That is to say the *sensus divinitatis* may misfire and “perceive” an epistemic support relation that is not actually there. This is analogous to the situation in which we think we see a rule of inference that applies in an attempted proof, but we are simply mistaken, and the rule is not a theorem.

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21 We expect the triggering experiences to possess robust propositional content such as: that one has violated the moral law, that the universe and everything in it didn’t have to exist, that this sunset is objectively beautiful, and so on. The input is not limited, for instance, to mere sensations or propositions about the immediate contents of one’s mind. If the inputs *were* so limited then one would be justifiably skeptical about whether there are any discernable support relations between these triggers and theistic contents. It is far more plausible that there be appreciable support relations between the content of the triggering experiences and propositions about God when the content of these triggering experiences extends beyond the confines of our minds.
Second, the recognition of these support relations—at least in the formation of the relevant theistic seemings—occurs on a sub-personal, unconscious level. A lot of complex cognitive processing unfolds at this level. Consider the intricate calculations the mind automatically makes in determining how to shoot a basketball (the angle and force of release, the direction of the toss, the position of the arms, legs, and body, etc.). Stunningly complex calculations are routinely performed in the blink of an eye and without the subject being consciously aware of them. In fact, if the subject is asked to consciously walk through such calculations she is often unable to do so. Our model posits that the relevant sorts of theistic seemings result when we unconsciously draw connections—perhaps very complex connections that we could not rehearse on a conscious level—between the content of our experiences and claims about God.22

Finally, we leave open the precise way in which we “tacitly grasp” or “perceive” epistemic support relations. One option is that we are directly acquainted with probabilistic support relations (or the fact that there are such relations), as Fumerton maintains is possible (1995, 198 and 202).23 All we are committed to, however, is that there is some way we can unconsciously register that one proposition supports another; and this claim is well-motivated.

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22 Some might call this unconscious processing an unconscious inference. This is consistent with, though not required by, our model. Does our model still explain the non-inferential justification of theistic belief if it involves an unconscious inference? We think so. These automatic, sub-personal calculations are not things that we, properly speaking, do. They are things that happen in us. The sense of “non-inferential justification” which foundationalists have in mind is of justification that does not result from any inference we make. Thus, the existence of an unconscious inference does not endanger our success in modeling non-inferentially justified theistic belief.

23 In cases where the sensus divinitatis mistakenly “perceives” that \( p \) supports \( q \), we may be acquainted with a fact “very similar” to the fact that \( p \) supports \( q \) (Fumerton 1995, 77).
Cognitive science, for example, is committed to there being cognitive mechanisms that process information on an unconscious level, and such processing seems to require some kind of sub-personal awareness of facts and their relations to one another.

Let us assume that there are objective epistemic support relations between facts about cosmic order, cosmic contingency, natural beauty, the moral order, and the like and the proposition that God exists, and that the *sensus divinitatis* successfully detects those support relations. Explicitly and correctly describing these relations constitutes the construction of a well-formed theistic argument (whether inductive or deductive). In fact, the majority of natural theology can be plausibly understood as attempts to unpack epistemic support relations that were first recognized on an intuitive level.\textsuperscript{24, 25} Unpacking these relations is difficult and most people do not operate at this level of reflection and abstraction. Thus it is fitting that God make people capable of grasping these connections more intuitively and tacitly. In this way, one might intuitively see *that* an experience confirms God’s existence without seeing *how* it does so.

\textsuperscript{24} Jerome Gellman writes, “If we look at the arguments for God’s existence, we can appreciate that each of them is an articulation in a discursive, argument form, of a basic mode of experience of God” (1992, 212).

\textsuperscript{25} This is similar to the “natural signs” approach taken recently by Evans 2010. On Evans’s view, God has designed our faculties to produce theistic beliefs upon encountering certain natural signs. Some of the most common natural signs are cosmic wonder, the beneficial natural order, experiences of our own moral accountability, and perceptions of human dignity. The cosmological, teleological, and moral arguments for the existence of God are attempts to articulate these signs. We find Evans’s view insightful but incomplete. Evans does not suggest that our theistic beliefs result from perceiving epistemic support relations between the content of these beliefs and the natural signs occasioning them. In fact, Evans leaves open the possibility of their not being any epistemic support relation between the natural sign and the content of the resulting belief (2010, 45). Another difference is that Evans does not identify, as we do, the production of theistic beliefs as just another instance of our standard rational faculties at work. So we see our model as making important advances.
less working it out). From the subject’s perspective, one merely takes in a wonder of nature and it seems that God exists.

On our view, the production of theistic seemings is modeled in the same way as (many) “regular” seemings without any characteristically theistic content.\(^{26}\) This suggests that the same faculty is at work in all of these instances, or at least that there is no need to posit a special faculty to explain theistic seemings. The production of theistic seemings is just one operation of an intuitive faculty with much broader scope. Thus, on our model the *sensus divinitatis* is just a sub-function of a standard rational faculty (or a combination of such faculties) that we call by “sensus divinitatis” when producing seemings with religious content.

Eliminating the need for a special religious faculty is a serious advantage. We account for the same data (i.e. non-inferentially justified theistic belief in matters of general revelation) with a simpler, slimmer ontology than the alternatives. Preferring the simpler theory is good practice in general, but it is especially so in this case. It seems to many—theists, atheists, and agnostics alike—that positing a special religious faculty is an *ad hoc* attempt to salvage one’s deeply held religious beliefs; or at least this is a common first impression.\(^{27}\)

\(^{26}\) We think our model provides a plausible explanation of how a wide variety of seemings are formed, but this needn’t be the way that all seemings are formed. Perhaps in some cases we can “just see” the truth of a fact and this direct “seeing” prompts a seeming in that proposition’s truth. Perhaps our minds are just contingently hard-wired to produce certain seemings when undergoing certain experiences. The existence of such cases is no threat to our model. We only contend that the formation of a wide variety of seemings—most importantly the theistic seemings produced by the *sensus divinitatis*—can be modeled as we suggest.

\(^{27}\) We are not claiming that the alternative models are *ad hoc*, just that they appear to be to a considerable number of people.
As a result, many are adverse to reformed epistemology from the get go. Our model, on the other hand, has no appearance of being *ad hoc* since theistic beliefs are justified in the same manner by the same faculties as many non-theistic beliefs.

Another major advantage is that our model better aligns with certain findings in the cognitive science of religion. There is a growing consensus that humans are naturally inclined to believe in God (or gods) and that the faculties responsible are “part of the general conceptual toolkit for negotiating life as a human and not some special religion-specific faculty or ‘god spot’ in the brain.”28 These findings jar with models on which the *sensus divinitatis* is a special religious faculty. In contrast, these are welcome findings for the reductive model on which the *sensus divinitatis* is nothing more than the sub-function of a standard rational faculty acting on religious content.

A final advantage is that the reductive model offers a more satisfying explanation of nature’s role in the natural revelation of God. Consider two prominent biblical passages:

> Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Romans 1:20, NRSV)

> The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (Psalm 19:1, NRSV)

A natural interpretation of these passages is that certain features of creation play a central explanatory role in bringing us to knowledge of their creator. Calvin

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28 Barrett and Church 2013, 312-13.
calls these features “unmistakable marks of his glory.” The reductive model fits naturally with this interpretation since theistic seemings are produced by tacitly grasping epistemic support relations between features of nature and a divine creator. Just as a famous painter leaves certain characteristic marks on the canvas that provide evidence of his or her authorship, so God has left marks on creation that provide evidence of his role in creation. In other words, we know God through nature because we see how nature testifies to (provides evidence for) its creator.

Consider an alternative view on which experiences of nature trigger the sensus divinitatis only because God specially programed it to output theistic seemings (or theistic beliefs, in Plantinga’s framework) upon receiving certain manually-selected experiences of nature as input. Whether these experiences of nature bear support relations to the theistic seemings they occasion is neither here nor there. Even if the trigger happens to confirm the content of the theistic seeming, it is not in virtue of this support relation that the seeming is produced. We need not be aware of the support relation on any level. Let us call this position “the indifferent view” since it claims that the sensus divinitatis is indifferent to epistemic support relations.

There are at least two problems with nature’s role in natural revelation on the indifferent view. First, the indifferent view seems to make the role of nature

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30 Though we will frame the discussion as if the sensus divinitatis produces theistic seemings, nothing in our criticisms is lost if we assume that the sensus divinitatis produces theistic beliefs instead. The upshot is that our discussion applies equally to Plantinga’s model.
in revealing God too tenuous. While any model must admit of some circumstances in which the sensus divinitatis is not triggered by experiences of nature (e.g. when the subject is brain damaged, drugged, distracted, deranged by sin, etc.), it seems reasonable to expect that in normal circumstances, and definitely in ideal circumstances, extended experience with nature will have some chance of revealing God to us. But this is precisely what the proponent of the indifferent view must deny. If God hand picks which experiences will trigger the sensus divinitatis, then it’s possible that he not select any experiences of nature. In such worlds, nature would never declare the glory of God—at least not to creatures like us. This is a big bullet to bite. The reductive model, in contrast, can maintain that natural revelation always remains available to creatures like us by virtue of an essential ability to pick up on necessary support relations between nature and God (in suitable circumstances), even if our particular situations prevent us from using this ability.

A second problem is that the indifferent view does not allow nature to reveal God in the right way. On the indifferent view, nature only reveals God because it was manually selected by God to perform this function. The revelation does not occur because nature possesses features that, apart from God’s special activity, are especially liable to reveal God to us. This is either because nature does not possess such features or because God chose not to use the revelatory-power of such features. Either option is problematic. First, consider the idea that nature, apart from God’s special activity, has no notable
power to reveal God. This is to say that an experience of the cosmos in all of its majesty is no more intrinsically liable to reveal God to us than an experience of sneezing or of eating broccoli or of getting a root canal. We think this is an implausible feature of natural revelation as such. If we say instead that nature *is*, apart from God’s special activity, especially liable to reveal God to us, then it is puzzling why God would not just use that power to reveal himself through nature. Why resort to special activity when such activity was not necessary? The most plausible position seems to be that nature *does* have a strong liability to reveal God to us (apart from any special divine activity) and that nature reveals God to us precisely *because* it has this special liability. The reductive model can accommodate this position since nature reveals God by virtue of bearing necessary support relations to its creator—ones that we don’t need special divine activity to pick up on. A model employing the indifferent view cannot.

As it stands, Plantinga and Tucker have not taken sides on this issue, though it seems (mostly through what they have *not* said) that they were implicitly assuming something like the indifferent view. Of course, in light of the concerns we raise here, Plantinga and Tucker are welcome to make additions to their models. They might insist that God always programs the *sensus divinitatis* to be triggered by experiences of nature, attempting to eliminate the concern that nature only contingently reveals God. But it’s not at all clear why God would *have* to do this. Even if such an addition could be justified, it doesn’t address the problem we raised about the *manner* in which nature reveals God. It
is preferable to think that nature testifies to God by virtue of its features’ intrinsic liability to reveal him, not because God manually selected those features to trigger the *sensus divinitatis*.

It’s difficult to see what this intrinsic liability to reveal God might consist in besides the bearing of necessary and appreciable support relations to God’s existence. So to bring their models in line, Plantinga and Tucker must hold that the *sensus divinitatis* produces theistic seemings (or beliefs) by picking up on epistemic support relations between God and nature. Since our standard rational faculties can perform these functions, there is no need to postulate a special religious faculty. If Plantinga and Tucker retain a special religious faculty, they are opting for a needlessly cumbersome ontology. If they reduce the *sensus divinitatis* to a sub-function of some standard rational faculty (or see it as arising out of a combination of such faculties), they become proponents of the reductive model.

§4 Conclusion

Building off the work of Tucker and Plantinga before him, we have presented a new model of the *sensus divinitatis*—one that is simpler and more fleshed out than previous models.\(^{31}\) We have also continued the important

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\(^{31}\) Now we have *not* said that models of the *sensus divinitatis* employing the indifferent view are *impossible* but only that they are *less satisfactory* than the reductive model. Nor have we said that *all* seemings more generally must bear an intelligible connection to the experiences that trigger them. If Reid is correct, for instance, then perception is one domain in which seemings are triggered by sensations that bear no necessary evidential connection to the content of those seemings; the principle governing their production is simply hard-wired into us. We don’t deny that this might be the case. We just think that there are (i) general advantages to avoiding
project (in which Tucker and others are engaged) of showing that between reformed epistemology and evidentialist epistemology there can be concord rather than conflict.32

instances of brute hard-wiring when it can be avoided, and (ii) specific advantages (presented above) to modeling the sensus divinitatis without appeal to brute hard-wiring. Our argument is that we should prefer the reductive model of the sensus divinitatis, not that the reductive model is the only possible one.

32 See Dougherty and Tweedt 2015 for a more detailed description of this project.
Bibliography


