

The Reliability Relay

C. S. Lewis, Cognitive Trust, and the Christian Retreat to Empirical Testing

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Central claim

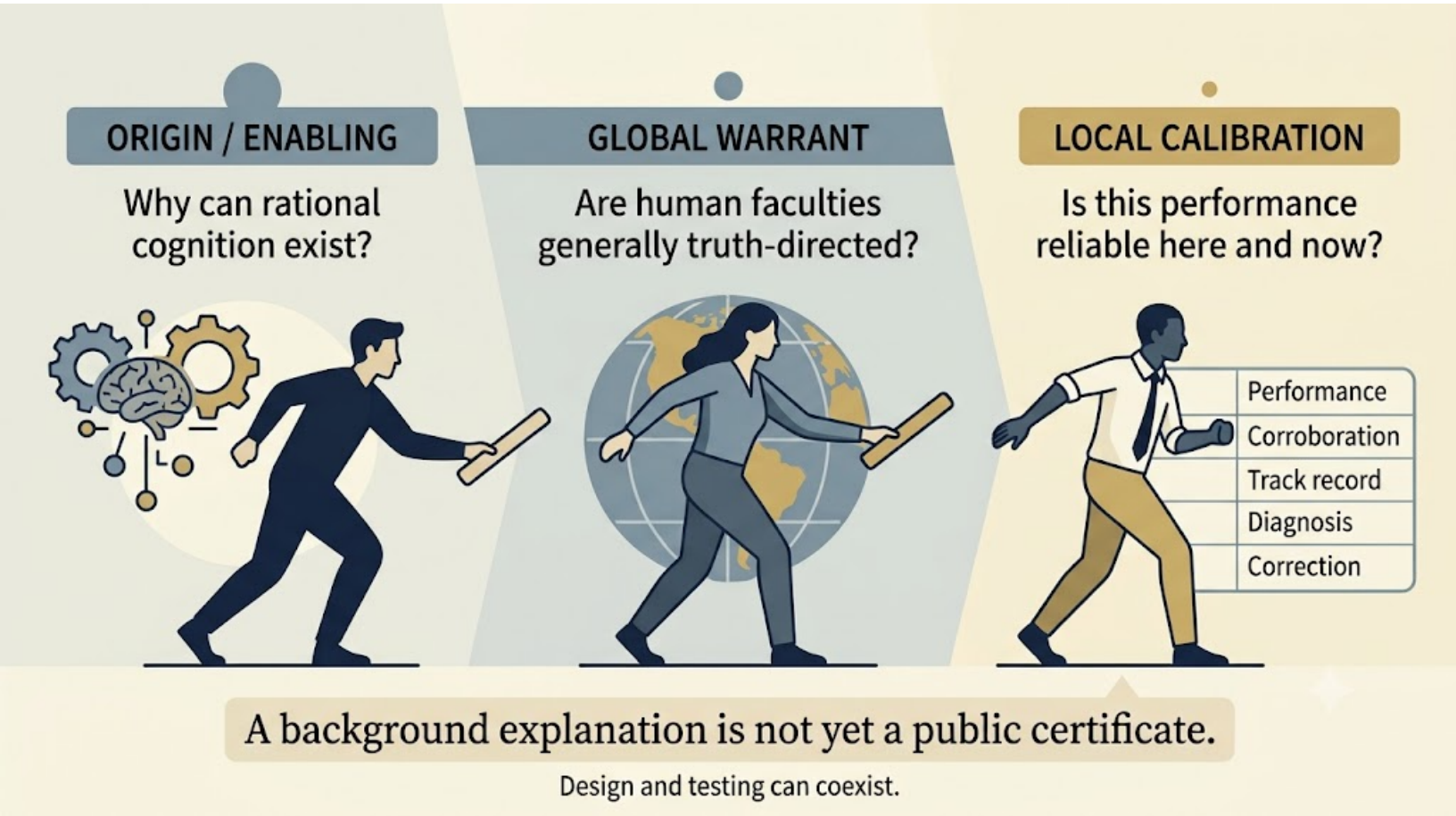
A Christian origin account may explain why rational cognition exists, and externalism may allow knowledge without prior proof of one’s faculties. Neither point by itself shows that this thinker, faculty, or inference is reliable here and now. Christian parents, hospitals, churches, ministries, and Bible translators already settle such questions through performance tests, independent checks, records, expert diagnosis, and correction. Unless theology predicts an independently supported difference, those shared tests—not the origin premise alone—supply the public discrimination.

Preview:

Apologetic starting point	Question it may answer	Christian practice	Operational result
A rational creator makes trustworthy cognition intelligible.	Why rational capacities exist, or how first-order warrant is possible.	Christians test persons, judgments, records, translations, and cognitive health.	Those tests supply local discrimination unless the origin premise predicts an added difference.

The criticism is not that Christian design and empirical testing are incompatible. It is that compatibility does not make design the evidence that performs the testing.

Visual preview:



The relay passes through metaphysical enabling, general warrant, and local calibration. Performance, corroboration, track record, diagnosis, and correction bear on the final stage; the graphic does not claim that design and testing conflict.

Abstract

Christian arguments from reason often press a legitimate meta-level question: can a wholly nonrational causal history preserve rational inference, truth-directed function, and warranted trust? A common apologetic relay then moves from that challenge to a positive assurance that Christian theism secures cognition. This paper argues that the relay changes questions without supplying the required bridge. It distinguishes (1) a *metaphysical-enabling* question about what makes rational cognition possible, (2) a *global-entitlement* question about whether human faculties are generally reliable enough for knowledge, and (3) a *local-calibration* question about whether a particular faculty, person, process, or judgment is reliable under specified conditions. Lewis's argument from reason primarily addresses the first question. Plantinga's proper-function epistemology and evolutionary argument against naturalism concern the first two. Neither view, merely by being true, answers the third.

The paper grants two important objections. A Christian design account is compatible with testing fallible minds, and an externalist account of warrant need not require reflective proof of reliability before first-order knowledge. The target is instead *distinctive public assurance*: a comparative claim, offered to an interlocutor, that the Christian premise improves the warranted assessment of actual cognition. Christian practice itself supplies the paper's central evidence. Christian parents use developmental assessments; Christian health systems use cognitive testing and caregiver interviews; churches authenticate records and references; Christian ministries require independent financial review; and Bible translators use consistency checks, source comparison, consultant review, and correction. In each setting, confidence changes with the test result while the origin premise remains fixed. These methods are not worldview-neutral in every philosophical respect, but their force does not depend on first accepting the disputed Christian premise. They therefore bear the local discriminatory load.

The conclusion is conditional and limited. The analysis neither disproves theism nor vindicates every form of naturalism, and calibration cannot noncircularly certify reason as a whole. It shows instead what a genuine comparative advantage would require: an independently supported bridge from the theological premise to identifiable reliability differences, new predictions, or a dependable channel of correction. Without such a bridge, the apologetic relay ends in a background explanation, not a public assurance of cognitive trust.

Keywords: C. S. Lewis; Alvin Plantinga; cognitive reliability; argument from reason; proper function; calibration; religious epistemology

1. Three Questions Hidden Inside “Trust Reason”

The statement “Christian theism secures reason” can perform several jobs. It may mean that rational inference would be unintelligible in a reality exhausted by nonrational causes. It may mean that human faculties have a truth-directed function. It may mean that people are generally entitled to rely on perception, memory, and inference. Or it may mean that a particular thinker should be trusted in a particular case. These are not interchangeable claims.

Christian practice already displays an important practical contrast. Christians do not assess a child's development, a witness's memory, an accountant's calculation, or an aging parent's judgment by citing divine manufacture. They examine performance, compare independent routes, seek expert assessment, and revise confidence. This practice does not rebut a theistic account of cognitive origin. Design and testing are compatible: a fallible designed instrument may require calibration, and a Christian theology may expect cognitive limitation, damage, bias, or decline. The precise lesson concerns which premise does the public epistemic work.

For that purpose, three questions must remain separate.

Table 1: Three levels of cognitive trust. A position may answer one level without settling the next.

Question	What it asks	Possible theistic answer	What remains to be shown
Metaphysical enabling	What makes rational inference, intentional content, or truth-directed cognition possible?	Rational capacities belong to a purposive order grounded in a Christian creator.	Why this account is better supported than its rivals and how it bears on actual reliability.
Global entitlement	Are human faculties generally reliable enough for ordinary knowledge?	Properly functioning faculties follow a truth-aimed design plan in a suitable environment.	Whether those conditions obtain, and what defeats or confirms confidence in them.
Local calibration	Is this faculty, person, process, or judgment reliable in this domain and condition?	Design permits fallibility and therefore also permits testing and correction.	Which observations discriminate normal function from error, impairment, bias, or domain failure.

Call an answer *public* when its evidential force can be inspected by an interlocutor without requiring prior acceptance of the worldview under dispute. Public does not mean infallible, culture-free, or stripped of all background commitments. It means that the proposed indicator can be checked, criticized, and compared by people who disagree about its ultimate metaphysics. Call assurance *distinctive* when the Christian premise adds epistemic traction beyond what those parties already obtain from shared evidence.

The paper's central claim can now be stated without overreach. A Christian origin account might answer the enabling question. Plantinga's externalism might explain how first-order warrant can exist without reflective access to its conditions. Yet if the actual assessment of reliability is fixed by the same calibration evidence on both sides, then the Christian premise has not by itself supplied distinctive public assurance. To supply it, an advocate must identify a bridge: a reason the theological premise changes a prediction, distinguishes reliable from unreliable cases, or makes a dependable corrective channel available.

The no-substitution rule

An answer to *Why can rational cognition exist?* must not be substituted for an answer to *Why should this cognitive performance be trusted?* The first may constrain a metaphysics of mind. The second requires evidence that discriminates success from failure in the case at hand.

2. What the Lewisian Challenge Does—and Does Not—Establish

Lewis's argument from reason begins from a serious feature of thought. An inference is not rational merely because one mental event causes another. A conclusion is rationally held because its grounds support it. In the revised edition of *Miracles*, Lewis distinguishes the causal relation by which one event produces another from the logical relation by which a conclusion follows from grounds (Lewis, 1947/1960). A worldview that treats rational transitions as exhausted by nonrational causes therefore owes an account of how the normative relation of ground and consequent remains effective rather than epiphenomenal.

Reppert develops this family of arguments through intentionality, truth, mental causation, logical laws, and the unity of consciousness (Reppert, 2003). Those arguments differ in strength and target, but they share a defensible demand: a naturalistic theory should not simply redescribe reasoning at a level that leaves out the truth-sensitive relations that make it reasoning. A crude eliminativism or a theory on which reasons never affect what anyone concludes faces genuine pressure.

That pressure, however, is not yet a positive certificate issued by Christianity. At least three steps would be needed to reach one.

1. The argument must show that the relevant naturalistic accounts fail, not merely that a simplified causal caricature fails.

2. It must show that a Christian account succeeds where the alternatives fail, rather than only showing that some nonnatural or purposive feature is needed.
3. It must connect that successful background account to a warranted estimate of the reliability of actual human cognition.

The third step is the concern here. Suppose, for argument's sake, that the Lewisian challenge succeeds and that rational inference ultimately requires a rational source. That result would make rationality metaphysically intelligible on the proposed view. It would not tell us whether a witness is confabulating, a thinker is reasoning under a motivated distortion, a memory has decayed, a visual experience is illusory, or a doctrinal intuition tracks truth rather than upbringing. Those are not objections to the argument from reason. They are reminders of its level.

This limitation matters because apologetic presentations can relay a negative challenge into a stronger positive claim. The naturalist is asked how reason can be trusted; the Christian then speaks as if invoking a rational creator completes the trust relation. But a successful undercutting argument against one rival does not automatically confer local reliability on the advocate. Even if every viable worldview must recognize rational normativity, each human participant remains fallible, socially situated, and vulnerable to domain-specific error.

The title's word *relay* marks this transfer. Lewis raises a question about the relation between causes and grounds. Later apologetic use may pass the baton to an origin claim, then to a general reliability claim, and finally to confidence in a concrete judgment. Each handoff needs an argument. Treating the finish as contained in the starting point hides the burden rather than meeting it.

3. Plantinga: Proper Function, Defeat, and Access

Plantinga supplies a more sophisticated framework than the simple slogan that divine creation guarantees reliable minds. On his proper-function account, a belief has warrant when the relevant cognitive faculties function properly, in an environment suitable for those faculties, according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth, with a sufficiently high objective probability of a true belief (Plantinga, 1993). The conditions themselves acknowledge malfunction, environmental mismatch, and imperfect performance. Proper function is therefore not equivalent to origin alone.

This framework also exemplifies epistemic externalism. Very roughly, externalism allows a belief to possess warrant because of a truth-conducive relation that need not be reflectively available to the believer. A child can know that a ball is red without first possessing a theory of vision. A person can remember breakfast without proving memory reliable. Goldman likewise developed reliabilist approaches that connect justification to truth-conducive belief-forming processes rather than requiring a prior argument in the subject's possession (Goldman, 1979, 1986).

The externalist point defeats an easy objection to theism: a Christian need not first identify and prove proper function before possessing any warranted belief. But it does not defeat the argument of this paper, because first-order warrant and second-order public assurance are different achievements. A process may in fact be reliable while the subject lacks a good method for demonstrating that fact to a disputant. Conversely, a person may feel assured while the process is unreliable. An apologetic claim offered as a comparative reason to trust Christian cognition is second-order and interpersonal. Its hearer may properly ask which observable difference the proposed design account makes.

Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism also needs exact dialectical placement. In its familiar form, the argument claims that a person who accepts both naturalism and evolution faces a low or inscrutable probability that human cognitive faculties are reliable, and thus acquires a defeater for that conjunction and, recursively, for beliefs produced by those faculties (Plantinga, 1993, 2000). The argument is controversial; Fitelson and Sober challenge its probability assignments and inferential structure (Fitelson & Sober, 1998). The present paper need not settle that controversy. Even a successful evolutionary argument against naturalism would

be a defeater argument against a conjunction. It would not by itself establish that Christianity is true, that a truth-aimed design plan obtains, or that the advocate's current process is functioning properly.

Plantinga's later Aquinas/Calvin model illustrates a way Christian belief could possess warrant if the relevant theological story is true and the proposed belief-producing faculty functions as intended (Plantinga, 2000). The conditional is philosophically important. Yet it also reveals why the apologetic use cannot stop at the model. If two people disagree about whether a religious seeming expresses proper function, social formation, wishful thinking, pathology, or some mixture, repeating the design condition does not adjudicate the case. The parties need grounds for classifying the process and its environment.

There is a familiar danger in trying to extract that classification from the process's own outputs. Work on *easy knowledge* asks whether a source can generate warrant for its own reliability merely through a series of apparently successful deliverances (Cohen, 2002). The problem is not unique to religion. Vision, memory, induction, testimony, and scientific reasoning all face some form of dependence on the very capacities they evaluate. It nevertheless blocks a shortcut: one cannot simply treat a belief produced by a disputed faculty as an independent certificate that the faculty operates according to a truth-aimed design plan.

First-order warrant versus public assurance

Externalism can explain how a person knows without first proving the reliability of her cognition. It does not follow that she has a public argument establishing that reliability, still less that her worldview gives her a comparative advantage in identifying reliable cases.

4. Christians Already Test Cognitive Reliability

Calibration is the disciplined adjustment of confidence in light of how a process performs under relevant conditions. It includes controlled testing, but it is broader than laboratory measurement. Independent recomputation, corroborating records, adversarial criticism, longitudinal comparison, expert diagnosis, prediction, and error correction are all calibration practices. Their point is not to escape cognition. It is to use partially independent routes and accumulated feedback to locate specific failure.

The empirical premise should be stated plainly: Christians already use such tests to decide whether particular acts of cognition are dependable. This occurs not only when Christians participate in ordinary schools, professions, or medicine, but inside explicitly Christian institutions and activities. The Church of England's safer-recruitment rules require pre-appointment information to be confirmed in writing, scrutinized for authenticity, documented, and followed up when discrepancies appear; the process normally includes at least two references and, where appropriate, a criminal-record check (Church of England, 2026). The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability requires member organizations to prepare accurate statements, engage an independent certified public accountant, review the results, and attend to weaknesses in internal control (Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, n.d.).

The same pattern reaches cognition more directly. AdventHealth Medical Group, an explicitly Christian health system, assesses possible cognitive impairment through cognitive testing, written or verbal screens, patient and caregiver interviews, and specialist referral (AdventHealth Medical Group, n.d.). United Bible Societies describes Scripture-translation work that validates texts, checks consistency, compares multiple texts, tracks revisions, and subjects drafts to collaborative consultant checking (United Bible Societies, 2025). In none of these cases is Christian identity treated as a substitute for checking. A Christian institution lets records, performance, independent expertise, and correction change what it trusts.

The same logic appears in ordinary Christian life. A Christian parent accepts that repeated tasks and specialist assessment may overturn an impression about a child's development. A Christian student checks an answer by recomputation. A pastor compares a recollection with minutes or correspondence. A church committee seeks independent testimony before deciding whether a report is credible. A theologian checks an interpretation against

source languages, textual evidence, rival readings, and criticism. These are not gotchas or proofs that Christianity is false. They are examples of Christians distinguishing functioning from failure by tests whose outcomes can rationally change confidence.

Table 2: Christian calibration in practice. The examples establish existence and variety, not universal compliance. In every row, test results can revise confidence while Christian identity remains fixed.

Christian setting	Judgment being checked	Tests actually used	What can revise confidence
Parents and educators	Is a child's cognitive capacity developing within an expected range?	Repeated tasks, age-sensitive comparison, observation across settings, and specialist assessment.	A stable performance pattern, discrepancy across settings, or clinical finding.
Ministry finance	Are calculations and financial reports accurate?	Reconciliation, documentary trails, internal controls, board review, and independent accounting.	A reproduced total, audit finding, missing record, or control failure.
Church safeguarding	Is testimony about a candidate's identity, history, and suitability dependable?	Authenticated documents, multiple references, record checks, discrepancy follow-up, and continuing oversight.	Corroboration, inconsistency, omitted history, or later observed conduct.
Christian clinical care	Is impairment, medication, depression, or decline affecting cognition?	Cognitive tasks, written and verbal screens, patient and caregiver interviews, baselines, and specialist review.	Test performance, longitudinal change, differential diagnosis, or response to care.
Bible translation	Is a translation judgment accurate and consistent?	Source-text comparison, automated checks, parallel-text comparison, team review, consultant checking, and revision history.	A mismatch, inconsistency, stronger rendering, or correction accepted after review.
Doctrine and apologetics	Does an intuition or inference survive serious scrutiny?	Argument analysis, source checking, rival explanations, cross-tradition disagreement, and correction.	A failed inference, defeated premise, contrary evidence, or stronger rival account.

The practice-concession

Christians do not merely say that testing is compatible with designed minds. Across family, clinical, ecclesial, financial, and interpretive settings, they let test results change which cognitive performance they trust. That practice identifies the tests as the local discriminator, even when theology supplies the ultimate interpretation of why testing is possible.

The examples prove neither that every Christian always tests well nor that these practices are uniquely Christian. They establish the narrower fact the argument needs: Christian belief and calibration coexist across diverse settings, and Christians themselves treat calibration outcomes as reasons to raise or lower confidence. The cases reveal four features of useful calibration.

First, it is *targeted*. A memory test need not validate reason as a whole. It evaluates a class of performances under stated conditions. This modesty is an advantage because cognitive reliability varies by domain, task, environment, fatigue, information, and training.

Second, it is *contrastive*. A useful procedure changes confidence differently across possible states. If the same result would be reported whether cognition were healthy or impaired, the result provides little discrimination. Theological origin language becomes operationally relevant only when it similarly distinguishes possibilities.

Third, calibration is *diachronic*: it uses performance over time. A single correct answer may be luck; a stable track record under varied tests is stronger. A single error does not establish global unreliability; a repeatable pattern can identify a bounded weakness.

Fourth, calibration is *socially corrigible*. Disagreement does not mechanically require splitting the difference, and not every dissenter is an epistemic peer. Still, the considered disagreement of comparably informed people can supply higher-order evidence that one's reasoning may have gone wrong (Christensen, 2007). Records, critics, instruments, and institutions can preserve information that an individual's introspection misses.

None of this makes calibration worldview-free. A procedure presupposes memory, perception, inference, and standards of relevance. It may embody contested assumptions about normality or competence. Its findings can be misused. The claim is comparative and local: the procedure can improve an estimate of a specified capacity because outcomes differ depending on how that capacity performs. Invoking a Christian origin without identifying an additional discriminating consequence does not improve the estimate in that way.

5. The Public-Assurance Argument

The central inference can be presented without claiming a contradiction in Christian practice.

1. A premise provides *distinctive public assurance* of cognitive reliability only if it gives interlocutors a warranted way to discriminate reliable from unreliable cognition beyond, or through an independently supported improvement to, their shared calibration evidence.
2. A Christian-origin premise by itself does not identify which faculty, person, process, domain, or occasion is reliable; design is compatible with normal function, immaturity, error, bias, damage, environmental mismatch, and decline.
3. In documented Christian settings—including health care, church safeguarding, ministry finance, and Bible translation—people use performance, corroboration, diagnosis, records, independent checking, and correction to discriminate those possibilities.
4. Therefore, where no further bridge is supplied, the Christian-origin premise does not by itself provide distinctive public assurance of actual cognitive reliability.

The conclusion is about *by itself*. It does not say that the origin premise is false, explanatorily idle in every respect, or incompatible with the evidence. It says that compatibility and explanation are not yet calibration. A manufacturer may explain why an instrument has the capacity to measure. The manufacturer's excellence may provide reasonable initial confidence if independently established and if quality control connects that reputation to the instrument class. Yet after impact, corrosion, or unusual conditions, present accuracy still depends on relevant checks. The analogy helps only if all of its bridges are carried over rather than selectively omitted.

The premise also leaves room for a genuine theistic contribution. Suppose, for example, that a theological account entailed a clear and independently motivated distribution of cognitive strengths and vulnerabilities, predicted recoverable differences that rival accounts did not, or supplied a dependable channel by which errors could be identified. Evidence confirming those consequences could enter the calibration ledger. The paper does not rule that out. It asks advocates to name the consequence and show the connection.

Without such a bridge, the origin premise can still function as a background explanation: *if* rational beings exist within a Christianly created order, their truth-directed capacities have an intended place. That may matter metaphysically and existentially. It does not change whether the witness's recollection conflicts with the record or whether the argument commits an invalid inference. The public assurance in those cases comes from the discriminating evidence.

This is why Christian recourse to testing is not a defeat for theism. It is evidence about division of labor. Christian institutions themselves hold the worldview commitment fixed while allowing cognitive tests, audits, records, reference checks, textual comparison, and correction to change the local verdict. Theology may propose an ultimate explanation; calibration supplies the case-sensitive warrant. Trouble begins when the former is advertised as securing what only the latter identifies.

6. Five Objections and Replies

6.1 “Design and testing are perfectly compatible”

Agreed. A designer may create limited agents who learn, depend on others, suffer damage, and require calibration. Christian doctrines of creaturely finitude and human disorder may positively predict fallibility. No contradiction follows merely from combining a Christian design account with the use of calibration.

But the compatibility reply concedes the paper’s narrower point unless it adds more. If testing is what separates trustworthy from untrustworthy performance, then testing supplies the local discriminatory evidence. Design may explain why the capacity exists or why calibration is possible. It becomes a distinctive public assurance only when the design hypothesis changes what should be observed or how the result should be interpreted, and when the bridge is supported without merely assuming the disputed conclusion.

6.2 “Externalist warrant requires no public certificate”

Agreed again. A reliabilist or proper-function theorist can say that first-order knowledge depends on the process actually having the right features, not on the subject’s ability to prove them. The objection would refute a demand that every knower antecedently certify cognition.

The present argument makes no such demand. It concerns an apologist who offers Christianity as a reason that an interlocutor should trust cognition, or should regard Christian trust as better grounded. That is a reflective, comparative claim. The advocate cannot both advertise the condition as a public advantage and retreat, when asked for discrimination, to the claim that no one need know whether the condition obtains. Externalism may secure first-order warrant; it does not automatically secure the sales pitch.

6.3 “Calibration is epistemically circular”

At the broadest level, yes. People use perception, memory, and inference when they assess perception, memory, and inference. Alston’s analysis of epistemic circularity shows why a wholly noncircular validation of our basic practices is difficult to obtain (Alston, 1986). Calibration does not create an Archimedean point outside cognition.

Its value is local and comparative. Two people can check a calculation by different routes; a record can correct memory; a longitudinal baseline can reveal decline; an instrument can extend perception; and a critic can expose an inference the original thinker missed. These checks remain fallible and mutually dependent, but they can reduce identifiable error. The paper therefore does not claim that empirical methods vindicate reason as a whole. It claims that they provide the evidence used to distinguish specified reliable and unreliable performances. A theological premise does not gain that discriminatory power merely by pointing out the ultimate circularity.

6.4 “Naturalism still owes an account of rational normativity”

Correct. Nothing in the public-assurance argument supplies a complete naturalistic theory of intentionality, logical normativity, mental causation, or truth-directed function. A Lewisian challenge may continue to burden some naturalistic positions. Plantinga’s evolutionary argument may also remain live if its probabilistic premises can be defended against criticism.

The consequence is dialectical restraint on both sides. The naturalist must not treat local empirical success as a complete metaphysics of reason. The Christian must not treat a challenge to naturalism as a local certificate or as a proof that Christianity uniquely owns rational inference. Different burdens can coexist. Meeting one is not meeting them all.

6.5 “A rational creator makes reliability more probable”

This is the strongest positive reply because it proposes a probabilistic bridge rather than a bare slogan. A perfectly rational and good creator might seem more likely to produce truth-directed agents than an indifferent process.

Yet the comparison cannot be completed from those adjectives alone. The advocate must specify the relevant likelihoods: reliable in which domains, to what degree, under which environmental conditions, across what developmental stages, and with which allowed effects of freedom, finitude, disorder, suffering, or hiddenness?

The observed record is mixed. Human beings achieve striking success while also displaying systematic error, deep disagreement, delusion, confabulation, motivated reasoning, and decline. Flexible auxiliary theology can accommodate that mixture, but accommodation is not a discriminating prediction. A comparative argument needs independently motivated expectations under each view and evidence that favors one expectation. It also needs to avoid using the creator's alleged goodness to infer reliable cognition while using cognitive judgment about goodness to certify the premise without further support.

Thus the probabilistic reply is not dismissed. It is converted into a research program: state the model, specify the distribution, identify the observations, and compare alternatives. Until then, "a rational creator would make reliable minds" remains too coarse to settle actual trust.

The decisive fork

Either the Christian-origin premise predicts or reveals an identifiable reliability difference, in which case the difference can be stated and assessed, or it does not, in which case it cannot serve as a distinctive public assurance. In both branches, the evidential work must be shown rather than transferred by rhetoric.

7. What a Genuine Theistic Advantage Would Require

The criticism becomes constructive when expressed as a checklist. A proposed Christian advantage in cognitive trust should answer at least five questions.

1. **Target.** Is the claim about the metaphysical possibility of reason, general human reliability, a particular faculty, Christian belief, or a particular inference? Broad language should not obscure a narrow target.
2. **Bridge.** Which independently supported proposition connects the Christian account to the target's reliability? The existence of a rational source is not yet a design specification, and a design specification is not yet evidence of proper present function.
3. **Discrimination.** What should look different if the proposed account is true rather than false? A result compatible with every reliability profile provides little assurance.
4. **Defeat conditions.** Which observations would lower confidence that the process is functioning properly? If every error is absorbed by finitude, freedom, disorder, or mystery, the view may be resilient but offers little public calibration.
5. **Rival control.** Could an advocate of another religion or a nonreligious teleology use the same form with equal ease? If so, more is needed to identify the Christian conclusion.

These questions do not privilege naturalism. They enforce a standard on any worldview claiming a comparative epistemic benefit. A naturalist who says evolution guarantees accurate metaphysics faces an analogous burden: selection tracks reproductive consequences directly, not truth in every abstract domain, so the claimed bridge and its scope require argument. A spiritualist who invokes a universal mind, or a rival theist who invokes providence, must likewise state the predicted difference.

The checklist also protects the proper modesty of calibration. No test needs to settle ultimate metaphysics in order to improve a local judgment. A clinical assessment can inform treatment without solving skepticism. An independent proof can reveal an arithmetic error without validating all inference. A record can defeat a memory without explaining consciousness. These bounded successes are precisely why the relay should stop at the level its evidence reaches.

For Christian epistemology, the result invites a cleaner division of claims. One may argue that a Christian creator explains the existence and normativity of reason; that proper function can confer externalist warrant; that certain experiences or testimonies support Christian belief; and that concrete reliability is assessed through fallible public practices. Each claim can then be defended on its own terms. The conceptual problem arises only when one is treated as if it had already completed the others.

8. Conclusion

Christians already test cognitive reliability in practice. Parents use developmental assessment; Christian clinicians use cognitive screens and collateral interviews; churches authenticate records and references; ministries submit accounts to independent review; and Bible translators compare texts, run consistency checks, consult other experts, and correct drafts. These practices do not contradict a design account. They show that the design account does not by itself identify actual reliability. The public route from a mind to warranted trust still passes through evidence that discriminates functioning from failure.

Lewis's argument from reason raises an important question about whether nonrational causation can preserve rational grounds. Plantinga supplies a serious externalist account of warrant and a controversial defeater argument against evolutionary naturalism. Neither project should be reduced to the claim that divine origin certifies every thinker. Correspondingly, neither project may be enlarged into that certificate without additional premises.

The resulting position is deliberately limited. The paper does not disprove Christian theism, vindicate all naturalisms, demand an impossible noncircular proof before anyone may know, or deny the possibility of a theistic reliability advantage. It identifies the condition for such an advantage to become public and comparative: an independently supported bridge must connect the Christian premise to identifiable reliability differences, predictions, or corrections.

Absent that bridge, Christians and their interlocutors meet at the same practical checkpoint. They compare performance, locate error, consult records and other people, revise under defeat, and preserve confidence in proportion to a bounded track record. Theology may stand behind that work as an ultimate explanation. It should not be represented as the evidence that the work has already supplied.

A. Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Core argument

1. A premise supplies distinctive public assurance for a target process only if it gives interlocutors a warranted discriminator of that process's reliability beyond, or through an independently supported improvement to, the calibration evidence otherwise available.
2. A Christian-origin premise alone is compatible with reliable and unreliable performance across persons, faculties, domains, developmental stages, environments, and conditions.
3. A premise compatible with those opposed possibilities, absent a supported bridge to different expectations, does not discriminate among them.
4. Across documented Christian settings, confidence in cognitive performance changes with testing, independent checking, corroboration, diagnosis, records, longitudinal comparison, and correction while the Christian-origin premise remains held constant.
5. When the verdict changes with those outcomes while the origin premise is fixed, those tests supply the local discrimination; the origin premise alone does not.
6. Therefore, absent a further supported bridge, the Christian-origin premise alone supplies no distinctive public assurance of the target process's reliability.

The inference is valid given the stipulated meaning of *distinctive public assurance*. Premise 2 is supported by the ordinary range of Christian accounts that permit finitude, immaturity, malfunction, bias, damage, environmental mismatch, and decline. Premise 4 is inductively supported by the family examples and by the documented practices of Christian health care, safeguarding, financial accountability, and Scripture translation. It is an existence-and-diversity claim, not a universal statement about every Christian or every case. Premise 5 identifies the division of evidential labor: varying test results explain the varying local verdict while the theological origin premise is held fixed. A counterexample would challenge the conclusion only if it supplied a dependable Christian-specific discriminator rather than an uncheckable assurance.

A.2 What would defeat or limit the conclusion

The conclusion would be defeated for a specified target if an advocate produced a well-supported bridge from the Christian premise to a reliability difference and evidence confirmed that difference. It would be limited if the claimed advantage concerned only metaphysical intelligibility or first-order externalist warrant rather than public assurance. It would also be limited where the calibration evidence itself depended on a specifically Christian premise whose independent support had been established.

The argument does not infer that Christianity is false from the absence of a public discriminator. It does not infer that a process is unreliable because its reliability cannot be reflectively demonstrated. It does not infer that calibration validates reason without circularity. Its conclusion is exactly comparative: no distinctive public assurance has been shown by the origin premise alone.

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