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PLANTINGA'S EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS  
BELIEF

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I

I shall restrict this paper to a consideration of Plantinga's explicit and developed epistemological views concerning religious belief. Thus I will not be discussing his treatment of arguments for the existence of God or of the problem of evil. No doubt, his discussion of these matters can be seen as contributing to the development of an epistemology of religious belief. Thus the final upshot of *God and Other Minds*<sup>1</sup> is that since the teleological argument, the best argument for the existence of God, is subject to difficulties of just the same sort as the argument from analogy for the existence of other minds, the best argument for that conclusion, the two beliefs have a similar epistemological status; hence if the latter is rational so is the former. Nevertheless, prior to the recent essays that will be considered in this paper, Plantinga has not attempted an explicit account of the epistemological status of religious belief. I shall be concentrating on this recent attempt to do so. The essays in question are 'Is Belief in God Rational?' [4],<sup>2</sup> 'The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology' [5], and 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?' [6].

I think there can be no doubt but that these essays constitute a powerful challenge to the customary philosophical ways of thinking about the epistemic status of religious belief, and that they have decisively altered the terms in which the problem must be posed. Since I almost entirely agree with Plantinga's position, this paper will not produce much in the way of polemical fireworks. What I shall seek to do, in addition to a brief exposition and some relatively minor criticisms, is to put the position in its setting and to develop the view further.

Plantinga has not, thus far, developed a general epistemology of religious belief; rather he has concentrated on the belief in God, thinking of God in theistic terms, as an eternal personal being who has created the world and who is perfect in wisdom, justice, knowledge, and power, and using 'belief in God' as shorthand for the more felicitous 'belief that God exists'. His positive view on this matter can be stated very simply, in one thesis:

- (1) One can rationally (justifiably) believe in God without having adequate reasons, indeed without having *any* reasons, for that belief.

Plantinga's preferred statement of (1) has a more technical cast. He points out that some of one's beliefs are *based on* others, while others are not.<sup>3</sup> Thus my belief that my wife is not at home is based on my belief that the car is gone, while my belief that I feel tired at the moment is not based on any other belief. A belief of the latter sort he (along with many others) terms 'basic', and where it is rational or justified for one to accept a belief without its being based on other beliefs, he calls it 'properly basic'.<sup>4</sup> Thus the preferred formulation:

- (2) Belief in God is properly basic.

Actually, as Plantinga goes on to point out, it is not, strictly speaking, the belief that God exists that he takes to be properly basic, but specific beliefs about God's relations to the world, each of which entails that God exists.

- (3) God is speaking to me.
- (4) God has created all this.
- (5) God disapproves of what I have done.
- (6) God forgives me.<sup>5</sup>

Call beliefs like this 'M-beliefs' ('M' for 'manifestation'). There are certain circumstances that evoke M-beliefs.

Upon reading The Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I've done*. Upon confession and repentance, I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgives me for what I've done* . . .<sup>6</sup>

Plantinga's suggestion is that such beliefs are properly basic *in circumstances like that*.<sup>7</sup> One is then justified in believing that God exists since beliefs like

(3)–(6) constitute adequate reasons for it.<sup>8</sup> This is analogized to the account given of perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs about other persons by many epistemologists.<sup>9</sup> According to Reid, Price, Chisholm, and others, when I have certain kinds of perceptual experiences I am at least *prima facie* justified in supposing that I am perceiving a tree. Otherwise put, when I have that kind of perceptual experience, then, in the absence of sufficient reasons to the contrary, I am justified in supposing that I am perceiving a tree. In *circumstances like that* I am justified in that belief without basing that belief on other justified beliefs of mine. And here too the more abstract belief that there are trees, or the still more abstract belief that there are physical objects, is justified by being based on such more concrete beliefs as that there is a tree in front of me or that I am seeing a tree.<sup>10</sup> Thus, says Plantinga, even though beliefs like (3)–(6) are properly basic, they are not *groundless*. Our grounds for accepting them consist in the circumstances (including experiences) within which it is rational to accept them without reasons, i.e. without basing them on other beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

Where a proposition<sup>12</sup> is properly basic for me I would be justified in accepting it as basic. But suppose I accept the proposition on the basis of reasons. Then I have not taken advantage of the epistemic opportunity afforded by proper basicity as Plantinga explains it. But does, or should, Plantinga think that the proper basicity of the proposition has no bearing on my epistemic condition? Suppose, e.g., that “upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked I . . . feel guilty in God’s sight”. Then according to Plantinga, I am in a condition in which the proposition *God disapproves of what I’ve done* is properly basic for me. And suppose I do form the belief that God disapproves of what I’ve done, but instead of taking it as basic, I base it on the the reasons: *What I’ve done is wicked and God disapproves of wicked actions*. Does the fact that I would have been justified in forming that belief in the absence of reasons imply that I am justified in that belief in this situation regardless of the adequacy of my reasons?

What I am suggesting with these questions is that one might construe proper basicity not just as the propriety of accepting a certain belief *as basic*, but, in a more comprehensive way, as a license to accept the belief whatever support by reasons one might or might not have. On this construal the proper basicity (for me in that situation) of the proposition *God disapproves of what I’ve done* would render me justified in believing that proposition, even though I didn’t take it as basic.<sup>13</sup>

Plantinga may object to this suggestion by saying that in order for a

condition to render a belief properly basic it must be a causal ground of belief formation.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps his view is not that when I am in circumstances C, then I will be justified in believing that *p* without basing that belief on other beliefs, no *matter* what gives rise to the belief; but rather this: when I am in circumstances C, then if I come to believe that *p because* I am in circumstances C, I am justified in that belief. I do feel that the latter alternative is to be preferred. A principle of justification should not give *carte blanche* to a belief regardless of what gives rise to it. That would require us to approve beliefs that are adopted on wildly irrational bases. But that still leaves us with a choice between a wider and a narrower construal of *properly basic*. Suppose that I accept the belief that God disapproves of what I've done because I am in condition C and also because I have the reasons specified above. I haven't accepted the belief as basic because it is, at least in part, based on reasons. Does the proper basicity of the proposition imply that I am justified in the belief whatever the adequacy of those reasons?

I don't think it implausible to suppose that reasons play a significant role in the formation and sustenance of most beliefs about God. This is especially plausible if we recognize that beliefs can be based on reasons where no explicit conscious reasoning is involved, and if we remember that there may be such humble reasons as "All the people around me believe this", as well as such elaborate reasons as those involved in the Five Ways. If this is so, then the proper basicity of M-beliefs will have a bearing on most theists' M-beliefs only if we adopt the wider interpretation according to which the proper basicity of a belief (perhaps with further restrictions as to what gives rise to the belief) licenses that belief whether or not reasons are playing some role.

Plantinga presents his position as standing over against a position he calls "Evidentialism". The evidentialist holds that belief in God is "irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or noetically sub-standard"<sup>15</sup> unless there is sufficient evidence or reasons for it. This is a category that cuts across more usual divisions. For example, it includes both these, like Bertrand Russell and A. G. N. Flew, who reject belief in God because of the insufficiency of reasons, and those, like Charles Hartshorne and F. R. Tennant, who accept belief in God but only because they think there are adequate reasons.<sup>16</sup> Of course one can be an evidentialist about other things as well. One who holds that we are justified in accepting perceptual beliefs only if there are adequate reasons for these beliefs, perhaps in the form of facts about sense-data, would be an evidentialist about perceptual beliefs. Note that the issue between Plantinga (the "basicalist")

and the evidentialist is *not* over whether there are adequate reasons for belief in God. We have already seen both positions exemplified in the evidentialist camp. And the basicist need not deny that there are adequate reasons; he need only deny that the rationality of belief of God hangs on whether there are. Plantinga himself seems inclined to hold that the ontological argument, properly developed, provides an adequate reason for belief in God.<sup>17</sup>

The opposition between Plantinga and the evidentialist continues a long standing opposition within Christian thought between those who, like Aquinas and Paley, have felt a need to put the Christian faith, or certain basic portions thereof, on a sound intellectual footing by exhibiting adequate reasons, and those who, like Calvin, Kierkegaard, and Barth, have insisted that the faith has no need of such foundations. Recently Plantinga has been at pains to stress his continuity with the Reformed tradition. ([5]) We don't find an analogous split within the ranks of unbelievers, unless you want to count those unbelievers who hold that it's all right for anyone to believe anything, with or without reasons, so long as it makes them feel good. Unbelievers who attempt a philosophical defense of their position are hardly likely to allow that it is rational to believe in God without reasons.

On the current scene there are many thinkers who stress the autonomy of religious belief, who resist any suggestion that it is legitimate only if it receives sufficient support from outside. On the one hand there are Protestant theologians like Tillich and Bultmann who take religious belief to be something like a response of the total person to an "existential" situation. From another quarter there are the "Wittgensteinian fideists", most notably Wittgenstein himself and D. Z. Phillips, who understand affirmations of belief in God, as well as other religious utterances, in terms of the role they play in the religious "form of life". Plantinga differs from most of these people by his more traditional understanding of the content of religious belief. He resolutely refuses to compromise, or scale down, the cognitive content of the faith. He insists that it is a matter of objective fact whether there is an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good creator of the universe, that belief in God is either true or false in a perfectly straightforward sense of these terms, the same sense in which it is either true or false that snow is white. He is distinctive, though not unique, in combining this understanding of the problem with the claim to epistemic autonomy. He is also unusual, though again not unique, in developing this position from a philosophical orientation that is, broadly, analytical in character.

## II

Plantinga does not attempt to give positive arguments in support of (2). What he does is to (a) attack Evidentialism and (b) answer objections. Let's consider these in turn.

The attack on evidentialism is most fully developed in [4]. The basic strategy is first to saddle his opponent with a commitment to "classical foundationalism", and then to argue against that.

### A

Here is one of Plantinga's characterizations of foundationalism.

... For each person S there is a set F of beliefs, such that a proposition *p* is rational or rationally acceptable for S only if *p* is evident with respect to F – only if, that is, the propositions in F constitute, on balance, evidence for *p*. Let us say that this set F of propositions is the *foundation of S's noetic structure*. On this view every noetic structure has a foundation; and a proposition is rational for S, or known by S, or certain for S, only if it stands in the appropriate relation to the foundation of S's noetic structure.<sup>18</sup>

Plantinga presents no objection to foundationalism, as so stated. In fact he seems to favor the position. But all we have in the above quotation is a statement of the kind of *structure* foundationalism ascribes to justified belief. To fill out the theory we must add some stipulations as to the constitution of the set F. Philosophers who subscribe to the structural thesis just formulated differ on this point; these differences give rise to different forms of foundationalism. The form that Plantinga ascribes to the evidentialist, and opposes, is what he terms "*classical foundationalism* according to which a proposition *p* is properly basic for a person S if and only if *p* is either self-evident or incorrigible for S (modern foundationalism) or either self-evident or 'evident to the senses' for S (ancient and medieval foundationalism)".<sup>19</sup> Thus both forms of classical foundationalism allow self-evident propositions in the foundation. To this the ancient and medieval form adds only what we learn about the physical environment through the senses, and the modern version adds only those experiential beliefs that cannot possibly be mistaken, such as one's beliefs about one's own current conscious states. According to classical foundationalism a belief that is not of the specified foundational sorts is rationally believed only if it is adequately supported by beliefs of those sorts.

The evidentialist denies that belief in God is properly basic. If he is to

support this denial he must adduce some necessary condition of basicity and show that belief in God does not satisfy that condition. Plantinga takes him to be committed to the conditions involved in one or another of the forms of classical foundationalism. (The extended discussion restricts itself to "modern foundationalism", and I shall observe the same restriction.) But why should we suppose that the evidentialist does, or should, support his denial by appeal to the principles of modern foundationalism? Plantinga presents no textual support for the claim that the evidentialists he cites, W. K. Clifford, Bertrand Russell, A. G. N. Flew, and Michael Scriven, adhere to any form of classical foundationalism. But perhaps what Plantinga wants to claim is not that some or all evidentialists do, or would be disposed to, support their position in this way, but rather that this is the way it will have to be supported if it is to be rationally held.<sup>20</sup> His formulations of the claim are in terms of "stock" or "paradigm" figures.

According to our paradigm Cliffordian, then, a belief is properly in the foundations of my noetic structure only if it is either self-evident or incorrigible for me.<sup>21</sup>

Now suppose we return to the main question: why shouldn't belief in God be among the foundations of my noetic structure? . . . The answer, on the part of our hypothetical Cliffordian, was that even if this belief is *true*, it does not have the characteristics a proposition must have to deserve a place in the foundations . . . A proposition is properly basic for a person only if he knows it immediately . . . The only propositions that meet this condition of immediate knowledge are those that are self-evident or incorrigible.<sup>22</sup>

Why should we suppose that evidentialism must be based on classical foundationalism if it is to be rationally held? And first, why should we suppose that it must be based on any general conditions for basicity at all — classically foundationalist or otherwise? Of course, as I acknowledge above, if the evidentialist is going to produce a substantive argument for his denial, he must produce necessary conditions. But why require, as a condition of rationality, that he produces any such argument? Plantinga himself argues that the "Reformed epistemologist" is perfectly within his rights in holding that certain propositions are not properly basic, even if he is without any general conditions for basicity.<sup>23</sup> Why should not the same privilege be accorded the evidentialist? Do we have a double standard at work here?

But even if we hold the evidentialist to propounding some general conditions for basicity, why must they be those embodied in classical foundationalism? It's true that classical foundationalism is widely held *and* that it serves the purpose, in that it is implausible to take the belief in God to be either self-evident or incorrigible (in the appropriate sense)<sup>24</sup> or evident to

the senses. However it is by no means the only position that will serve. In [6], p. 44, Plantinga, in supporting the claim that "the evidentialist objection is rooted in classical foundationalism", writes: "so far as I know, no one has developed and articulated any other reason for supposing that belief in God is not properly basic". Now if he is saying that no one has explicitly presented that denial as following from some other developed and articulated position that is probably true, but it remains to be shown that anyone has done that with respect to classical foundationalism either. But if the claim is that no other epistemological theory could plausibly serve as a reason for the evidentialist denial, that is palpably false. Take, e.g., the liberalization of classical foundationalism that involves accepting memory beliefs and beliefs about the mental states of other human beings (in each case under certain conditions) as basic. Those additions don't accommodate belief in God any better than the classical categories. Or take the various forms of coherence and contextualist epistemology. These serve admirably for the purpose, since on these views there are no properly basic beliefs at all. Plantinga is clearly mistaken in supposing that classical foundationalism is the only possible support for the evidentialist denial.<sup>25</sup>

*B*

Be that as it may, Plantinga's argument against modern foundationalism in [4] is worthy of consideration in its own right. The argument is uncharacteristically difficult to follow, because of the way in which a number of side issues keep intruding. Thus we get discussions of how we tell that a given proposition is self-evident (21–3) and of why we should suppose that apparently self-evident propositions are mostly true (23–5). Plantinga seems to be relating these issues to his main concern (the modern foundationalist requirements for being properly basic) in ways that are not easy to specify. But unless Plantinga is prepared, as he is not, to maintain that the concept of self-evidence is irretrievably flawed or that apparent self-evidence is not a valid ground for accepting a proposition, these discussions do not directly further his attack on the modern foundationalist's restrictions on the properly basic.

Plantinga's basic argument against modern foundationalism focuses on that position's requirement for proper basicity:

- (7) Only self-evident and incorrigible propositions are properly basic for S.



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The argument seeks to show that the foundationalist has no right to (7) on his own principles. In one form of the argument Plantinga claims that his opponent takes (7) as basic, which by (7) he would be entitled to do only if it were either self-evident or incorrigible; but it is neither.<sup>26</sup> Why does he think that (7) is basic for his opponent? Speaking of the foundationalist's relation to certain other propositions he says:

For he has no reasons for accepting (24) and (25); but he does accept them, and he uses them to determine the acceptability of *other* propositions. In other words, (24) and (25) are members of the foundations of his noetic structure.<sup>27</sup>

And why suppose that the foundationalist has no reason for (7), or, more accurately, why suppose that he does not accept (7) on the basis of other beliefs? Presumably it is because he mentions no such other beliefs; he offers no reasons in support of (7). But since modern foundationalists do not discuss the epistemic status of (7) but, rather, just lay it down, this is a very shaky inference. It often happens that people believe that *p* on the basis of *q* without ever citing *q* in support of their belief that *p*. Hence Plantinga would be ill-advised to rest his case on the claim that (7) is justified for the modern foundationalist only if it is properly basic. He should explore the possibility that (7) is indirectly justified for his opponent, on the basis of reasons. Hence he should take into account not only what it takes, on modern foundationalist principles, for a belief to be properly basic, but also the other possibility for justification he recognizes, viz., being evident on the basis of properly basic propositions. And Plantinga does argue in this way also. (His 28) is our (7).)

I there any reason to believe (28)? If so, what is it? (28) certainly does not appear to be self-evident; it is certainly not incorrigible. It is very hard to see, furthermore, that it either follows from or is evident with respect to propositions that *are* self-evident or incorrigible. So it is hard to see that there is any reason for accepting (28), even from a roughly foundationalist point of view. Why then should we accept it? Why should the theist feel any obligation to believe it?

The answer, I believe, is that there is no reason at all for accepting (28); it is no more than a bit of intellectual imperialism on the part of the foundationalist.<sup>28</sup>

To spell this out a bit: (7), which is crucial to modern foundationalism, is not justified in any of the ways that position recognizes. And even if it is justified in some other way, the modern foundationalist could not, consistent with his position, recognize it as justified. Hence the modern foundationalist is in the self-defeating position of having to recognize that one of his crucial

principles is unjustified. This argument would seem to be what Plantinga had in mind when in [6] he writes that in [4] "I argued that both forms of foundationalism are self referentially incoherent and must therefore be rejected".<sup>29</sup>

We can get this conclusion only if we are entitled to the claim that (7) can be justified in none of the ways allowed by modern foundationalism. What does Plantinga do to support this claim? Very little. Such support as he proffers is typified by the survey of possibilities in the last quotation. He points out that (7) is not incorrigible. He alleges that it does not appear to be self-evident. And he suggests that it is "hard to see" that it follows from propositions that are. That isn't good enough to support the substantive claim that the modern foundationalist cannot be justified in accepting (7). Let me hasten to say that I share Plantinga's impressions on this point. I too am unable to see how (7) can receive any kind of justification that is allowed by the modern foundationalist. But I am far from supposing that this puts me in position to assert that a modern foundationalist has, or can have, no adequate ground for (7). This is going much too fast; the matter requires more thorough exploration. To illustrate this point, let's concentrate on the second formulation of the third possibility, that (7) is evident with respect to propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible. We should not expect it to be obvious on inspection whether a given proposition enjoys this status. For one thing, it depends on what stock of self-evident and incorrigible propositions we have to work with, and even if we are able to tell, with respect to any proposition we consider, whether it falls in that class, we may not have surveyed all the propositions that are relevant to the evidence of (7). Second, it will depend on what principles of transfer of evidence we have to work with, and it is not obvious what those principles should be. It is not even obvious how we should go about deciding what principles to accept. If we adopt Chisholm's procedure of assuming whatever principles of derivation are necessary to get from the foundations to whatever else is evident or whatever else we know, and if we are convinced that we know (7) or that it is evident to us, then we will adopt some principles of transfer that, given what foundations we have to work with, will yield the conclusion that (7) is evident. And even if we renounce so heroic a course, it will still not be obvious at first blush that no acceptable set of principles will approve a transfer of evidence from the foundations to (7). Third and finally, however the first two issues are settled, we shouldn't expect it to be obvious on the surface just what can be extracted from a given set of foundations. Let's not forget that a controversy has been raging for several

hundred years over whether propositions about physical objects can be evident with respect to self-evident and incorrigible propositions. I don't believe that they can, but in view of the complexity and subtlety of the issues involved, and in view of the number of learned and brilliant thinkers on both sides of this question, I would certainly hesitate to make a judgment on the basis of its being hard for me to see that this derivation can be carried through. Normative or evaluative propositions, like those concerning the propriety of accepting a proposition as basic, seem particularly difficult to support on the basis of foundations recognized by modern foundationalism, unless we recognize a generous stock of normative or evaluative principles as self-evident; but, again, it may be possible even though I can't now see how to do it.

Thus I cannot agree that Plantinga has adequately supported the substantive claim that modern foundationalism is "self-referentially incoherent". Does that mean that his attack is without value? By no means. What he has done is to issue a fundamental challenge to the modern foundationalist. Whatever the possibilities might be for justifying (7) foundationalists of this stripe have signally failed to do so, or even attempted to do so. Indeed the whole question of the epistemic status of principles like (7) has been almost completely neglected. Plantinga's signal achievement on this point is to force the issue on our attention. When the modern foundationalist proclaims that a belief is properly taken as basic only if it is either self-evident or incorrigible, Plantinga asks him for the credentials of this pronouncement, and, in particular, whether it has the kind of credentials the proclaimer requires, suggesting at the same time that it would appear that it does not. He then points out that until such time as the foundationalist provides us with adequate reason to accept his restrictions we are under no obligation to do so. The launching of this challenge is an important step in consciousness-raising, even though the impression is given that something more substantive has been achieved.

### III

Plantinga considers two objections to (2). I have already considered what he has to say in response to the first, that (2) would imply that belief in God is groundless. The second runs as follows.

... if belief in God is properly basic, why can't *just any* belief be properly basic? Couldn't we say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every

Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as basic? And if I can't why can I properly take belief in God as basic?<sup>30</sup>

As Plantinga construes this objection it can be more fully set out as follows. "You claim that belief in God is properly basic without establishing a general criterion for proper basicity and showing that this belief satisfies that criterion. Indeed you don't point to any feature of this belief that would serve to justify us in regarding it as properly basic.<sup>31</sup> But if (2) is to be granted without any justification, won't we have to accept *any* ungrounded claim to proper basicity? Wouldn't it be arbitrary to accept some and reject others?"

Plantinga's answer is that no

... revealing necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity follow from clearly self-evident premises by clearly acceptable arguments. And hence the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, *inductive*. We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously *not* properly basic in the latter.<sup>32</sup>

This means that we must be able to recognize particular cases prior to possessing any general criterion for proper basicity. If we do not have that capacity we will have no chance of arriving at a general criterion. Hence it is unreasonable to require that all discriminations between what is properly basic and what is not be made on the basis of a general criterion. And this being so, what grounds do we have for denying that Plantinga can tell that belief in God is properly basic, in certain conditions, while belief in the Great Pumpkin is not?

This is an effective response to the claim that anything goes so long as we have not established a general criterion for proper basicity. But where does all this leave the partisan of (2)? Plantinga, and some other theists, will take some M-beliefs about God as clear cases of the properly basic. Many other persons will not. Of those who do not, at least some will consider it irrational or unjustified for Plantinga to do so. In the absence of a shared criterion, how can the conversation proceed? Plantinga seems to suggest that each person or each group must simply proceed on the basis of what seems clear to it, and learn to live with the fact that many will disagree.

But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he doesn't accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn

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Murray O'Hare may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.<sup>33</sup>

This strikes me as a bit hard-nosed. Certainly a philosopher must accustom himself to the persistence of fundamental disagreements. Certainly one should not renounce what seems clearly so, just because many others reject it. But perhaps we should try harder than Plantinga does to find some basis on which the conversation can continue. Even in the absence of general substantive criteria for proper basicity of the sort laid down by modern foundationalism, considerations might be found that are relevant to the question of whether propositions of a given kind, in conditions of a given kind, are properly taken as basic. No matter how convinced one feels of ones samples of proper basicity, the existence of widespread diversity on this point, the frequency with which people change their positions, and a general sense of human fallibility should lead him to investigate further the question of whether it is he or his opponent who is mistaken. In my last section I shall try to push the discussion beyond the point at which Plantinga has left it.<sup>34</sup>

### IV

Perhaps one reason Plantinga left the matter in the "agree to disagree" state is that, in the few published writings he has devoted to this topic to date, he has not probed deeply enough into the concepts of *proper basicity*, *rationality*, and *justification* to provide the basis for further discussion. If we want to critically evaluate a claim to proper basicity, and if, as Plantinga correctly observes, it is not antecedently obvious what the propriety-making characteristics are, we will have to get clear about the kind of propriety involved. In the absence of an explicit delineation of the concept, combatants will be reduced to staring at each other across the railing.

Proper basicity is a species of rationality or epistemic justifiedness. To properly accept *p* as basic is to be rational or justified in accepting *p* without basing it on other justified beliefs. Let's focus on this more general concept of epistemic justification. Plantinga, along with many other epistemologists, takes this to be a normative or evaluative notion, and he briefly mentions various alternative ways of thinking of this.<sup>35</sup> I am going to take it to be a normative concept. On a normative construal, to say that a belief is justified is, roughly speaking, to say that in believing that *p* one is conducting oneself intellectually as one ought, or that in believing that *p* one has done the best

one can intellectually. As Carl Ginet puts it, "One is justified in being confident that *p* if and only if it is not the case that one ought not to be confident that *p*; one could not be justly reproached for being confident that *p*."<sup>36</sup> As this last formulation implies, justification, in cognition as in conduct, is not a matter of doing what is required, but of doing what is permitted, or not doing something forbiddent. To be justified in believing is to be in the clear vis-a-vis intellectual norms.

How are we to think of these intellectual norms to which I may or may not be conforming in my believings? The most direct and obvious move would be to think of them as laying down conditions under which one is required, forbidden, or permitted to hold a certain belief. Then if, when I believe that *p*, I am not doing so in conditions under which that is forbidden, or, otherwise put, if I am doing so in conditions under which it is permitted, then I am justified in that belief. But normative principles of this sort presuppose that belief is under direct voluntary control, that I can decide what to believe in a given situation, and forthwith do so. For prohibitions, permissions, and injunctions apply only to what is amenable to my choices, decisions, or volitions. Most epistemologists who are explicit about a normative conception of epistemic justification seem to think of the matter in this way. But it seems clear to me that belief is not, in general, and perhaps never, under direct voluntary control. Since I do not have time to argue the point, I will simply assume it for purposes of this discussion.

But even if beliefs are not under direct voluntary control, there are various things we can do at will to influence our belief forming processes. These can be divided into (1) activities that bring influences to bear on, or withhold influences from, a particular situation, and (2) activities that develop, extinguish, or affect our belief forming tendencies. (1) includes such activities as checking to see whether I have considered all the relevant evidence, getting a second opinion, and looking into the question of whether there is anything abnormal about my current perceptual situation. (2) includes such activities as training myself to be more critical of gossip and practicing greater sensitivity to the condition of others. This being the case, we might think of the relevant intellectual norms as governing activities like these. One will be doing ones intellectual duty if one engages in such activities as the relevant principles require. Then we may think of S's belief that *p* as being *justified* in a normative sense *iff* S's coming to believe and continuing to believe that *p* does *not* stem from any *violation* of those obligations, i.e., *iff* it is not the case that had S fulfilled those obligations S would not have come to believe that *p* or would not have continued to believe that *p*. On this construal, justification of

belief is normative in an indirect sense, since what is or is not in conformity with norms is not the belief, but rather activities that have influenced the formation and retention of that belief.

With this background let's tackle the question at issue. This question has to do with whether one is epistemically justified in engaging in, as we might say, a certain *epistemic practice*, the practice of accepting M-beliefs as basic in conditions of certain types. Let's call this "theistic practice" (TP). (To fully identify the practice we would have to make explicit what types of conditions are in question.) Extrapolating the above account of the justification of beliefs to the justification of epistemic practices, we may say that TP is justified provided one's engaging in it does not stem from violation of any relevant intellectual obligations. To pursue the matter further we must be more specific as to the relevant intellectual obligations.

It seems clear that one's fundamental obligation as a cognitive subject is to maximize both the absolute number and the proportion of the correct beliefs in one's cognitive store, in other words, to acquire as many true beliefs and as few false beliefs as possible.<sup>37</sup> Applied to epistemic practices, this would imply that our basic intellectual obligation is do what we can (or at least what can reasonably be expected of us) to make those practices as reliable as possible.

If we may take so much as settled, we are still faced with an opposition that parallels the famous Clifford-James debate over whether beliefs are guilty until proved innocent (Clifford) or innocent until proved guilty (James). That is, we might recognize a harsher, Cliffordian, obligation to do what we can to avoid any practice that has not been shown to be reliable to a considerable extent, or we might recognize a more liberal, Jamesian, obligation only to do what we can to avoid any practice that has been shown to be unreliable or insufficiently reliable. Assuming for the sake of easy formulation that epistemic practices are all wholly within our (indirect) control, we might say that on the Cliffordian version we are justified in engaging in a practice *iff* we have shown, or can show, it to be reliable, whereas on the Jamesian version we are justified in engaging in a practice *iff* it has not been shown to be unreliable. Putting the contrast in terms of "having reasons" rather than in terms of what one has "shown", it will come out as follows. On the harsher version, one is justified in engaging in a practice *iff* one has adequate reasons to regard it as reliable, while on the more liberal version, one is justified in engaging in a practice *iff* one does not have adequate reasons for regarding it as unreliable.

Obviously it will make a big difference to the justifiability of TP which

of these versions we accept. I shall consider the application of each to our problem.

The first point to be made about the harsher version is that if it is applied universally we will not be justified in any epistemic practices. I cannot have adequate reasons for regarding practice  $P_1$  as reliable unless I have acquired those reasons by engaging in some practice  $P_2$  and am justified in doing so. If  $P_2$  is different then I am justified in engaging in it only if I have adequate reasons for regarding it as reliable. Again, on pain of circularity this is the case only if I have adequate reasons for regarding some third practice,  $P_3$ , as reliable. And so on. Thus, on pain of infinite regress, I cannot subject all epistemic practices to this requirement. I can have adequate reason for taking some of them to be reliable only if I am justified in engaging in others without having any such basis for doing so.

It might be thought that this argument depends on using a “linear”, as opposed to a “wholistic” or pure coherence model of justification by reasons. If we use the latter model, then all practices will be justified by their involvement in a total system that exhibits certain desirable systemic properties. We don’t have to assume that we have antecedently validated a given practice in order to use its results as reasons for the one under examination; and so we are faced neither with an infinite regress nor circularity. But this will appear to be a way out of the difficulty only so long as we forget that the overarching practice of accepting what fits into a coherent system can itself be questioned. Once we ask for the reasons for supposing it to be reliable, we must obtain those reasons either from it, in which case we run into circularity, or from some other practice, in which case we are off to the races again.

Of course it is consistent with this point to accept some practices as justified without having adequate reason to regard them as reliable and then impose the Cliffordian requirement on others. But how could this be a rational procedure? Wouldn’t this be sheerly arbitrary? One might suppose that it is obvious on the face of it that some epistemic practices are justifiably engaged in, e.g., accepting self-evident propositions or spontaneously forming beliefs about one’s current conscious states, while others, e.g., TP, lack this immediate credibility. But, assuming that we agree that reliability is the basic desideratum for an epistemic practice, this just leaves us with the question: why should we take immediate plausibility of this sort as an adequate mark of reliability? That is, we are confronted with the question of the reliability of the higher level practice of forming beliefs about the reliability of epistemic practices on the basis of their seeming credibility. And we are off to the races again.



Moreover, even if we should countenance the procedure of deciding on practices, other than the two "Cartesian" ones just mentioned, on the basis of whether their reliability could be established by using those two practices and any others the reliability of which had already been established in this way, it is not only TP that would be in trouble. In surveying the centuries-long attempt to justify the reliability of sense-perception on something like the Cartesian basis, one may feel that the prospects of carrying it through are remote indeed. The same might be said for standard practices of forming memory beliefs, of accepting generalizations on inductive grounds, and of inference to the best explanation. If this is right, then if the practitioner of TP fails to be justified on this harsher requirement, he finds himself in a rather large company.

I take it this shows that the Cliffordian version of what it takes to be justified in an epistemic practice is not really viable. Let's turn then to the more liberal version, according to which TP is justified unless there are good reasons for regarding it as unreliable.<sup>38</sup> Of course, in order to acquire such reasons one would once more have to presuppose that certain other practices are justifiably engaged in. But on the weaker requirement for justification this does not pose the same difficulty, for it may well be that one does *not* have adequate reasons for regarding them as unreliable. But what reasons could there be for regarding TP as unreliable?

First, we can have the most direct and unquestionably relevant reason for regarding an epistemic practice as unreliable if we have ascertained that its outputs are generally incorrect, or that they are not generally correct. We have this kind of reason for regarding many "unscientific" methods of weather prediction to be unreliable. But we can have this kind of reason only where we have some other access to the domain about which the practice in question yields beliefs. In the case of predicting weather by examining entrails, we can simply wait and see what the weather is, thereby using a more deeply entrenched practice as a check on the one in question. Now to the extent that TP yields beliefs about matters that we also have some other, perhaps more favored, way of discovering, its unreliability could be shown in the same way. Perhaps something like this is involved when fundamentalist Christians take it on the "inward testimony of the Holy Spirit" that the Bible is the word of God and then proceed to suppose that in the Bible God is telling us about the physical history and constitution of the universe. However one who engages in TP need not get involved in anything like that. I shall restrict this discussion to a kind of TP that only yields beliefs about God, His nature, and His doings, the truth or falsity of which are not assessable on empirical or scientific grounds.

Another way of acquiring reasons of this most direct kind is to establish conclusions by philosophical reasoning that contradict all or many of the products of TP. For example, we might demonstrate the non-existence of the theistic God. Or, contrariwise, we might be able to show that God's nature is such that He couldn't be doing what He is frequently represented in TP as doing. Finally, we might be able to show that TP yields a system of belief that is ineradicably internally inconsistent. (I am not speaking of isolated and remediable inconsistencies that continually pop up in every area of thought and experience.) I do not believe that we are able to bring off any of these, though I will not have time to argue the point.

If we can't directly show that the output of TP is not generally correct, is there any other way of providing adequate reasons for a judgment of unreliability? It is true that TP differs in salient respects from other epistemic practices that are both more widespread and less problematic, e.g., our ordinary practice of forming perceptual beliefs about the physical environment. Call that "perceptual practice" (PP). There are important features of PP, which it does not share with TP, and it may be thought that the lack of these features goes some considerable way toward showing TP to be unreliable. These features include:

1. With PP there are standard ways of checking the accuracy of any particular perceptual belief.<sup>39</sup>
2. By engaging in PP we can discover regularities in the behavior of the objects putatively observed, and on this basis we can, to a certain extent, effectively predict the course of events.
3. Capacity for PP, and practice of it, is found universally among normal adult human beings.
4. All normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience.

In thinking about the possible epistemic bearing of the lack of these features, we must be careful to distinguish reasons for unreliability from lack of reasons for reliability. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the fact that PP has these features gives us some reason for regarding it as reliable. This is not an unproblematic assumption. For one thing, it seems that we have to use PP, and reasoning based thereon, to discover that it does have these features. How else would we find this out? Being told by an

angel? Thus an appeal to these features to justify reliance on PP is infected with circularity. And, waiving that point, it is not at all clear, e.g. just how universality is connected with reliability. But my present point is that even if the possession of these features is a reliability-indicating characteristic, all we can infer from that alone, plus TP's lack of these features, is that we do not have *those* reasons for regarding it as reliable. It by no means follows that TP is unreliable, or even that we have *any* reason for regarding it as unreliable.

Let's consider then whether there is any further reason for taking the lack of any of these features to be a strong indication of unreliability. I shall have to be brief.<sup>40</sup> How is the argument supposed to go? Why suppose that lack of universality or lack of predictive efficacy betokens unreliability? In supposing that it does one is assuming that universality or predictive efficacy is necessary for reliability, or least that these features would naturally be expected to accompany reliability. But, so far as I can see, this expectation stems from concentration on one kind of case, the familiar kind paradigmatically exemplified by PP. Why suppose that *any* epistemic practice must be reliable in that way, or exhibit its reliability in that fashion? The reality with which TP claims to put us in touch is, so TP tells us, quite different from this. What we seem to learn from TP, if we follow its guidance, is (1) that this reality, God, is too different from created beings, too "wholly other", for us to be able to grasp any regularities in His behavior, and (2) that God has decreed that a human being will be aware of His presence and activity in any clear and unmistakable fashion only when certain special and difficult conditions are satisfied. If this is the way the wind blows it is not at all surprising that TP should lack features (1)–(4) even if it is a reliable way of forming M-beliefs. If this is the kind of reality about which we are seeking to form reliable beliefs, then the absence of (1)–(4) does not betoken unreliability, nor does their presence betoken reliability. Quite the contrary. If this is the way God is, then if an epistemic practice led us to suppose that we had discovered regular patterns in the divine behavior or that the divine doings are equally discernible by all men, that would be a reason for regarding the practice as unreliable. And why shouldn't we take TP's word for the kind of reality with which it is dealing, as much as we take PP's word for the kind of reality with which it is dealing? However the basic point I am making here is independent of this last claim. Whatever the credentials of TP or of PP, the basic point is that *if* God is as we are led to suppose in the practice of TP, then the lack of features (1)–(4) is quite to be expected if TP is a reliable source of beliefs. Hence in taking the lack

of those features as a sign of unreliability we are begging the question. In using those standards we are prejudging TP as unreliable. Hence we cannot suppose that the lack of those features constitutes any reason for unreliability.

Feature (4) requires special attention. For it may seem clear that, in spite of what was said in the last paragraph, the variation in what one takes oneself to be experiencing in different religions is a strong reason for a judgment of unreliability. How can we consider TP a reliable procedure when adherents of other religions regularly take incompatible beliefs as basic?<sup>41</sup> To go into this properly we would have to decide whether the Christian and the Hindu are getting incompatible results from the same epistemic practice or whether they are simply engaged in different practices that yield incompatible results. But pending a thorough discussion, let me just say this. Human cognitive activity has a history. If we supposed that the persistence of competing practices was incompatible with reliability, then we would have to regard, e.g., “scientific method” as unreliable. For it was practiced for centuries without attaining the degree of unanimity that we have come to take for granted in e.g., physics and chemistry. It may be that the attempt to discern God’s presence and activity from religious experience is in the state that the attempt to discern the basic nature of the physical world, by reasoning from what we learn from perception, was in for the first 1600 years of our era. And if God is as hard for us to discern as all the great religious traditions suggest, we may be in that position for an indefinitely long period of time in the future. In any event, analogies like the above suggest that we should not rush to the conclusion that persistent disagreement betokens unreliability.

I would hope that even these brief remarks can illustrate how a more thoroughgoing investigation into the conditions of proper basicity can lend some support to Plantinga’s contention that M-beliefs may be properly basic.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the appended bibliography for details on this and on other works referred to.

<sup>2</sup> Bracketed numbers refer to listings in the appended bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> [6], pp. 41–42.

<sup>4</sup> [6], p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> [6], pp. 46–7.

<sup>6</sup> [6], p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> [6], p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> [6], p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> [6], pp. 44–46.

<sup>10</sup> [6], p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> [6], pp. 47–8.

<sup>12</sup> It is fairly clear that Plantinga intends to be attributing proper basicity to beliefs in the sense of *what is believed*, the propositional *object* or *content*, rather than to the total psychological state that has that object as content. In [4] pp. 42, 44, and 47 he uses the term ‘proposition’ for what is properly basic.

<sup>13</sup> This way of understanding the matter is suggested by Plantinga’s initial introduction of the term in [6]. “According to the classical foundationalist, some propositions are *properly* or *rightly* basic for a person and some are not. Those that are not, are rationally accepted only on the basis of evidence . . .” (p. 42). The contrast implied by the last sentence is with those are not rationally accepted *only* on the basis of evidence. That is, a properly basic proposition is one that may be accepted either on the basis of evidence or not.

<sup>14</sup> “My having that characteristic sort of experience . . . plays a crucial role in the formation and justification of that belief.” ([6], p. 44) . . . “this is the ground of my justification, and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself.” ([6], p. 45.)

<sup>15</sup> [6], p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Actually Plantinga uses the term ‘evidentialist’ only as a part of the term ‘evidentialist objector (objection)’. (See e.g., [6], pp. 41, 42, 44.) An evidentialist objector is one who is not only an evidentialist in the sense just defined but also holds that there are not adequate reasons for belief in God, and hence objects to the belief on those grounds. Nevertheless it is clear that Plantinga’s opponents, *so far as* the epistemological issues are concerned, include all those, both believers and unbelievers, who satisfy my definition. Although Plantinga fails to make this quite explicit, he does say, in [6], after explaining the “evidentialist objection”:

Many other philosophers and theologians – in particular, those in the great tradition of natural theology – have claimed that belief in God is intellectually acceptable, but only because the fact is there is sufficient evidence for it. These two groups unite in holding that theistic belief is rationally acceptable only if there is sufficient evidence for it. (p. 41)

It is clear that Plantinga’s epistemological arguments are directed against all those who fall within the union of the two groups, not just the evidentialist *objectors*, and that ‘evidentialist’ is a quite appropriate term for all the members of that larger group.

<sup>17</sup> See [3], Ch. X, sec. 7.

<sup>18</sup> [4], p. 12. We should not take it that the set *F* is the same for a given person *S* at all times. All foundationalists who take experiential beliefs to be foundational hold that the set is constantly changing.

<sup>19</sup> [6], p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> In [6] Plantinga says that in [4] “I argued that the evidentialist objection is rooted in classical foundationalism” (p. 41). And on p. 44 of the same essay he says, “Typically this objection has been rooted in some form of classical foundationalism”. These formulations are naturally taken as claiming that evidentialists have supported their objection by an appeal to classical foundationalism. But I cannot see that in either essay Plantinga has so much as made an attempt to show that this is the case.

<sup>21</sup> [4], p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> [4], p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> [6], p. 49. This is argued on the grounds that general principles embodying such conditions can be arrived at only inductively from a survey of instances, and, hence, that we have to be able to recognize instances and noninstances apart from appeal to general conditions.

<sup>24</sup> See [4], pp. 15–16 for a discussion of the appropriate sense.

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps Plantinga does not hold, and did not mean to be suggesting, that classical foundationalism is the only serious candidate for a support of evidentialism. But the course of the argument in [4] strongly suggests that he was assuming that.

<sup>26</sup> The more extensive discussion of this point concerns another principle, but on p. 26 Plantinga says of (7) as well that “It is . . . basic for the foundationalist”.

<sup>27</sup> [4], p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> [4], p. 26. Cf. [6], p. 49. Note that the argument gets confused by the fact that in the previous quotation having reasons for accepting *p* is contrasted with taking it as basic, whereas in this passage satisfying requirements for properly accepting *p* as basic is one way of having reasons for believing *p*.

<sup>29</sup> p. 44. The other form is “ancient and medieval foundationalism”. concerning which no argument at all is mounted.

<sup>30</sup> [6], p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> At least any feature that we could see the belief to have without already accepting the belief. Plantinga does allege that God has implanted in us a tendency to accept M-beliefs as basic under certain conditions.

<sup>32</sup> [6], pp. 49–50.

<sup>33</sup> [6], p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> The position briefly expounded in the next section has been worked out in the course of extended discussions with members of the Center for Christian Studies at Calvin College for 1979–80, especially George Mavrodes, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

<sup>35</sup> [6], pp. 42–3.

<sup>36</sup> [1], p. 28.

<sup>37</sup> This is a first approximation that needs refinement in the light of such considerations as the greater need we have to acquire information about some matters than about others, and the undesirability of cluttering up our minds with useless information.

<sup>38</sup> Of course, even if there *are* good reasons in the sense of there being facts that would provide good reasons if known or justifiably believed, many, or even all persons, would be justified in engaging in TP if they did not *have* these reasons.

<sup>39</sup> It is this lack that has been most often invoked in this connection by twentieth-century philosophers. C. B. Martin, in a widely discussed essay, ‘A Religious Way of Knowing’, reprinted as a chapter in his book, *Religious Belief* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1959) argues that since there is no such “society of checks and tests” involved in religious experience, we are thereby prevented from taking religious experience to be a cognition of anything beyond itself. But though 1. has been focused on more than 2., I think we can see that 1. is just a special case of 2. For our standard checking procedures in perceptual practice presuppose that we know a good deal about the ways in which things can be expected to behave in the physical world. Consider the appeal to other observers. Suppose I think I see a fir tree across the street from my house. What would count an intersubjective corroboration? Surely not *any* report of

seeing a fir tree. If someone reports seeing a fir tree in Nepal, that will not tend to show that there is a fir tree across from my house. Nor will the failure of someone in Nepal, or across town, to see a fir tree have any tendency to disconfirm my report. Nor if a blind man or one wholly preoccupied with other matters stands just where I was standing and fails to see a fir tree, would that disconfirm my report. The point is, of course, that only observers that satisfy certain conditions as to location, condition, state of the environment (enough light), etc., can qualify as either confirming or disconfirming my report. And how do we know what conditions to specify? We do it in the light of presumed regularities in the interaction of physical objects and sentient subjects. Persons in certain circumstances, and only in those circumstances, will count as possible confirmers or disconfirmers of my claim, by their observations, because, given what we know about the way things go in the psychophysical world, it is only persons in such circumstances that could be expected to see a fir tree if there is one there. Hence checking procedures are possible only where we can discern regularities.

<sup>40</sup> For a more extended discussion see my 'Religious Experience and Religious Belief', *Noûs* 16 (1982), 3–12; and my 'Christian Experience and Christian Belief', forthcoming in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, University of Notre Dame Press.

<sup>41</sup> We should not be too hasty to impute contradictions between beliefs of different religions. They might just be dealing with aspects of the same reality. But let that pass.

## References

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- [2] Plantinga, Alvin: 1967, *God and Other Minds*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.
- [3] Plantinga, Alvin: 1974, *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- [4] Plantinga, Alvin: 1979, 'Is Belief in God Rational?' in *Rationality and Religious Belief* (ed. C. Delaney), University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.
- [5] Plantinga, Alvin: 1980, 'The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*.
- [6] Plantinga, Alvin: 1981, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?' *Noûs* 15, 41–51.