Reforming Reformed Epistemology: A New Take on the *Sensus Divinitatis*

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Abstract: Alvin Plantinga theorizes the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*—a special cognitive faculty or mechanism dedicated to the production and non-inferential justification of theistic belief. Following Chris Tucker, we offer an evidentialist-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 probabilistic 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 account of natural revelation.

§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. 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, wondering at the immensity of the universe or at a fortuitous happening of events. As a result, the agent comes to believe in God’s existence.

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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.
(or some proposition obviously supporting his existence). Let us assume that humans have a *sensus divinitatis* (which, being ours, we shall call ‘the’ *sensus divinitatis*), and that some gain non-inferential justification for theism thereby.³

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*.”⁴ 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, that it is separate from and possessed in addition to the rational faculties that atheists admit, such as reason, perception, memory, and introspection. In this paper, we argue for a quite different model, one related to a tradition far older than Calvin,⁵ on which the *sensus divinitatis* emerges from our standard rational faculties. The operations of the *sensus divinitatis* are carried out, on a fundamental level, through reason, perception, and other faculties. There are, we will argue, formidable advantages to modeling the *sensus divinitatis* in this way—ones that make our model a superior explanation of non-inferentially justified theistic belief.

³ 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 role as creator, our guilt before him, etc. Non-inferential justification in matters of special revelation should be explained through other means.
⁴ Plantinga 2000, 187.
⁵ 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.
You might wonder whether our task is to reform reformed epistemology or to replace it. It’s tough to tell the difference without a detailed understanding of which features are more or less central to reformed epistemology—something we do not claim to possess. Michael Bergmann, a reformed epistemologist himself, characterizes it as “the view that belief in God can be rational even if it is not inferred from any other beliefs.” If this is its defining feature, then our model qualifies as an instance of reformed epistemology. Perhaps it is also important that the view be consonant with the historical reformed tradition. On this front, we think that our model of the sensus divinitatis may actually be closer to Calvin’s original idea than Plantinga’s. In short, we think that our view has as strong a claim to being an instance of reformed epistemology as any other. Regardless, our main objective is to explain non-inferential justification for theistic belief, and along this dimension of evaluation, we think our model not only matches but surpasses the other models on offer.

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. It should be noted that certain features of our model advance not just religious epistemology but epistemology generally conceived.

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6 Bergmann (2014), 613.
§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.\(^7\) 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,\(^8\) and the model is arguably no less plausible for the swap.\(^9\) 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.”\(^10\) 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

\(^7\) Plantinga 2000.
\(^8\) Plantinga 1993, 192-3. See also Bergmann 2006 who repurposes Plantinga’s proper-functionalist theory of warrant into a theory of justification.
\(^9\) Plantinga seems to think that justification for theistic beliefs is far easier to get than warrant (2000, Ch. 3 and 177-9).
\(^10\) Plantinga 2000, 172.
and issues as output theistic beliefs.”¹¹ Tucker (2011, 61) diagrams Plantinga’s model as follows.

Fig. 1 – Plantinga’s Model

![Diagram of Plantinga’s Model](image)

The sensations of a sunset, for instance, trigger the *sensus divinitatis*, which produces a theistic belief in turn. On a proper functionalist theory of justification, this theistic belief is justified if it results from the proper functioning of a faculty that is reliably aimed at truth and that is operating in the circumstances for which it was designed. So assuming God exists and created the faculty at work to reveal his existence, this theistic belief is justified.

Recently, Chris Tucker has made several amendments to Plantinga’s original model.¹² These changes are a substantial step in the right direction, and we incorporate them into our own model. We’ll focus on three of Tucker’s revisions.¹³ The first is that the outputs of the *sensus divinitatis* are experiences about God (as opposed to beliefs about God). The experiences Tucker has in

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¹² Tucker 2011.
¹³ Evans 2010, 182, discusses the possibility of a model with some of these same features.
mind are the kinds of mental states one has when something seems true. Accordingly, such mental states have come to be called “seemings”. Seemings have propositional content and a distinct phenomenal character (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. Addressing these debates would take us too far afield. We will simply assume the aforementioned characterization of seemings and voice our conviction that the best arguments bear this view out.

Tucker’s second amendment is that theistic beliefs are formed on the basis of theistic seemings. The basing relation at issue here is the one epistemologists are interested in; the one we speak about when we say that doxastically justified beliefs are based on justifiers. On Plantinga’s model, the theistic belief is immediately based on the sensations that triggered its formation. On Tucker’s model, these sensations continue to play an intermediate causal role in triggering the sensus divinitatis, but the belief is directly based on the theistic seeming, which inclines the subject to believe its content.

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14 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”.
16 See Tucker 2013a for an overview of the debate. The above characterization falls into the “Experiential View” of seemings.
The third amendment is that, on Tucker’s model, the theistic belief is non-inferentially justified by the seeming on which it is based. Implementing this suggestion requires that we adopt a view on which seemings provide evidence. We will use a view called reasons commonsensism:\(^\text{18}\)

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

After implementing all of these suggestions, we get the following picture (from Tucker 2011, 62).

**Fig. 2 – Tucker’s Model 1**

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

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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.
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. We will explain some of these advantages here, but an extended defense of these points will take us too far off track. Our goal is to revise and expand Tucker’s view, not rehash it. For a fuller comparison of Tucker and Plantinga’s models, we would point you to Tucker own work.20

The first advantage is that Tucker’s model avoids some implausible implications of the proper functionalist account of evidence.21 On proper functionalism, a mental state, m, is evidence for p for S if

1. S belief that p is based on m, and
2. S’s belief that p is formed by the proper functioning of S’s reliable, truth-aimed faculties operating in the environment for which they were designed.22

Applying this to the matter at hand, if God designs S’s sensus divinitatis to produce belief in his existence in the presence of m, and S believes that God exists on the basis of m, then m is evidence of God’s existence for S. Things become odd when you realize that, for all Plantinga has said, God could program any mental state to trigger the sensus divinitatis. For instance, if the sensus

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20 Tucker 2011.
*divinitatis* is designed to be triggered by sneezing or brushing one’s teeth or reading the phonebook (and this occurs), then the experience of sneezing or brushing one’s teeth or reading the phonebook becomes evidence that God exists. This is hard to swallow.

The root of the problem is that Plantinga’s model, with its proper functionalist account of evidence, allows God’s existence to be evidentially supported by an apparently arbitrary experience— one that seems completely unrelated to God’s existence. It’s difficult to precisely characterize an “apparently arbitrary experience”, but we can at least say that those mental states whose content is, from the subject’s perspective, probabilistically independent of God’s existence are arbitrary in the intended sense. Let ‘←Α→’ designate the relation of “apparent arbitrariness”. This relation exists between two mental states and is relative to a subject. \(m_1 ←Α→ m_2\) is true for S iff the content of \(m_1\) and the content of \(m_2\) are probabilistically independent from the S’s perspective. Let ‘←E→’ designate a relation between a mental state, m, and a belief. For S, \(m ←E→ \text{belief}(p)\) is true iff m provides evidence for \(p\) for S. We can diagram the concern with Plantinga’s model as follows.

Fig. 3 - Plantinga’s Model 2
To translate, the sneezing sensation provides evidence for God’s existence, even though the content of the sneezing sensation and the existence of God are probabilistically independent from the subject’s perspective. This is odd. How can a mental state provide evidence for God’s existence if these things apparently have nothing to do with one another?

Tucker’s model avoids this concern. On this framework, the sensation triggering the sensus divinitatis is not evidence for God’s existence. Rather, it is the theistic seeming resulting from the sensus divinitatis that provides evidence.

Fig. 4 – Tucker’s Model 2

Its seeming that God exists provides evidence that God exists. While this position has its own challenges, one charge it clearly avoids is that of arbitrariness. We’re not tempted to say that the content of this seeming is completely irrelevant or unrelated to God’s existence.

You might wonder whether Tucker’s model offers any real advantage on this point. For all Tucker has said, the theistic seemings output by the sensus
Sensus Divinitatis might be prompted by experiences whose content apparently bear no probabilistic connections to the content of those seemings. Plantinga may have to admit that a sneeze can trigger belief that God exists, but is it any better to say that a sneeze can trigger a seeming that God exists? Both admit a prominent role for apparently arbitrary experiences (see below).

Fig. 5 – Tucker’s Model 3

The key difference—and the source of Tucker’s advantage—is that, on Tucker’s model, the triggering experience is not supposed to be evidence for the theistic seeming or its content. Seemings, as experiences, aren’t even the sort of thing you can have evidence for, nor can seemings be justified or unjustified. They are the experiential foundations underlying our noetic structures. On Tucker’s model, the only evidential relations in play are those that exist between theistic seemings and theistic beliefs. In contrast, Plantinga must say that whatever triggers the formation of theistic beliefs in the properly functioning

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mind is evidence for those beliefs (or their content). Thus, we think Tucker’s model offers a real advantage here.

This is not to say that Tucker’s model rids itself of every problematic feature. In particular, we think it preferable (for reasons spelled out later) to remove the apparent arbitrariness between the experience that triggers the *sensus divinitatis* and the theistic seeming. We don’t contend that the *sensus divinitatis* must be modeled in a way that removes this arbitrariness, but only that there are numerous advantageous to doing so. More on this momentarily.

At present, we should mention some other advantages Tucker’s model claims over Plantinga’s. One is that it contains a psychologically superior account of belief formation. Experience confirms that we don’t just find ourselves with basic beliefs—beliefs not based on any other beliefs—rather we form a basic belief in something *because it seems true*. Even Plantinga seems ready to admit this. He states, “Could it really be that you should believe a proposition, even though it had none of this phenomenal attractiveness, this seeming-to-be-true...?”\(^{25}\) So it is more accurate to model the *sensus divinitatis* as producing theistic belief via seemings.

A final advantage of Tucker’s model is that it makes non-inferentially justified theistic belief consistent with evidentialism (at least as described in Conee and Feldman 2004) and internalism. It greatly broadens the appeal of the *sensus divinitatis*, and reformed epistemology more generally, to have an

\(^{25}\) Plantinga 1992, 193.
internalist-friendly model available. What’s especially nice is that the basic framework of Tucker’s model is externalist-friendly as well. While RC is implausible given externalism, there are externalist principles that can fill the role of RC in Tucker’s model. For instance, if it is proper function to form theistic beliefs on the basis of theistic seemings, then a proper functionalist could endorse a version of Tucker’s model. Thus, Tucker’s model (at least the basic framework) is something both internalists and externalists can get behind.

§3 The Reductive Model

Like Tucker, we model the sensus divinitatis as a cognitive mechanism producing theistic seemings that provide evidence for theistic belief (in accordance with some common sense principle like RC); but we go beyond Tucker in at least two principal ways. First, we simplify our model by avoiding any special religious faculty. Second, we fill out our model by giving an account of how these seemings are produced. This account of seeming formation is widely applicable and so constitutes an important addition to epistemology more generally. We call our model “the reductive model” since the sensus divinitatis reduces to a sub-function of more fundamental cognitive faculties.

We begin by highlighting some of the intellectual abilities afforded to us by our standard rational faculties. We will then argue that the operations of the sensus divinitatis can be carried out by these standard rational faculties.

26 See Bergmann (2013) for a proper functionalist who gives a prominent epistemic role to seemings.
Afterwards, we expand on the advantages that reducing the *sensus divinitatis* in this fashion affords us.

### 3.1 Standard Rational Abilities

We start with the mundane observation that humans can sometimes tell when one proposition (or set of propositions) supports another. For instance, we can see that 〈a reliable expert earnestly testifies that *p*〉, in concert with standard sorts of background information, makes it probable that *p*. Properly understood, this is a platitude. It almost feels silly to give examples. Nevertheless, consider elementary argument forms like *modus ponens* on which all propositional logic rests. We can see the validity of these elementary arguments—that the premises make maximally probable the conclusion. Even non-realist interpretations of logic (like psychologism) do not deny our ability to see that *modus ponens* is valid; they just question the realist’s position on what that validity involves. Arguably, all rational inference requires the ability to appreciate when one or more propositions support another. How can we rational infer one proposition from another if we can’t see that the one supports the other? But this particular argument is more controversial than its conclusion. Nearly everyone should agree that, in some cases, we can see that one proposition (or some group of propositions) supports another.

If we assume realism about logic (as we will, for convenience) then there are going to be probabilistic support relations that exist between at least some
propositions. These support relations specify the logical probability of a proposition given some other proposition (or set of propositions)—the logical probability being “that measure of inductive support that would be reached by a logically omniscient being (that is, one who knows what are all the relevant logical possibilities and knows what they entail, and has correct inductive criteria).”

We can then describe our ability to tell when one proposition supports another as the ability to “perceive” these probabilistic support relations. To be clear, this should be close to a truism for realists. If you find this controversial, you may be loading more into it than intended.

Since nearly everyone is committed to our having this ability, there is no special burden on us to explain how it works. Maybe we are directly acquainted with probabilistic support relations (or the fact that there are such relations), as Fumerton suggests but ultimately rejects. Perhaps we perceive support for a proposition by appreciating the superior coherence and explanatory virtue of a noetic system including that proposition in comparison to the available alternatives. There may be many other options. We don’t need to take a stance on this. The same can be said about some other pressing questions. How far does this human ability extend? How accurate is it? Why can some perceive

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27 Swinburne 2001, 64.
28 The phrase “when one proposition supports another” suggests that support relations can exist between just two propositions. But if some form of holism is correct, then no support relation will exist between just two propositions. A proposition only receives support from a (non-singleton) set of propositions. We don’t intend to rule this view out. Talk of “one proposition supporting another” is just for convenience. In such cases, just imagine us saying that one proposition plus our background information supports another.
30 See, e.g., Poston 2014.
support for a proposition where others can’t? Given the limited focus of our paper, it is not incumbent on us to answer these questions. Our only task is to explicate and defend the features of this ability that will figure into our model of the *sensus divinitatis*. Everything else, though important, can be fairly set aside.

Let us focus, then, on some relevant features of this ability. First, the ability to perceive probabilistic support relations between propositions is not infallible. That is, we might “perceive” a probabilistic support relation between propositions that isn’t actually there. This occurs, for instance, when we look at an argument and mistakenly take it to be valid. Hence, when we say that a subject “perceives” or “sees” support relations, we are not using these as success terms. It might be more analogous to say that the subject *apparently sees* a support relation, but for convenience, we will continue to use the analogy of “perceiving” or “seeing”.

The next important feature is that this ability can operate on a tacit level. That is, the exercise of this ability does not require a conscious reasoning process in which one proposition is explicitly thought to support another. Often, the support relations are unconsciously perceived. Take, for instance, a normal situation in which you enter your home, see your spouse’s keys on the table, and shout, “Honey, I’m home!” You shout because you are confident that your spouse is home, and you are confident of this because you took their keys on the table to be evidence of their presence. But no conscious reasoning took place. You never stopped to explicitly consider the evidential connection between the
keys and your spouse’s presence in the home. The best explanation seems to be that you tacitly perceived the connection.

The ability to perform unconscious operations of this sort shouldn’t surprise us. A lot of complex cognitive processing unfolds at this level. Consider Magnus Carlsen, a chess prodigy who took over the world No. 1 ranking when he was 19 and (as of 2016) has the highest peak rating ever. In an interview with 60 Minutes, Carlsen explains how he determines his next move.

Most of the time, I know what to do. I don’t have to figure it out. I don’t have the sit there [and] calculate for 45 minutes, an hour to know what the right move [is]. Usually I can just feel it immediately. ... I have to, you know, verify my opinion, see that I haven’t missed anything. But a lot of the time it’s fairly useless because I know what I’m going to do, and then I sit there for a long time and I do what I immediately wanted to do.\[31\]

Given Carlsen’s success, the intuitions guiding his play can’t be blind, gut reactions. They are the result of stunningly complex, sub-conscious calculations performed at a shockingly fast pace. Carlsen is obviously a unique specimen, but the mental difference between Carlsen and the normal human is one of degree, not kind. For a more mundane example, consider the complex calculations involved in simply carrying on a conversation. Supercomputers are only now approaching the point where they are capable of imitating normal human conversation. The fact that this task is effortless for most humans doesn’t show that conversing is simple but, rather, that we can perform enormously complicated calculations in the blink of an eye. We are just observing that

\[31\] Taken from the 60 Minutes Overtime feature for “The Mozart of Chess”, originally aired February 19, 2012.
sometimes our unconscious calculations include the perception of probabilistic support relations.

The ability to tacitly perceive support relations is further confirmed by cognitive science. It is generally accepted that humans possess a collection of cognitive tools, many of which can operate on an unconscious level. One of these tools, for example, is an agency detection device. This cognitive tool “looks for evidence of beings (such as people or animals) that not merely respond to their environment but also initiate action on the basis of their own internal states, such as beliefs and desires.” Devices of this sort “operate implicitly and automatically. The fluidity with which they solve problems renders them largely invisible to conscious reflection or evaluation.” To identity stimuli as evidence of agency, this device must have the ability to recognize which stimuli make more probable the presence of an agent—that is, it must perceive probabilistic connections between various stimuli and the existence of agents. Thus, this agency detection device (or any relevantly similar cognitive tool) confirms our ability to tacitly perceive probabilistic support relations.

Sometimes this tacit processing can be made explicit. Returning to the key example, if asked why you thought your spouse was home, you would presumably be able to recount the unconscious reasoning that led you to this conclusion. Other times, however, we are unable to explicitly draw out our

33 Barrett 2004, 4.
34 Barrett 2004, 5.
unconscious processing. Say you walk into your house and immediately sense that something is wrong. You begin to get nervous. It seems very strongly that someone else—someone who does not belong—has been in this room. What is likely going on is that you are unconsciously registering signs of invasion: say, a below-average room temperature or a slight breeze indicating an open door or window. Still, you may be at a complete loss to say why it seems that an intruder has been inside.

This example also illustrates our final point. When we tacitly perceive that a proposition is supported by other propositions that we already believe or that are already probable on our evidence, it commonly results in that proposition seeming true. Thus, it seems that there is an intruder in the house when you unconsciously perceive that the content of your perceptual experience supports this claim.

This leads to a natural account of (a subset of) seemings according to which they result from tacit graspings of probabilistic support relations. Obviously, 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. Our only contention is that sometimes a proposition seems true because we tacitly perceive that this proposition is supported by other propositions that are already probable for us.
To quickly review, we have seen reason to affirm that among standard human intellectual abilities is the power to perceive probabilistic support relations. This ability often operates on a tacit level, drawing complex connections between propositions that we may or may not be able to rehearse on a conscious level. When a likely proposition $p$ is tacitly seen to support a different proposition $q$, it will often seem to the subject that $q$ is true. In the following section, we will argue that this ability can fully account for the operations of the *sensus divinitatis*, eliminating the need for any special faculty.

3.2 Reducing the Sensus Divinitatis

On the reductive model, the *sensus divinitatis* functions by tacitly perceiving probabilistic support relations between the content of our experiences and propositions implying the existence of God. The latter propositions then seem true, conferring non-inferential justification on them in accordance with RC. In diagram, this looks similar to Tucker’s model.

Fig. 6 – The Reductive Model
But what this diagram doesn’t show are the inner workings of the sensus divinitatis. On both Tucker and Plantinga’s models, the sensus divinitatis is a black box. It takes in sensations and outputs seemings or beliefs with no deep explanation for why or how this occurs. The reductive model fills out this story.

In a little more detail, the story goes like 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 support relation between this triggering proposition and a proposition about God; for instance, you tacitly perceive (perhaps incorrectly) that violating a moral law implies that there is a moral law, that the existence of a moral law supports the existence of a moral lawmaker, that 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 support relation. Given RC, this theistic seeming provides the subject with a pro tanto reason to believe in the existence of God.

You’ll notice that there is no principled difference between this example and the ones given in the previous section. There, the content of your experience was tacitly recognized to support the existence of your wife or an intruder or an agent, making it seem to you that your wife was home or that someone broke into your house or that some agent was present. Here, the content of your
experiences is tacitly recognized to support the existence of God, making it seem that you are guilty before him. In this way, the reductive model of the *sensus divinitatis* requires nothing over and beyond the standard rational ability to tacitly perceive probabilistic support relations. Accordingly, the reductive model eliminates the need to posit any special intellectual faculty. Its operations can be carried out, on a more fundamental level, by those faculties already present in our standard rational package. We have a *sensus divinitatis* simply because we have a tendency to draw logical connections between the content of our experiences and propositions implying the existence of God. Thus, on our model, the *sensus divinitatis* is nothing other than a sub-function of our standard rational faculties (another important feature that isn’t represented in fig. 6).

A couple of clarifications should be made before we expand on the advantages of the reductive model. First, as you may recall from the previous section, when we say that the *sensus divinitatis* “perceives” a support relation, we are not using this as a success term. That is to say the *sensus divinitatis* may misfire and “perceive” a probabilistic support relation that is not actually there. For instance, perhaps the existence of a moral law doesn’t make probable the existence of a moral lawmaker. Even still, you might mistakenly “glimpse” a connection between the moral law and a moral lawmaker. And given RC, seemings that result from a misfire of this sort still provide *pro tanto* reasons to believe their content. Of course, this reason is defeasible and would be effectively countered if the subject has some reason to suspect that this seeming
resulted from faulty insight. In the case of an undetected error, the subject may lack some other positive epistemic status such as warrant, but their justification would remain intact.\(^ {35} \)

Second, we expect the triggering experiences to possess robust propositional content such as *that one has violated the moral law, that the universe didn’t have to exist, that this sunset is objectively beautiful*, and so on. The input is not limited to mere sensations or propositions about the immediate contents of one’s mind. To clarify, let’s return to the standard case of a subject who gazes at a beautiful sunset and forms the belief that God created it. As shown in the above diagrams, Tucker and Plantinga say that a “sunset sensation”—the phenomenal “image” of a sunset in the subject’s mind—triggers the *sensus divinitatis*. We model things differently. If we assume this is a normal case of perception, such sunset sensations will be accompanied by a second mental state—a perceptual seeming—in which it seems to the subject that the sunset is beautiful or that this sunset is especially colorful or perhaps just that the sunset looks thus and so. Tucker has argued at length for the difference between sensations and the perceptual seemings that follow them,\(^ {36} \) and Plantinga seems open to this as well.\(^ {37} \) On our model, the *sensus divinitatis* is triggered by this sunset *seeming* with its propositional content, not the sunset sensation.

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\(^ {35} \) We find the following general account of warrant attractive: *p* is warranted for *S* at *t* iff at *t*, *p* is justified for *S* by seemings produced by the proper functioning of *S*’s reliable, truth-aimed faculties operating in the environment for which they were designed.

\(^ {36} \) See Tucker 2010, 530-31; 2011, 56-58.

\(^ {37} \) See Plantinga 1993, 91-92, as quoted in Tucker 2011, 57.
This is an important difference. If the inputs of the *sensus divinitatis* were limited to sensations (or propositions about sensations), then one might be justifiably skeptical about whether subjects could perceive any probabilistic support relations between these triggers and theistic contents. Tucker, for instance, doubts that there is any plausible evidential connection between the sunset sensations and propositions about God.\(^ {38} \) Our model avoids such worries. 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.

Third, the recognition of these support relations—at least in the formation of the relevant theistic seemings—occurs on a sub-personal, unconscious level. There is no guarantee that the subject will be able to explicitly rehearse these connections.\(^ {39} \) For instance, someone might tacitly perceive a connection between her experience of the cosmos and the existence of a divine creator while being completely unable to specify precisely what the connection is supposed to be. If one manages to explicitly describe the apparent support relations, this constitutes the construction of a theistic argument (whether inductive or deductive). In fact, the majority of natural theology can be plausibly understood as attempts to unpack support relations that were first recognized on an intuitive

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38 Tucker 2011, 59-60.
39 This is common in non-religious situations, as noted in the previous section, so there’s no special pleading here.
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 on a tacit level. In this way, one might intuitively see that an experience confirms God’s existence without seeing how it does so (much less working it out). From the subject’s perspective, one merely takes in a wonder of nature and it seems that God exists.

Lastly, you might wonder whether the unconscious processing posited by our model qualifies as an unconscious inference. If it does, the worry becomes that our model no longer explains the non-inferential justification of theistic belief. Even if we grant that our model involves an unconscious inference, we don’t see this as a problem. 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. Indeed, walking the line in this way enables

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40 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).

41 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 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 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.
us to bring together insights from reformed epistemologists and natural theologians in new and compelling ways. More on this in the conclusion.

3.3 *The Advantages of Reduction*

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. This in itself may be enough to tip the scales in favor of reduction.

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.\(^{42}\) 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 by the same faculties and in the same manner as many non-theistic beliefs. In fact, on the reductive model, even atheists can acknowledge the existence of the *sensus divinitatis*.\(^{43}\)

Another major advantage is that our model better aligns with certain findings in the cognitive science of religion. There is a growing consensus that

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\(^{42}\) We are not claiming that the alternative models are *ad hoc*, just that they *appear* to be to a considerable number of people.

\(^{43}\) In fact, given Plantinga’s proper functionalist account of warrant, false theistic beliefs might even have some degree of warrant (assuming, for the moment, that any beliefs can have warrant given naturalistic evolution). Even if God didn’t exist, theistic beliefs would still be produced by a generally reliable, truth-aimed faculty (e.g. our agency detection device) operating in the environment for which it was designed. It errs only because it is operating at the limits of its capacity in seeking evidence for divine agency. Beliefs of this sort are prime candidates for somewhat-warranted false beliefs.
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.” 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 our standard rational faculties acting on religious content.

Consider what is arguably the most prominent theory in the cognitive science of religion: the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD). This hypothesis builds off of the agency detection device introduced in §3.1. HADD suggests that our agency detection device is especially sensitive—we are assiduously attuned to signs of agency (and perhaps even prone to “perceiving” stronger connections between stimuli and the existence of agents than actually exist). As a result, our agency detection devices will regularly register evidence of divine agents, thus helping to explain widespread belief in God (or gods).

HADD and our model go together like milk and cookies. In §3.1, we used the agency detection device as a prime example of our ability to tacitly grasp support relations. If this device is responsible for producing our theistic seemings, it just serves to confirm our model. The sensus divinitatis is nothing

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44 Barrett and Church 2013, 312-13.
45 Barrett 2004.
47 The HADD is, of course, just one among many contributing factors.
other than a sub-function of our agency detection device (or a combination of such standard cognitive tools).

In contrast, non-reductive models of the *sensus divinitatis* must say that there are *two* agency detection devices: the regular one and a second, divine agency detection device that is specially programmed to register the presence of supernatural agents and may operate in ways wholly different from the standard agency detection device. As mentioned before, this clashes with growing consensus in cognitive science that there is no special “divine detection” tool, and that belief in God results from the same sorts of processes that bring about belief in other non-divine agents. Thus, we think the reductive model coheres much better with findings in the cognitive science of religion than the alternative models.

Finally, scripture seems to teach that nature reveals God, but leaves unstated exactly how this revelation takes place. For example,

> 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)

There are more and less plausible ways of filling out the story. We argue that the reductive model offers a more satisfying explanation of nature’s role in natural revelation than the alternatives. We also think that reductive model’s picture of natural revelation has precedent the reformed tradition, cementing its status as a genuine instance of reformed epistemology.
Let’s start with Calvin’s view of natural revelation, which we’ll treat as representative of the reformed tradition. Plausibly, Calvin proposes that creation testifies to the existence and authorship of God by providing evidence to this effect. Thus in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes,

> There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and on earth that declare this wonderful wisdom; not only those more recondite matters for the closer observation of which astronomy, medicine, and all natural science are intended, but also those which thrust themselves upon the sight of even the most untutored and ignorant persons, so that they cannot open their eyes without being compelled to witness them.

A little later, Calvin marvels at the many “proofs of [God’s] powers” present in nature. Calvin is careful to emphasize, however, that such proofs are accessible to everyone, “even unlettered and stupid folk”.

We see that no long or toilsome proof is needed to elicit evidences that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty; since from the few we have sampled at random, whithersoever you turn, it is clear that they are so very manifest and obvious that they can easily be observed with the eyes and pointed out with the finger.

Calvin’s point may not be that natural revelation operates independently of reason, but only that natural revelation doesn’t require any special training or gifting in the use of reason. Indeed, some features of nature so obviously support God’s existence that Calvin says, “upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory.” Just as a sculptor leaves characteristic marks on the marble that provide evidence of her authorship

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48 Calvin (1960), 53.
49 Ibid, 60.
50 Ibid, 52.
52 Ibid, 52. Calvin’s examples of such unmistakable marks include the “innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host” (53) and “the human body” (54).
(differentiating it from a naturally occurring rock formation), so God has left marks on creation that provide evidence of his design.

The reductive model fits naturally with this plausible interpretation of Calvin. Nature reveals God by standing in logical support relations to his existence, but we usually grasp these support relations on a tacit, intuitive level. Accordingly, even those with lower intelligence or little education are able to receive the testimony of nature, for it doesn’t require them to explicitly articulate the ways in which nature speaks to the existence of God. We think this is a plausible account of natural revelation and one that is consonant with the reformed tradition.

Now compare this to an alternative view on which experiences of nature trigger the *sensus divinitatis* only because God specially programed it to output theistic seemings (or beliefs)\(^{53}\) upon inputting certain experiences of nature. In essence, this view says that God designed the *sensus divinitatis* to execute a series of input/output protocols. For instance,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INPUT:</th>
<th>OUTPUT:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunset seeming</td>
<td>Seeming that God loves us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starry sky seeming</td>
<td>Seeming that God created all this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sneezing sensation</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading the phonebook</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And so on. The chosen protocols were manually selected by God, and he might have chosen completely differently. On this view, nature reveals God’s existence

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\(^{53}\) 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.
just because God selected some experiences of nature to trigger theistic seemings. Whether these experiences of nature bear support relations to the theistic seemings they occasion is neither here nor there. An output might be completely unrelated to the input that triggers it (from the subject’s perspective). Even if the input happens to confirm the content of the output, it is not *in virtue* of this support relation that the output is produced and we needn’t be aware of it on any level. Let us call this position “the indifferent view” since it claims that the *sensus divinitatis* is indifferent to probabilistic support relations.

Our main problem with the indifferent view’s account of natural revelation is that it doesn’t allow nature to reveal God *in the right way*. On the indifferent view, nature only reveals God because it was manually selected 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 or tendency to reveal God to us. This would imply that nature doesn’t provide any evidential support for God’s existence—at least none that is readily appreciable by us. It also implies 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 yawning or of eating broccoli or of getting a root canal.
additionally means that nature might easily fail to reveal God to anyone. If God
doesn’t manually select experiences of the sky as triggers, then the firmament
doesn’t proclaim his handiwork. We think these are implausible features of
natural revelation as such. Nor do they have any precedent in the early
reformed tradition, as far as we can tell. In fact, they stand in direct tension with
our interpretation of Calvin’s view.

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 tendency to reveal himself through nature. Why resort to special
activity when such activity wasn’t needed? 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 support relations to its creator—ones
that we don’t need special divine assistance to pick up on. A model employing
the indifferent view doesn’t have this option.

As it stands, Plantinga and Tucker have not explicitly endorsed the
indifferent view, though it seems (mostly through what they have not said) that
they were implicitly assuming this position (or something like it). 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, but it’s not at all clear
why God would have to do this. Even still, it wouldn’t address all of the problems we raised. It is preferable to think that nature testifies to God by virtue of its intrinsic liability to reveal him, not because God manually selected experiences of nature to produce theistic seemings or beliefs.

The only way out is to give an account of this intrinsic liability and develop a corresponding model of the *sensus divinitatis*—one that uses this natural tendency in the production of theistic seemings (or beliefs). It is difficult to see, however, what nature’s intrinsic liability to reveal God might consist in besides the bearing of readily appreciable support relations to God’s existence. So to bring their models in line, Plantinga and Tucker will likely have hold that the *sensus divinitatis* produces theistic seemings (or beliefs) by picking up on 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 our standard rational faculties, they become proponents of the reductive model.

Now we have not said that alternative models of the *sensus divinitatis*—such as those 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 apparent probabilistic connection to the experiences that trigger them. If Reid is correct, for instance, then perception is one domain
in which seemings are sometimes triggered by sensations that bear no evidential connection to the content of those seemings;\textsuperscript{54} the principles governing their production are simply hard-wired into us as a part of our natural constitution.\textsuperscript{55} We don’t deny that this might be the case. We just think that there are (i) general advantages to avoiding instances of brute hard-wiring when it can be avoided, and (ii) specific advantages (presented above) to modeling the \textit{sensus divinitatis} without appeal to brute hard-wiring. Our argument is that we should \textit{prefer} the reductive model of the \textit{sensus divinitatis}, not that the reductive model is the only possible one.

\textbf{§4 Conclusion}

Building off the work of Tucker and Plantinga before him, we have presented a new model of the \textit{sensus divinitatis}—one that is simpler and more fleshed out than previous models. It is simpler in that it eliminates the need for a special religious faculty. It is more fleshed out in that we explain the internal operations of the \textit{sensus divinitatis}. Few epistemologists have tried to explain the inner workings of how seemings are produced, and no philosophers of religion have tried to connect those accounts of seeming-formation with the \textit{sensus}

\textsuperscript{54} To clarify, Reid thinks sensations trigger beliefs, not seemings, but it does no harm to ignore that fact here.

\textsuperscript{55} Even for Reid, this is only true in a limited number of instances. We quickly learn that certain sensations—say, certain visual patterns of greens and browns—present themselves in the presence of certain kinds of external objects—like trees. Reid’s point is just that we can’t draw such associations \textit{a priori}. But once this background information is built up through experience, even Reid should admit that sensations bear appreciable support relations to the content of perceptual seemings.
divinitatis.\textsuperscript{56} Because we develop a general account of seeming-formation—one that applies to far more than just the special case of theistic seemings—our work advances not only religious epistemology, but epistemology more generally.

We have also continued the important project (in which Tucker and others are engaged) of showing that reformed epistemology—or at least non-inferentially justified theistic belief—is harmonious with evidentialism and natural theology. With regard to the former, evidentialists that allow experiences to provide evidence have no essential conflict with reformed epistemologists and may very well populate their ranks. The real dispute is between reformed epistemologists and those who think that belief in God must be supported by arguments.\textsuperscript{57}

With regard to natural theology, many (including Plantinga) have noted that arguments might be helpful for theists, even if not necessary.\textsuperscript{58} They can, for instance, supplement one’s justification for believing that God exists. Our model suggests that there might be even deeper concord than this. On the reductive model, the sensus divinitatis—a key source of non-inferential justification in matters of general revelation—basically operates by tacitly engaging in natural theology. Of course, those subjects who tacitly perceive support for God in nature are often unable to rehearse these connections. For them, it simply seems that God exists and they base their belief on this experience. Those that do

\textsuperscript{56} Tucker’s model of the sensus divinitatis, for instance, makes no mention of the specific inner workings by which theistic seemings are produced.

\textsuperscript{57} See Dougherty and Tweedt 2015 for a more detailed description of the relationship between reformed epistemology and evidentialism.

\textsuperscript{58} For instance, Plantinga thinks there are two dozen (or so) good theistic arguments.
attempt to work out these connections become natural theologians in the truest sense of the term. This picture acknowledges the vital role of nature in providing evidence for God while simultaneously preserving the reformed insight that theistic belief needn’t be based on arguments to be justified. This is, we think, an especially compelling account of general revelation and another way in which adopting the reductive model significantly broadens the appeal of reformed epistemology.59

59 Many thanks to XXXX and the audiences at XXXX for their helpful comments which led to a much improved paper.
Bibliography


