PLANTINGA'S REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY:
CLARIFICATION AND CRITIQUE

by

JOHN ALAN CRABTREE

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Philosophy
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

June 1992

APPROVED: 

Dr. Robert Herbert

An Abstract of the Dissertation of

John Alan Crabtree for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the Department of Philosophy to be taken June 1992

Title: PLANTINGA'S REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY: CLARIFICATION AND CRITIQUE

Approved: [redacted]
Dr. Robert Herbert

Alvin Plantinga has proposed a distinctive answer to the question whether belief in the existence of God apart from evidence is rational. Developing the suggestions of various theologians in the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition into a philosophically rigorous epistemological theory, Plantinga espouses what he calls Reformed epistemology. Reformed epistemology defends the rationality of belief in God's existence by arguing that belief in God is a properly basic belief. It argues, therefore, that belief in God is eminently rational apart from any evidence; for a basic belief is foundational and not based on evidence. I do two things in this study: (1) I attempt to clarify key aspects of Reformed epistemological theory, discussing at greater depth certain of its more problematic aspects and expanding the theory where necessary to show its basic coherence and/or plausibility; and (2) I attempt to answer the question whether Reformed epistemology is right - whether it accurately captures the epistemological status of the theist's belief in God. My answer is that most likely it does not. I argue that - due to an overly vague conception of "basic belief" - Plantinga has failed to recognize a fundamental

incompatibility in his own views on the status of theistic belief. Furthermore, I argue that, when we have rightly understood what Reformed epistemology requires with respect to the nature of theistic belief, it is doubtful that Plantinga or any other theist actually holds his belief in God on the epistemological basis that Reformed epistemology says he does.

VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: John Alan Crabtree

PLACE OF BIRTH: Salem, Oregon

DATE OF BIRTH: October 13, 1949

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon
Stanford University

DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, 1992, University of Oregon
Bachelor of Arts, 1971, Stanford University

AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Biblical Philosophy
Religious Epistemology
Philosophy of Religion

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Teaching Fellow, Department of Philosophy, University of Oregon, Eugene,1987-90

AWARDS AND HONORS:

Phi Beta Kappa, 1970

DEDICATION

To Jody, Casey, Tyler, Morgan, Shelby, and John David

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Reformed Epistemology: The Issues and the Literature	1
	The Limits of This Study	4
	The Structure of This Study	10
II.	AN OVERVIEW OF PLANTINGA'S REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY	15
	The Rhetorical Context of Plantinga's Exposition of Reformed Epistemology	15
	Evidentialism's and Classical Foundationalism's Conception of Rational Belief	19
	Rejecting the Classical Foundationalist's Conception of Rational Belief	34
	Reformed Epistemology and the Criteria of Proper Basicality	40
	Is Belief in God Apart from Evidence Rational?	48
	Belief in God as Properly Basic: An Argument from Analogy?	52
	Theo-Implicatory Beliefs as the Ground for Theistic Belief Proper	55
III.	REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY AND FIDEISM	63
	Plantinga in the Light of a Fresh Analysis of Fideism	64
	Penelhum's Classification of Plantinga as a Fideist	83
IV.	PLANTINGA AND RELATIVISM	93
	The Great Pumpkin Objection	94
	The First Great Pumpkin Objection: Plantinga's Response	96
	Understanding the Second Great Pumpkin Objection	99
	Plantinga's Response to the Second Great Pumpkin Objection	111
	Further Objection: The Unacceptability of a Stalemate	116
	Parity But Not Relativism	119
	Summary	123
	Grounds for Belief Without Evidence for Belief	124

Chapter Page

V. THE HUMAN NISUS TO BELIEVE IN GOD. 128

Pavlovian Response Model. 130
Mechanical Model. 131
Natural Language Model 132
Plantinga Is Not Advocating a Sixth Sense. 140
Plantinga Does Not Mistake Causes for Reasons 141

VI. THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN. 144

Sin as an Explanation for the Non-Universality of Theistic Belief. 144
Improper Subjectivity as Explaining the Non-Universality of Theistic Belief. 149
How Improper Subjectivity Blocks Theistic Belief. 153
Summary: Plantinga's Explanation of the Noetic Effects of Sin 156

VII. BASIC BELIEFS IN PLANTINGA AND KENNY. 158

Kenny Vs. Plantinga. 159
Kenny's Revised Criteria of Proper Basicality 160
Epistemologically vs. Economically Basic Beliefs 166
The Concept of "Basic Belief" in Plantinga and Kenny. 174
The Concept of "Basic Belief" Required by Reformed Epistemology. 178
Kenny's Failure to Rebut Reformed Epistemology 179
Plantinga's Failure to Show That Theistic Belief Is Basic. . . . 186
Summary 192

VIII. CAN BELIEF IN GOD BE DEFEATED?. 194

The Dogmatism Objection 195
The Dogmatism Objection and Reformed Epistemology 196
How Plantinga Responds to the Dogmatism Objection 203
Reformed Epistemology's Response Revisited 209
Plantinga In Two Minds. 220
The Source of This Irreconcilable Conflict 221
Plantinga's View of the Status of Theistic Belief 230
Summary 232

Chapter Page

IX. REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY: A CRITIQUE. 234

The Basis for Plantinga's Claim That Belief in God Is Properly Basic. 236
Questioning Plantinga's Claim That Theistic Belief Is Epistemologically Basic 239
A Phenomenology of Holding Beliefs as Basic 241
The Phenomenology of Holding Theistic Belief 255
The Phenomenology of Holding Theo-Implicatory Beliefs . . . 257
Conclusion. 263

X. CONCLUSION 269

BIBLIOGRAPHY 275

LIST OF TABLES

Table — Page

1. Comparison of the Phenomenology of Holding Different Sorts of Basic Beliefs 254

2. Comparison of the Phenomenology of Holding Theistic Belief on Plantinga's View with the Phenomenology of Holding Pseudo-Basic and Quasi-Basic Beliefs. 256

3. Comparison of the Phenomenology of Holding Theo-implicatory Beliefs According to Me, Plantinga, and a Consistent Reformed Epistemology 263

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study is an exposition, clarification, and critique of Reformed epistemology as it is expounded in the writings of Alvin Plantinga. "Reformed epistemology" is what Plantinga himself calls his distinctive views on the epistemology of belief in the existence of God; for they are self-consciously dependent upon the Calvinistic or Reformed tradition in Christian theology. Not only will I interact with what Plantinga has written on the subject; I will also interact explicitly with a few of his more important critics and defenders. Implicitly, however, others of Plantinga's critics and defenders are also in view in this study. My study has been informed throughout by the many different responses which Plantinga's intriguing theory has engendered.

Reformed Epistemology: The Issues and the Literature

Plantinga's exposition of Reformed epistemology unfolds as he attempts to answer five different questions. It is not immediately obvious that these questions are interrelated. But for Plantinga they are. The distinctive viewpoint of Reformed epistemology is central to the answer he gives to each of them.

The following are the five questions which Plantinga takes up in his writings which provide the occasion for his articulating Reformed epistemology:

1. On the commonly accepted assumption that theists do not have sufficient evidence for the existence of God, are theists therefore irresponsible to continue holding their belief in God in the face of insufficient evidence?

Plantinga's earliest attempt to directly address this question was his article "Is Belief in God Rational?" published in 1979. Subsequently, in March, 1981, he published "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" which extended the view proposed in the initial article still further. "Rationality and Religious Belief" - published in 1982 - is nothing but a combination of and reorganization of the arguments in "Is Belief in God Rational?" and "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" An article and its sequel published in the Reformed Journal - "On Reformed Epistemology" (January, 1982) and "Reformed Epistemology Again" (July, 1982) - continue his discussion of whether the theist is rational to believe in God when he lacks sufficient evidence. But they also begin to discuss Plantinga's critique of natural theology - the next question listed below. In 1983, Plantinga published his most thorough and important paper defending Reformed epistemology - "Reason and Belief in God." Subsequently, responding to a paper which Philip Quinn had written in response to Plantinga's views, he wrote "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply" (July, 1986). To fill an important gap in the argument of "Reason and Belief in God" - a gap which Plantinga acknowledged at the time he wrote it - Plantinga finally published "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God" in 1986. These are Plantinga's articles, to date, which speak directly to the issue of whether it is rational for the theist to believe in God in the face of insufficient evidence.

2. Is natural theology right in its conception of how theists hold their theistic belief?

From the standpoint of Reformed epistemology, this second question turns out to be closely related to the first one. Plantinga addresses this question specifically in two separate papers: "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" (1980 and reprinted in 1982) and "The Reformed Objection Revisited" (1983).

3. What is the nature of the warrant for or justification of a belief? What exactly does it mean that a belief is warranted?

The question of warrant or justification of belief is addressed by Plantinga as a larger epistemological issue - not just as an issue in religious epistemology. But his distinctive approach to this question is intimately linked to the distinctive viewpoint of Reformed epistemology. Accordingly, his discussion of this question is very important to an accurate understanding of Reformed epistemology. Two recent papers reflect his most important work on this subject - " Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function" (1988) and "Chisholmian Internalism" (1988). An earlier paper on the question, "Epistemic Justification" (March, 1986), is simply an earlier, truncated version of "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function."

4. A more specific concern is with this question: What distinctive perspective does theism bring to the question of what it means for a belief to be warranted? Does theism have a unique contribution to make to these questions?

Plantinga addresses this question in a very important paper - "Justification and Theism" (October, 1987). Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is central to the answer he gives to this question.

5. Is it possible to be a Christian philosopher who goes about doing philosophy in a distinctively Christian way and still have it be philosophy that he is doing?

This question too receives a very distinctive response because of the Reformed epistemological perspective that Plantinga brings to it. He answers this question in his address "Advice to Christian Philosophers" (July, 1984) and again - responding to a critic - in "Method in Christian Philosophy: A Reply" (April, 1988).

The papers Plantinga wrote in response to these five questions define the core literature upon which my study is based. My project is to explain, to clarify, and to critique the distinctive epistemological views which are reflected in this set of papers - particularly, as they relate to the epistemology of belief in the existence of God.

The Limits of This Study

It is important to be clear as to what I shall not do in this study. In setting out to defend Reformed epistemology, Plantinga begins with a general picture of knowledge and belief which he makes no attempt to defend. He doesn't even question it - nor does he acknowledge the possibility that it *could* be called into question. He simply takes it for granted.

My project is to look at Plantinga "from the inside," not to critique him "from the outside." Consequently, challenging this general conception of knowledge and belief which he assumes is not part of my critique. Instead, I grant him his general picture of knowledge and belief and seek to critique Reformed epistemology from within the framework of that general picture.

But in conceding his fundamental picture of knowledge and belief to him, I do not mean to suggest that it is unproblematic. Many aspects of his initial picture of knowledge and belief are indeed quite problematic. They are worthy of close scrutiny in their own right. Nonetheless, it is outside the scope of this project to make any of these the basis of my critique.

Here are some of the more important aspects of Plantinga's picture of knowledge and belief that - while they are problematic - I nonetheless accept without challenge for the purposes of this study:

1. Plantinga's mind is well-furnished with "beliefs." If Plantinga were to look out the window and see a mountain in the distance, he would "form the belief" that there is a mountain there. Not only that, but Plantinga has the belief that he had breakfast this morning, that his coffee cup is empty, that his computer is turned on, that his shirt is unbuttoned, etc.

Can this be right? Does it make sense to say that we have such beliefs? We know what it means to have the belief that democracy is superior to oligarchy. We know what it means (presumably) to have the belief that God will judge the wicked. But does it make sense to have <u>beliefs</u> that the mountain is there, the coffee cup is empty, etc.? What do we mean by referring to these as "beliefs"? I know that my coffee cup is empty. I know that there is a mountain on the horizon. But do I form "beliefs" that my cup is empty and the mountain is there?

This is an odd use of language. Perhaps this locutionary oddness reveals something more philosophically significant: a false picture of knowledge and belief - one which mistakenly and misleadingly transforms aspects of what we know into philosophical fictions called "beliefs."

If so, then Plantinga's entire epistemology is undermined. It is fundamental to his very picture of human believing that any and every aspect of what we know involves our holding a "belief" about something. For Plantinga, it makes perfectly good sense to "form the belief" that my shirt is unbuttoned. But this is a point of real vulnerability for Reformed epistemology. If this is a fundamental mistake - if "beliefs" about empty coffee cups and unbuttoned shirts are philosophical fictions - then Reformed epistemology, from the outset, is based on a false picture of knowledge and belief.

For my project here, however, I grant him his picture of human believing. I assume that he is right. I assume that it somehow makes sense to "hold the belief" that my shirt is unbuttoned.

2. There is another important aspect of Plantinga's initial picture of knowledge and belief. Plantinga assumes that all of his beliefs (of which there are many) can be understood to form what he calls a "noetic structure" - a network of beliefs wherein one belief is based on one or more other beliefs which in turn are based on still other beliefs, etc. The noetic structure involves, among other things, a pattern of "basis relations" which can, in principle, be seen to exist between all of one's beliefs. So, from the standpoint of Plantinga's picture of rational belief, my knowledge that a mountain exists or that the coffee cup is empty has to be "based on" something. It will not be based on "evidence"; Plantinga rejects that. Such beliefs are basic beliefs; they are directly "based on" or "grounded in" my experience itself. But even these basic beliefs must be <u>based</u> <u>on</u> *something.* That he simply takes for granted.

But is this right? Isn't this too a misleading picture of knowledge and belief? Now it is true: I do hold beliefs that can meaningfully be said to be "based on" something else - like evidence. It makes sense to say, for example,

that - based on some legal records which I have seen - I now hold the belief that my great-great-grandfather came to Oregon from Missouri. Does it follow, therefore, that every belief must have some sort of basis or grounds upon which it is held - whether evidence or something else? Plantinga assumes "yes." This is part of his general picture of rational belief; and I will swallow it whole, right along with the rest of his picture of rational belief.

But the question still remains. Once again we have a point at which Plantinga's whole project is vulnerable. His whole epistemological theory attempts to answer the question - when is a belief held on a sound "basis"? But the very question being answered is dependent upon a particular picture of knowledge and belief. If the picture is wrong, the question itself is misplaced and misleading.

3. Closely related to this last point: Plantinga is unmistakably a foundationalist. Foundationalism holds that one has a set of foundational beliefs. Foundational beliefs function as the ultimate basis upon which all one's other beliefs are held. They cannot themselves be based on other beliefs; for they must serve as the basis for all one's other beliefs. Accordingly, they must derive their warrant differently from other beliefs. Either they are self-warranting, or they are directly warranted by experience in a unique sort of way.

Again, it is not my purpose in this study to challenge or question this foundationalist picture of knowledge and belief. That is a whole different project in its own right. I will assume that foundationalism is acceptable and proceed to understand and critique Reformed epistemology from within the foundationalist picture of belief.

4. Fundamentally - in Plantinga's general picture of knowledge and belief - belief in God is not fundamentally unlike other beliefs that one has. The logic of belief in God is fundamentally like the logic of ordinary beliefs; and the epistemology of our belief in God is fundamentally like the epistemology of our ordinary beliefs. Plantinga does not defend this assumption; it is just part of his general picture of knowledge and belief.

But this is a problematic assumption. Perhaps religious belief in general (and belief in God in particular) is not sufficiently like non-religious belief to even warrant a comparison? In Plantinga's general picture of religious beliefs, religious beliefs involve hypotheses about experience that need to be confirmed in order to be rationally held. But perhaps religious beliefs are not like that. Perhaps they are something entirely different. Perhaps, instead, they are means whereby we give expression to a certain self-awareness, a certain contact with our own feelings. Or perhaps they are discrete forms of knowledge given as a "gift from God," and are not acquired through the rational processes through which my other beliefs are acquired. In other words, perhaps coming to hold a religious belief is fundamentally a non-rational process. In such cases as these, the right way to defend religious belief - when it seems to come up short when evaluated by the standards of rationality used to evaluate non-religious belief - is to point out how radically unlike non-religious belief it is and to argue that different standards need, therefore, be applied.

But this is not Plantinga's approach; and it is not within my purposes to challenge him on this assumption. For the sake of this study, I will grant him that a basic continuity exists between the logic of religious and non-religious

belief. I will grant him that religious beliefs and non-religious beliefs are fundamentally the same sort of thing.

5. Assuming that belief in God is fundamentally like other non-religious beliefs, Plantinga typically draws an analogy between theistic belief and perceptual beliefs. Furthermore, the analogy he seeks to draw is to perceptual beliefs as understood by a particular theory of perception. He typically alludes to a theory of perception wherein one forms the perceptual belief "I see a tree" when one is "appeared to treely." It is difficult to say to what extent Plantinga's argument depends upon this particular theory of perception. I think he could reformulate his arguments in such a way that - though he still drew an analogy between theistic belief and perceptual beliefs - he did so without articulating that analogy in terms of his particular theory of perception. In any event, it is outside the scope of my study to challenge his theory of perception. I grant it to him.

6. Plantinga typically refers to "beliefs" as the output of one's "noetic equipment." This is clearly a kind of mechanical metaphor. Beliefs are the output of our God-given "equipment" for forming beliefs just as widgets are the products of a widget-making machine. One cannot help but be suspicious of an analogy drawn between two such disparate things. It seems unlikely that coming to hold beliefs is like manufacturing widgets. Nonetheless, it is outside the scope of my project to challenge this sort of metaphor. I will swallow this along with everything else in Plantinga's general conception of forming and holding beliefs.

The Structure of This Study

My study begins (in chapter II) with a survey of Reformed epistemology. I attempt to give a brief but thorough overview of Plantinga's theory and the arguments he gives in its defense. In order to come to a clear understanding of what Reformed epistemology is, it is important from the outset to have the whole picture in view. That is the purpose of chapter II.

In chapters III through VII, I explore a series of five important issues. Clearly understanding these issues brings us to a clearer and more accurate understanding of Reformed epistemology in general. Chapters III through VI concern four issues which have been raised by critics of Reformed epistemology. My purpose in these four chapters is to explore whether and to what degree these criticisms of Reformed epistemology are valid. For the most part, chapters III through VI turn out to be a defense of Plantinga against his most important critics.

One of the criticisms leveled at Reformed epistemology is that it constitutes a form of fideism. In chapter III, I analyze what fideism is - determining that there are different kinds of fideism - and, at the same time, discuss how Reformed epistemology is situated with respect to each of these different types of fideism. I argue that Reformed epistemology is not helpfully viewed as fideism in any sense which makes it epistemologically objectionable.

The second criticism I discuss is that Reformed epistemology leads to a sort of relativism vis a vis truth and knowledge. In chapter IV, I argue that - though there is a sort of relativism implicit in Reformed epistemology - it is not a sort of relativism to which one can reasonably object. Some of Plantinga's

critics argue that Reformed epistemology leaves us with no basis from which to criticize or disallow arbitrary, gratuitous, or even "nutty" beliefs which others might propose to hold. I show how these critics - in raising this sort of objection - have misconstrued what Reformed epistemology is actually saying. It does not lead to this sort of relativism where any and every basic belief is equal to any other. Rather, the sort of relativism which Plantinga does embrace is one which accurately and realistically describes life in the real epistemic world.

The final two objections involve the cogency of two of Reformed epistemology's central doctrines. In chapters V and VI, respectively, I explore at length these two important doctrines - (1) the *sensus divinitatis* or the human being's natural tendency to believe in God, and (2) the effect of human sinfulness in overriding and obscuring a person's natural tendency to believe in God. If one is going to embrace Reformed epistemology, he needs to be convinced that these absolutely central doctrines are themselves reasonable doctrines and neither *ad hoc* nor fundamentally confused. In these chapters I attempt to reach clarity as to exactly what Plantinga does and does not mean by these doctrines. Furthermore, I attempt to show how they naturally cohere with and arise from the rest of Plantinga's Christian beliefs. I argue that these are not, therefore, *ad hoc* philosophical doctrines, but (in the light of a generally Christian view of things) are reasonable, plausible explanations of the reality of our experience.

Chapter VII is a transitional chapter. On the one hand, its purpose is to continue the project of clarifying exactly what it is that Reformed epistemology is and is not asserting. Particularly, I attempt to clarify the all-important concept of a "basic belief" in Plantinga's thought. I do so in the course of defending him against Anthony Kenny's important challenge to Reformed epistemology. I try

to show that Kenny's rebuttal of Reformed epistemology has not altogether succeeded. I show how Kenny does not really address the key assertion that Plantinga - rightly understood - is making.

At the same time, chapter VII begins to lay the groundwork for my critique of Reformed epistemology. I argue in chapter VII and chapter VIII that there is a fundamental ambiguity in Plantinga's conception of a "basic belief." As a result, his assertion that belief in God is "properly basic" is not precise enough to clarify its exact epistemological status. With regard to that question, Plantinga seems to be of two minds. On the one hand, he seems to understand belief in God to be a truly-basic, ultimately-foundational belief on the order of a perceptual belief. On the other hand, he sometimes regards it as basic only in the sense that it is - for the theist - taken for granted; it is the practical starting point for all his rational discourse. As such, it is not really epistemologically foundational. It can be and ultimately must be defended by argument. It is foundational only in the sense that it functions as a working foundation for the theist in practical everyday discourse. This, I argue, is a very important tension in Plantinga's own views on the matter.

Chapter VIII deals specifically with Plantinga's arguments that belief in God can be basic and yet still be defeasible by argument. By seeking to defend this position, Plantinga reveals a confusion in his own mind as to the status of theistic belief. If theistic belief were an epistemologically foundational belief of the kind that Reformed epistemology requires, it would be a virtually indefeasible belief. But Plantinga rejects this; he clearly wants to maintain that it is defeasible, that it can be undermined by arguments or evidence which show it to be wrong. The only way to understand his resistance to the clear implication of his own theory is to conclude that he is himself fundamentally

confused - of two minds - as to the true status of belief in God. As an able defender of Reformed epistemology, he must argue that it is a truly epistemologically basic belief. As an intellectually responsible theist, he argues that it is held non-dogmatically, with openness to refutation. These two positions are fundamentally incompatible; but their incompatibility is not at all obvious. It is concealed by the vagueness of the categories he employs.

In chapter IX, I offer my final critique of Reformed epistemology. My main concern is not to critique Plantinga's presentation of Reformed epistemology. That is marred, as I have already shown, by Plantinga's confusion as to how he wants to view the status of theistic belief. My primary concern in chapter IX is to critique a consistent, coherent Reformed epistemology. A coherent Reformed epistemology holds that theistic belief is actually a non-basic belief which is directly and transparently inferred from innumerable truly-basic beliefs like "God made that flower" - a belief formed while looking at a flower. The validity of Reformed epistemology hinges on the claim that beliefs such as "God made that flower" are truly-basic for the theist. I argue that there is a distinctive phenomenology of holding a belief as truly-basic. I argue further that when I, personally, hold the belief "God made that flower," the way I do so does not conform, phenomenologically, to the phenomenology of holding a belief as truly-basic. Hence, I argue, it does not seem to be truly-basic for me. Neither is there unambiguous evidence that it is for Plantinga himself. I conclude, therefore, that Reformed epistemology is probably mistaken in its factual claim that theists do, in fact, hold beliefs like "God made that flower" as truly-basic. But if Reformed epistemology is mistaken about that, it is altogether wrong as a theory of the epistemology of theistic belief.

In chapter X, I sum up my position: though I have not proven Reformed epistemology wrong, I have raised serious doubts as to whether it accurately identifies the epistemological status of belief in the existence of God.

CHAPTER II

AN OVERVIEW OF PLANTINGA'S REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

In this chapter, I shall give an overview of Reformed epistemology as Plantinga understands and defends it. To reach an accurate understanding of Plantinga's position we need to understand the rhetorical context within which it is set. Reformed epistemology takes a distinctive stand on a significant controversy. Does the intellectual and moral integrity of the theist's belief in the existence of God rest on whether or not God's existence can be successfully proven from "evidence"? Many committed atheists say "yes." So do many committed theists. Reformed epistemology says "no." To put the same question differently: If no incontrovertible argument for the existence of God could ever be made from commonly accepted "evidence," would the theist be intellectually or morally deficient to believe in God as he does? Would he be remiss to go on believing in God anyway? Most atheists and many theists would answer "yes." Plantinga and Reformed epistemology answer "no."

The Rhetorical Context of Plantinga's Exposition of Reformed Epistemology

To understand what Plantinga sees is at stake in this controversy, we need to understand his background. Undoubtedly his personal history has shaped the point of view he brings to this debate. Plantinga's experience is

that of a theist, raised and nurtured in a Dutch Calvinist subculture, confronting modern culture's prejudice against theism.

As a young boy, then, he grew up in a community where the existence and reality of God was simply taken for granted. It was part of the fabric of their lives. He describes the religious tradition of his family like this:

> The idea that religion is relevant just to one's private life or to what one does on Sunday was foreign to these people. For them religion was the central reality of life; all aspects of life, they thought, should be lived in the light of Christianity.[1]

But their devotion to Christianity was not a simple-minded one. In their own minds, to be a committed theist was not in conflict with the life of the mind, it was the context for it. Plantinga's description of his grandfather's church evidences the intellectual curiosity that was embedded in that culture:

> Although most of the members of the church were rural folk who hadn't the benefit of much formal education (my grandfather was lucky to finish the sixth grade), there was an astonishing amount of theological sophistication about. Many had read their Kuyper and Bavinck, and a few were considerably better at theology than some of the ministers in charge of the church.[2]

It would seem that this high esteem for intellectual endeavor permeated the culture. The Dutch Calvinism which Plantinga knows is an erudite and intellectually sophisticated tradition. This manifested itself in the spirit of Calvin College - the center of Plantinga's philosophical training:

---

[1]Alvin Plantinga, "Alvin Plantinga: Self-Profile" in Alvin Plantinga, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985), 4.

[2]Ibid., 6.

> At Calvin then (as now) the life of the mind was a serious matter. There was no toleration of intellectual sloppiness and little interest in the mindless fads that regularly sweep academia; rigor and seriousness were the order of the day.[3]

So Plantinga's religious background led him to a very vivid picture of theism as a viable and intellectually respectable view on the world. At the same time, his academic adventures exposed him to a broader culture - a culture which had come to be somewhat hostile to the faith he was nurtured in:

> ... the contemporary world contains much that is hostile to Christian faith: according to much of the intellectual establishment of the Western World, Christianity is intellectually bankrupt, not worthy of a rational person's credence.[4]

He experienced a conflict between these two opposing forces. The force of his religious background moved him toward seeing theism as intellectually rigorous and utterly rational. The force of modern culture moved him toward seeing theism as outmoded and anti-intellectual.

There is one final factor shaping Plantinga's point of view: through his study of philosophy, he became convinced that "it is difficult to find much by way of noncircular argument or evidence for the existence of God."[5]

Here, I think, we find the context for Plantinga's interest in Reformed epistemology. Two important (and seemingly contradictory) assumptions lie behind his interest: (1) there exist no arguments for the existence of God which decide that issue for all persons concerned; and (2) there exist committed theists in spite of the lack of conclusive "proof of" or "evidence for" the

---

[3]Ibid., 12.

[4]Ibid., 34.

[5]Ibid.

existence of God. Given this state of affairs, Plantinga is puzzled. What are we to make of such committed theists? Are they - as the conventional wisdom would have it - irresponsible to believe in God under such circumstances? Plantinga suspects not; that would fly in the face of his own experience. He finds in Reformed epistemology a plausible explanation as to how and why these undaunted theists are not being irrational.

It is important to note that Plantinga's aim is not primarily to attack atheism. His is a defensive stance. In contrast to much of classical apologetics, he is not trying to convict the atheist of being irrational. Rather, he is content to show that the theist is not being irrational. This more modest goal which Plantinga hopes to reach is simply a reflection of the defensive posture in which theism finds itself in the modern context. Plantinga is working within the rhetorical context as he finds it. Plantinga's goal is to refute the view that dominates popular opinion - namely, that theism is irresponsibly irrational. It is important to keep Plantinga's goal clearly in mind. Some of Plantinga's critics - failing to understand his true goal - misinterpret him because of it.[6]

---

[6] A number of critics, for example, misconstrue Plantinga's position to be a form of relativism where what is true and rational is simply a matter of what your particular intellectual community agrees is true and rational. It is true that Plantinga's emphasis is on the *parity* between theism and atheism with respect to epistemic rights. But what these critics fail to see is that Plantinga's emphasis is due to his defensive agenda - his desire to defend theism against the charge of irrationalism - rather than due to a committment to relativism. In fact, Plantinga explicitly holds that theism is true and rational and atheism is not. For examples of critics who misconstrue Plantinga in this way, see J. Wesley Robbins, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 14 (1983): 241-248 and Donald Hatcher, "Plantinga and Reformed Epistemology: A Critique" Philosophy and Theology: Marquette University Quarterly 1, (Fall 1986): 84-95.

None of this is to deny that Plantinga holds theism to be epistemically superior to atheism. Clearly he believes that. But in all of his work to date, it is not fundamentally his goal to turn the charge of irrationality back against atheism. Indeed, a distinctive implication of Plantinga's theory - one which he begins to make clear in his later essays - is that atheism is epistemically inferior to theism without being irrational and without being intellectually irresponsible.

Evidentialism's and Classical Foundationalism's Conception of Rational Belief

As we have already suggested, Plantinga's intent is to challenge the notion that belief in God is intellectually and morally deficient because we lack sufficient "evidence" for God's existence. He typically refers to this notion as the "evidentialist" challenge to belief in God, or "evidentialism." The nature of Plantinga's challenge is to call into question evidentialism's insistence that belief in God requires supporting "evidence." Although, superficially, the notion of needing evidence for one's belief in God seems straightforward, it is not. What sorts of things count as evidence? When is one's evidence sufficient evidence? How does one know when something is evidence? One would need to answer a whole host of questions before he could understand exactly what "there is not enough evidence" (for theism) even means.

Plantinga suggests that the atheist's charge that there is "not enough evidence" for theistic belief arises in the context of a particular picture of rationality. This picture is widely held, having dominated the minds of people for centuries. He labels it "classical foundationalism." The notions of rationality and evidence which are operative in the evidentialist challenge to theism are

notions which arise directly from the classical foundationalist picture of rational belief.

Plantinga expounds Reformed epistemology to show that there is an alternative to the classical foundationalist conception of rationality. But a word of caution is in order. Some of Plantinga's critics have assumed that his purpose is to propose a radically different alternative to classical foundationalism. This is mistaken.

First of all, *Plantinga never rejects foundationalism as such.* Reformed epistemology is itself a form of foundationalism. We might fairly describe him as offering Plantingan foundationalism as an alternative to classical foundationalism.[7] This important point has been lost on some. Some of Plantinga's critics complain that Plantinga rejects foundationalism without ever really explaining what he finds wrong with it.[8] What they fail to see is that Plantinga never explains why he rejects foundationalism because he never actually rejects foundationalism. What he rejects is a particular sort of foundationalism - namely, the version he calls classical foundationalism and goes to great lengths to describe.

---

[7]In some later essays, Plantinga himself distinguished between Reidian foundationalism and classical foundationalism. Reidian foundationalism, the epistemological view of the Scottish commonsense philosopher, Thomas Reid, does not - in Plantinga's view - suffer the same defects as classical foundationalism. Indeed, Plantingan foundationalism is inspired by and parallels Reidian foundationalism in some very important respects. See Alvin Plantinga, "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God" in Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment , ed. by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 115 (especially n. 12), 122, and 126.

[8]Henry B. Veatch, "Preliminary Statement of Apology, Analysis, and Critique" in Thomistic Papers IV, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988).

Furthermore, Plantingan foundationalism (Reformed epistemology) is not a *radically* different version of foundationalism. The differences which set Plantingan foundationalism apart from the classical foundationalism which he rejects are subtle. This is not to suggest that they are unimportant. They are very important. Plantinga is right about that. But they are nonetheless quite subtle; and it is the failure to appreciate these differences that has led many of Plantinga's critics to misinterpret him. The rejection of classical foundationalism is central to Plantinga's position. But we must not let that mislead us into thinking that what he wants to put in its place must be *radically* different from the classical foundationalism it replaces. The similarities between Plantingan and classical foundationalism are greater than the differences. *Reformed epistemology can better be characterized as an attempt to significantly modify classical foundationalism than as an attempt to reject it altogether.*

To understand classical foundationalism we need first to understand the notion of foundationalism itself. For this, Plantinga introduces the concept of a *noetic structure*. Plantinga suggests that every person has a set of beliefs and that those beliefs which he holds exist within a definable framework or structure. This structure is defined, primarily, in terms of what beliefs are held on the basis of which other beliefs. Belief B may be believed on the basis of Belief A, for example. And Belief C may be believed on the basis of belief B. The structure defined by such "basis" relationships is at the heart of what Plantinga means by a noetic structure.

Nowhere (to my knowledge) does Plantinga give a detailed analysis of what it means for one belief to be held "on the basis" of another. In a later

article,[9] he identifies this "basis" relationship as one wherein one belief acquires warrant from another. If Belief B is based on Belief A and Belief A is a warranted belief, then Belief B acquires warrant from Belief A by virtue of a *warrant transfer* from A to B. He writes:

> "[A proposition] can acquire warrant by virtue of warrant transfer: by virtue of being believed on the basis of some other proposition that already has warrant."[10]

I think we are to understand the "basis" relationship like this: *Belief B is based on Belief A if the nature of the relationship between Belief A and Belief B is such that if Belief A is warranted, Belief B is also warranted.* But this, of course, does not really tell us what this "basis relationship" is; it only tells us what it entails. He seems to assume that we have an intuitive sense of what it means for one belief to be based on another. It is not altogether unreasonable for him to do so. We probably do have a pretty good idea of what he has in mind. But we can wish for a fuller analysis of this basis relationship nonetheless. In any event, this relationship between various beliefs such that one belief is "based on" or "believed because of" another belief is - for the purposes of our discussion - the most important relationship existing between those beliefs which comprise the *noetic structure* of a person.

There are other important features of a noetic structure as well. Each belief in our noetic structure is held by us with a certain degree of firmness. So,

---

[9]Plantinga,"Coherentism," 113-123 is probably his most detailed discussion of the "basis" relationship. See also Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicolas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 52-55.

[10]Plantinga,"Coherentism," 120.

for example, Plantinga says, " I believe both that 2 + 1 = 3 and that London, England is north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; but I believe the former more resolutely than the latter."[11] Therefore, some "index of degree of belief" will be an important feature of a person's noetic structure.

Similarly, an index of the "depth of ingression" of each belief will be an important feature of one's noetic structure. By "depth of ingression" he has in mind how deeply embedded a belief is in the heart of the noetic structure - i.e., how radical or fundamental is the belief. Some beliefs I could change my mind about with little or no affect on the remainder of my beliefs. Other beliefs are so deeply intertwined with the rest of my beliefs that to change my mind about those beliefs would result in a dramatic and extensive reconsideration of vast portions of the rest of what I believe. Plantinga illustrates the concept thus:

> Some of my beliefs are, we might say, on the periphery of my noetic structure. I accept them, and may even accept them firmly, but I could give them up without much change elsewhere in my noetic structure. I believe there are some large boulders on the top of the Grand Teton. If I come to give up this belief (say by climbing it and not finding any), that change need not have extensive reverberations throughout the rest of my noetic structure; it could be accommodated with minimal alteration elsewhere. So its depth of ingression into my noetic structure is not great. On the other hand, if I were to come to believe that there simply is no such thing as the Grand Teton, or no mountains at all, or no such thing as the state of Wyoming, that would have much greater reverberations. And suppose I were to come to think there had not been much of a past (that the world was created just five minutes ago, complete with all its apparent memories and traces of the past) or that there were not any other persons: these changes would have even greater reverberations; these beliefs of mine have great depth of ingression into my noetic structure.[12]

---

[11]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 49.

[12]Ibid., 50.

So the description of a person's noetic structure - as Plantinga defines it - will identify the entire set of beliefs which he holds, will specify how firmly he holds each of his beliefs, will specify how great the depth of ingression is for each belief, and will describe the "basis" relationships which exist among all his beliefs.

For the purpose of understanding foundationalism, only this latter feature is important. A map of the basis relations holding between one's beliefs would reveal the framework of his noetic structure. Say, for example, that Belief B is held on the basis of Belief A. Belief C, in turn, is held on the basis of Belief B. And both Belief D and Belief E are held on the basis of Belief C. We have chains of beliefs related by one being the basis of another: D is based on C which is based on B which is based on A; but also E is based on C which is based on B which is based on A. And such chains would be only two of many such chains in a noetic structure. It is this complex interrelatedness of one's beliefs wherein some beliefs are based upon other beliefs which gives rise to the notion of foundationalism.

The foundationalist contends that any rational (and responsible) noetic structure will be characterized in a particular way - namely, it will have a level of beliefs which form the foundation of the noetic structure, and all the other beliefs in the noetic structure will be based, either immediately or mediately, on those foundational beliefs. The set of beliefs which form the foundation are what he calls "basic beliefs." These basic beliefs are not held on the basis of any other belief. They are truly foundational. They must be accepted on their own terms, without the evidential support of other beliefs. But all one's other beliefs - one's non-basic beliefs - must be supported by or "evidenced by" one's basic beliefs. Non-basic beliefs need not be based directly on basic

beliefs. They can be indirectly based on them. For example, they may be supported by beliefs which are supported by other beliefs which are supported by basic beliefs. But somehow, eventually, one ought to be able to trace the support for every one of his non-basic beliefs back to the basic beliefs in the foundation of his noetic structure.

There is more to foundationalism than this however. It also claims that not just any beliefs can populate the foundations of one's noetic structure. One cannot just arbitrarily decide what one wants to believe apart from any evidence or basis. If a belief is functioning in the foundations of one's noetic structure as a basic belief, it may be doing so properly or it may be doing so improperly. Hence, within the foundationalist conception of a noetic structure, the issue arises: when can a belief properly function as a basic belief? Any foundationalist view of knowledge must have some sort of criterion of proper basicality - i.e., a criterion whereby one determines whether a belief can legitimately serve as a basic belief in the foundations of one's noetic structure.

Foundationalism, then, can be understood as involving these three assumptions about the character of a rational noetic structure:

1. There will be two types of beliefs in one's noetic structure, basic beliefs and non-basic beliefs. Basic beliefs are foundational beliefs which have no basis in or support from other beliefs. Non-basic beliefs are based on and supported by other beliefs that one holds.[13]

---

[13]Ibid., 72. Plantinga explains further that such beliefs will be "proportional" to the support they receive from the foundations. I.e., non-basic beliefs will be accepted and held only with that degree of tenacity which is warranted by the degree of support they receive from the foundations of the noetic structure. For the purposes of this paper, this feature of foundationalism will not be particularly important.

2. The set of basic beliefs which one holds forms the foundation of his noetic structure in the sense that it provides the basis upon which all the rest of his beliefs are accepted.

3. In order for a belief to be legitimately and responsibly considered a basic belief in the foundations of one's noetic structure, it must be a particular sort of belief whose distinctive characteristics make it suited to serve in the foundations of a rational noetic structure.

In the last of these three assumptions there is room for differences among foundationalists. A particular foundationalist view of rational belief will have to specify what it is that makes one belief suited to be a basic belief and the next belief not. What is it that allows one belief to be properly considered as part of the foundation of one's noetic structure while another belief is not? In other words, a particular foundationalist epistemology must have some set of criteria of proper basicality.

Here is where the distinctive (and, to Plantinga, troublesome) character of classical foundationalism begins. Classical foundationalism takes a definitive stand on what constitutes proper basicality. For classical foundationalism, a belief can properly be taken to be basic only if it is either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses.[14] I shall explain what Plantinga means by each of these criteria.

---

[14]Plantinga's presentation is a bit more complex than stated here. Plantinga defines classical foundationalism as the conjunction of two related types of foundationalism: ancient - medieval foundationalism and modern foundationalism. Ancient - medieval foundationalism's criteria of proper basicality is that a belief is properly basic if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses. Modern foundationalism's criteria of proper basicality is that a belief is properly basic if it is either self-evident or incorrigible. The disjunction of these two views - what Plantinga calls *classical foundationalism* - holds, then, that a properly basic belief must be either self-evident, evident to the

A proposition is self-evident if it can immediately be seen to be true simply by understanding what it means. Upon understanding the statement, "A proposition cannot be both true and false at the same time in the same respect," I can immediately know that it is true. One need not provide an argument for it to convince me. I need not see evidence that it is true. Its truth is immediately obvious. When a proposition is self-evident in this sort of way, it is proper and appropriate to accept it as a basic belief. Self-evidence, therefore, is a sufficient condition for accepting a belief as basic. This is the first of the three criteria of proper basicality which classical foundationalism accepts.

When I am in the familiar circumstance of looking out the window of my study at the tree growing in my back yard, the proposition, "I see a tree in my back yard," can also be immediately known to be true.[15] I know it is true, because I am have the immediate experience of seeing the tree. Such a proposition, Plantinga says, is "evident to the senses."

> It is not easy to see just what Aquinas means by "evident to the senses," but perhaps the following is fairly close: a proposition is evident to the senses if

---

senses, or incorrigible. This particular formulation of the set of criteria is somewhat artificial. But - by combining them in this way - Plantinga is only trying to leave room for variation and vagueness in the classical foundationalist view.

[15]Putting the various clues together - see Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 50-52 and 78-82 - I take Plantinga to be doing this: he takes the perceptual proposition "I see a tree in my back yard" as a properly basic belief, the existential proposition "there is a tree in my back yard" as a non-basic belief based on the former perceptual belief, and the experiential belief "I am appeared to treely" as representing the ground of that perceptual belief but <u>not</u> a prior belief upon which that perceptual belief is based. Indeed, Plantinga would maintain that one does not even hold the experiential belief "I am appeared to treely" when looking at a tree. Rather, he forms the belief "I see a tree."

> we human beings have the power to determine its truth by looking at, listening to, tasting, touching, or smelling some physical object.[16]

In ancient times, philosophers like Aristotle and Aquinas maintained that, when a proposition can immediately be known to be true because it is evident to one's senses in this way, then it is appropriate to accept that belief as basic - i.e., to accept it outright, without any evidence.

(In these paragraphs I describe "self-evident" and "evident to the senses" in terms of "knowing" that certain propositions are true. This is perhaps speaking loosely. Strictly speaking, these have to to do with one's "believing" that these propositions are true. However, for Plantinga as well as Aquinas and others, "believing" that such propositions are true amounts to "knowing" that they are true. They are convinced that such propositions are in fact true and that one is justified in thinking them so. Hence, they tend to blur the distinction between belief and knowledge in these contexts. In chapter IV I will have more to say about the relation between truth and proper basicality for Plantinga.)

But this account of being "evident to the senses" is a little confusing. How is it that being "evident to the senses" is a criterion of proper basicality for the classical foundationalist? Aren't such beliefs believed <u>on the basis of</u> evidence? Do I not believe "I see a tree in my back yard" on the basis of the evidence which my senses provide? Isn't my visual experience the evidence for my belief? So, how can being "evident to the senses" be a criterion for accepting a belief <u>apart from</u> any evidence? It is the evidence!

---

[16]Ibid., 43. Admittedly, Plantinga is explicating Aquinas's view here. But Plantinga does not go on to challenge or correct this view in any way. He appears to accept this account of a proposition's being evident to the senses.

To understand what Plantinga is saying here, we need to pay close attention to what Plantinga means by "evidence." As Plantinga has defined it, one's noetic structure is the set of beliefs which a person holds and the relationships which exist between those beliefs. So "evidence" - as Plantinga means it - is the support which one *belief* provides for another *belief.* My belief that "there exists a tree in my back yard" receives evidential support from my belief that "I see a tree in my back yard"; but my belief that "I see a tree in my back yard" has no evidential support, for there is no prior belief I hold which forms the basis for my holding it. I believe "I see a tree in my back yard" on the basis of a visual experience - my being "appeared to treely"[17] - not on the basis of some other belief. My "being appeared to treely" - whereas it may be called the "ground" of my belief - is not the "evidence" for my belief. It is not a belief but an experience. By Plantinga's definition of his terms, only another belief can be "evidence" for my belief.

So a belief like "I see a tree in my back yard" will be a basic, foundational belief for me. It is a belief which is accepted without the evidential support of some other belief.[18] It is among those foundational beliefs which serve as the

---

[17]Ibid., 58 et al. Plantinga adopts this peculiar locution from Chisholm. According to the sense-data theory of perception which lies behind this locution, one infers the existence of a tree from the familiar visual "appearance" or sense-data which one experiences. "I see a tree" - in ordinary language - is a conflation of the familiar "appearance" and the inference we make from it. In order to refer to the "appearance" apart from our belief in the tree's existence, Chisholm has devised the peculiar locution, "I am appeared to treely." Plantinga adopts this phrase in order to distinguish modern foundationalism, based on more modern sense-data theories of perception, from ancient foundationalism, based on more ancient theories of perception.

[18]See ibid., 51 where Plantinga argues explicitly that "I see a tree" is not based on the evidence of "I am appeared to treely."

ultimate "evidence" for all my other beliefs; but it is itself held apart from the evidence of any other belief. It is properly suited to function in that capacity because, through my visual experience, it can be known immediately to be true. This is what Plantinga means by being "evident to the senses."[19] Being evident to the senses is the second of the three criteria of proper basicality accepted by classical foundationalism.

To understand the third criterion we need to back up a bit. I assumed above that the belief "I see a tree in my back yard" is grounded in an experience but not held on the basis of any other belief. Some modern philosophers have rejected this. They argue that the belief "I see a tree in my back yard" is some sort of inference from the belief "I am being appeared to treely" (ignoring the back yard for the sake of simplicity). What is immediately acceptable without evidence on the grounds of my visual experience is only the belief "I am being appeared to treely." This, then, becomes the belief which serves as evidential support for the belief, "I see a tree (in my back yard)."

Epistemologists who prefer this analysis of perceptual knowledge do not accept "being evident to the senses" as a criterion of proper basicality; rather, they prefer "incorrigibility" (along with self-evidence) as the appropriate criterion. Incorrigibility is the quality which a proposition might have of being unable to be false. "I am in pain," "I am being appeared to greenly," "I feel sad" - these propositions all express beliefs about which we cannot be mistaken. If I think I feel sad, I simply cannot be wrong about that. It would make absolutely

---

[19] In one of his more recent essays , Plantinga describes such beliefs as "perceptual beliefs." In Plantinga, "Coherentism," 114, he writes, "... perceptual beliefs of this sort, as he [the ancient or medieval classical foundationalist] sees things, are typically taken as basic and furthermore are properly basic."

no sense to say, "I thought for a moment that I was feeling sad, but now I realize I was mistaken about that." Feeling sad, being in pain, experiencing pleasure, these are not the sorts of things we can get wrong. Therefore, any propositions which state beliefs about our subjective experience in this way are what Plantinga (and others) call "incorrigible."

According to certain theories of perception, the subjective experience of "being appeared to treely" - from which we infer the belief "I see a tree" - is one of these incorrigible propositions. It cannot be wrong. If I think I am being appeared to treely, then I am being appeared to treely. I may be wrong to think that I am seeing a tree - for it may actually be the case that I am hallucinating a tree. But in no case can my belief that I am being appeared to treely be wrong. Hallucination, dream, or optical illusion - they all involve the experience of being appeared to treely. "Incorrigibility," then, is the third sufficient condition for a belief's being accepted as basic. It is the last of the three criteria of proper basicality which classical foundationalism accepts.[20]

We are finally in a position to understand the picture of rational belief called classical foundationalism. The distinctive feature of classical foundationalism is the answer it gives as to what sorts of beliefs can properly serve in the foundations of one's noetic structure. If a belief is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, it can properly serve as a basic belief. If it is not one of these, it cannot; it is not suited to function in the foundations of one's noetic structure.

---

[20]See ibid., 122 where Plantinga steers away from calling such beliefs "incorrigible" beliefs and refers to them instead as propositions "...appropriately about my own mental states."

As we can see, then, classical foundationalism is quite clear as to what it would mean for belief in the existence of God to be rational. It must either be suited to function as a basic, foundational belief - which means it must be self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible - or it must be a belief which is ultimately based on suitably basic beliefs. If the existence of God is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, then one could properly hold belief in God to be a basic belief. Indeed, only if the existence of God is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses can one properly accept it as basic. It would be irresponsible to hold belief in God as a basic belief if it were not the sort of belief that is suited to being basic; and classical foundationalism is clear that only these three sorts of beliefs are suited to being basic. Or, on the other hand, if the existence of God can somehow be demonstrated to follow from other beliefs and those other beliefs from which it follows are, ultimately, self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible - in that case, too, one is rational to believe in God's existence. But only on one of these two conditions is belief in God rational - either it must itself be properly basic (by the criteria of classical foundationalism), or it must follow from beliefs that are.

No one could plausibly claim that the existence of God is properly basic by classical foundationalist standards. Certainly it is not *self-evident* that God exists. To know what it means to say "God exists" is not to know immediately that it is true. It is entirely different from the belief "1+ 1 = 2." And surely belief in God is not *incorrigible.* It is not the sort of belief that one cannot get wrong. And finally, it is not *evident to the senses.* I do not just open my eyes, look at God, and know that God exists because I see him. By the standards of classical foundationalism then - if belief in the existence of God has any place in a rational noetic structure - it belongs not in the foundations, but in the

superstructure. It is a non-basic belief and must be shown to be based on and supported by other beliefs which, ultimately, are properly basic beliefs.

Here is where a great divide occurs among philosophers. Classical foundationalists who are theists argue that there is irrefutable evidential support for the existence of God which is ultimately based on properly basic beliefs. Classical foundationalists who are not theists argue that no such evidential support can be found. The evidentialist objection to belief in the existence of God arises from just this perspective. No rational noetic structure can permit a belief which is neither properly basic nor evidenced by and supported by beliefs which are. Belief in God is not properly basic; and no properly basic beliefs provide sufficient evidence for it. Therefore, belief in God has no place in a truly sound and rational noetic structure. In other words, there is insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of God, so to believe in God anyway is to be irrational and intellectually (if not morally) irresponsible. As Plantinga sees it, this is the reasoning behind the evidentialist objection; and classical foundationalism is undeniably the context out of which this objection arises.

Traditionally, theists have countered the evidentialist objection by denying that the existence of God lacks evidential support from properly basic beliefs and seeking to supply arguments which lay out that evidence. Plantinga's is a completely different response. On the question of whether theistic belief can be supported on the basis of basic beliefs acceptable to classical foundationalism, Plantinga's sympathies lie more with the evidentialist objector than with the theistic apologist. In the final analysis, it would seem to him that it cannot.

Yet, says Plantinga, it would be too hasty to conclude that belief in the existence of God is, therefore, inappropriate in a rational noetic structure. Perhaps - he argues - belief in the existence of God is itself a properly basic belief after all. Perhaps we can find no evidential support for it precisely because it is itself one of the foundational beliefs which serve as the very basis of all evidential support. Having been held under the sway of the classical foundationalist picture of rational belief, we have too hastily dismissed this possibility.

Rejecting the Classical Foundationalist's Conception of Rational Belief

Any good classical foundationalist responds with immediate incredulity at Plantinga's suggestion here. It seems absurd to think that belief in the existence of God could properly function as a foundational, basic belief. If flies right in the face of all our intuitions about rational belief. Plantinga knows that. He cannot hope to convince us that it makes sense to accept theistic belief as properly basic without first undermining the confidence we place in these intuitions about rationality. That is the tack he takes.

Plantinga argues that at the heart of these intuitions which urge us to reject theistic belief as basic is our tacit acceptance of the criteria for proper basicality proposed by classical foundationalism. The reason the existence of God cannot be a foundational belief is because it is neither self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. But is this really a complete list of sufficient conditions for proper basicality? Classical foundationalism assumes that it is. Is classical foundationalism right about this? Plantinga thinks not.

Upon a little reflection, we discover two major problems with the classical foundationalist's criteria of proper basicality (and hence with its overall picture of what constitutes a rational noetic structure):

1. Classical foundationalism's criteria of proper basicality are much too restrictive. If taken seriously, there are many beliefs which are clearly properly basic which would be disallowed by the criteria of classical foundationalism. If clearly properly basic beliefs are disallowed by its criteria of proper basicality, then these criteria are too restrictive and not inclusive enough. There must be other sufficient conditions of proper basicality which classical foundationalism has omitted from its list.

2. If classical foundationalism is right - if self-evidence, incorrigibility, and evidence to the senses are the only criteria of proper basicality - then classical foundationalism ends up being self-referentially absurd.

I shall explain both of these objections more fully. As for the first objection, Plantinga observes two sorts of beliefs which, though they clearly are properly basic, would be ruled improper by the classical foundationalist's criteria for proper basicality: (1) propositions about the past, and (2) propositions which entail the existence of other persons distinct from myself. (And in some modern forms of classical foundationalism, we would find propositions which entail the existence of enduring physical objects ruled improper as well.)

My belief that I had lunch this noon is clearly properly basic for me. I do not believe it on the basis of other beliefs that I hold. I do not accept it on the basis of "evidence." I believe it because I remember it. I just remember having

lunch and therein know that it is true.[21] Am I irrational in accepting such a belief without "evidence"? Surely not. Surely any rational person, thinking rationally, would know immediately, on the basis of his memory, whether he had lunch. It is crazy to think otherwise. But what if we apply the classical foundationalist's criteria?

Is it self-evident that I had lunch this noon? Does merely understanding what it would mean to have lunch this noon immediately lead to my knowing it is true? Certainly not ! Is it incorrigible? Is it the sort of belief that I could not possibly be wrong about ? Is it impossible that I could think that I had lunch this noon and be mistaken? No, certainly not. I could certainly have a hazy, unclear (and unreliable) memory about having had lunch. Surely I could be thinking that I had eaten lunch and not remember that I had forgotten to do so. It is not an incorrigible proposition. Is it evident to the senses? Not in the sense

---

[21]In Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 79-80 he qualifies this. The circumstance or condition that confers justification on a proposition like "There is a rose-colored wall before me" consists of more than the experience of being appeared to in a certain fashion. He writes: "No doubt [the condition which would confer justification on this proposition] will include more [than being appeared to in a certain fashion]. If I am appeared to in the familiar fashion but know that I am wearing rose-colored glasses, or that I am suffering from a disease that causes me to be thus appeared to, no matter what the color of the nearby objects, then I am not justified in taking ["I see a rose-colored wall before me"] as basic. Similarly for memory. Suppose I know that my memory is unreliable; it often plays me tricks. In particular, when I seem to remember having breakfast, then, more often than not, I have not had breakfast. Under these conditions I am not justified in taking it as basic that I had breakfast, even though I seem to remember that I did." He concludes, "So being appropriately appeared to, in the perceptual case, is not sufficient justification; some further condition - a condition hard to state in detail - is clearly necessary." He would clearly say the same thing with respect to the case of memory beliefs. Remembering, in itself, is not a sufficient justification of a memory belief; "some further condition - a condition hard to state in detail - is clearly necessary."

that classical foundationalism means it. I do not know that I had lunch this noon because of what I see, smell, taste, feel, or hear.

So the classical foundationalist is faced with a dilemma here. By his own criteria, it would be irrational to accept the proposition "I had lunch this noon" as a basic, foundational belief which he accepts apart from any evidence. Yet, it is clearly the case that that is precisely what he does. What else can we conclude but that the classical foundationalist's criteria are not inclusive enough. They are too restrictive. They do not spell out all of the conditions which a proposition could satisfy to qualify it as a properly basic belief.

Not only would the classical foundationalist's criteria wrongly and artificially diminish the stock of basic beliefs which one could rationally hold, but it would, indirectly, condemn as irrational much of what we all do, in fact, believe. Much that we believe is based on beliefs we accept as basic which classical foundationalism - were it true to its own criteria - would dismiss as irrational. If everything we believe which is ultimately based on memory beliefs (for example) is irrational, then consider how much of what we believe is thereby condemned as irrational.

Surely there is something wrong with a set of criteria which judges to be irrational what we all accept to be rational. This unhappy and absurd result strongly suggests the inadequacy of the classical foundationalist's picture of rational belief. In Plantinga's own words:

> We should note first that if this thesis, [Plantinga is referring to the thesis that only propositions which are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses are properly basic beliefs.] and the correlative foundationalist thesis that a proposition is rationally acceptable only if if follows from or is probable with respect to what is properly basic - if these claims are true, then enormous quantities of what we all in fact believe are irrational. One crucial lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy - Descartes

> through Hume, roughly - is just this: relative to propositions that are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable - at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable. Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me ... .
>
> And does not this show that the thesis in question is false?[22]

Plantinga's second objection has to do with the self-referential inconsistency of the classical foundationalist's criteria for proper basicality. What if we render the classical foundationalist's criteria in propositional form? We get something like this (for convenience I will refer to it as "CF") -

> ... A is properly basic for me only if A is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for me.[23]

Is it rational to accept such a proposition? If classical foundationalism is right, then I can only rationally accept CF if - (1) it is itself properly basic - and, hence, if it is itself self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, or (2) I believe CF on the basis of propositions which are properly basic for me. Now clearly CF cannot itself be properly basic; for certainly it is not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. So if classical foundationalism is right, it will be rational to believe CF only if some good argument for it can be given whose premises are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. But, according to Plantinga, no foundationalist has ever provided such an argument. The fact of the matter is - in total conflict with classical foundationalism's own criteria of proper basicality - the criteria themselves are

---

[22]Ibid., 59-60.

[23]Ibid., 60.

accepted as basic by the classical foundationalist. It is therefore inconsistent. It claims that only self-evident, incorrigible, or sense-evident propositions are qualified to serve in the foundations of one's noetic structure, and yet it accepts this very claim as to what can properly be basic (CF) itself as a foundational, basic belief even though it is itself neither self-evident, incorrigible, nor sense-evident. The fundamental claim of classical foundationalism is, therefore, self-referentially inconsistent. If classical foundationalism is true, then (by its own criteria of rationality) it is irrational to accept it as true. And if classical foundationalism is false, it would be irrational to accept it as true - for it is inherently irrational to accept as true something one knows to be false. Classical foundationalism, therefore, is an inadequate picture of rational belief.

This puts the evidentialist's objection to belief in the existence of God in a new light. What if we concede that there is no compelling evidence for belief in the existence of God? Is it not still open to the theist to hold that his belief in God is a basic belief? Here, traditionally, is where classical foundationalism has entered the picture. The evidentialist answers (roughly) - "No, you cannot hold belief in the existence of God as basic, because God's existence is neither self-evident, incorrigible, nor evident to the senses." But, says, Plantinga - given the obvious inadequacy of the classical foundationalist's conception of rationality - this can no longer be accepted. What if the line of reasoning advocated by the evidentialist in recommending the rejection of theistic belief were consistently applied? Not only would the theist have to reject his belief in God, he would also have to give up his belief in the existence of other persons and his belief that "the world has existed for more

than five minutes."[24] There is no "evidence" that the world has existed for more than five minutes. There is no "evidence" that other persons besides myself exist. And neither of these beliefs can rationally be accepted as basic beliefs (since neither of them is self-evident, incorrigible, or sense-evident). Hence, the evidentialist argument against the rationality of belief in God's existence employs a line of reasoning which would also require us to reject our belief in the past and our belief in other minds. The theist has no obligation to take such a line of reasoning seriously. The evidentialist objection - rooted as it is in classical foundationalism's faulty conception of rationality - is no serious threat to theistic belief.

To summarize Plantinga's critique of classical foundationalism, Plantinga has leveled two objections against the criteria of proper basicality which lie at the heart of its conception of rational belief: (1) its criteria of proper basicality are self-referentially incoherent, and (2) its criteria of proper basicality are too restrictive and need to be made more inclusive. As a consequence, when classical foundationalism announces that - by its criteria - belief in God is not soundly rational, it is less than threatening to the theist; for the criteria it employs to determine rational soundness are woefully inadequate. By its criteria (applied consistently), most of what we rationally believe is not soundly rational!

Reformed Epistemology and the Criteria of Proper Basicality

To understand where Plantinga wants to take us from here, we need to explore how one would come to an adequate set of criteria for proper

---

[24]Ibid., 59.

basicality. Plantinga thinks there is one and only one way to discover the criteria which qualify a belief to be a foundational, basic belief - namely, induction.

> ... the proper way to arrive at such a criterion [i.e., a criterion of proper basicality] 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. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicality and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples.[25]

One must not impose a set of criteria of proper basicality on one's beliefs which has not been informed by those beliefs which one does in fact hold to be basic. If one holds belief P as basic and accepts that it is eminently rational to do so, what sense does it make to espouse a criterion of proper basicality which rules that P is not properly basic? Doesn't it make more sense to correct or revise one's criterion of proper basicality before rejecting as irrational a belief I know to be rational?

As Plantinga shows, this is one of the telling objections to classical foundationalism. To be consistent with its own criterion, it must rule to be irrational what every classical foundationalist surely knows to be rational. Its criterion of proper basicality does not reflect and explain the actual foundations of the classical foundationalist's noetic structure. It is artificially constructed and imposed from the outside. In the end, therefore, to impose its criterion on the theist is artificial, arbitrary, and hypocritical - imposing a set of criteria

---

[25]Ibid., 76.

which the classical foundationalist himself does not follow. It is nothing more than a bit of "intellectual imperialism."[26]

To avoid this sort of artificiality in one's criteria of proper basicality, one must construct those criteria with reference to the set of foundational beliefs which he does, in fact, hold. He must discover the criteria of proper basicality already implicit in the basic beliefs he holds. That being so, the theist need not accept classical foundationalism's judgment as to whether belief in God can properly serve as basic. The theist need only ask of his own noetic structure, "Do I believe in the existence of God on the basis of 'evidence' - i.e., do I believe it on the basis of some other belief that I hold? Or does my belief in God serve as a basic belief for me? If so - if it is foundational for me - then, in my own judgment, am I being rational to hold it as foundational?" If the theist can answer "yes" to his theistic belief's serving him as a properly basic belief, then if follows that it is a properly basic belief for him.

Can the theist answer "yes" to this? Does the theist hold his belief in God as a basic belief? And in his own estimation, does he do so properly and rationally? He can and he does, says Plantinga. He does not argue this point. He simply asserts it as fact. Theists do not believe in God on the basis of evidence. The theist - out of the ground of his own experience - just knows that there is a God. It is simply a basic, foundational fact in his noetic structure. It is part of the foundation for everything else he knows.[27]

---

[26]Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?" in Rationality and Religious Belief, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 26.

[27]Strictly speaking, it is part of the foundation for everything he "believes." He only knows it if theistic belief is true and if he is justified in holding his theistic belief. But, for Plantinga, both of these conditions are met.

How can this be? How can belief in the existence of God be foundational? Enter, Reformed theology. The Reformed tradition, as Plantinga understands it, has all along advocated the view that belief in the existence of God is a properly basic belief. It has not used the concept of "proper basicality" to express it , but its teaching comes to the same thing according to Plantinga. Indeed, in defending theistic belief as a properly basic belief, Plantinga has self-consciously intended to expound the claims and views of these Reformed theologians in more philosophically rigorous terms. As far as I can tell, he has succeeded in doing just that.

How does Reformed theology explain how belief in God could be a properly basic belief? According to Reformed theology's interpretation of the Christian scriptures, every human being, as a creature of God, has been created with a "tendency" or "nisus" to believe in God. God so made the human creature that when, for example, he sees God's handiwork in the creation, he is predisposed to believe in the existence of the designer behind the design. It is not that he has an inclination to infer the existence of the designer; it is that he simply knows of the designer through - or on the occasion of - his encounter with the design. The point Reformed theology is making comes to this: as a human being confronts the world which God created, the existence of God is a transparent fact to him. No argument for God's existence is needed. God has so made the mind of man that he just knows that God exists

---

Ultimately, Plantinga wants to say that the theist does know that there is a God. However, one must not think that Plantinga is saying that because the theist accepts his theistic belief as properly basic he, therefore, knows that God exists. For Plantinga, the atheist accepts his atheistic belief as properly basic; but he is wrong to claim to "know" that God does not exist.

- as a basic, foundational belief - on the ground of God's existence being transparent to him when he encounters the creation.

We can better understand this aspect of Reformed epistemology through an analogy which is implicit in Plantinga's arguments. According to Plantinga, when I look out my window toward the tree in my back yard, I simply know that there exists a tree there. Plantinga rejects any analysis of perception that would suggest that I infer the existence of the tree. I do not experience being "appeared to treely" and then, through some sort of reasoning process, infer that a tree must actually exist there.[28] Rather, my looking at the tree simply provides me with the occasion for knowing (or, forming the belief) that a tree is there. For Plantinga, the belief "there is a tree in my back yard" is a basic, foundational belief grounded in the fact that I see it when I look out the window. Though it is grounded in my *experience*, it is not based on any prior *beliefs* which serve as evidence for it. It is believed apart from any evidence. My experience of seeing it there (in a particular set of circumstances) - that alone has resulted in the fact that I believe it is there.[29]

---

[28]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 51.

[29]Plantinga's theory of perception is not worked out in enough detail in his essays on Reformed epistemology to know if I have got it exactly right here. Here is the question I have: Which would Plantinga hold - (1) that - on the ground of my experience of looking at a tree - there is formed in me the properly basic belief "I see a tree" from which the belief "There exists a tree" is then immediately and straightforwardly inferred, or (2) that - on the ground of my experience of looking at a tree - there is formed in me both of these beliefs as properly basic beliefs - "I see a tree" and "There exists a tree"? The way I am drawing the analogy here assumes the latter rather than the former. There would seem to be some evidence for this interpretation. In ibid., 88, Plantinga specifically cites - in passing - as an example of a basic belief, the proposition, "There is a house over there." This would seem to be of the same sort as my "There exists a tree." What his view on this matter actually is does not matter for my purposes. In the analogous situation Plantinga has been clear. He holds

Similarly, when I observe a beautiful, delicate flower, I simply know that the beauty and intricate design of the flower is the result of its being made by God. I simply know that "God made this flower." I do not infer the existence of God. I do not see the flower and, through some version of the teleological argument, infer that the Designer made the flower. Rather, seeing the flower simply provides me with the occasion for forming the belief that God designed and created this flower. Hence, the belief "God made this flower" - which I entertain on the occasion of seeing a flower - is a basic, foundational belief in the same way that the belief "there is a tree there" - which I entertain on the occasion of looking at a tree - is a basic, foundational belief.

Notice exactly what the analogy is here. It is not: as I look at a tree and know immediately and non-inferentially that the tree exists, so also I look at a flower and know immediately and non-inferentially that God exists. This is not the analogy in view. Rather, it is this: as I look at a tree and know immediately and non-inferentially that the tree exists, so also I look at a flower and know immediately and non-inferentially that *the flower was made by God.*

Strictly speaking, my knowledge of God's existence *is* inferred and evidential. I believe in the existence of God on the basis or evidence of prior beliefs such as "God made that flower," "God made that sunset," and "God made that rainbow." To coin a phrase, I call this latter sort of beliefs "theo-implicatory beliefs." For Reformed epistemology - or at least for Plantinga - it is these theo-implicatory beliefs which are properly basic beliefs. It is these, not

---

that on the ground of my experience of looking at a tree there is formed in me both of these beliefs as properly basic beliefs - "I see a flower" and "God made that flower." This is clear because Plantinga's whole point rests on his insistence that beliefs such as "God made that flower" are basic, non-inferential beliefs.

belief in the existence of God *per se*, which are the common possession of every human person. God has so formed the human's noetic equipment that he cannot confront the creation without forming, as basic beliefs, theo-implicatory beliefs like those mentioned above. From these, it is a very straightforward, transparent inference to the existence of God.[30]

An obvious objection to Reformed epistemology can be raised at this point. If every human being is so equipped that he cannot help but form theo-implicatory beliefs, then how can there be anyone - let alone *a significant portion* of the human population - who does not form theo-implicatory beliefs on the appropriate occasions? Presumably, Bertrand Russell does not look at a sunset and form the belief, "God made that sunset." But, if Reformed epistemology is correct, wouldn't even Bertrand Russell form such a belief? In the analogy which we have drawn, the tendency to believe that the tree which one is looking at exists is (presumably) unexceptionally universal. Even such unabashed atheists as Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare find themselves believing the tree exists when they look at it. But there are numerous exceptions on the other pole of the analogy. Many are not at all inclined to believe that God made the flower they are looking at. Does this not count as evidence that theistic belief is not analogous to perceptual belief in the way Reformed epistemology suggests? If theistic belief were a natural and automatic outcome of the noetic processes of a rational being - i.e., if it were a

---

[30]Hence, Plantinga feels that, "speaking loosely," we can think in terms of belief in the existence of God, itself, as being a properly basic belief even though, strictly speaking, that is not true for the theist. See ibid., 82.

"deliverance of reason"[31] in the same way that belief in the existence of the tree I am looking at is, then we would expect theistic belief to be similarly universal. Since it is not, ought we to conclude that it is not an immediate, non-inferential deliverance of reason?

Here another aspect of Reformed epistemology enters in - the noetic effects of sin. Sin, of course, is a very important concept to the philosophy of Reformed theology generally - as it is to the philosophical viewpoint of the Christian scriptures themselves. But it plays a particular role in Reformed epistemology. Plantinga holds that one important effect of human sinfulness is the suppression of the theo-implicatory beliefs which would otherwise be immediately and non-inferentially formed in me. In a later chapter I will explore more fully Plantinga's conception of just how sin is supposed to have this suppressing effect and exactly what this suppression looks like. For now, it is sufficient to note that, because of the universal presence of sin among human beings, the failure of any one human being (or the whole lot of them) to form theo-implicatory beliefs would not count as evidence against the Reformed position that there is a God-given tendency to spontaneously form such beliefs. Reformed epistemology also holds that the universal human tendency to form belief in the existence of God is, in effect, canceled out by the universal

---

[31]This is Plantinga's own term for this: "From this vantage point we can see, therefore, that the Reformed epistemologist is not a fideist at all with respect to belief in God. He does not hold that there is any conflict between faith and reason here, and he does not even hold that we cannot attain this fundamental truth by reason; he holds, instead, that it is among the *deliverances of reason.* " [emphasis mine] - ibid., 90. The term itself first gets introduced in ibid., 70 - 71.

tendency of human sinfulness to reject belief in the existence of God.[32] So the fact that any one individual does not look at a flower and think, "God made this flower," is not evidence against there being a human inclination toward belief in the existence of God. Nor is it evidence against the propriety of belief in God being held as a basic, foundational belief.

Is Belief in God Apart from Evidence Rational?

Finally, we are in a position to see how Plantinga's exposition of Reformed epistemology has answered the question with which his work began - is a theist who believes in the existence of God without evidence irrational? Plantinga's answer is "No."

The charge of irrationality is one that is rooted in classical foundationalism. Plantinga has shown classical foundationalism to have a faulty picture of rationality. It imposes an arbitrary, artificial, and hypocritical standard when it charges the theist with irrationality for believing in God on insufficient evidence. What classical foundationalism fails to take into account is that there are numerous basic beliefs - beyond the arbitrarily and artificially restricted few that classical foundationalism is willing to admit - that every human being properly and rationally accepts on no evidence at all. For the theist, belief in God is among them.

---

[32]If human sinfulness really is universal, then why do any human beings - namely, theistic believers - believe in the existence of God? Why does their sinfulness not cancel out their theistic belief? Plantinga does not address this, but Reformed theology does. God chooses some - the elect - in whom he corrects the distorting effects of sin. It is a gift of God's mercy and goodness that he does so. In such a fortunate few, their natural tendency to believe in God is restored to its natural role and result.

It is the Reformed epistemologist's contention that just as rationality includes a noetic mechanism which delivers to me basic beliefs about the past [memory], about perceptual objects [the senses], about truths of logic, about other minds, and more, so rationality likewise includes a noetic mechanism which - on the appropriate occasions - delivers basic beliefs about God - eg., "God is speaking to me," "God has created all this," "God disapproves of what I have done," "God forgives me," and "God is to be thanked and praised."[33] The Reformed epistemologist holds that God has so constructed the human being that, in the right circumstances, our noetic equipment forms in us the appropriate sort of belief. I form a belief about the existence of a tree when looking at a tree. I form a belief about the existence of another rational being - a "mind" - when talking to another person. I form a belief about the truth of affirming the antecedent when reflecting on that argument form in logic. And I form a belief about my having had lunch when I remember having had lunch. Plantinga expresses the doctrine thus:

> Now how shall we think of positive epistemic status, or indeed, the whole human cognitive enterprise, from a Christian or theistic point of view? What bearing does theism have on the human cognitive enterprise?... The central point, I think, is this: according to the theistic way of looking at the matter, we human beings, like ropes and linear accelerators, have been designed; we have been designed and created by God. We have been created by God; furthermore, according to Christian and Jewish versions of theism, we have been created *in his own image* ; in certain crucial respects we resemble him. ...
>
> In setting out to create human beings in his image, then, God set out to create them in such a way that they could reflect something of his capacity to grasp concepts and hold beliefs. Furthermore, as the whole of the Christian tradition suggests, his aim was to create them in such a way that they can reflect something of his capacity for holding *true* beliefs, for attaining *knowledge.* ... he could have been aiming us, not at truth, but at something of

---

[33]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 81.

> some other sort - survival, for example, or a capacity to appreciate art, poetry, beauty in nature, or an ability to stand in certain relationships with each other and with him. But the great bulk of the tradition has seen our imaging God in terms (among other things) of knowledge ... .
>
> God has therefore created us with cognitive faculties designed to enable us to achieve true beliefs with respect to a wide variety of propositions - propositions about our immediate environment, about our own interior lives, about the thoughts and experiences of other persons, about our universe at large, about right and wrong, about the whole realm of abstracta - numbers, properties, propositions, states of affairs, possible worlds and their like, about modality - what is necessary and possible - and about himself. These faculties work in such a way that under the appropriate circumstances we form the appropriate belief. More exactly, the appropriate belief is formed in us; in the typical case we do not decide to hold or form the belief in question, but simply find ourselves with it.[34]

Here Plantinga speaks of the God-given design of our cognitive faculties whereby we come by our ordinary stock of everyday basic beliefs. But, according to Reformed epistemology, belief in God is on an epistemological par with just such everyday basic beliefs. In the same way that I naturally and spontaneously form a belief about the existence of the tree as I look at a tree, so also I naturally and spontaneously form a belief about God being the designer and creator of the flower when I am looking at a flower. Here again is how Plantinga expresses it:

> A theist may be inclined towards a *reliabilist* theory of knowledge; he may be inclined to think that a true belief constitutes knowledge if it is produced by a reliable belief producing mechanism. ... If the theist thinks God has created us with the *sensus divinitatis* Calvin speaks of, he will hold that indeed there is a reliable belief producing mechanism that produces theistic belief; he will thus hold that we *know* that God exists. One who follows Calvin here will also hold that a capacity to apprehend God's existence is as much a part of our natural noetic or intellectual equipment as is the capacity to apprehend truths of logic, perceptual truths, truths about the past, and truths about other minds. Belief in the existence of God is then in the same boat as belief in truths of logic, other minds, the past, and perceptual objects; in each case

---

[34]Alvin Plantinga, "Justification and Theism," Faith and Philosophy 4 (October 1987): 405 - 406.

> God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we acquire the belief in question. But then the belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of our natural noetic faculties as are those other beliefs. Hence we *know* that there is such a person as God, and don't merely believe it; and it isn't by *faith* that we apprehend the existence of God, but by reason; and this whether or not any of the classical theistic arguments is successful.[35]

And, we might add: whether there is any evidence of any kind whatsoever. Hence, just as our noetic faculties deliver to us beliefs about perceptual objects, the past, etc., so also they deliver theo-implicatory beliefs to us.The important point is this: it is our noetic equipment - i.e., our *rationality* - which delivers all of these beliefs to us. Hence, there is nothing about any of these beliefs - including our theo-implicatory beliefs - which makes them inferior with respect to rationality. It is rationality itself which has produced them. They are eminently *rational.*

If beliefs in other minds, perceptual objects, the past and other ordinary beliefs are rational, then belief in God is rational in the same sense. If it is neither hasty nor irresponsible to accept belief in other minds and the past without evidence, then neither is it hasty or irresponsible to accept belief in God without evidence. If we can legitimately claim to *know* of other minds and the past, then the theist can also legitimately claim to *know* of God's existence. The evidentialist charge of irrationality against theistic belief is narrow, arbitrary, and unfair. The theist who believes in God - *even though he has no evidence* - is not being irrational. This is what Plantinga's whole project was intended to show.

---

[35]Alvin Plantinga, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," Faith and Philosophy 1 (July 1984): 262.

I have attempted above to provide a quick overview of Reformed epistemology. In the next few chapters I intend to delve more deeply into specific aspects of Plantinga's theory. But before I do that, there are two important issues which I can deal with briefly and immediately. The first involves the fundamental nature of Plantinga's argument that theistic belief is a properly basic belief. The second involves a clarification of exactly what Plantinga takes the relationship between theistic belief and theo-implicatory beliefs to be.

Belief in God as Properly Basic: An Argument from Analogy?

Plantinga's key contention is that, for the theist, theistic belief is a properly basic belief. At least two of Plantinga's critics have accused him of fallaciously arguing from analogy.[36] In this section I want to briefly explore the validity of this criticism.

Richard Grigg construes Plantinga's reasoning behind his claim that theistic belief is properly basic as going something like this:

1. Belief in God is analogous to memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs, and beliefs in other minds.

2. Memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs, and beliefs in other minds are properly basic beliefs.

3. Therefore, belief in God is a properly basic belief.

Clearly, this is in the classic form of an argument from analogy. If this were indeed what Plantinga is arguing, then he would have a problem. Such

---

[36] Namely, Donald Hatcher in Hatcher, "A Critique," 84-95 and Richard Grigg in Richard Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicality: A Response to Plantinga," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 14 (1983): 123-127.

an argument would be fallacious. Grigg tries to point out three important differences between belief in God and these other commonsense beliefs.[37] Given that belief in God is significantly different from these other commonsense beliefs, it does not follow that because the latter are properly basic so is the former.[38]

But Grigg has not taken enough care to understand what Plantinga is saying. Plantinga has nowhere advanced the above line of reasoning. Plantinga's argument for why theistic belief is properly basic is clearly and simply this: *belief in God is properly basic to theists because theists hold their belief in God as properly basic.* His argument is from what he takes to be a matter of fact about the way in which theists do believe in God. They do so not on the basis of argument or evidence. They do so foundationally. They simply

---

[37]Probably the most important of the differences he cites is that whereas commonsense beliefs (eg. memory beliefs) can be confirmed by empirical evidence, belief in God has no outside sources of confirmation. Mark McLeod responds to this alleged difference between commonsense beliefs and theistic belief in an interesting essay: Mark McLeod, "Can Belief in God Be Confirmed?" Religious Studies 24 (September 1988): 311-323. McLeod argues that, though theistic belief is not subject to the kind of confirmation which Grigg has in view, it is nonetheless subject to a certain kind of confirmation for some theists.

[38]Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicality," 123-127. His argument is not altogether successful however. Grigg's article suffers from failing to note the distinction Plantinga makes between belief in God (which is not, strictly speaking, basic) and what I have labeled theo-implicatory beliefs (which are basic). What Grigg needs to compare are these theo-implicatory beliefs and the commonsense beliefs such as memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs, and beliefs in other minds. Nonetheless, Grigg's overall point could be salvaged. Theo-implicatory beliefs, too, are significantly different from these commonsense beliefs. One cannot soundly argue that because commonsense beliefs are properly basic, it follows that theo-implicatory beliefs are properly basic.

know immediately, on the ground of their experience, that God exists. Hence, it is a basic belief for them, not one founded on and supported by prior beliefs.

Plantinga sees it as beyond question that theists hold their belief in God as basic. What is at issue is whether they do so properly and rationally when they do. Classical foundationalism has said that they do so improperly and irrationally - and they supply a set of criteria for proper basicality as the basis of that judgment. But Plantinga is suspicious of the classical foundationalist's set of criteria for proper basicality. On the one hand, it is self-referentially incoherent. On the other hand, it excludes from holding as properly basic various commonsense beliefs[39] which everyone, including classical foundationalists, do in fact properly and rationally hold as basic. It is here that Plantinga's interest in the commonsense beliefs enters his discussion. There is one common feature of theistic belief and the commonsense beliefs which is of interest to him: *neither of them can properly be held as basic if classical foundationalism's set of criteria for proper basicality obtains.*

Here then is the argument which Plantinga is, in fact, making when he appeals to the status of commonsense beliefs:

1. If the set of criteria for proper basicality set forth by classical foundationalism obtains, then commonsense beliefs cannot properly be held as basic.

2. As a matter of fact, we all know that commonsense beliefs <u>can</u> properly be held as basic.

---

[39]For convenience I will, throughout this study, refer to the important triad of memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs, and beliefs in other minds as simply "commonsense beliefs."

3. Therefore, the set of criteria for proper basicality set forth by classical foundationalism does not obtain.

4. If the only reason we have for denying the proper basicality of theistic belief is that it does not meet the set of criteria for proper basicality set forth by classical foundationalism, then it follows that we have no reason for denying the proper basicality of theistic belief, for the set of criteria for proper basicality set forth by classical foundationalism does not obtain (as we concluded in 3 above).

5. Furthermore, the theist has his own reason for asserting the proper basicality of theistic belief. He knows and is convinced that certain theo-implicatory beliefs from which theistic belief is inferred are naturally and spontaneously formed in him by the natural, proper functioning of his God-given noetic equipment.

As is evident, this is a very different sort of argument from the analogical argument that Grigg believes Plantinga is making. Unlike the fallacious analogical argument which Grigg proposes, the actual argument Plantinga is making is not at all fallacious.

Theo-Implicatory Beliefs as the Ground for Theistic Belief Proper

As we have seen, Plantinga contends that our God-given noetic equipment forms in us - on the appropriate occasions - certain basic beliefs which I have called theo-implicatory beliefs. (Following Calvin, Plantinga sometimes refers to the noetic mechanism which forms such beliefs as our

sensus divinitatis.)[40] Theistic belief proper, however, is a non-basic belief inferred from these theo-implicatory beliefs. This is a crucial, central claim for Reformed epistemology. The plausibility of this claim is essential to the plausibility of Reformed epistemology as a whole.

At first glance, it would appear that Plantinga has put the cart before the horse. Don't I need to believe in God already before I can form a theo-implicatory belief such as "God made that flower"? How can theo-implicatory beliefs form the ground of theistic belief when the very formation of theo-implicatory beliefs would seem to require a belief in the existence of God to begin with? Is not a belief like "God made that flower" an expression of a prior belief that a flower-making God exists? How, then, can it be the grounds or reason for it? Why do I believe in a creator God? Not because I form the belief that he made this flower and then, from that, come to the conclusion that he exists. On the contrary, I form that theo-implicatory belief about the flower - "God made it" - because I already believe in a creator God.

Plantinga's theory is a denial of this. To be logically consistent, Plantinga must reject the view that to form the belief "God made that flower " requires a prior belief in God's existence. It is not that Plantinga explicitly envisions a scenario wherein an atheist who has no prior belief in God looks at a flower and forms the belief "God made this flower." On the contrary, the scenario he is envisioning is where a *theist* - who does have a prior belief in God - sees the flower and forms the belief "God made that flower." Nevertheless - at the heart of his theory - is the clear implication that this theist's belief -"God made that flower" - is not formed by inference from his prior belief in God. It is just the

---

[40]Plantinga,"Advice," 262.

opposite. His theistic belief (even though he already holds it) is inferred from and evidentially supported by the theo-implicatory belief which he forms - "God made that flower." This latter (theo-implicatory) belief is formed and embraced quite independently from the fact that this theist also happens to believe that God exists. Plantinga's epistemology hinges on this being the epistemological relationship between theistic belief and theo-implicatory beliefs. So the question arises, how can this be? How can theo-implicatory beliefs stand on their own? How can they plausibly be formed independently of a prior belief in God?

If Plantinga is right, then we ought to be able to make sense out of a different scenario from the one he envisions - one where a person *who does not have a prior belief in God* forms a theo-implicatory belief for the first time. The crucial question is whether we can possibly make sense out of such a scenario. Some would argue that such a scenario makes no sense at all. Plantinga must assume that it does.

Plantinga's detractors might frame their objection this way: you cannot form a belief about what God has done if you do not already believe that he exists. But to press the objection against Plantinga on these grounds is to beg the question. Whether I can form a belief about what God has done without already knowing he exists is precisely the point at issue.

Plantinga might argue his case like this: On the authority of the newspaper, I can form the belief "David Duke was formerly a member of the KKK" without having a prior belief in the existence of David Duke. Likewise, I can form the belief "God made this flower" without having a prior belief in the existence of God. The epistemological basis upon which I form the former belief - about David Duke - is completely different from the epistemological basis

upon which I form the latter belief - about God's making the flower. The former belief is based on authority; the latter is based on my *sensus divinitatis*. But in neither case is my lack of a prior belief in the existence of the one concerned - David Duke or God - an obstacle to my forming these beliefs.

But perhaps the objection could be pressed on the grounds that I cannot form a belief about what God has done *if I lack a prior concept of God.* But, once again, this is begging the question. To be consistent, Plantinga must contend that we can. His position requires that, on the basis of theo-implicatory beliefs formed in us by our *sensus divinitatis* , we can actually form the concept of a God who exists (even when previously we had no such concept). As suggested earlier, this is not to suggest that this is how Plantinga envisions the experience of most theists. Certainly he does not. Most theists - before encountering the flower in question - clearly do have a prior concept of God. They have been raised in a particular culture where they imbibed a concept of God along with the rest of their language and culture. When they see the flower and the belief "God made this flower" is formed in them, it is being formed in terms of a prior conceptual framework that they have. But Plantinga's view requires that someone who lacked a concept of God could nonetheless have a theo-implicatory belief formed in them on the appropriate occasion. How can we make sense out of that?

Let's assume that Sophie is a relatively young child raised in a secular family in a totally secular culture who has never even heard the word "God" - and she has never formed any corresponding concept. If Plantinga is right - if the *sensus divinitatis* is a universal noetic mechanism - then, in theory, Sophie ought to be able - on the requisite occasion - to form the belief, "God made that flower." How would that be possible? The noun "God" has absolutely no

meaning to Sophie. Are we to understand that her *sensus divinitatis* would form in her the belief "God made that flower," while Sophie - having no understanding of what its language denotes nor having any concept of God whatsoever - is totally incapable of understanding the very belief which she begins to hold? That would be absurd. We can imagine the ensuing conversation:

"Mom!"

"Yes, Sophie?"

"A funny thing just happened to me. I was looking at this flower and I suddenly found myself believing with the utmost conviction that God made it. What does that mean, Mom? What is God anyway? What does 'God made the flower' mean?"

It is extremely doubtful that this is how Plantinga would have us imagine such an event. The absurdity of the scenario as I just described it is not a result of the absurdity of Plantinga's position. Its absurdity arises from the fact that I articulated the theo-implicatory belief being formed in Sophie in terms of language which was totally unfamiliar to her. I stipulated in the example that the concept of God was meaningless to her. But Plantinga need not agree to this particular formulation of Sophie's first theo-implicatory belief. If instead of forming the belief, "God made that flower," Sophie forms the belief, "Somebody made that flower and whoever made it isn't a normal person like me," we no longer have a totally absurd scenario. There is nothing especially problematic about her forming this latter belief. It is articulated in language that is perfectly meaningful to her. It is a belief which she can hold and reason from. From this belief, Sophie could reasonably infer a quasi-theistic belief like, "There exists someone who isn't just another normal person like me and who is able to make

flowers and trees and stuff like that." Only later, after a more sophisticated appreciation of the history of human discourse, can she exchange this quasi-theistic belief for the more familiar, "God exists."

Now one might still refuse to grant that a belief like "Somebody made that flower and whoever made it isn't a normal person like me" could ever possibly arise on the occasion of seeing a flower. That is clearly to contradict Plantinga. But in order to press this point as an objection against his epistemology, it must be accompanied by an argument showing how and why such a belief could never arise - or, at least, how and why the intelligibility of such a belief is in doubt. Plantinga is saying that such beliefs are utterly intelligible and that they can and do arise all the time.[41] On what basis would one argue that they cannot and do not?

The critical assumption which Plantinga makes is this: *there exists a tendency which human beings have to form theo-implicatory beliefs on the appropriate occasions.* This tendency, created in us by God himself, is a reliable mechanism which forms true beliefs - beliefs which put us in touch with reality as it actually is. God created me to form the belief "God made that flower," because he did make that flower and he wants me to come to know the truth. If we grant Plantinga the plausibility of this assumption, then there is nothing ultimately implausible about Plantinga's position that our theistic belief is ultimately an inference from basic, foundational theo-implicatory beliefs.[42]

---

[41]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 80-82.

[42]It is a confusing feature of Plantinga's discussion that whenever he speaks of one's forming a theo-implicatory belief, he always seems to have in view a theist who already believes in God's existence. I am contending, however, that Reformed epistemology must hold that an atheist - who does not already believe in God's existence - could, in principle, form a theo-implicatory

As Plantinga understands the nature and origin of theo-implicatory beliefs, they do rightly serve as the grounds for theistic belief. They are not simply expressions of the theist's prior belief in God. They could arise in one who did not even have a prior conception of God. The way Plantinga sees it, to form the belief "God made that flower" does not presuppose a belief that there exists a flower-making God. This is a radical, controversial, and crucial claim. To rightly understand Reformed epistemology as Plantinga expounds it, one must understand that this is the claim he is making.

One final point of clarification : Plantinga is not saying that I come to know that God made the flower before I come to know that God exists. That does indeed sound strange. No, on Plantinga's view, I come to know them simultaneously. Certainly I can infer the fact that your team won the soccer match from the fact that you scored the winning goal. The fact that your team was victorious is logically contained in the fact of your scoring the winning goal. Consequently, in coming to know that you scored the winning goal I am, thereby, simultaneously coming to know that your team won the match. Likewise, in coming to know that God made the flower, I am, thereby (simultaneously) coming to know that God exists. I cannot come to know the former without also coming to know the latter. The latter is directly and transparently contained in the former.

The fact that "God exists" is logically contained in "God made that flower" and, hence, that to grasp the latter is to simultaneously grasp the former does

---

belief in exactly the same way. In stating this explicitly, my discussion is an improvement on Plantinga's discussion with regard to its clarity on this issue. I am convinced, however, that Plantinga would approve of my contention here. What I am contending, though never made explicit, is nonetheless implicit in the very logic of his arguments.

not negate the fact that the latter is epistemologically more basic. I may know (either on your report or on my own witnessing of the event) that you scored the winning goal and *by inference* know that your team won the soccer match. My belief that your team won the soccer match is founded on the epistemologically prior belief that you scored the winning goal. (That belief, in turn, is founded on your authoritative report to me or on my own direct witnessing of the event.) But I come to believe both things simultaneously. Similarly, I may (by my *sensus divinitatis*) know that God made the flower and, by inference, simultaneously know that God exists. Though the two beliefs are formed simultaneously, the latter is epistemologically derived from the former. The point is this: the simultaneity of theistic belief and a theo-implicatory belief being formed does not preclude the theo-implicatory belief's being epistemologically prior to theistic belief proper.

The important thing to keep in mind here is that the epistemological priority of a theo-implicatory belief does not entail its occurring temporally before theistic belief. That would be very odd indeed - to form the belief "God made that flower," and then, at a later time, to form the belief "God exists" by inference from the previous belief. But that is not what Plantinga is saying. The latter belief's being logically required by the former belief makes it impossible for there to be a time when the former is held as a belief and the latter is not. The two beliefs - theistic belief and the theo-implicatory belief it is based on - must necessarily be simultaneously formed.

CHAPTER III

REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY AND FIDEISM

One objection which gets raised against Reformed epistemology is that it constitutes a form of fideism. Plantinga responds to this charge in "Reason and Belief in God." In this chapter, I will discuss the merits of both the accusation and Plantinga's response.

The greatest obstacle to clarity on this subject is the vagueness of the label itself. It is difficult to get clear on exactly what fideism is supposed to be. Richard Popkin defines it so:

> Fideism is the view that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence. This claim has been presented in many forms by theologians from St. Paul to contemporary neo-orthodox, antirationalist writers, usually as a way of asserting that the fundamental tenets of religion cannot be established by proofs or by empirical evidence but must be accepted on faith. Some forms of fideism denigrate or deny the value of reason and science, and these amount to irrationalism ... .[1]

It is not clear - from this definition - exactly what constitutes fideism. The definition includes some rather vague concepts. Popkin says, "truth in religion is ultimately based on faith." But what exactly does that mean? What is "faith" in this connection? Fideism, according to Popkin, denies that religious truth is ultimately based on "reasoning or evidence." But under exactly what conceptions of "reasoning" and "evidence" does it deny this? And what

---

[1]The Encyclopedia of Philosophy , 1972 ed., s.v. "Fideism," by Richard Popkin.

exactly is it supposed to mean that religious truth is "based on" faith rather than reason? I.e., what exactly is meant by a religious truth's being "based on" faith? Without clear answers to these questions, we have no clear conception of what fideism is supposed to be.

In all likelihood, different people will have very different conceptions of what constitutes someone a fideist. So it is understandable if one person holds that Reformed epistemology is a form of fideism and the next person denies it. Their opposing judgments may very well result from their applying different conceptions of fideism.

I do not explore the question of whether Reformed epistemology is appropriately seen as fideism because it is important to have a definitive answer to it. I explore it because - by doing so - we will be forced to come to an even clearer understanding of Plantinga's position.

Popkin and Plantinga both begin their analysis of fideism by distinguishing "moderate fideism" from "extreme fideism." Plantinga's strategy in defending himself against the fideism charge is simply to show how his position qualifies as neither extreme fideism nor moderate fideism respectively. But it seems to me that analyzing fideism merely by distinguishing a moderate and an extreme form (in the way that they do) is woefully inadequate. Rather than follow the Popkin-Plantinga analysis of fideism, I will develop my own analysis and terminology and will evaluate Plantinga's position in the light of that.

Plantinga in the Light of a Fresh Analysis of Fideism

Two preliminary remarks are in order. First - although in principle it could describe something about the way one holds any of his beliefs - "fideism" is

rarely a relevant or useful label except in the case of religious beliefs. In the analysis which follows, I assume that our concern is with religious belief (unless I make it clear otherwise). Secondly, even in the context of religious beliefs, whether "fideism" is an apt description of someone's position depends upon which particular belief is under consideration. For example, while one may be a fideist with respect to his belief in the triune nature of God, at the same time, he may not be a fideist with respect to his belief in the mere fact of God's existence. The "fideist" label will be relative to the particular belief which is in view. My interest, of course, lies in Plantinga's views with respect to belief in the existence of God. Given what he has to say about how and why the theist believes in God, is he or is he not helpfully labeled a "fideist"?

The problem for understanding fideism is that, in current practice, it is used to encompass so many different sorts of philosophical and theological positions. It seems to be used any time a religious thinker gives *any* sort of significant priority to faith. It usually involves a priority of faith over reason, but even this need not be the case. What sort of priority faith must have in order to make it fideism is left extremely vague. Consequently, the "fideist" label is applied over a wide range of different points of view. As a result, it is not a particularly useful label in current discussion. It misleads more than it clarifies.

For a descriptive label such as "fideism" to be useful it must describe a set of similar answers to some specific, identifiable question. So, for example, the "coherentist" takes a particular position vis a vis the nature of epistemological warrant - i.e., he gives a distinctive answer as to what it means for a belief to be warranted. The "reliabilist" gives a distinctive, but different answer to exactly the same question. Coherentists may differ from one another

in the detail of their answers; but we label them all "coherentists" because of the striking family resemblance which all their answers share.

Initially, this is what we expect from the "fideist" label. We expect "fideism" to identify a distinctive sort of answer to a particular, identifiable question. But this is not so. In current usage, there is no one single question in view when a philosopher's position is labeled "fideistic." "Fideism" can describe a position taken on any of several different questions. Consider three important examples: (1) it can describe the position one takes as to how belief in God is warranted, (2) it can describe the position one takes as to what is meritorious about believing in God, or (3) it can describe one's position on the question as to where one's belief in God originates.

It is misleading to attach one common label to people just because *somewhere* in their philosophical views they give faith *some* sort of priority. To be helpful, the labels we use need to describe thinkers who offer faith, in the same sense, as their answer to the same question. Unfortunately, this is not how "fideism" is currently applied. We desperately need a complete analysis of all the different ways that "faith" plays a role in different philosophical theories and we need a fresh nomenclature corresponding to that analysis. It is outside the scope of this paper to attempt that complete analysis here. But I do hope to start down that road. For my purposes, I will identify four distinctive and ultimately unrelated philosophical positions which could be and often are seen as forms of "fideism." I will give a distinctive label to each. And as I do this, I will analyze Reformed epistemology in the light of each of these four different positions.

Warrant Fideism

Consider what is required in order for me to be warranted or justified in believing T (where T stands for any religious belief under consideration - eg., belief in the existence of God). What about T would warrant my believing it? The answers that might be given to this question can usefully be classed in two categories - *rationalism* and *fideism.*

Rationalism holds that it is the *rationality* of T that justifies me in holding it. In other words, I am warranted in holding T only in the event that T is a rational belief. There are several variations on what exactly is meant by T being a rational belief. But all such answers explicitly hold that belief T must be a "rational" belief (as that particular philosopher would define "rational") in order to be a justified or warranted belief. There is no ready-at-hand label for this family of answers to the question of warrant. At the risk of confusing this with traditional Rationalism, I will label this class of answers "rationalism." (It must be understood that there is no necessary relation between this rationalism - which opposes fideism - and the tradition of Rationalism which one typically confronts in the study of philosophy - i.e., Rationalism as the philosophical alternative to Empiricism.) But rationalism is one answer to the question "How is T justified?"

Fideism is the other important answer to this question. Fideism - in this sense - appeals to the believer's "faith" rather than to the rationality of T as the grounds for T's being justified for the believer. To be clear that such fideism describes a position taken vis a vis the question of warrant, I will use the label "warrant fideism" to describe it. It is thereby distinguished from uses of the term "fideism" which describe positions on entirely different issues.

Warrant fideism, then, is an alternative to *warrant rationalism*. The latter holds that it is the rationality of T which justifies the believer's holding it; the former holds that it is the believer's faith which justifies him in holding it.

Warrant fideism can further be divided into *anti-rational warrant fideism* and *para-rational warrant fideism.* Anti-rational warrant fideism sees the believer's faith as the one and only basis for T's warrant. On this view, T's rationality or lack of it is totally irrelevant to the question of whether it is warranted. Para-rational warrant fideism holds that belief T can be warranted either way - either by T's rationality or by the believer's faith.

Aquinas, it seems to me, espoused a form of para-rational warrant fideism. According to Aquinas, the vast majority of people hold their belief in God on the authority of the church - i.e., *by faith.* They are warranted in doing so. But an elite few, he thought, hold their belief in God on the basis of reason. These have discovered the eminent rationality of belief in God. Consequently, they are warranted in believing in God on the basis of reason. There are, then, two independent means whereby theistic belief can be justified to a person: it can be justified by faith (i.e., by the person's submission to the church's teaching), or it can be justified by reason. Applying my nomenclature, those who accept it by faith - on the authority of the church - accept it *warrant-fideistically.* Those who accept it by reason accept it *warrant-rationalistically.* Aquinas is a para-rational warrant fideist because, for him, the possibility of theistic belief's being warranted by faith (rather than reason) does not exclude the possibility of its being warranted by reason (rather than faith) in different circumstances.

In the case of anti-rational warrant fideism, holding that belief T is warranted by the believer's faith is meant to exclude the possibility that belief T could ever be warranted by reason. I know of no good, clear examples of anti-

rational warrant fideism. Several thinkers from Tertullian to Kierkegaard to Pascal have been so interpreted. But it is not clear to me that these interpretations are right.

Anti-rational warrant fideism need not take a definitive stand on the rational status of belief T. Belief T may be an intrinsically rational belief or it may be an intrinsically irrational belief. But even if T is intrinsically rational - according to anti-rational warrant fideism - what warrants my holding it can never be its rationality; it can only be the believer's faith in holding it.

Leaving the anti-rational / para-rational distinction aside, one clear example of warrant fideism is the position that belief T is justified by an appeal to some kind of religious authority. Belief T is justified because the Bible teaches it, the church teaches it, the pope says so, etc. I call this form of warrant fideism, *authoritarian fideism.* Authoritarian fideism could come in the form of either anti-rational warrant fideism or para-rational warrant fideism.

Dogmatic fideism is another form of warrant fideism worth mentioning. Dogmatic fideism is the view that I am justified in holding T precisely because I do believe T. In other words, the fact of my believing T is its own justification. Or, more accurately perhaps, it is the view that I need no justification for believing T beyond the bare fact that I do so.

It is doubtful that any philosopher or theologian, rightly understood, is a serious proponent of dogmatic fideism. (Perhaps a case could be made that Kierkegaard espouses dogmatic fideism.) But even if it is not a serious philosophical position, it does seem to be the practical position of some theistic believers when faced with a challenge to their beliefs. More importantly, in popular opinion, dogmatic fideism would seem to serve as the fundamental

paradigm of fideism in general. So, even if no dogmatic fideist actually exists, it is nonetheless useful to have a descriptive label for such a position.

For most people, to call someone's religious epistemology a form of fideism is to condemn it, not merely to describe it. Fideism - like solipsism - is a four-letter word in philosophy. This is because - to most people - fideism is obviously indefensible. (In "Reason and Belief in God," Plantinga accepts without question that attaching the label "fideism" to Reformed epistemology would constitute a challenge or objection to it. Plantinga is simply reflecting the popular sentiment that fideism is somehow an indefensible position.) But why? Why is fideism so summarily dismissed as indefensible? Because most people equate fideism with dogmatic fideism, and dogmatic fideism surely is indefensible. Given the popular equation of fideism with dogmatic warrant fideism, it is understandable that the label "fideism" is tantamount to a condemnation. If any form of fideism, however argued and presented, is ultimately nothing more than an attempt to espouse and rationalize dogmatic fideism, then any form of fideism is philosophically suspect. This is wrong of course. Few or no forms of fideism are actually forms of dogmatic warrant fideism. But this is a popular misconception nonetheless.

What about Plantinga? Is Reformed epistemology a form of warrant fideism? No, clearly not. According to Plantinga, the theist is warranted in his belief in God because his belief in God is among the "deliverances of reason" - i.e., because the theist's belief in God is something that results from the operations of his <u>reason</u>. The point of contention between Reformed epistemology and classical foundationalist epistemology is not whether reason or the theist's faith gives warrant to theistic belief. They agree on that. Reason and reason alone can provide warrant for a belief - including belief in the

existence of God. Their disagreement concerns what is to be included among rational beliefs - i.e., what exactly are the "deliverances of reason"? Plantinga argues that my belief that a tree exists (when I look at the tree in my back yard) is one of the deliverances of reason. He argues that my belief that I had lunch today (when I remember having lunch today) is among the deliverances of reason. Similarly, the theist's theo-implicatory belief "God made that flower" (when he looks at a flower) is among the deliverances of reason as well. The theist's belief in God is warranted in exactly the same way that his beliefs in perceptual objects, the past, and other minds is warranted. They are all warranted by reason. To be consistent, one can deny that belief in God is warranted by reason only if he denies that all these other beliefs are warranted by reason as well. One cannot insist that his beliefs in perceptual objects, other minds, and the past are rationally warranted and, at the same time, deny such rational warrant for belief in God. The theist's belief in God is no less warranted by reason than these other commonsensical beliefs.

Plantinga directly addresses the question whether Reformed epistemology is a form of fideism in "Reason and Belief in God." But his discussion suffers from a lack of careful analysis of the way "fideism" is used. He has not distinguished all the different issues that typically get mushed together in the way "fideism" gets applied. Nevertheless, his intent is clear. He wants to show that Reformed epistemology is not a form of warrant fideism. His argument consists in two claims:

1. The Reformed epistemologist is not what Plantinga calls an "extreme" fideist - i.e., he does not believe that reasoning is essentially unreliable and inherently suspect, nor does he believe that there must be a clash or conflict between what reason dictates one must believe and what religious faith

dictates one must believe. Nothing about the Reformed epistemologist's position even remotely suggests that reason is epistemologically suspect in this way. And in the final analysis, there is absolutely no conflict between what religious faith and reason say concerning belief in the existence of God. According to Reformed epistemology, the theist believes in the existence of God because of what reason dictates.

2. The Reformed epistemologist is not what Plantinga calls a "moderate" fideist - i.e., he does not hold that belief in God is warranted by faith rather than by reason. He believes that theistic belief is warranted by and "delivered by" reason itself. In Plantinga's words:

> The Reformed epistemologist, therefore, is a fideist [and here we should read, *warrant* fideist] only if he holds that some central truths of Christianity are not among the deliverances of reason and must instead be taken on faith. But just what are the deliverances of reason? What do they include? First, clearly enough, self-evident propositions and propositions that follow from them by self-evidently valid arguments are among the deliverances of reason. But we cannot stop there. ... the deliverances of reason include ... basic perceptual truths..., incorrigible propositions, certain memory propositions, certain propositions about other minds, and certain moral and ethical propositions.
>
> But what about the belief that there is such a person as God and that we are responsible to him? Is that among the deliverances of reason or an item of faith? ... [According to Calvin and Reformed epistemology] a capacity to apprehend God's existence is as much a part of our natural noetic equipment as is the capacity to apprehend perceptual truths, truths about the past, and truths about other minds. Belief in God is in the same boat as belief in other minds, the past, and perceptual objects; in each case God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we form the belief in question. But then the belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of reason as those other beliefs.
>
> From this vantage point we can see, therefore, that the Reformed epistemologist is not a fideist [read, *warrant* fideist] at all with respect to belief in God. He does not hold that there is any conflict between faith and reason

here, and he does not even hold that we cannot attain this fundamental truth by reason; he holds, instead, that it is among the deliverances of reason.[2]

Plantinga is right. Whatever one thinks about the truth of Reformed epistemology, it cannot legitimately be construed as a form of warrant fideism.

Aretetic Fideism

Now consider a very different question from that of warrant: What is it that makes one virtuous in believing T? There are two positions one might hold with respect to this question: *aretetic rationalism* and *aretetic fideism*. Aretetic rationalism holds that the virtue of believing T lies in the fact that T is a rational belief. To put it another way, it is virtuous for me to believe T because T is rational and believing what is rational is a virtue. Aretetic fideism, on the other hand, holds that the virtue in my believing T lies precisely in the fact that it requires an exercise of faith on my part to hold it. In other words, I am virtuous in believing T because, in believing T, I am evidencing faith. The faith that is required in order to believe T may be variously conceived. But what characterizes every form of aretetic fideism is its explicitly holding that something other than reason - namely, something called "faith" - is the virtue which is evidenced when a person believes T. Aretetic fideism need not deny that reason is operative in or evidenced by believing T; but it denies that rationality is the most important virtue manifested by the act of believing T. The virtue of believing T rests primarily in this other dimension of believing it - faith.

Two sorts of aretetic fideism come to mind. The first is *submissionist fideism*. Submissionist fideism defines faith as submission to some form of

---

[2]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 89-90.

religious authority - whether the church, the Bible, the pope, or whatever. According to submissionist fideism, the virtue of believing in God rests in the fact that, in doing so, one is submitting to the appropriate religious authority. Such submission - i.e., faith - is a prime moral and spiritual virtue; hence, believing T has virtue as an act of belief insofar as it requires such an act of submission to hold it.

A second form of aretetic fideism is *irrationalist fideism*. Irrationalist fideism, oddly enough, defines faith in terms of the existential commitment involved in committing oneself to a belief that one knows to be irrational. According to irrationalist fideism with respect to belief in God, it is a virtue to believe in God precisely because it is irrational to believe in God. Kierkegaard, at times, would seem to be an aretetic fideist espousing a form of irrationalist fideism. His irrationalist fideism (if that is what it is) is not with respect to belief in God per se, but with respect to belief in the incarnation. It is precisely the contradictory and irrational nature of the incarnation which he thinks makes it so much an exercise of faith - i.e., an act of existential commitment - to believe it.

Whether Plantinga can be considered an aretetic fideist is much more difficult to determine than whether he is a warrant fideist. Plantinga says very little that would help us decide this. My bet is that he is not.

What would it mean for Plantinga to be an aretetic fideist? What would that look like in the context of Reformed epistemology? Aretetic fideism would have the following consequence: if one's belief in God were in part the result of faith (which, in turn, was the result of divine grace), then that belief in God would be somehow more virtuous than a belief in God which was the result of human reasoning alone. But there is nothing in Plantinga to suggest that he is

thinking along these lines. Inevitably, an aretetic fideist will say something about the virtues of faith over reasoning. Plantinga does not do this. In those articles which afforded him an excellent opportunity to do so (i.e., in those articles where he advocates Reformed epistemology over natural theology), he does no such thing. In all likelihood, Plantinga is not an aretetic fideist. But it is difficult to be confident on this point. Plantinga gives no attention to this specific issue. In any event, it is clear that Plantinga espouses neither submissionist fideism nor irrationalist fideism - two of the more problematic forms of aretetic fideism.

Genetic Fideism

There is a third cluster of questions which might be asked about belief in God (or any religious belief): Where does my belief in God originate? What exactly gives rise to it? And, what is required to bring it about that I believe in God? Another form of fideism offers a distinctive answer to this cluster of questions.

Genetic rationalism would argue that my belief in God arises from some sort of reasoning process. My reasoning produces arguments which support belief in God's existence and I come to embrace theistic belief because of or in the light of those arguments. *Genetic fideism* , on the other hand, argues that no amount of reasoning, by itself, could ever produce belief in God. No evidence nor proofs could ever be sufficient to bring one to belief. Some other extra-rational influence or cause is needed before belief in God can arise. Whether it be something *in addition to* reasoning, or something *instead of* reasoning - something else must enter in before belief in God can result.

One form of genetic fideism - *charismatic fideism* - takes the position that belief T is produced when God supernaturally enables me to form such a belief. This divine grace is a prerequisite to my coming to believe T. Apart from God's grace, no amount of reasoning in the world would ever result in my believing T.

Another form of genetic fideism - *existential fideism* - takes the position that belief T is the result of an existential commitment that I make to such a belief. Belief T arises out of a deep, personal commitment which I make; and, without that existential commitment, no authentic belief in T could possibly arise.

Reformed epistemology should probably be classed as a form of genetic fideism. In all likelihood, Plantinga (along with Reformed theologians generally) does not consider the rational noetic processes alone sufficient to bring about belief in God. As a sinner, no human being is capable of coming to belief in God apart from some special act of God's grace - some special empowerment that overcomes the noetic effects of sin. Plantinga does not tell us what exactly this divine grace is supposed to do nor how it is supposed to work. We could only guess what he might be thinking. But in any case, it is likely that Plantinga (consistent with Reformed theology generally) espouses some sort of genetic fideism - specifically, some sort of charismatic fideism. Belief that God exists cannot result from rational processes alone; it is not the output of unaided rationality. It can only result from God's giving grace to the believer.

For Plantinga, then, rationality is not a sufficient condition for theistic belief. But is it a necessary condition? Can one come to belief in God as a gift of God's grace apart from any rational noetic process at all? Plantinga does not address this explicitly. But, once again, we can make an intelligent guess at what he might say. Some sort of rational noetic process *is* necessary to one's coming to belief in God. Reasoning from evidences is not necessary.

Rational proofs are not necessary. But the *sensus divinitatis* - that rational noetic process whereby theo-implicatory beliefs are formed as a natural, spontaneous response to one's experience - apparently is.

Plantinga's conception of coming to belief is not one of the theist suddenly - out of the blue - simply beginning to believe that God exists (when God mysteriously produces that belief in him). The theist believes in God on the basis of justifying grounds in his experience. He sees a beautiful sunset and knows that God put it there. He senses a profound guilt, and knows that he stands guilty before God as his righteous judge. In all likelihood, Plantinga sees such justifying grounds as a necessary condition for belief in God to arise.[3] What is needed from God's grace is a supernatural restoration of the relevant noetic processes (which have been damaged by sin) to their intended state - where they are free from the distorting, damaging effects of sin. These rational noetic processes - restored and undamaged - would then naturally give rise to belief in God in response to the requisite experiences.

Plantinga's view goes something like this: there are three necessary conditions for coming to belief in God - (1) the requisite ground in experience, (2) the natural noetic processes created by God to produce theistic belief, and (3) the grace of God to free those natural noetic processes to work properly. All of these are necessary conditions for coming to belief in God. None of them

---

[3]As I discussed above in a different context, it would be odd if Plantinga were suggesting that one finds the belief formed in him that he is guilty before God and then - subsequent to that in time - forms the belief, by inference, that God exists. This cannot be what Plantinga is suggesting. Clearly his view is that the latter belief ("God exists") is already contained in and implied by the former feeling of guilt-before-God such that the two are best understood as temporally simultaneous. See the earlier discussion in chapter II for a fuller treatment of this.

alone is a sufficient condition. Because the natural noetic processes (in the context of the requisite experiences) are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to give rise to belief in God, Plantinga can legitimately be called a genetic fideist.[4] The supernatural restoration of one's noetic equipment by God - and not human reasoning alone - is necessary in order for belief in God to arise. This is rightly classed a form of charismatic fideism - a species of genetic fideism.

Belief-Class Fideism

There is one last distinctive use of the term "fideism" that I must discuss. Ultimately, I reject this usage as misleading and useless; but it describes a view of the relation of faith to reason that some thinkers actually hold. Consequently, it is necessary to at least define and name this view.

As with the other distinctive forms of fideism, it involves giving an answer to a whole different sort of question that can be asked about belief T - namely, what role does belief T play in the believer's noetic structure? Is belief T a basic, foundational belief which one accepts without evidence and without the support of rational argument, or is it a non-basic belief which one accepts on the basis of evidential support? In other words, is belief T a basic belief or a non-basic belief (as we defined those in the last chapter)?

---

[4]One would not have to call Plantinga's view here "fideism." I do so because "faith" is the term generally used to describe any sort of openness to God and belief in God. In view of this general usage, a new-found openness to believe in God which results when God graciously restores one's noetic equipment can appropriately be called "faith." "Faith" - in this sense - is a necessary condition for coming to believe in God for Plantinga. Faith, so conceived, does not have priority over reason however. Both are necessary conditions for theistic belief. The "genetic fideism" label is warranted vis a vis Plantinga insofar as "faith" is a necessary condition of theistic belief at all.

Belief-class rationalism is the view that belief T is a non-basic belief which I hold on the basis of evidential support. *Belief-class fideism* is the view that belief T is a basic, foundational belief.

It is odd that such a view (namely, that belief T is a basic, foundational belief) would elicit the label "fideism." Odd though it is, it is understandable if we approach it in the right way. We must begin by recognizing a significant distinction between my various beliefs. Some beliefs I have consciously reasoned out and hold on the basis of that conscious reasoning. Others I have not consciously reasoned out and could never articulate why it is that I believe them - yet I believe them nonetheless. Now there is a certain familiar idiom that we use to make this distinction. The former beliefs are described as beliefs I accept "by reason" and the latter are described (rather confusedly, I think) as beliefs I accept "on faith." Such a conception of "faith" vs. "reason" - though it is ultimately rather confusing and misleading - is really very popular.

In "Reason and Belief in God" Plantinga discusses Abraham Kuyper's use of "faith" and "reason" - a use which parallels the rather peculiar but popular idiom described just above:

> ... it depends upon how we propose to use the terms "reason" and "faith." One possibility would be to follow Abraham Kuyper, who proposes to use these terms in such a way that one takes on faith whatever one accepts but does not accept on the basis of argument or inference or demonstration ... On this use of these terms, anything taken as basic is taken on faith; anything believed on the basis of other beliefs is taken on reason. I take 2 + 1 = 3 as basic; accordingly, I take it on faith. ... On the other hand, what I take on the basis of reason is what I believe on the basis of argument or inference from other propositions. Thus I take 2 + 1 = 3 on faith, but 21 x 45 = 945 by reason; for I accept the latter on the basis of calculation, which is a form of argument.[5]

---

[5]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 88.

Such definitions of "believing on the basis of reason" and "accepting something on faith" lead naturally to thinking of a belief which is held as basic as being held fideistically (i.e., "by faith"). But, obviously, believing T fideistically in this sense is very different from believing it fideistically in any of the senses discussed above. To distinguish this view from the others we are concerned with, I will refer to accepting belief T by faith (i.e., holding it as a basic belief) as "belief-class fideism." Correspondingly, I will refer to accepting belief T on the basis of reason (i.e., holding it as a non-basic belief) as "belief-class rationalism."

Clearly Plantinga is a belief-class fideist. The heart of Plantinga's thesis in "Reason and Belief in God" is that the theist's belief in God is a properly basic belief - i.e., one which one does not hold on the basis of evidence. But this is just how I defined belief-class fideism. So Plantinga is unmistakably a belief-class fideist.

Plantinga essentially admits that he could be classed a belief-class fideist when he admits that he could accept the "fideist" label if he could accept Kuyper's distinction between "faith" and "reason."[6] But Plantinga rejects Kuyper's definitions of "faith" and "reason," claiming they are not particularly helpful nor relevant to clarifying the issue of faith vs. reason in religious epistemology. In effect, Plantinga is suggesting that the very concept of a belief-class fideist is not a particularly helpful category. He would argue (and I agree) that it confuses rather than clarifies the issues. If we grant the label any usefulness at all, then Plantinga is a belief-class fideist. But if we reject the

---

[6]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 88-89.

usefulness of the label, then, of course, we will resist making any application of it to Plantinga.

I do (with Plantinga) reject the usefulness of the label. To define a basic belief as accepted "by faith" rather than "on the basis of reason" tends to obscure a very important issue - namely, what is the rational status of that basic belief. Is it a rational belief or not? To label it as being accepted "on faith" tends to suggest - misleadingly - that it is non-rational or irrational. But even the most committed classical foundationalist believes that there are basic, foundational beliefs which are nevertheless eminently rational. The classical foundationalist (as Plantinga has defined him) may accept 2 + 2 = 4 as a basic belief. But, at the same time, he also holds that 2 + 2 = 4 is a rational belief and that one is being utterly rational in accepting it. To define his holding such a basic belief as holding it "by faith" is therefore misleading insofar as it suggests that he is holding it apart from reason. That is not what the classical foundationalist is trying to suggest.

What is at stake between the classical foundationalist and the Reformed epistemologist, at any rate, is not whether belief in God is taken as basic (i.e., taken "on faith" in Kuyper's sense); both could agree that it is. What is at issue is whether it is *properly* taken as basic. Or - to put it another way - whether it is rational and in conformity to reason to take it as basic. This issue is totally obscured by the Kuyperian definitions of "faith" and "reason." They do not help us sort out our choice between classical foundationalism and Plantingan foundationalism. Hence, I reject Kuyper's definitions and, finally, the belief-class fideist label which arises out of those definitions. So, whereas Plantinga could legitimately be called a belief-class fideist, it would be misleading and

unhelpful to do so because it tends to obscure the true nature of Plantinga's views with respect to the rationality of belief in God.

Summary of Analysis: Plantinga and Fideism

I have identified four very different sorts of fideism. This does not constitute an exhaustive analysis of our use of the term "fideism"; it is only a start. The four different views can be designated as follows: warrant fideism, aretetic fideism, genetic fideism, and belief-class fideism. I have also identified some different sub-classes of each of these forms.

The following outline summarizes the above analysis and the nomenclature I have proposed and suggests how Plantingan foundationalism might be identified vis a vis this nomenclature:

I. Warrant fideism — *•Plantinga does <u>not</u> espouse*

- A. Anti-rational warrant fideism
  - 1. Authoritarian fideism (anti-rational version)
  - 2. Dogmatic fideism (anti-rational version)
- B. Para-rational warrant fideism
  - 1. Authoritarian fideism (para-rational version)
  - 2. Dogmatic fideism (para-rational version)

II. Aretetic fideism — *•Plantinga does <u>not</u> espouse*

- A. Submissionist fideism
- B. Irrationalist fideism

III. Genetic fideism	•*Plantinga <u>does</u> espouse*
A. Charismatic fideism	•*Plantinga <u>does</u> espouse*
B. Existential fideism	
IV. Belief-class fideism	•*Plantinga <u>does</u> espouse - (but the classification itself is unhelpful and misleading)*

<u>Penelhum's Classification of Plantinga as a Fideist</u>

Before leaving the issue of whether Plantinga is a fideist, it will be instructive to take a look at Terance Penelhum's discussion of Plantinga in his book <u>God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism</u>.[7] On one plausible reading, Penelhum interprets Plantinga as a modern day Evangelical Fideist.[8] If this is what Penelhum is saying, what should we make of this claim?

---

[7]Terence Penelhum, <u>God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism,</u> Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, vol. 28 (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers Group, D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1983), 147-158.

[8] This interpretation of Penelhum is shared by Richard Askew in Richard Askew, "On Fideism and Alvin Plantinga," <u>International Journal for Philosophy of Religion</u> 23 (1988): 3-16. In most respects it is the most natural and obvious interpretation. But what Penelhum is doing is not totally transparent. Without question he is saying that Plantinga employs the "Parity Argument" in a manner analogous to how his paradigm Evangelical Fideists employ it. But the problem is this: Does Plantinga's use of the Parity Argument in this way mean that he is - in Penelhum's mind - an Evangelical Fideist? One cannot answer this definitively from Penelhum's text. With Askew, I will assume that Penelhum <u>does</u> mean to class Plantinga as a fideist. If I am wrong - if Penelhum does not intend to label Plantinga a fideist - then his discussion of Plantinga has no relevance to my present concern. But if he does mean to call him a fideist, then it is important to look at his position carefully - to see whether Penelhum has seen something in Plantinga that I have overlooked.

Penelhum's interpretation of Plantinga as a fideist rests on Plantinga's use of what Penelhum calls the "Parity Argument." To understand Penelhum's argument, we need to understand something of Pascal's and Kierkegaard's use of the "Parity Argument."

As Penelhum understands them, both Pascal and Kierkegaard accept the judgment of Skepticism that everyday commonsense beliefs are without rational justification.[9] They are similarly willing to accept Skepticism's judgment that religious beliefs (including belief in God) are without rational justification. Hence, there is an important parity between commonsense beliefs and religious beliefs. Both lack rational justification and - if accepted - are accepted without it.

Since everyday commonsense beliefs lack rational justification, when one accepts them he is making a sort of "faith" commitment. Here is where the Parity Argument comes to play. It is addressed to the unbeliever who willingly makes a faith commitment to secular commonsense beliefs, but declines to make the corresponding faith commitment to religious beliefs. The Parity Argument accuses him of inconsistency. It is inconsistent to accept everyday commonsense beliefs and then - on the grounds that they lack rational justification - to reject religious beliefs. The commonsense beliefs which he willingly embraces lack rational justification no less than the religious beliefs which he rejects.

---

[9] Penelhum's interpretation of these thinkers is not without controversy. C. Stephen Evans, for one, contests Penelhum's interpretation of Kierkegaard as a Skeptical Fideist in his insightful paper: C. Stephen Evans, "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs," Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 1 (January 1988): 25-39.

Pascal and Kierkegaard employ the Parity Argument in trying to persuade the unbeliever to make a religious faith commitment. By charging him with inconsistency, these Evangelical Fideists want him to stop being inconsistent and to add religious beliefs to his commonsense beliefs. There is no *rational* reason not to do so; religious beliefs are no less rationally suitable than the commonsense beliefs he does hold. The Parity Argument employed to this end is what Penelhum calls the *classical version* of the Parity Argument.[10]

But Plantinga, according to Penelhum, employs a modified "permissive" version of the Parity Argument. Instead of being employed to convict the unbeliever of inconsistency in order to move him toward religious belief; the permissive version is used to clear the believer of the charge of irrationality. It is used to defend the theist against the charge that he is being irrational to believe in God without adequate evidence. Plantinga's defense, according to Penelhum, is this:

> ... believers and unbelievers alike are necessarily committed to principles such as the reliability of our sensory apparatus or the constancy of nature. (Not necessarily *these* principles, of course, but some such principles as these.) The justification that unbelievers demand for belief in God is not available for these secular commitments ...[11]

Hence, the theistic believer is no more irrational to believe in God (without adequate evidence) than the unbeliever is to make the "secular commitments" he makes "without adequate evidence." Most will acknowledge that these secular commitments which the unbeliever makes are rational, even though they lack evidential support. If it is not irrational for the unbeliever to make

---

[10]Penelhum, God and Skepticism, 150.

[11]Ibid., 151.

these secular commitments to beliefs which lack evidential support, then we cannot consistently charge the theist with irrationality because his theistic belief lacks evidential support. If the lack of evidential support is no problem in the former case, it cannot consistently be a problem in the latter.

Penelhum rightly sees Plantinga's use of the Parity Argument as intended to "show something rather less than"[12] the classical version of it as employed by Pascal or Kierkegaard. Plantinga does not argue that the unbeliever is being inconsistent and, therefore, should rationally add theistic belief to his commitments. Rather, he argues merely that if it is rational for the unbeliever to accept certain secular beliefs apart from evidence, then it is no less rational for the believer to accept his theistic belief apart from evidence.

Apart from this significant difference between Plantinga's "permissive" use of the Parity Argument and its classical use, Penelhum sees the arguments as in all other respects similar. That being so, we could summarize Penelhum's understanding of Plantinga's Parity Argument like this:

> Many everyday commonsense beliefs are without rational justification. Similarly, belief in God is without rational justification. So there is a certain parity between commonsense beliefs and theistic belief. Both lack rational justification and, when accepted, are accepted without rational justification. Now, since commonsense beliefs lack rational justification, when one accepts these everyday commonsense beliefs, he is making a sort of faith commitment. Here is where the Parity Argument comes to play. It is addressed to the unbeliever who willingly makes a faith commitment to secular, commonsense beliefs, but then accuses the theist - who makes the corresponding faith commitment to theistic belief - of irrationality. The Parity Argument accuses such an atheistic accuser of inconsistency: it is not being consistent to accept a faith commitment to everyday commonsense beliefs as being compatible with rationality and then accusing the theist who makes the analogous faith commitment to theistic belief of being irrational. The commonsense beliefs which the atheist willingly embraces lack rational justification and require a faith commitment to accept them no

---

[12]Ibid.

> less than does theistic belief. Hence, the theistic believer is no less rational in his theistic belief than the atheist is in his everyday beliefs.

But, there is a fundamental flaw in Penelhum's interpretation of Plantinga's position.[13] Plantinga, unlike Pascal and Kierkegaard (on Penelhum's interpretation), does not understand the parity to be that both commonsense beliefs and theistic belief require a "faith commitment." Rather, Plantinga clearly believes that both are, what he calls, "deliverances of reason." Like Pascal and Kierkegaard, he <u>does</u> argue that there is parity between commonsense and theistic beliefs. But unlike them, he believes that the fundamental commonsense beliefs are eminently rational beliefs - beliefs which result from the proper functioning of our rational noetic equipment. To claim that theistic belief has parity with commonsense beliefs, therefore, is to

---

[13] This assumes, of course, that my interpretation of what Penelhum is saying is correct. The concept of a "faith commitment" is critical to my contention that Penelhum has misunderstood Plantinga. Penelhum, I think, is suggesting that Plantinga holds belief in God - like secular common sense commitments- to be "faith" commitments. He never explicitly says as much; but I believe this is the best way to read Penelhum (though such a reading is not without its problems). The most weighty evidence in favor of this interpretation is Penelhum's view that the permissive Parity Argument as used by Plantinga must ultimately lead to a stand-off between theistic belief and atheistic belief. In Penelhum's description of how this stand-off would unfold, he assumes that the foundational beliefs of theism and atheism are - in both cases - basic, ungrounded "faith" commitments. So - though he never calls Plantinga's view of how we hold theistic belief a "faith commitment" - his evaluation of the outcome of Plantinga's position can best be understood on the assumption that Penelhum is viewing it as such. Most telling in this regard is Penelhum's qualification (ibid., 151-152) that commitment to theistic belief can and does receive what he calls "internal support" even when it has no "evidence" in its support. His contrast between "internal support" and "evidence" in this passage is significant, but not decisive. It would seem that his conception of theistic belief having no supporting evidence is the notion that theistic belief is totally ungrounded, unjustified, and baseless - and, hence, a "faith commitment."

claim that it too is rational. It too results from the proper functioning of our rational noetic equipment.

This is an important difference between Plantinga and the Evangelical Fideists. It is a difference which removes Plantinga from the fideist category altogether. If Penelhum has rightly understood them,[14] Pascal and Kierkegaard are rightly classed as fideists. They hold that commonsense beliefs (as well as religious beliefs) result from a sort of faith commitment - a commitment that is not supported by, and may even be opposed by, reason. Plantinga, on the other hand, holds that commonsense beliefs (and theistic belief as well) result from human reason as it functions properly in the appropriate environment. Hence, for Plantinga, it is fundamentally reason - not faith - that gives rise to both commonsense beliefs and theistic belief. This is not a fideistic position. His explicit intent is to base belief in God squarely on reason - identifying it as a "deliverance of reason."

Now Plantinga clearly departs from the traditional view of rational belief - i.e., classical foundationalism's view of rational belief. He finds the traditional view of what makes a belief rationally sound to be unacceptable. As we have seen, Plantinga rejects the traditional criteria of rational belief because they are too narrow and arbitrary and because they are self-referentially inconsistent. Rational soundness is not adequately analyzed as being supported by foundational beliefs which are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. But Plantinga's rejection of the traditional picture of what makes a belief rational is <u>not</u> a rejection of its understanding of the role of

---

[14]I am not in a position to either support or refute Penelhum's interpretation of Kierkegaard and Pascal.

reason. He is not suggesting that (contra classical foundationalism) belief in God must be based on a "faith commitment" rather than upon reason. If he opposed classical foundationalism on this point, he could legitimately be called a fideist. But Plantinga accepts unreservedly classical foundationalism's view that belief in God should be accepted only if it is soundly rational. But, according to Plantinga, once the nature of rational belief is rightly understood, we will discover that theism has a soundly rational basis. This position can hardly be thought of as fideism.[15]

It is understandable, though, how one might come to think of Plantinga as a fideist. Consider Popkin's definition of fideism: "Fideism is the view that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence." This definition of fideism is based on assumptions rooted in classical foundationalism. It does not pit faith against *reason*. It pits faith against *reasoning* or *evidence*. Popkin's definition suggests that if one rejects "reasoning" as the basis for theistic belief, his only other alternative is "faith." Now Plantinga quite clearly rejects "reasoning" (i.e., inferential arguments for God's existence) and "evidence" as the basis for believing in God. Hence, on the assumption implicit in Popkin's definition, faith is the only other possibility. Logically, Plantinga must hold that theistic belief is based on faith. He must be a fideist. But (as should be clear by now) Plantinga is attempting to defend a

---

[15] Ronald J. Feenstra, in Ronald J. Feenstra, "Natural Theology, Epistemic Parity, and Unbelief," Modern Theology 5, no. 1 (1988): 3-7 is right to point out that Penelhum goes wrong in his reading of Plantinga because he fails to take seriously Plantinga's claim that the theist's belief in God - though it is not based on "evidence" - does have justifying grounds. If Penelhum had paid more attention to this claim, he would have seen that Plantinga is not arguing for an irrational, non-cognitive "faith" as the basis for belief in God. He is arguing that belief in God is not only a permissibly rational belief, but also a justified belief which has justifying grounds in the theist's experience.

third alternative. Theistic belief is not based on faith, nor is it based on "reasoning" or "evidence"; it is based on a whole different aspect of reason other than the output of inferential arguments. Theistic belief is itself a well-formed rational belief which is grounded in the theist's experience and is the natural, spontaneous, immediate outcome of his properly functioning reason. It is not arrived at inferentially - on the basis of "reasoning or evidence" - but it is the output of reason[16] nonetheless and it is decidedly not the output of faith. Hence, Plantinga's rejection of the notion that belief in God is based on "reasoning" and "evidence" is not sufficient grounds for labeling him a fideist.

One might object that Plantinga's so-called "deliverance of reason" is really, in essence, just a faith commitment which he has conveniently opted to call a "deliverance of reason" so as to avoid the charge of fideism. Call it what he will, however, Plantinga's belief in God is just a commitment of faith. This is not a fair objection.

In the first place, it fails to see the import of Plantinga's use of the Parity Argument - especially what Penelhum calls the "permissive version of the Parity Argument." If our belief in God has epistemological parity with our belief in other minds, perceptual objects, and the past (as Plantinga claims), then we cannot consistently maintain that these commonsense beliefs are rational while at the same time we insist that theistic belief is a faith commitment. They are epistemologically in the same boat. Either belief in God - like our

---

[16] This is what Plantinga means by calling belief in God a "deliverance of reason." He uses this phrase several times in different papers. In Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 90 he uses it in the context of denying the charge of fideism on the grounds that, as he sees it, "belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of reason as those other beliefs" (where he means everyday beliefs such as belief in other minds, the past, and perceptual objects).

commonsensical beliefs in other minds, perceptual objects, and the past - is based on reason; or these other commonsensical beliefs are commitments of faith as well. Plantinga prefers recognizing the rationality of theistic belief to denying the rationality of these other commonsense beliefs. So, in the light of the Parity Argument (assuming it is successful) - the only way to press the above objection and insist that Plantinga is really a fideist is by concluding that we are all fideists. This conclusion, while possible, would be counter-productive to any attempt to use the charge of fideism as an objection to Plantinga's view.

Secondly, when we consider the development of Plantinga's epistemology in his later essays, it becomes clear that Plantinga espouses an epistemological theory wherein he tries to make plausible his claim that theistic belief is the output of reason. It is not an *ad hoc* suggestion - a strategy devised to escape the charge of fideism. It is part and parcel of a sincerely held epistemological theory. We may not agree with Plantinga's conception of rational belief. His epistemology may very well be wrong. But, in any event, he is making a serious proposal that we call "rational" whatever is the belief-output of properly functioning noetic equipment which is functioning in the environment for which it was intended.[17] This is a plausible suggestion - especially in the context of a theistic worldview (which Plantinga holds). It

---

[17] Actually, as I discuss elsewhere in this paper, Plantinga thinks that a belief can be "rational" by meeting less stringent requirements than this. So, for example, although atheistic belief lacks "positive epistemic status" because it is the result of noetic equipment not functioning properly; yet atheistic belief is nonetheless "rational" in Plantinga's view. If a belief has "positive epistemic status" - as belief in God does (for Plantinga) - then it must necessarily be rational. But a belief can have "rational" status without having "positive epistemic status."

certainly makes more sense to call the spontaneous output of our noetic equipment "rational" than to call it a "commitment of faith." One who would re-label the output of our noetic equipment "faith" is more reasonably charged with arbitrary re-labeling than Plantinga is. All things considered, then, Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is not - as he himself puts it - "felicitously thought of as a version of fideism."[18]

---

[18]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 91.

CHAPTER IV

PLANTINGA AND RELATIVISM

In the last chapter, I considered whether Plantinga's epistemology is a form of fideism. In this chapter I consider whether it involves a form of relativism. At times Plantinga's presentation certainly invites such a conclusion. We must carefully consider how and to what extent it may be so.

In countering the evidentialist objection, Plantinga's key move is the simple claim that belief in God is a basic belief and therefore needs no evidential support in order to be rational. He thinks this claim is justified. He gives two reasons: (1) certain theists (eg., those in the Reformed tradition) do, in fact, self-consciously hold that their theistic belief is a basic belief, and (2) contrary to the claims of classical foundationalism, there exists no acceptable criterion of proper basicality which would rule out belief in God as a properly basic belief. Plantinga does not offer us an alternative set of criteria according to which belief in God does pass muster as a properly basic belief. His position is simply that -

1. belief in God is properly basic;

2. the proposed set of criteria by which belief in God is typically ruled out (i.e., that of classical foundationalism) is in fact unacceptable; and

3. there is no other proposed set of criteria by which basic belief in God would be ruled irrational - indeed, there is no acceptable set of criteria of proper basicality at all.

The Great Pumpkin Objection

Early in his exposition of Reformed epistemology, Plantinga saw a very important and obvious objection to his key move.[1] He colorfully dubs it the "Great Pumpkin Objection" -

> If belief in God is properly basic, why cannot *just any* belief be properly basic? Could we not 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 properly basic? ... If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?[2]

Plantinga's statement of the Great Pumpkin objection[3] is ambiguous. It does not distinguish between two importantly different objections that could be raised:

1. If it is rationally permissible for me to hold belief in God as properly basic, then it is rationally permissible <u>for me</u> to hold belief in the Great Pumpkin

---

[1]Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" <u>Nous</u> 15 (March 1981): 48-51 is Plantinga's first discussion of this objection.

[2]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 74.

[3]It is a mistake to be distracted by the outlandishness of the Great Pumpkin, or to argue that - since no one really believes in the Great Pumpkin - Plantinga's responses to this objection are tendentious. Plantinga could just have easily framed this objection in terms of the animist's belief in tree spirits or the Indian peasant's belief in household gods. Such an objection and Plantinga's response would parallel exactly the discussion which he does give us *vis a vis* the Great Pumpkin. Nothing in his response as to why the theist need not accept belief in the Great Pumpkin pivots on any distinctive feature of belief in the Great Pumpkin *per se*. The Great Pumpkin is a place holder. It represents any and all other competing religious beliefs which the theist wants to reject while embracing his own theistic belief.

(or any other bizarre belief) as properly basic. If no criteria of proper basicality stand in the way of the former, then no criteria stand in the way of the latter. So, if I can embrace belief in God as a basic belief, there is nothing to prevent me from embracing just any belief as a basic belief.

2. If it is rationally permissible for me to hold belief in God as properly basic, then it is rationally permissible for the next person to hold belief in the Great Pumpkin (or any other bizarre belief) as properly basic. If no criteria of proper basicality stand in the way of my holding theistic belief as properly basic, then no criteria stand in the way of the next person's holding belief in the Great Pumpkin as properly basic. So, if I can rationally embrace belief in God as basic, there is nothing irrational about the next person's embracing just any odd belief as basic - no matter how bizarre the belief. It follows that I have no basis whatsoever from which to persuade a Great Pumpkinist that his belief in the Great Pumpkin is irrational and ought to be discarded. So long as he can permissibly hold his Great Pumpkinist belief as basic (and, in fairness, I cannot deny him the right to do so while holding my own theistic belief as basic), I have no basis for charging him with irrationality.

Plantinga's response to the Great Pumpkin objection is unclear and confusing at times. Most of the confusion, I think, is due to his failure to separate out the two different objections listed above. His response addresses both objections, but his presentation does not clearly specify when he is addressing which one. The net result is a somewhat unsatisfying response. I will attempt to sort through all that Plantinga is saying and clarify exactly how Plantinga wants to respond to each of these separate objections.

The First Great Pumpkin Objection: Plantinga's Response

The first objection is this: Plantinga has not accounted for how a theist can hold belief in God as properly basic while at the same time ruling out - *for himself* - holding belief in the Great Pumpkin as properly basic. The objection assumes that any proper conception of rationality will somehow disallow my holding bizarre superstitions and obviously irrational beliefs. If the Reformed conception of rationality cannot rightly disallow beliefs which are obviously false - eg., belief in the Great Pumpkin - then there is something wrong with its conception of rationality. How does Plantinga respond to this? His response involves the following three considerations:

1. Reformed epistemology does not reject the notion of proper basicality altogether. It acknowledges that some beliefs are properly held as basic while others are not. It only insists that neither classical foundationalism nor anyone else has successfully articulated a set of criteria for determining which beliefs are which. The Reformed theist claims that belief in God is among those of his beliefs which can properly be accepted as basic.[4] This does not commit him to allowing any belief whatsoever to be accepted as properly basic. Some beliefs are clearly not acceptable as basic beliefs. For the theist, belief in the Great Pumpkin is one of them. To such a theist, the unacceptability of belief in the Great Pumpkin is just as sure as the acceptability of belief in God.

---

[4]As explained earlier, belief in God is not "strictly speaking" properly basic. Theo-implicatory beliefs are the properly basic beliefs for Reformed epistemology. Following Plantinga's lead, however, I will not continually interject this complication into the discussion.

2. This objection assumes that the only way one can rationally disallow certain beliefs from being properly basic is by articulating a criterion which clearly distinguishes what is and what is not properly basic. Plantinga thinks this assumption is wrong. One need not articulate a set of criteria by which to judge whether a belief is properly basic before he can make such a judgment. Plantinga writes,

> Must one have such a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgments - positive or negative - about proper basicality? Surely not. Suppose I do not know of a satisfactory substitute for the criteria proposed by classical foundationalism; I am nevertheless entirely within my epistemic rights in holding that certain propositions in certain conditions are not properly basic.[5]

One can reject an obviously irrational and bizarre belief as unacceptable, then, without ever having established a set of criteria beforehand. Hence, the theist has every right to reject belief in the Great Pumpkin as properly basic at the same time that he accepts belief in God as such. So long as it is his sincere judgment that belief in the Great Pumpkin is not suited to being accepted as basic while belief in God is, it is perfectly reasonable for him to reject the former and embrace the latter.

3. The reason the theist can regard belief in God differently from belief in the Great Pumpkin is because there is an important difference between them. If Reformed epistemology is right, certain circumstances serve as the justifying grounds for belief in God; but no analogous circumstances serve as justifying grounds for belief in the Great Pumpkin. According to Reformed epistemology, God created man with a tendency - when being attentive to some aspect of the

---

[5]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief,"75.

creation - to "see" the handiwork of God[6] (i.e., to form the belief that he is confronted with the handiwork of God). So, upon seeing a flower, man "sees" that the flower is of God's workmanship and forms the belief "God made this flower." But - as Reformed epistemology sees it - there is no Great Pumpkin and there is no tendency in human beings to form beliefs about the Great Pumpkin while being attentive to some aspect of life experience. If this is right, then nothing in a person's experience provides the justifying grounds for belief in the Great Pumpkin whereas innumerable circumstances provide the justifying grounds for his belief in God. This is a critical and decisive difference between these two beliefs. It explains why the latter can rationally be accepted (as basic) while the former is rejected. To hold belief in the Great Pumpkin as properly basic would be irrational, for - unlike belief in God - there are no *grounds* for doing so.[7]

In light of the above three considerations, Reformed epistemology does not have the unhappy consequence that it permits belief in God as rational only at the cost of permitting *any belief whatsoever* as rational. The Reformed

---

[6]See Alvin Plantinga,"Reformed Epistemology Again," Reformed Journal 32 (July 1982): 7-8. Here Plantinga objects to his view being characterized in this way by Peter Losin - Peter Losin,"Reformed Epistemology: Three Replies," Reformed Journal 32 (April 1982): 21-23. Neither Losin nor I means for "see" to be taken literally here. Plantinga clearly means to say that the immediate, non-inferential knowledge of God gained from experience is due to a distinctly different noetic function from the sense of sight. But we have no ordinary word for that noetic function. For convenience, it is tempting to describe it as "seeing" God in his handiwork. Besides, Calvin uses just such language.

[7]For Plantinga, the "grounds" for accepting a belief as basic is not the same thing as the "evidence" upon which I accept a belief. The "evidence" for holding a belief is always itself another belief. If belief A is evidence for belief B, then I hold belief B by some sort of inference (broadly speaking) from belief A. But the "grounds" for accepting a belief as basic is a circumstance or experience of some sort.

epistemologist need not find belief in the Great Pumpkin rationally acceptable in order to find belief in God rationally acceptable. So, the first of the two objections embodied in "the Great Pumpkin objection" is answered. Reformed epistemology can and does distinguish between beliefs which can and cannot properly be held as basic, and it provides a basis upon which such a distinction can be made. The Reformed epistemologist's decision to allow belief in God as basic (while disallowing belief in the Great Pumpkin) is not arbitrary or gratuitous. It is grounded in the presence or absence of justifying circumstances or "grounds."

Understanding the Second Great Pumpkin Objection

But what if a theist confronts a Great Pumpkinist who makes a claim exactly parallel to his own? Does the theist have any basis from which to charge this Great Pumpkinist with irrationality?[8]

Suppose this Great Pumpkinist believes that there exists a Great Pumpkin and that there is a natural tendency in all human beings, when in the right set of circumstances (e.g., when alone in a pumpkin patch on a frosty Halloween night), to come to "know" that the Great Pumpkin exists. In other words, he holds that every human has a tendency, under the right circumstances, to form beliefs about the existence of the Great Pumpkin. These circumstances serve as the justifying grounds for his belief. Hence, it is rationally acceptable for him to hold his Great Pumpkinist belief as properly basic.

---

[8]See Bredo C. Johnsen,"Basic Theistic Belief," Canadian Journal of Philosophy 16, no. 3 (September 1986): 455 - 464. His objection parallels this second Great Pumpkin Objection.

When confronted by the above claim, does the theist have any basis whatsoever from which to charge this Great Pumpkinist with being irrational and to persuade him to give up his bizarre belief? The question is not whether the theist has, *for himself*, a basis for rejecting belief in the Great Pumpkin as irrational. The question is whether he has any basis from which to show the Great Pumpkinist the irrationality of his ways. This is what lies behind the second of the two objections combined in the Great Pumpkin Objection. This second objection can be put like this: Plantinga's epistemology has not accounted for how a theist can hold belief in God as properly basic and - at the same time - charge the Great Pumpkin believer with irrationality when he does the same thing. If Plantinga cannot account for that, then his theory must ultimately lead to a radical subjectivism: the rational is what is rational for me. And that will differ from person to person. Great Pumpkinist belief is rational for the Great Pumpkinist, theistic belief is rational for the theist, and atheistic belief is rational for the atheist.

The three considerations offered in response to the first objection above do not help answer this objection. If anything they would tend to support it. First, our Great Pumpkinist can rationally believe in the Great Pumpkin without having to accept just any bizarre belief whatsoever. (So, for example, he can believe in the Great Pumpkin while rejecting belief in the Easter Bunny.) Secondly, it is not necessary that he articulate a criterion of proper basicality before he can do so. And finally, he can do so without being arbitrary or gratuitous. He has grounds for his belief in the Great Pumpkin; he does not have grounds for believing in the Easter Bunny. All these considerations heighten the force of this second objection. The Great Pumpkinist (within the scenario as we have sketched it) is in no worse position than the theist to

defend the rationality of his belief. But if Great Pumpkinism is rational for the Great Pumpkinist and theism is rational for the theist - this might seem to support the accusation that Plantinga espouses subjectivism.

Plantinga's "Inductive" Approach and Subjectivism

The sense that Plantinga's position involves a radical subjectivism gains further support from yet another aspect of Plantinga's theory. Plantinga argues that "the proper way to arrive at ... a criterion [of proper basicality] is, broadly speaking, *inductive.*"[9] He goes on to describe what he means:

> 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. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicality and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples.[10]

Properly, he thinks, each individual should conduct a survey of *his own personal beliefs*. Each person must make a determination as to which of his own beliefs he accepts as basic under what sorts of circumstances. For each individual, then, any proposed criterion for distinguishing properly from improperly basic beliefs must be answerable to the set of examples he has compiled in this manner. Hence, it must be answerable to a set of beliefs which he actually does hold as basic. Any criterion of proper basicality one accepts should be determined "inductively," in this sense.[11]

---

[9]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 76.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Cf. James G. Hanink, "Some Questions About Proper Basicality," Faith and Philosophy 4, no. 1 (January 1987): 20. What Plantinga means is

What Plantinga Is Not Suggesting

It is important to understand clearly what is not involved in nor implied by Plantinga's suggestion that a criterion of proper basicality be arrived at inductively:

1. Plantinga is not envisioning an empirical, scientific survey of all the members of the various intellectual communities. Some have so interpreted him.[12] But this is not strictly right. His "inductive" approach does not require a survey of all the different intellectual communities in order to determine what each of them holds as basic. Neither does it involve an inductive survey of all the different members of my own intellectual community - in order to establish inductively what "we" believe. Rather, as we have seen, Plantinga has in mind an inductive survey by each individual of his own personal judgments as to what is properly held as basic.

Plantinga does believe that distinct "intellectual communities" do exist. Each person has "intellectual peers," who share his intuitions and judgments as to what is and is not rational. In accordance with the pattern of my judgments as to what I will and will not allow as properly basic, I will tend to group myself with one of these different "intellectual communities." Accordingly, Plantinga assumes that it is meaningful to speak of intellectual communities - eg. theists, atheists, Great Pumpkinists - and more often than not,

---

approximately what Hanink is describing here: "... it is only by the analysis of one's own noetic structure that one can achieve progress in identifying the criteria of proper basicality. And even then, one can do so only if one has, as a reflective person, the capacity to carry out this analysis carefully and insightfully."

[12]See ibid., 13-25.

he refers to the rational judgments of intellectual communities rather than to the rational judgments of individuals *per se*. But we must not be misled by this fact. What is fundamental to the theory which Plantinga is espousing are the rational judgments and intuitions of each individual *per se*.

2. There is no assumption underlying Plantinga's "inductive" approach that one's conception of what is rational is defined by the intellectual community to which he belongs.[13] Neither does it involve the assumption that one's conception of rationality is determined by the intellectual community to which he belongs. Both of these are totally alien to Plantinga's assumptions. If people tend to group themselves into intellectual communities (as Plantinga thinks they do), it is not because the intellectual communities in which they fall have somehow foisted their conceptions of rationality on the individuals within each community; nor have they defined rationality for the individuals within their community. In Plantingan foundationalism, the shared judgments of individuals form communities; communities do not form the judgments of individuals.

What Plantinga Is Suggesting

We have seen what is not involved in Plantinga's suggestion that a criterion of proper basicality be arrived at inductively. But what is involved in it? Four things are worth noting, being points that Plantinga himself emphasizes:

---

[13]See Robbins, "Properly Basic?" 241-248. Also see Hatcher, "A Critique," 84-95. Both of these critics have wrongly assumed that Plantinga espouses the view that rationality is defined by one's community and that rationality is, therefore, relative to the community of which one is a part.

1. As we already discussed in connection with the first objection, we do not need a criterion to know what we ourselves do and do not accept as basic. That we already know - apart from any such criterion. The purpose of formulating a criterion is not to teach us something we do not otherwise know; it is to articulate and systematize what we *do* already know. It is to describe judgments which we already in fact make - not to prescribe judgments which we should make. This is what lies behind this statement:

> Accordingly, criteria for proper basicality must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented *ex cathedra* but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples.[14]

In other words, a criterion of proper basicality should not be imposed on me from the outside, it should arise as a natural and appropriate expression of a conception of rationality which I already possess.

2. There is a significant sense in which rationality must be seen to be relative. It is relative to each intellectual community and - more accurately - to each individual. If each individual were to construct his own personal set of basic beliefs (in accordance with the "inductive approach" described above), each such set of beliefs will differ from person to person.[15] Consequently, Plantinga does not hesitate to speak of different "conceptions of reason" possessed by different communities of people:

> A former professor of mine for whom I had and have enormous respect once said that theists and nontheists have different conceptions of reason. At the

---

[14]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 77.

[15]Or, at least, there will be several such different sets and individuals would - by their own judgments as to what is properly basic - group themselves into one of these different intellectual communities.

> time I did not know what he meant, but now I think I do. On the Reformed view I have been urging, the deliverances of reason include the existence of God just as much as perceptual truths, self-evident truths, memory truths, and the like. It is not that the theist and nontheist agree as to what reason delivers, the theist then going on to accept the existence of God by faith; there is, instead, disagreement in the first place as to what are the deliverances of reason.[16]

Rationality to the theist, says Plantinga, is not the same thing as rationality to the atheist.

But this could be misleading. To say that the conception of rationality differs from individual to individual - from community to community - is not to deny that individual human beings hold in common the vast majority of their judgments about what is rational. At certain crucial points, our judgments depart from one another. Hence, what makes a group a distinct intellectual community is the fact that, *at certain key junctures* , it differs from the other communities in its conception of what is rational. But there is a tremendous overlap in the conceptions of rationality operative in these diverse communities. The differences which do exist are all the more striking and significant because of the even greater agreement between them. Plantinga is not denying any such common ground. It is on the basis of this vast common ground of rationality that diverse people can relate to one another and enter into discourse together. But at certain points the theist and the atheist (for example) will simply have different judgments. In that sense, they possess different "conceptions of rationality."[17] This latter mode of expression can be misleading if we do not understand the limited sense in which Plantinga means it.

---

[16]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 90.

[17]Ibid.

3. From the above, it follows that I cannot be concerned about the rational intuitions of others. I am concerned only about my own rational judgments. When it comes to articulating a criterion of proper basicality which is relevant to me - it is not relevant what another person will and will not accept as properly basic. All that matters is what I (out of my own conception of rationality) accept as basic. So, for example, it is not relevant to the Christian what an *atheist* will and will not accept as properly basic.

> Accordingly, criteria for proper basicality must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented *ex cathedra* but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples. 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 does not 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 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.[18]

(If I understand Plantinga correctly, not only is it irrelevant what the atheist may or may not accept as basic, it is equally irrelevant what another theist may or may not accept as properly basic. There is no divergence among theists on the issue of theistic belief. But if on some other issue my judgment as to what is properly basic differs from that of another theist, then his judgment is irrelevant to me no less than the atheist's. I am responsible to *my* set of examples, not to his.)

4. Finally, it is not appropriate for one intellectual community to impose its conception of rationality on another intellectual community. This is precisely

---

[18]Ibid., 77.

what Plantinga thinks classical foundationalism is doing when it raises the evidentialist objection to theistic belief. For the classical foundationalist to foist his criteria of proper basicality on the theist "ex cathedra" is nothing more than "a bit of intellectual imperialism."[19] Every intellectual community (presumably) should avoid such imperialism. We have no right to impose our rational intuitions on another. Each has his own. This is, in part, what lies behind the statement we cited earlier:

> The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not 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 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.[20]

Summary

To summarize, then: Plantinga thinks that we each have our own individual conception of rationality which differs from person to person and from community to community. The rational judgments and intuitions of one intellectual community are not really relevant to the next intellectual community. In fact, it is nothing short of "intellectual imperialism" for one community to impose its criterion of what is rational on the beliefs and judgments of another.

---

[19]Plantinga, "Is Belief Rational?" 26.

[20]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 77.

In Defense of Plantinga's Acknowledgment of Rationality as Relative

Is Plantinga's holding that rationality is relative in the way that he is suggesting an objectionable position? I would argue that, rightly understood, it is not. It is an accurate representation of the actual rhetorical and epistemic situation which exists.

Is it not true that the theist and the atheist evaluate the rationality of their respective beliefs differently? And is it not true that in doing so they are applying different criteria for judging what is rational?

Nonetheless, some of Plantinga's critics clearly want to press his concession here as an objection. They insist that all people everywhere have the same conception of rationality and embrace the same criteria, which can be used to adjudicate the differences of belief among them. But I agree with Plantinga. It is simply naive, I think, to remain oblivious to the very different conceptions of rationality which different people apply to theirs and other's beliefs. Granted, there is a great deal of common ground, a great deal of overlap. But there are significant differences as well. It is the differences, not the agreements, that cause the conflicting judgments.

So, with regard to people's standards, pictures, and conceptions of what it means for something to be rational, Plantinga is a relativist. But surely this much cannot be pressed as a problem for or objection to Plantinga's position. This is a strength of Plantinga's position. The fact of the matter is, people's conceptions of what is rational do vary from person to person in the way that Plantinga suggests.

The Objection Revisited: Plantinga's Theory Involves Subjectivism

Returning to the second Great Pumpkin objection, if Plantinga is right about all this, then the Great Pumpkinist (as described above) is in no worse position than the theist when it comes to the rationality of his belief. He already "just knows" that belief in the Great Pumpkin is properly basic, grounded as it is in his experience. If his or anyone else's criterion disallows belief in the Great Pumpkin, then so much the worse for that criterion. Any proposed criterion which rules as *improperly* basic what one already knows to be *properly* basic must be rejected. So, if the criteria of classical foundationalism (or of theism) disallow belief in the Great Pumpkin - that fact does not count against Great Pumpkinist belief. It counts against those criteria.[21] Hence, as a theist, I have no criteria of rationality (with which the Great Pumpkinist agrees) by which I could persuade him that his belief in the Great Pumpkin is irrational.

But Great Pumpkinist belief is clearly false. Hence, our Great Pumpkinist embraces as a basic, foundational belief a belief which is patently false; and Plantinga's theory will not permit us to charge him with irrationality when he does so. Surely a theory which cannot condemn this as irrational is inadequate and wrong-headed. An epistemology which defends the rationality of my theistic belief only at the cost of also defending the rationality of the next person's Great Pumpkinist belief has not successfully defended the rationality of my theism at all.

The problem with Reformed epistemology is that it leaves us in a position where rationality becomes radically subjective, relative to each individual.

---

[21]Cf. ibid.,76.

What is rational to one person is irrational to the next. What is accepted as properly basic by me is rejected by you. We have no common ground from which to settle our dispute. Plantinga explicitly acknowledges this:

> And hence criteria for proper basicality arrived at in this particularistic way may not be polemically useful. If you and I start from different examples - if my set of examples includes a pair <B,C> (where B is, say belief in God and C is some condition) and your set of examples does not include <B,C> - then we may very well arrive at different criteria for proper basicality. Furthermore I cannot sensibly use my criterion to try to convince you that B is in fact properly basic in C, for you will point out, quite properly, that my criterion is based upon a set of examples that, as you see it, *erroneously* includes <B,C> as an example of a belief and condition such that the former is properly basic in the latter. You will thus be quite within your rights in claiming that my criterion is mistaken, although of course you may concede that, given my set of examples, I followed correct procedures in arriving at it. But of course by the same token you cannot sensibly use your criterion to try to convince me that B is *not*, in fact, properly basic in C. If criteria for proper basicality are arrived at in this particularistic way, they will not be or at any rate need not be polemically useful. Following this sort of procedure, we may not be able to resolve our disagreement as to the status of <B,C>; you will continue to hold that B is *not* properly basic in C, and I will continue to hold that it *is*.[22]

I accept belief in God as properly basic and I can trot out a set of criteria to demonstrate its proper basicality. You, on the other hand, think it irrational to accept theistic belief as basic and you have your own set of criteria by which to support your judgment. Our individual conceptions of what is rational have already predetermined which criteria of proper basicality we will embrace; and we have radically different conceptions of what is rational. To you, it is manifestly irrational to accept belief in God as basic. To me, it is manifestly rational.

But if, for Plantinga, rationality is relative in this sense, does it not follow that knowledge and truth are made relative as well? This is exactly what the

---

[22]Ibid., 77-78.

second Great Pumpkin objection wants to charge against Plantinga: he is a relativist with respect to what is rational and, hence, with respect to what is truly known. Hence, he has removed any basis that we might otherwise have to persuade another person that his view lacks rationality and that he lacks knowledge.

The second Great Pumpkin objection amounts to this: *Plantinga's epistemology is clearly mistaken insofar as it suggests that what is rational is radically subjective and relative to the individual.* [23]

Plantinga's Response to the Second Great Pumpkin Objection

As we have seen, Plantinga does hold that one's *conception of what is rational* will vary from person to person. Likewise, what one *claims to know* will vary from person to person. But does Plantinga mean to suggest that *truth* will vary from person to person? And does it follow that *actual* rationality and *true* knowledge will vary for each individual? Plantinga says "no." To best understand why, it will be helpful to spell out how Plantinga sees the relationship between truth, rationality, and proper basicality.

---

[23]This objection takes for granted that any view which does not acknowledge a universal conception of rationality is necessarily faulty. The thinking behind this seems to be this: Truth is universal; it is not relative to the individual or the community. What is true is rational and what is rational is true. Hence, what is rational must likewise be universal.

Truth, Rationality, and Proper Basicality: Background to Plantinga's Response

For Plantinga there is a distinct correlation between rationality and proper basicality.[24] A belief can be a properly basic belief only if it is a truly rational belief. In certain circumstances- from the standpoint of rationality - it may be acceptable, understandable, and even "rationally appropriate"[25] for one to judge a belief to be properly basic (when, in fact, it is not). But to say that it is "rationally appropriate" to hold such a belief as properly basic is not to say (1) that it is a properly basic belief, nor (2) that it is rational-in-fact to hold it as basic. *I can be mistaken in my judgment of its proper basicality (and , hence, of its rationality) without being intellectually remiss in making that judgment.* But a correct judgment that a belief is properly basic must necessarily entail that that belief is rational-in-fact.

The relationship between rationality and truth is more complicated in Plantinga. There is clearly a correlation; but it is not a strict correlation. A

---

[24]See Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection Revisited," Christian Scholar's Review 12, no. 1 (1983): 59. Although Plantinga is not totally consistent in the way he talks about this, here he makes a claim which leaves open the possibility of a false belief being a properly basic belief for someone: "...whether belief in the non-existence of God is ever properly basic, therefore, is a complicated question on which I don't propose to take a stand."

[25]This is not Plantinga's term; it's mine. It does not mean the same thing as Plantinga's "rationally permissible." By the latter, Plantinga means to imply what one's reason is entitled to hold. By the former (my term) I mean to denote what it is understandable that one hold, even if one is not rationally entitled to do so. What if a Great Pumpkinist has mistakenly thought that he had "grounds" for his belief, when in fact, he does not. It might be "rationally appropriate" for him to hold his Great Pumpkinist belief as properly basic in such a circumstance; but it would not be "rationally permissible." He has no grounds for doing so. Something can be "rationally permissible" without being true, for Plantinga. But it is a stronger claim than my being "rationally appropriate" here.

basic belief can be rational-in-fact without being true[26] - for there may be something inadequate about my experience or knowledge which leads me to *rationally* embrace what is false. But a rational belief will always tend toward truth. So, for example, a young fourteen-year-old atheist raised in an atheistic family may very well hold atheistic belief as a properly basic belief.[27] Under the circumstances, he may be rational to do so. But it is rational for him to do so precisely because he is a fourteen-year-old boy (with all the limitations in learning and experience which that entails). In time, with the appropriate amount of experience and learning, he would come to see the impropriety of his atheism (if his noetic structure were to continue to conform to what is rational-in-fact). Plantinga's view seems to be this: with the appropriate amount of experience and learning, only beliefs that are true will prove to be rational-in-fact and properly basic for me.

It is the purpose of my noetic equipment - as designed by God - to lead me toward the truth.

> So even if we say that S's faculties are working properly, it doesn't follow that S has positive epistemic status for his beliefs. What we must add is what the theistic view does add: *that our faculties have been designed by a being who wishes to enable us to achieve true belief* over a wide and varied range of topics and areas. [emphasis mine][28]

---

[26]A non-basic belief can clearly be rational without being true. Consider the syllogism. A syllogism's reasoning may be valid or correct and yet its conclusion false. Since non-basic beliefs are inferential; they can be derived from prior beliefs by rationally sound inference and yet still be false if the beliefs it is derived from are false.

[27]But see Plantinga,"Objection Revisited," 59.

[28]Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Justification," Nous 20 (March 1986):16.

This does not necessarily mean that every belief which is the result of my properly-functioning noetic equipment will be true. In certain special situations, such a belief may not be true. But all such beliefs will tend toward truth; indeed they will be true-in-fact whenever the inadequacy of my learning or experience does not prevent it.

Generally and ideally, then, properly basic beliefs can only be rational beliefs which can only be true beliefs. In other words - ideally - if belief B is properly basic then it is rational-in-fact; and if it is rational-in-fact, it is true. There are complicating factors which keep Plantinga from asserting this for each and every situation; but this is clearly what he assumes will generally be true.

Plantinga's Response

With the above as background, we are in a position to understand Plantinga's response to the second Great Pumpkin objection. That objection suggests that Reformed epistemology involves the relativity of truth, rationality, and knowledge. The theist and the Great Pumpkinist each has his own truth, his own knowledge, and his own rationality to support it. *Plantinga denies this.* Whereas he concedes a kind of relativity to our rational *judgments* , he quite explicitly denies that truth, *actual* rationality, and *true* knowledge are relative. Plantinga does not suggest that atheistic belief is rational and true for the atheist while - at the same time - theistic belief is rational and true for the theist. Plantinga is quite explicit in his insistence that only one of them is right:

> Of course it does not follow that there is no truth of the matter; if our criteria (the criteria of rational belief of the theist and the atheist) conflict, then at least one of them is mistaken, even if we cannot by further discussion agree

> as to which it is. Similarly, either I am mistaken in holding that B (belief in God) is properly basic in C, or you are mistaken in holding that it is not. Still further, if I *am* mistaken in this matter, then if I take B as basic in C - that is, if I am in C and believe B without the evidential support of other beliefs - then I am irrational in so doing. Particularism does not imply *subjectivism* [the view that what I subjectively judge to be true, rational, or properly basic is, in fact, true, rational, or properly basic].[29]

Some of the force of the Great Pumpkin objection comes from tacitly assuming that if the evaluation of the rationality of belief B varies relative to the individual, then the truth of belief B varies right along with it. But Plantinga denies this. Plantinga does hold that one's *determination* as to whether belief B is rational will vary from individual to individual. But from that it does not follow: (1) that the actual rationality of belief B varies relative to the individual, nor (2) that the truth of belief B varies relative to the individual. In other words, though it is true that the atheist and the theist will judge the rationality of belief in God differently, it does not follow that belief in God is rational for the theist and irrational for the atheist, nor that it is true for the theist and untrue for the atheist. Though they make different judgments, one of them is actually mistaken. There is a truth of the matter. Either belief in God is rational or it is irrational. It is not rational for the one while irrational for the other. They will disagree in their judgments as to which of their beliefs is true and rational - and they will continue to argue about it - but one of them is right and the other is wrong.

If Plantinga were espousing the relativity of what is true and rational-in-fact, then his would be a highly objectionable position; and he would himself concur in condemning it. But Plantinga explicitly denies that this is his position. He is not a relativist *vis a vis* either truth or rationality-in-fact. He is a relativist only *vis a vis* individual people's judgments as to what is and is not rational.

---

[29]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 78.

And to say that is not to say anything particularly controversial nor problematic. It is simply a fact of the human epistemic condition that the theist and the atheist (for example) are doomed to see their debate go on unabated and unresolved.

This is not to say that they are both *really* "in the dark" - that neither *really* knows which of them is right and which is wrong. On the contrary, the theist *knows* that he is right (while the atheist *thinks he knows* that he is right). But there is no arbiter who can prove to the satisfaction of them both that the theist is right and the atheist is wrong. In that sense, there can be no resolution to their conflict.

Further Objection: The Unacceptability of a Stalemate

Nonetheless some among Plantinga's respondents are still quite bothered by this. Robert McKim[30] is not satisfied with an epistemology which cannot resolve the stalemate between the two. Theists and atheists are at loggerheads because each is committed to the rightness of his own judgment as to what is rational. McKim[31] is critical of Plantinga's position because it does nothing to prevent or resolve just such an impasse:

---

[30]Robert McKim, "Theism and Proper Basicality," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 22 (August 1989): 29 - 56.

[31]Losin and Van Hook see Reformed epistemology as problematic for exactly the same reason - see Jay Van Hook, "Knowledge, Belief, and Reformed Epistemology," Reformed Journal 31 (July 1981): 12-17 and Losin, "Three Replies," 21-23. Plantinga's responses to these men are helpful in understanding his position. In response to Van Hook's suggestion that it is problematic for the Reformed epistemologist to claim to know that God exists if he cannot prove it on terms acceptable to any rational human being, Plantinga writes, "Why should we suppose that if the theist can't prove his contentions to the satisfaction of the skeptic, he doesn't know what he claims to know? ... Surely it could be the case (in fact it *is* the case) that many Christians know that God created the world even if they cannot convince the Bertrand Russells of

> On this reading of Plantinga, declaring that one's beliefs are properly basic looks very like merely insisting that one is right and that others are wrong. But anyone can do that, including believers in ghosts, for example.[32]

Later, he adds,

> All, it appears, will be on a par with respect to the extent to which it seems to them [the believer in God and the believer in ghosts] that their basic beliefs are proper in their circumstances.[33]

But how exactly is this supposed to be a criticism? Is it not, in fact, true that anyone can insist that he is right while others are wrong and that it will seem to him that he has grounds for thinking so? And is it not in fact the case that - short of calling him insincere, deceived, or a liar - there is nothing I can give in response but a shrug of my shoulders when - from my vantage point - he must certainly be wrong? He insists he is right (to believe in ghosts, for example). He insists that he has grounds for accepting his belief as basic. At the same time, I insist that he is wrong and that there are no grounds. But is this not the way of life in the real epistemic world? Can it seriously be offered as a criticism of Plantinga's position that it does nothing to resolve a frustrating impasse such

---

this world."- Alvin Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," Reformed Journal 32 (January 1982): 15. And to both Van Hook's and Losin's suggestion that Plantinga's epistemology is not at all "apologetically useful" - i.e., it is not helpful in persuading unbelievers to believe in God, he writes, "Perhaps it's true that, say, St. Paul's knowledge that there is such a person as God was apologetically useless if he couldn't demonstrate to the skeptic's satisfaction that indeed there is such a person. But when the Reformed epistemologist claims that one can have basic knowledge of God - knowledge independent of argument and demonstration - she's not doing apologetics and not trying to convince the skeptic. There is more to epistemology than apologetics ..." - Plantinga, "Reformed Epistemology Again," 7.

[32]McKim, "Proper Basicality," 41.

[33]Ibid., 42.

as this? I don't think so. It seems to me that dogmatism and a stubborn refusal to admit that I might be wrong are the only "solutions" to an impasse of this sort (and these are "solutions" only insofar as they allow me to declare that I am right); but dogmatism is not a desirable feature in any epistemological position.[34]

McKim criticizes Plantinga for failing to offer a "reason" why the Reformed epistemologist's theistic claims should be taken "more seriously than the claims of the believer in ghosts... ."[35] McKim thinks that such a reason must be forthcoming if the Reformed epistemologist wants "... to contend, as Plantinga apparently does, that the central theistic beliefs, but not, say, belief in ghosts, are properly basic."[36] Clearly Plantinga has offered a "reason" why the Reformed epistemologist takes his theistic belief more seriously than belief in ghosts. Namely, *he does have grounds for his theistic belief while he does not have any grounds whatsoever for a belief in ghosts.* But, in the context of his argument, it is clear that what McKim thinks is missing is a "reason" *that is equally acceptable to the Reformed epistemologist and to the believer in ghosts* - i.e., a "reason" that will persuade the believer in ghosts to cease believing in them.

But why must Plantinga supply a "reason" such as this? Is McKim suggesting that the real intellectual conflicts that occur in the real world are all of them resolvable? (We just need to find the right "reason" that will persuade

---

[34]Plantinga's position is not one of relativized dogmatism as some of his critics have hinted (eg., McKim and Hanink). This should become clearer below.

[35]McKim, "Proper Basicality," 41.

[36]Ibid.

one of them to switch beliefs.) If so, we have a substantive disagreement between McKim and Plantinga on a matter of fact about the real world. As I indicated above, I have to agree with Plantinga on this point. The human epistemic situation is such that no amount of argumentation is going to resolve the impasse which exists between two people who genuinely and sincerely "see" things differently and feel that they have good grounds for the way they see it. Such unresolvable differences between people is a permanent feature of the human situation. Plantinga can hardly be criticized for espousing an epistemological theory which acknowledges and accounts for that feature. All of us could hope and wish that this feature were not a part of the real world. But I prefer an epistemological theory that accounts for the epistemic situation that does exist, not one which wishes for something that is not.

Parity But Not Relativism

Plantinga's project leads him to maintain a certain parity that exists between atheistic and theistic belief:

> The theist's experience of his world provides justifying grounds for holding his belief. It seems inescapably rational to him and he is, therefore, neither irresponsible nor incompetent to hold such a belief. Under the circumstances, it is perfectly understandable and "rationally permissible" for him to believe in God. If, however, it happened to be a false belief, one which resulted from a defect in the theist's noetic equipment - for example, a distortion caused by strong, irrational tendencies toward believing what one wishes were true - then it would have no "positive epistemic status." It would not be rational-in-fact, nor true. Nonetheless, it is - for the theist - a "rationally permissible" belief.

An exactly analogous thing can be said about atheism. The atheist's experience of the world provides him with no justifying grounds for accepting theistic belief. Theistic belief, therefore, seems inescapably irrational to him. Consequently, he is not being irresponsible to reject it. Under the circumstances, his rejection of theistic belief is perfectly understandable; it is "rationally permissible." If, however, it happened that theistic belief were actually true and rational and he failed to recognize it due to a defect in his noetic equipment - for example, a distortion caused by a strong, irrational rebellion against God - then his atheistic belief would have no "positive epistemic status." It would not be rational-in-fact, nor true. But - as it was for the theist - it is nonetheless a "rationally permissible" belief.

What I have just described is a parity which exists between theism and atheism with respect to the "rational permissibility" of these beliefs.[37] Plantinga clearly insists on this parity. Theistic belief is rationally permissible for the theist; and atheistic belief is no less rationally permissible for the atheist.

But Plantinga's insistence on this parity is easily misunderstood. If one is not following Plantinga carefully, this sounds like relativism. But Plantinga is not describing a parity which exists with regard to what is *actually* rational and true; he is describing a parity with regard to what is rationally *permissible*. The difference here is very important.

---

[37]Plantinga does not explicitly draw attention to this parity. Rather, it is implicit in the whole purpose of his project. The parity he does explicitly draw attention to is entirely different. He argues that there is *epistemological* parity between theistic belief and commonsense belief (in order to demonstrate the epistemological appropriateness of theistic belief against classical foundationalist objections). Never does Plantinga argue that there is *epistemological* parity between theistic belief and atheistic belief. Indeed his theory explicitly denies it. Atheistic belief is epistemologically inferior to theistic belief.

Just because the theist is rationally permitted to believe in the existence of God, it does not follow that his theistic belief is rational-in-fact, nor that it is true. He may be within his epistemic rights to hold his theistic belief and yet be horribly and tragically mistaken as to the true epistemic status of that belief. The atheist is in exactly the same situation. His atheistic belief is "rationally permissible." But it does not follow from that that his atheistic belief is, in fact, rational and true. Like the theist, though he is within his epistemic rights to believe as he does, he may, at the same time, be terribly wrong in his belief. So Plantinga's insistence on parity with respect to "rational permissibility" clearly does not entail parity with respect to truth and rationality-in-fact. In other words, parity of "rational permissibility" does not entail relativism.

Nonetheless, some of Plantinga's detractors are clearly bothered by his granting rational permissibility to both theistic belief and atheistic belief - and by the stalemate that seems implied in that.

What is the nature of their difficulty here? Is it simply that they find unacceptable a situation where theists and atheists cannot once and for all decide together which of them is right? If so, there is little that can be said in Plantinga's defense except that the stalemate he takes for granted is an accurate description of life in the real world. It is not realistic to think that theists and atheists will be able to come to an agreement as to which of them is right.

But I suspect that at the root of their difficulty is a failure to be clear that Plantinga is advocating parity with respect to *rational permissibility* and not parity with respect to *epistemic status.* Two things can be said in response to these critics, if this is the source of their worry:

1. They must pay careful attention to Plantinga's explicit statements to the effect that theistic belief and atheistic belief are not both true. One or the other is true and rational, not both.

2. They need to better understand the rhetorical purpose lying behind Plantinga's project. It is quite easy to mistake Plantinga for a relativist. The reason for this - I think - is that Plantinga's emphasis on the rationally-permissive parity between theism and atheism eclipses his talk about theism alone being true and rational. This misleads his readers and encourages them to see a sort of relativism in what is being said. But we can understand the reason for Plantinga's emphasis - i.e., for his eagerness to point to the parity between theistic belief and atheistic belief. His emphasis makes sense if we remember the rhetorical purpose which drives his project from the outset.

Ultimately, Plantinga's project is not to accuse the atheist of irrationality, nor is it to help the undecided person make up his mind between theism and atheism.[38] His purpose, at the outset, is to establish that (contrary to popular prejudice) the theist is *within his epistemic rights to believe in God.* Emphasizing the permissive parity between theism and atheism suits this purpose quite well. If Plantinga can show that, rationally, the theist has no less a right to his position than the atheist does to his, then he has accomplished his original purpose. The atheist can point his accusatory finger at the theist only

---

[38]Certainly Plantinga's Reformed epistemology does nothing in this regard - i.e., to help the undecided person decide whether to embrace theism or atheism. But it was never Plantinga's purpose to articulate an epistemological theory that would serve the undecided in this way. McKim misunderstands Plantinga. In part, it is because McKim understands it to be a failed attempt to do just that - i.e., to help the undecided person decide. But it is unfair to accuse Plantinga of failing to do what he never intended to do. See McKim, "Proper Basicality," 45.

by similarly condemning himself. This is all Plantinga really wants to establish. Though he believes in the epistemic superiority of theism over atheism, it is not a part of his rhetorical purpose to establish that, nor to emphasize it.

Summary

Plantinga is not a relativist. He does not hold that truth, knowledge, and actual rationality are different for different people. There is one truth, one knowledge, and one rationality for all. But Plantinga insists that the judgments people make as to what is rational and true can vary widely. Furthermore, these different judgments about rationality, though conflicting, may equally be the result of sincere, honest, intelligent, and responsible attempts to judge what is true and rational. To put it another way, conflicting judgments may both be "rationally permissible," for what one can permissibly judge to be rational (and, hence, *claim* to "know") will vary in accord with his unique vantage point and experience.

Accordingly, Plantinga insists on a parity between theism and atheism when it comes to the question of what is "rationally permissible." But insistence on such a parity does not constitute Plantinga a relativist. A relativist would insist on parity with respect to the truth and rationality of these beliefs as well - i.e., he would insist that theism and atheism are equally true and rational. But this is emphatically not what Plantinga is saying. Theism, he thinks, is true and rational while atheism is false and irrational. Yet the atheist is within his epistemic rights to believe as he does. He cannot be indicted for irresponsibility nor for lack of intellectual competence; he is just wrong.

Grounds for Belief Without Evidence for Belief

From the foregoing discussion, it should be clear that Plantinga makes the following two claims: (1) though the theist holds belief in God *apart from evidence*, he does not hold it without *grounds*; and (2) the theist has grounds for holding belief in God to be rational and true even though he has no grounds from which to persuade an atheist that belief in God is rational. Perhaps it is not clear how Plantinga can make these claims. How can the theist have *grounds* for theistic belief when he does not have *evidence* for theistic belief? And how can Plantinga claim that the theist *knows* that God exists (because of certain justifying circumstances which ground his belief in experience) and still be unable to persuade others of the rationality of his belief?[39]

Perhaps an example will help: Mary, let's say, is a biologist who works at the University of Oregon. Among other things, she has spent a great deal of time in the South studying alligators. One day, biking to work, she spotted what she thought was an alligator swimming in the river. She stopped, looked more carefully, and, sure enough, there was a real live alligator swimming down the

---

[39]An inability to understand this in a meaningful way has been the source of innumerable objections to Plantinga's reformed epistemology. The objection is roughly this: if Plantinga's epistemology does not make room for the theist to give evidence to the atheistic skeptic or otherwise demonstrate the rationality of his theistic belief to the skeptic, then there is something woefully inadequate about Plantinga's claim that theistic belief can be held as basic and yet be rational. This objection is pressed hardest by Jay Van Hook - see Van Hook, "Knowledge, Belief, and Reformed Epistemology." But others object along these lines as well. Notice how this objection is related to the second Great Pumpkin objection. The second Great Pumpkin objection criticizes Plantinga on the grounds that, as a Plantingan theist, I will not be able to persuade the Great Pumpkinist that his Great Pumpkinist belief is irrational. This objection is the flip-side of that.Namely, as a Plantingan theist, I will not be able to persuade the Great Pumpkinist that my theistic belief *is* rational.

river. When she got to work, she reported what she had seen to her colleagues. None of them believed her. All of them were native Oregonians; and any native Oregonian knows that "there ain't no alligators in the rivers of Oregon." In spite of Mary's protests to the contrary, they all considered Mary's report unreliable and when she persisted in believing that she had seen an alligator, they thought she was being very irrational. (They chalked it up to the severe stress that Mary was under due to her marital difficulties.)

Now, what exactly does the epistemic landscape look like in this situation? We can describe it thus:

1. Mary's colleague's are being perfectly rational not to hold the belief "There was an alligator in the river." They have no compelling reason for thinking that that belief is true. Mary has given no evidence other than her report of what she saw, and that is not sufficiently compelling. Mary may very well have been mistaken. Indeed, they have good reasons for thinking it quite likely that she was mistaken - she is under great stress.

2. At the same time, Mary is being perfectly rational to hold the belief "There was an alligator in the river." She saw the alligator with her own eyes under conditions which she knows were normal conditions (i.e., she was not hallucinating, visibility was good, etc.); and given her experience, she knows an alligator when she sees one. Mary, therefore, is perfectly rational to accept "There was an alligator in the river" as a properly basic belief; and she knows it.

3. Nonetheless, Mary may very well be unable to produce any argument, demonstration, or evidence for her skeptical colleagues at work which could persuade them that she had, in fact, seen an alligator. (Suppose, for example, that the alligator swam downstream, left the area, and was never spotted by

anyone again before it died and was swept out to sea.) From the perspective of her skeptical colleagues, therefore, Mary's belief is irrational. They do not themselves feel they have adequate grounds nor warrant for the belief that there was an alligator in the river. And, correspondingly, they fully believe that neither does Mary. Though it may be uncharitable for them to feel as they do, it is not irrational.

4. But though her colleagues are understandably and rationally committed to believing that Mary has no grounds for her belief, the fact of the matter is, she *does* have grounds for her belief - namely, she saw the thing with her own well-trained eyes and knows what she saw.

In this scenario, therefore, we have an instance where a person, Mary, has *grounds* for a belief without having any evidence for that belief.[40] Similarly, we have an instance where Mary *knows* that there was an alligator in the river (because of the justifying circumstance of having seen it with her own eyes under what she knows to be normal circumstances) at the same time that she is completely unable to persuade others that what she has reported is fact.

According to Reformed epistemology, the situation is exactly analogous to this for the theist. Granted, there is an important difference in that the theist does not "see" God with his own eyes. But, in the view of Reformed epistemology, the *sensus divinitatis* - though not perception - is another noetic function which, like perception, delivers a rational belief to a person in a direct, immediate, spontaneous, and non-inferential way. So the theist is epistemically

---

[40]"Evidence" - in this situation - would be a proposition which Mary's colleagues (and indeed any rational human being) would have grounds to accept which, in turn, forms the basis for their accepting the proposition, "there was an alligator in the river." This is always what Plantinga means by "evidence."

in the same boat as Mary. He has *grounds* for his belief in God - namely, he is daily confronted by a stream of theo-implicatory beliefs arising out of his experience via the *sensus divinitatis* (eg., God made that flower, God is to be praised for his love, etc.). At the same time, he has no *evidence* to offer the skeptic for any of these theo-implicatory beliefs. He has no evidence precisely because the ground of and warrant for these beliefs is something the theist has *and the skeptic does not.* [41] The theist can claim that he has such ground and warrant; but all the skeptic has is the theist's own word for it. That will not prove particularly compelling to the skeptic. Once again then, like Mary, the theist *knows* that God exists, but at the same time he is completely unable to persuade others of the rationality of his belief.

But the fact that the theist is helpless to persuade the skeptic cannot count as evidence against the epistemological position that belief in God is properly basic. Being useless in persuading a skeptic is not a mark against its rationality as a belief. It is nothing more than an unfounded dogma of classical foundationalism that only beliefs which "can be proven from common ground - ground common at least to all rational persons of good will"[42] can be classed as rational beliefs or knowledge.

---

[41]Because, according to Reformed epistemology, due to human sinfulness, the *sensus divinitatis* is not properly delivering theo-implicatory beliefs to the unbeliever as it should. The sinner's noetic equipment is not "working properly" in this respect.

[42]Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," 14.

CHAPTER V

THE HUMAN NISUS TO BELIEVE IN GOD

As Plantinga sees it, the primary difference between Reformed epistemology and classical foundationalism comes down to this: Reformed epistemology affirms the *sensus divinitatis* as a viable source of properly basic beliefs; classical foundationalism rejects it. In this chapter I want to clarify exactly what Plantinga means by the *sensus divinitatis.*

Plantinga finds reference to our *sensus divinitatis* in Calvin. Calvin claims that "God has implanted in us all an innate tendency, or nisus, or disposition to believe in him... ."[1] Calvin does not mean that God has implanted in all of us an innate belief *per se.* Man is not created with a theistic belief already intact. Nor does God later implant full-blown theistic belief in him. Belief in the existence of God - much like belief in other minds, the past, and the external world - *spontaneously* and *naturally* arises in the course of human experience. As we realize certain conditions or confront certain circumstances, belief in God is the natural result. It is "triggered or actuated"[2] by conditions which are widely (if not universally) realized in human

---

[1]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 65.

[2]Ibid. 66.

experience. So, for example, it is triggered when one confronts God's workmanship in the physical universe.[3]

Consequently, it is not God who forms theistic belief in humans; humans form theistic belief within themselves. But they do so in accordance with functions or operations that God built in to their noetic equipment.[4] If one's noetic equipment is working properly (i.e., as God intended it to work), it will naturally result in one's coming to believe in God.

Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is an attempt to express this same view with more precision. As he sees it, properly functioning noetic equipment does not give rise to theistic belief *per se*. Rather, it gives rise to innumerable theo-implicatory beliefs. So, for example - if our noetic equipment is working as God designed it - I observe a flower and know immediately that "God made that flower." I marvel at a sunset and know immediately that "God is to be praised." I confront some evil that I have done and I know immediately that "I am guilty before God." Each of these specific beliefs (and innumerable others) clearly and transparently implies the existence of God. Each directly and inescapably entails theistic belief. It is a continuing stream of just such theo-implicatory beliefs (not theistic belief *per se*) which our noetic equipment is designed to produce.

---

[3]In ibid., 66, Plantinga quotes John Calvin: "...[God] revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, *men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him.*" [emphasis mine] - quoted from Institutes of the Christian Religion, book 1, chapter 3.

[4]"Noetic equipment" is Plantinga's term. It is not to be confused with his concept of a "noetic structure." Our "noetic equipment" is roughly the set of principles and mechanisms operating in human reasoning to "manufacture" our beliefs. Our "noetic structure" (as I defined it earlier) is the set of beliefs we hold and the relationships which exist between them.

On Plantinga's view, then, there is a kind of causal relationship between the circumstances we find ourselves in and the specific theo-implicatory belief which results from them. It is important to be as clear as we can as to the exact nature of this "causal" relationship. There are four different models by which we might understand how a theo-implicatory belief is related to the circumstances which give rise to it: (1) a Pavlovian stimulus-response model, (2) a mechanical cause model, (3) a sixth-sense model, or (4) a "natural language" model. It is the "natural language" model which will prove most helpful in coming to understand how Plantinga understands this relationship.

Pavlovian Response Model

One possible understanding of Plantinga's position is that belief in God is a sort of Pavlovian response to a stimulus[5] - see flower, believe in God. On this model, the sort of stimulus-response relationship which is in view involves no inherently meaningful relationship between the stimulus and the response. The stimulus to some theo-implicatory belief could be *any stimulus whatsoever.* So, for example, (if God had so designed me) I could be caused to believe "God is to be praised" every time I stepped on a crack in the sidewalk. I could be caused to believe "God made the flower" every time I saw a Safeway store. I could be caused to believe "I am guilty before God" every time I saw a maple tree with no leaves.

---

[5]Plantinga's use of words like "triggered," "caused," "formed," etc. is misleading in this respect. His word choice should not be given too much weight. In choosing such words, Plantinga, I think, is trying to be noncommittal about his exact analysis of belief formation.

If we understand Plantinga along the lines of this model, we have failed to notice a very important feature of his view: there is, in fact, a meaningful relationship between the theo-implicatory belief which arises in a particular circumstance and the particular circumstance which gives rise to it. So, for example, there is a rational appropriateness to observing a flower (with its intricate design) and forming the belief "God (the grand designer) made this." Similarly, there is a rational appropriateness to confronting a deed that I have done which I know to be evil and forming the belief "I am guilty before God." This same sort of rational appropriateness does not exist between, for example, seeing a maple tree without leaves and forming the belief "I am guilty before God." The latter belief could be formed as a Pavlovian response to a stimulus; but it is clearly not a rationally appropriate belief relative to the circumstance. There is no intrinsically meaningful relationship between leafless maple trees and guilt before God.

Mechanical Model

What we have said so far also eliminates a mechanical cause model as accurately representing Plantinga's view. Plantinga is not construing our theo-implicatory beliefs as being merely mechanically caused results of certain environmental factors. As we have seen, between theo-implicatory beliefs and the circumstances which "cause" them, there is a meaningful relationship which goes beyond mere cause and effect.

The belief formed ("God made that flower") is somehow appropriate to the circumstance in which it is formed (i.e., while looking at a flower made by God). Indeed, it is in some sense rationally appropriate to the circumstance in which it is formed. Not only does the circumstance of looking at a flower "trigger,"

"cause," "form," "deliver," or "actuate" the theo-implicatory belief,[6] it also "grounds" it and "justifies" it.[7] Theo-implicatory beliefs are not arbitrary and meaningless products of my mind, made in response to my circumstances. They are meaningfully related to those circumstances. Namely, they involve my making direct epistemic contact with the real world. Consequently, this much is clear: Plantinga is not saying that our theo-implicatory beliefs are merely the mechanical effects of certain efficient causes in our environment. They are clearly more than that for Plantinga. They are, in his words, the "deliverances of reason." To say that is to say at least this much: they have *epistemic value* relative to the circumstances which engendered them.

Natural Language Model

Clearly, then, we need a more useful model for understanding how - on Plantinga's view - our theo-implicatory beliefs are related to our environment. But what would that model look like? How does Plantinga understand the relationship between our beliefs and the circumstances which prompt them?

Exactly what gives rise to our theo-implicatory beliefs is left frustratingly vague and undeveloped in Plantinga. Consider our standard theo-implicatory belief - "God made this flower." Plantinga attempts no explanation as to how this belief is supposed to arise. He simply asserts that we have a tendency or disposition to "see his [God's] hand in the world about us."[8] But what exactly does this mean? Is he saying that we have a tendency to see trees, flowers,

---

[6]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 16-93 passim.

[7]Ibid.,79-80.

[8]Ibid., 80; also see ibid., 64-66,78.

and sunsets as the handiwork of God, the ultimate maker and designer? Or is he saying that in the world around us we see the distinctive hand of God (as opposed to someone else's hand) in the same way that we might recognize the distinctive hand of Picasso or Monet in a painting?

No. Plantinga means neither of these. His understanding of how theo-implicatory beliefs are grounded in experience will best be understood by analogy to language. It may seem that this is not available to Plantinga. He does not explicitly draw any analogy to language. Instead, he relies almost exclusively on beliefs of visual perception as the analogue to theo-implicatory beliefs. But visual perception and language are not as far apart as at first they may appear. In the philosophy of Thomas Reid, for example, the basic, non-inferential nature of perceptual beliefs is explained in terms of the basic, non-inferential structure of language. In Reid's epistemology, therefore, the two merge: visual perception is the result of an innate ability we have to understand the "natural language" of our visual sensations. Consequently, Reid's model of a "natural language" will be very useful for coming to understand Plantinga's conception of our *sensus divinitatis*. To understand Plantinga better, we must briefly discuss Thomas Reid.

Thomas Reid's Conception of "Natural Language"

The Lockean tradition in philosophy had argued that human knowers are not directly acquainted with objects in the real world. They are acquainted rather with "ideas" in their own minds - ideas which correspond to and resemble objects in the real world. According to Reid, Hume had taken that assumption to its inevitable conclusion and had shown us that it necessarily results in skepticism. How could we ever know whether our ideas correspond

to the real world? We never have contact with the real world. We only have contact with the ideas in our heads. So how could we ever know whether our ideas and reality correspond?

But skepticism, Reid thought, is a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* of this Lockean theory of "ideas." The very things the skeptic says we can never know, we all know. Furthermore, we all know that we know them. If Locke's theory of ideas must lead to skepticism, so much the worse for his theory of ideas. Reid's project was to found epistemology on a different assumption - one which did not involve interposing "ideas" between me and the world I seek to know. Reid maintained that our senses brought us into direct acquaintance with the real objects themselves. Through our senses, we make contact with reality itself, not with mere ideal representations of that reality.

What is important for our purposes is Reid's explanation of how it is that that contact with reality is made. There are two crucial components to Reid's explanation: (1) the logic of signification, and (2) the presence of innate first principles in our natural faculties.

The Logic of Signification

According to Reid, when we smell a rose, the sensation associated with smelling that rose functions as a sort of "natural sign" of some real property in the rose (i.e., its aroma). In other words, the sensation which we experience signifies to us the presence of some real object (the rose) which has a property which is causing our sensation. Likewise, the characteristic sensation in our fingers when we touch something hard signifies hardness to us. And the characteristic auditory sensations associated with a particular tone of voice

signifies anger. Our sensations, then, constitute a kind of "natural language." They signify something to us; they "mean" something.

Innate First Principles of Our Natural Faculties.

Some of this "natural language" we learn through experience. It is through experience that we learn to associate the distinctive sensation we get when smelling a rose with the aroma of a rose (i.e., with a particular property of that rose). In other words, only through experience do we learn what that peculiar sensation (smelling the aroma of the rose) "means." Only through experience do we learn that it "suggests" the presence of an object with a particular property which we call its "smell."

Other parts of this "natural language" we know innately. Hardness is an example. We could never learn from experience that the sensation of touching a hard object signifies hardness. We could never even obtain a conception of hardness if the "meaning" of this sensation were not already known to us innately. In other words, if we were not so constituted as to already know what this sensation signified, there would be no way through experience that we could learn to associate it with the concept of hardness.

In both cases - both where we learn the meaning of "natural language" through experience and where we know its meaning innately - what ultimately establishes the meaning of the natural signs are *innate principles in the operation of our natural faculties.* In the one case, the meaning of a particular sign is built in to us as a very part of the first principles themselves. In the other case, there are certain first principles which make it possible for us to discover from experience the meaning of the particular sensations. But either way,

knowing the meaning of the "natural language" of our sensations requires certain innate first principles at work in our natural noetic faculties.

The Transparency of Natural Language

It is noteworthy that - as in a non-natural, "artificial" language like English - the meaning of natural language is immediately evident in the signs which constitute the language. In English, we do not *infer* the meaning of an English sentence from the phonemes or written symbols. The meaning of an English sentence is directly apparent to us. We do not (usually) attend to the signs. We attend to what they signify - to their meaning. The same is true for "natural language." We do not typically attend to the sensations which signify the existence of objects or their properties; we attend to the objects and their properties themselves. Nor do we come to know of their existence by a form of inference. We do not believe at first that we are having a particular sensation and then later infer from that belief that some object exists. The sensation we are having "suggests" to us the existence and properties of the object *immediately* and *directly.* The fact that an object exists with such and such properties is given to us directly in the sensation itself. That is exactly what the sensation "means."

Belief in God as the Result of a Natural Language

Plantinga's favorite analogy is between the *sensus divinitatis* and vision. I know that there is a computer before me because I see it. I do not *infer* that the computer exists from some other belief. I do not even *infer* it from some belief about my phenomenal (visual) experience. I just see that it is there. Plantinga employs the case of visual perception to demonstrate that we sometimes form

beliefs in the context of our experience *without making inferences from beliefs about our experience.*

Plantinga never explicitly acknowledges that theo-implicatory beliefs, like perceptual beliefs, follow the logic of language - i.e., that they arise as a result of one's simply knowing innately what his sensations signify and what his experience "means." But I think Reid's insight in this regard is implicit in Plantinga's view. In any event, no other model comes closer to explaining exactly what it is that Plantinga wants to suggest.

In terms of this model, Plantinga's view is that God has built in to a human's noetic equipment the ability to understand the "language" of nature and experience. Not only is this true for perceptual beliefs, it is also true for theo-implicatory beliefs. There is a message contained in our experience of looking at a flower - namely, that there is a maker who made it. Our noetic equipment has been so designed by God that we have an innate understanding of the "language" of nature in this regard. We innately know, when looking at the flower, that something about it signifies that it has been created by God. Upon seeing the flower, the fact that is has been made by God can be read directly off the perception. Similarly, there is a message in the pangs of conscience that I feel - namely, that I am in fact guilty before God. We are so created that we understand immediately the natural, God-intended meaning of those pangs. Feeling the guilt, the fact of our accountability to God is something that is directly and immediately apparent.

As we saw above, we do not *infer* a language's meaning from the symbols which signify it. No inference is necessary. The symbols mean what they mean to us directly. The symbols are transparent; their meaning is manifest. According to Plantinga, the same thing is true in the case of theo-implicatory

beliefs. We do not *infer* that a maker exists from the fact that we observe a flower he made. Rather, our perception of the flower carries within it a message which we receive immediately and directly. It is conveyed to us by a sort of "natural language"; and its meaning is directly apparent. It simply bears the message "God made this"; and we form the belief "God made this" without any inference of any kind.[9] That is why it is a basic belief. It is not based on any evidence - i.e., it is not inferred from any prior belief.

But there is a significant difference between Reid's view of perceptual beliefs and Plantinga's view of theo-implicatory beliefs. On Reid's view, we can identify the natural sign which signifies the existence of an object or its property. There is a particular familiar sensation which signifies the existence of a hard object. We do not normally attend to the sensation; we normally attend to what it signifies. But we are, in principle, capable of identifying and attending to the sensation itself. We can, in principle, isolate the "natural sign" which does the signifying. But apparently this is not the case with theo-implicatory beliefs. Plantinga does not suggest that there is a certain familiar sensation which naturally signifies "God made this flower." It is something else - not a familiar sensation - which conveys the message that the flower is God's handiwork. It is tempting to think that perhaps some sensation of its "designedness" is what tells us that God made it. But surely that is not right.

---

[9]This, I think, is why Bavinck (whom Plantinga quotes favorably) uses the kind of language he does. He writes, "Scripture urges us to behold heaven and earth, birds and ants, flowers and lilies, in order that we may *see* and *recognize God* in them. ... This certainty [that God exists] is established only by faith; that is, by the *spontaneous testimony which forces itself upon us from every side.*" [emphasis mine] - quoted in ibid., 64.

There is no familiar, identifiable sensation which naturally signifies "having been designed" (either by God or by anyone else).

So what is the requisite sensation which signifies that God made the flower? Plantinga makes no attempt to suggest *what it is* about seeing a flower which naturally conveys the message "God made this flower." He makes no attempt to identify the sign; he only tells us what is signified. Can we draw a valid analogy between theo-implicatory beliefs and language in such a case? Does this make any sense? Plantinga says that upon seeing a flower, *something* about our encounter with the flower naturally and inevitably means that "God made the flower." But he apparently thinks that we do not and cannot know *what* it is that is bearing this meaning. This is a strange and rather problematic suggestion.[10] We have a sort of natural language where what is signified is manifest to us while the sign or signs that signify it are invisible.[11]

Nonetheless, I think there is a reasonable response which Plantinga could make to this: the signs of this "natural language" are <u>not</u> invisible to us; but whereas they are not invisible, neither are they readily identifiable nor analyzable. In this respect, theo-implicatory beliefs are more like memory

---

[10]I have picked the hardest example for Plantinga to deal with in this regard. This same problem does not arise for some of Plantinga's other examples of theo-implicatory beliefs. For example, Plantinga might suggest that "I feel guilty before God" is signified by a familiar characteristic guilt-feeling. He could clearly make the natural language model work more readily in this latter case than in the case of "God made that flower."

[11]Reid did not advocate anything like Reformed epistemology himself. He advocated his own version of natural theology where belief in the existence of God is seen to follow from argument and evidence. Here, I think, we see the reason why. It would have been problematic for Reid to suggest that the belief "God made this flower" is the natural signification of a natural sign when we cannot identify any sign which could signify it.

beliefs than they are like perceptual beliefs. When I remember having lunch today, there is no identifiable sensation or experience which functions as a sign signifying the message "I had lunch today." It is impossible to isolate some aspect of my experience of remembering that functions as the sign of some natural language. I just remember that I had lunch; and I know that I had lunch because I remember it. Similarly, Plantinga wants to maintain that (upon looking at a flower) we just know of the creative activity of God. We know that God made the flower simply because we are made aware of it when we look at the flower. The sight of the flower directly and immediately leads me to know it. The sight of the flower *somehow* contains that message within itself.

I do not need to know *how* something is signified to me in order to know *that* it is signified to me. Even in non-natural language, I can know *what* a sentence means without knowing *how* it means it - i.e., without knowing what rules of grammar and syntax are embodied in its formulation. Similarly, I know *what* a memory means (i.e., that I had lunch), even though I do not understand *how* it means that. (I.e., I do not understand what it is about my experience of remembering something that leads me to know that I am knowing something about the past. Nevertheless, I do still know that I know something about the past. Not understanding *how* I know it does not negate the fact *that I do.*) The same can be said of theo-implicatory beliefs. It is quite plausible to suggest that I can know *what* looking at a flower signifies (namely, that God made the flower) without understanding *how* exactly it signifies that to me.

Plantinga Is Not Advocating a Sixth Sense

We are now in a position to understand the inadequacies of yet another possible model - the sixth sense model. Plantinga is not trying to suggest that

human beings have perceptual abilities that classical foundationalism (and common sense) are unwilling to acknowledge.[12] To see God in the flower is not to perceive God with some sixth sense, with some unacknowledged inner faculty of perception. An unacknowledged perceptual power is no more involved in theo-implicatory beliefs than it is in reading a book. Reading a book does not involve seeing its meaning by means of some mysterious sixth sense. We do not see the symbols on the page with our eyes while, with some other sixth sense, we "see" their meaning. Rather, we see the letter symbols with our eyes (that is the only literal perception that takes place), and - due to our understanding of the language - we know what they mean. Likewise, we observe the flower with our eyes (that is the only literal perception that takes place), but - due to an innate ability to know the meaning and significance of what we are seeing - we understand and know that God made the flower. This is the nature of the *sensus divinitatis* as Plantinga understands it.

Plantinga Does Not Mistake Causes for Reasons

The manner in which Plantinga sometimes articulates his view invites the criticism that he has mistaken causes of our beliefs for reasons for our beliefs: Observing the flower may very well be in some meaningful sense a *cause* of my believing "God made this flower." But my observation of the flower in and of itself is not a sufficient *reason* for my belief. My *reasons* for believing "God

---

[12]The strategy of Reformed epistemology is not to amend our notion of what qualifies as evident to the senses so that belief in God then qualifies as rational by classical foundationalist standards of rationality. Rather, it posits a whole different sort of noetic function - one entirely distinct from sense perception, one which classical foundationalism is not willing to recognize at all.

made this flower" must include some sort of arguments for the existence of God and his role as creator.[13]

It should be clear from what we have already discussed in this chapter that this objection is unfounded. Plantinga's suggestion is that my observation of the flower is, in some sense, both the *cause of* and a *reason for* my belief "God made this flower." It is a cause of my belief in the sense that it is the occasion or circumstance which "triggers" my noetic equipment into forming it. But it is also a "reason" for this belief in the sense that my belief "God made this flower" reflects something of what is really intrinsically signified by my perception of the flower. Hence, this belief is somehow justified and warranted by my perception. In other words - on the assumption that God did create our noetic equipment and did create the flower - it is rationally appropriate that our noetic equipment would deliver the belief "God made this flower." It is not arbitrary; it is rationally fitting. The effect is rationally suited to the cause. Furthermore, the effect (my belief) captures the true natural meaning and significance of the cause (my perception of the flower). Consequently, the belief formed is "justified" by the circumstance which occasioned it.[14]

Though he does not explicitly use the term - Plantinga would clearly grant that seeing a flower provides a "reason" for believing it was made by God. What he will not grant is something else - namely, that my belief that God made

---

[13]See Veatch, "Preliminary Statement," 40-45.

[14]This is what lies behind a statement like: "When the Reformers claim that this belief is properly basic, they do not mean to say, of course, that there are no *justifying* [emphasis mine] circumstances for it, or that it is in a sense groundless or gratuitous." -Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 80.

the flower requires any sort of argument to support it. My knowledge that God made the flower is read directly off my perception; it is not *inferred* from it. So, my perception of a flower is not *evidence* for my belief that God made it. It does not provide some prior belief from which I infer God's workmanship. So it is not - in *this* sense - a "reason" for my belief. But it is - *in a different sense* (in the sense described in the last paragraph) - a "reason" for it. Hence, Plantinga has not mistaken the *cause* of a belief for the *reason* for it. For Plantinga, seeing a flower is both the cause of and the reason for our believing it was made by God.

CHAPTER VI

THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN

Plantinga's claim that theo-implicatory beliefs are properly basic invites a very obvious objection. Other beliefs which are alleged to be properly basic are universally held. This is not so with theo-implicatory beliefs. Many people see a flower without forming the belief - "God made this flower." Yet no one sees a tree without forming the belief "There is a tree." This is an important difference. Perhaps it indicates that theo-implicatory beliefs are not properly basic after all. If they were, could we not expect them to be held universally (like all the other properly basic beliefs)?

Sin as an Explanation for the Non-Universality of Theistic Belief

Plantinga agrees that we could expect theo-implicatory beliefs to be universal - *in a perfect, unbroken world.* But in the actual world in which we live - sin is at work. *Sin*, according to Reformed epistemology, explains why theo-implicatory beliefs - though properly basic - are less than universal:

> On the Christian view of the matter, of course, there is such a factor [i.e., a factor that makes it impossible for a theist to prove the existence of God to certain non-believers] - *sin.* It is the existence of sin in the world that, for many, interferes with belief in God. Were it not for the existence of sin, we should all believe in God with the same natural and wholehearted spontaneity with which we believe in other persons, the past, and the external world. It is only because of sin in the world that some of us human beings find belief in God difficult or absurd. ...
>
> If there were no sin in the world, then perhaps there wouldn't be any irresolvable disputes or fundamental disagreements or deeply different ways

> of looking at the world.... If there were no sin in the world, the classical foundationalist picture of knowledge as what can be proved from common ground - ground common to all human beings - might very well be correct. It is certainly natural to think that in the absence of sin I would be able to prove whatever I know to anyone else. From this perspective, then, the classical foundationalist way of looking at knowledge is considerably out of date - not merely antediluvian but positively prelapsarian! This picture is appropriate to an unfallen world; sadly enough, however, it is not appropriate to ours.[1]

But exactly how sin is understood to operate, Plantinga does not make altogether clear. Why should sin have the effect of interfering with belief in God? How is that supposed to work?

Plantinga offers no thorough analysis of the noetic effects of sin. That lies outside the scope of his purposes. He merely asserts that sin can explain why theistic belief lacks universal acceptance and leaves an analysis of its dynamics to someone else and another time.

But C. Stephen Evans is right: the Reformed epistemologist's position would be considerably more credible if Reformed epistemology would offer a plausible account of sin's alleged effects.[2] How and why does sin interfere with theistic belief in the way that Plantinga claims it does? Without such an account, the appeal to human sin can seem to be little more than an *ad hominem* attack on non-theists. Or, at the very least, an *ad hoc* doctrine artificially contrived to snatch an implausible theory from the jaws of defeat. How credible is a theory which holds to be properly basic a belief which many people do not even hold at all? So it is not unreasonable to ask Reformed epistemology to give us a plausible account of the dynamics of sin's noetic effects. How far has Plantinga taken us toward this account?

---

[1]Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," 14.

[2]Evans, "Kierkegaard And Plantinga," 25-39.

When he is speaking off the cuff, Plantinga tends to describe sin as (1) causing a person's noetic equipment to malfunction, or (2) leading a person to misuse or abuse his noetic capacities. So, for example -

> As a result of sin these capacities and powers sometimes malfunction. Sometimes they fail to work as God intended them to. Furthermore (also as a result of sin), human beings sometimes don't employ these capacities as God intended them to be employed. The result is error, confusion, fundamental wrong headedness, and all the other epistemic ills to which humanity is heir. But when our epistemic powers *are* employed the way God meant them to be, and when, furthermore, they work in the way God intended them to work, the result is knowledge.[3]

Neither of these suggestions is particularly plausible as a serious analysis of the noetic effects of sin. If sin causes a "malfunction" of our noetic equipment, then how can it be that anyone believes in God? Has God repaired the noetic equipment of some, but not of others? Perhaps. But this seems a bit odd. Furthermore, what is the nature of this malfunction? It interferes with one's believing in God while leaving unaffected one's belief in other minds, the past, the external world, and other properly basic beliefs. Granted, our noetic equipment is undoubtedly quite intricate and mysterious in its design. But lacking a knowledge of that design, is it not problematic - does it not raise suspicions - to suggest that it malfunctions only with respect to theistic belief and functions properly with respect to all other classes of beliefs?

The suggestion that failure to believe in God results from one's not properly employing his noetic capacities does not fare much better. The biggest problem with the suggestion is even making sense of it. How are we to picture what Plantinga has in mind here? Surely we are not to envision our minds shaping and fashioning beliefs the way a potter fashions his pots. But

---

[3]Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," 17.

what then is the appropriate picture? Whatever it is, it does not look too hopeful.

Neither of these suggestions should be taken as a serious attempt to analyze the noetic effects of sin. In all likelihood, Plantinga is speaking loosely - choosing these images for dramatic effect more than for purposes of accurate analysis. More promising in this latter regard are his descriptions of the Reformed theologians' position on the subject. He describes Calvin's position thus:

> Calvin's claim, then, is that God has created us in such a way that we have a strong tendency or inclination toward belief in him. This tendency has been in part *overlaid* or *suppressed* by sin. Were it not for the existence of sin in the world, human beings would believe in God to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past. This is the natural human condition; it is because of our presently unnatural sinful condition that many of us find belief in God difficult or absurd. The fact is, Calvin thinks, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically substandard position - rather like a man who does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks she is like a cleverly constructed robot and has no thoughts, feelings, or consciousness.
>
> Although this disposition to believe in God is *partially suppressed*, it is nonetheless universally present. ... [emphasis mine][4]

Calvin seems to be suggesting that there exist two conflicting tendencies in the sinful human being: (1) a natural God-given tendency to know that God exists; and (2) an unnatural, perverse tendency to refuse to acknowledge God's existence. (The latter is caused by a moral-spiritual rebellion against God wherein the rebel does not want to acknowledge God in any way.) Both tendencies and their effects are present. *As a human being* I will tend toward belief in God. *As a sinner* I will tend toward refusing belief in God. Because

---

[4]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 66.

they tend toward contradictory effects, one of these tendencies must ultimately have the ascendency in a particular person's belief formation. Only one of these beliefs can become part of one's noetic structure. Either the natural tendency to believe in God will prevail and the person will be a theist. Or the sinful tendency to deny God will prevail and the person will be an atheist. In this latter case, the natural tendency to believe in God is still present *in some sense* - i.e., belief in God is still output by the sinner's mind as the natural, rational belief to hold. But this natural, rational belief is *suppressed* or *overlaid* by a contradictory belief. Consequently, he never actually embraces theistic belief.

Calvin is not suggesting that a person stops his natural tendency toward theistic belief through conscious volition. Rather - as we see in Plantinga's use of the word "overlaid" - he is suggesting that one's otherwise natural theistic belief falls victim to a much stronger and more insistent epistemic urging - to the perverse, unnatural urging to deny God's existence. Theo-implicatory beliefs - though there in some seminal form - are simply drowned out and overwhelmed in the sinner by the stronger tendency toward atheistic belief.

Reformed epistemology is not suggesting that one and the same noetic mechanism produces two different outputs - one in theists, the opposite in atheists. Rather, it proposes two different and independent sources for two conflicting beliefs. As I drive along the highway listening to a particular radio station on the car radio, eventually I may come within range of a different radio station broadcasting on a near frequency. The further I drive toward this "new" radio station, the stronger its signal becomes. Eventually, the signal of the "new" radio station is so strong that it *drowns out* and *overwhelms* the signal from the first station to which I am still tuned. The Reformed perspective on the

effects of sin is analogous to this. Reformed epistemology sees two independent but competing sources of belief. Everyone has a noetic mechanism which outputs theo-implicatory beliefs. At the same time, everyone's sinful hostility toward God outputs the denial of theistic belief. When this latter noetic effect is the stronger, the former - belief in God - is drowned out by the latter. A strong radio signal can overwhelm and drown out a weaker one. Analogously, the output of human sinfulness (i.e., the denial of theistic belief) can overwhelm and drown out the output of our God-given reason (i.e., theistic belief). So, belief in God is the natural output of one's God-given reason; atheistic belief is a competing (totally contradictory) output of a different noetic reality. Which of these competing realities gains the ascendency will determine whether a person does or does not believe in God.

This Calvinistic account of sin "suppressing" or "overlaying" our natural belief in God is the more accurate rendering of what Plantinga and Reformed epistemology understand to be the noetic effects of sin. It explains - in a way that malfunctioning or misused noetic equipment cannot - how theistic belief can be a universal noetic result at the same time that it is not universally accepted.

Improper Subjectivity as Explaining the Non-Universality of Theistic Belief

Still, we could wish for a fuller account of what lies behind this unnatural tendency to deny God's existence. C. Stephen Evans, in a very interesting

article, suggests that Plantinga could be greatly helped by Kierkegaard to this end.[5]

Kierkegaard (as Evans reads him) attempts to show us that some of the beliefs we hold are, to a significant degree, determined by our "inwardness" or "subjectivity." More specifically, Kierkegaard suggests that one's awareness of God (including his belief that God exists) arises out of certain experiences he has "only when they [the experiences] are mediated by the proper kind of subjectivity."[6] For Kierkegaard, "inwardness" or "subjectivity" refers to

> ... the central enduring concerns that give shape and substance to the personality, concerns that have both a dispositional character ("a willingness to renounce the relative for the sake of the absolute") and an episodic character ("passion is momentary"). ... These concerns are not simply "naturally" present in the individual; they are formed and the individual has the ability to assist or retard their development.[7]

So the "proper kind of subjectivity" which alone will give rise to an "awareness of God" is a character defined by the proper kinds of concerns. In other words, only a person who has grown into the right sort of person having the right sorts of concerns[8] will be capable of becoming aware of God. It is not that only such people will have theistic belief. Some people who lack the requisite inwardness - and, hence, lack the requisite awareness of God - nevertheless

---

[5]Evans, "Kierkegaard and Plantinga," 34.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid. Evans writes - "Those concerns which are essential to becoming a true self have a moral and religious character, and they are closely tied to a distinctive type of self-understanding."

believe in God's existence.[9] Anyone may believe in God's existence, but only those with the "proper kind of subjectivity" will believe in God in the proper sort of way.

But what is the right sort of inwardness? It is, Kierkegaard says, "a willingness to renounce the relative for the sake of the absolute."[10] If Kierkegaard's thought is consistent with the New Testament's teaching on this subject, then "the right sort of inwardness" - this "willingness to renounce the relative for the sake of the absolute" - is a character or disposition that longs to conform to what is right and good and to repudiate and be liberated from what is evil. Whether Kierkegaard is rightly understood as following and explicating the teaching of the New Testament, I cannot say; I claim no expertise in Kierkegaard. This would seem to be a very real possibility. In any case, to explore exactly what Kierkegaard means by "inwardness" would take us too far afield from our present concern.

Whatever "inwardness" is, it has to do with the intersection of the moral and existential dimensions of human existence. Kierkegaard's epistemological insight is this: a person's moral-existential orientation will have a profound impact on what - based on his experience - he comes to know and believe. If one's driving concerns and innermost passions - the central, defining projects of his existence - are compatible with who God (the Absolute) is, then those very passions will make him receptive to the presence of God in his experience. But if his driving concerns and passions are not compatible with

---

[9]Ibid., 37.

[10]Ibid., 34.

who God is, God will remain hidden and obscure - an unfocused blur in the background of his experience.

My purpose in discussing Kierkegaard here is not to better understand Kierkegaard. It is to highlight one of the most significant points in Evans's paper: Plantinga's appeal to sin to explain why theistic belief lacks universal assent - though not developed in Plantinga - is not an obviously *ad hoc* suggestion. It has the potential for being worked out in a plausible and convincing way. As Evans puts it -

> Making the knowledge of God conditional upon inwardness is therefore a plausible view of religious knowledge in itself. It is no ad hoc device to save religious knowledge from refutation. Nevertheless, this view also explains in a convincing manner why the knowledge of God is less than universal.
>
> First of all, we can now say why it is that sin blocks the operation of the natural tendency or disposition which God has placed in humans. For Kierkegaard sin can be described as a failure to become one's true self or as a rebellion against God. These are basically equivalent because one can only be one's true self through being grounded in God, and God commands each of us to become our true selves. One becomes one's true self through development of the right kind of subjectivity, through developing the right kinds of passion. To sinfully fail to become a self is therefore to lack the proper kind of inwardness and this means that one's ability to know God will be blocked or severely hampered.
>
> Obviously, this also explains the lack of universality. Since the disposition to believe in God only operates properly when the proper inwardness is present, the lack of such inwardness obviously means the operation of the disposition will be retarded in many.[11]

If Kierkegaard is right, then (knowing what we know about the realities of human existence) the Christian believer should *expect* belief in God to not be universal. Knowing that "a tree is there" (as I look at a tree) is significantly different from knowing that "God made that flower" (as I gaze at a flower). According to Christian theism, the latter has moral and existential dimensions

---

[11]Ibid., 36.

that the former lacks. It should not surprise us, then, if the former belief (in the tree) is universal while the latter belief (in God) is not.

Evan's (and Kierkegaard's) proposal takes us part way toward understanding the noetic effects of sin. But we are still without an explanation as to how exactly improper subjectivity has the noetic effect it does. What exactly is the interplay between one's inwardness and theistic belief? How is that to be understood? To answer this, we must go beyond Evans's discussion.

How Improper Subjectivity Blocks Theistic Belief

One possible explanation of how improper subjectivity blocks theistic belief is this: the sinner's sin (or improper "subjectivity") renders him *unwilling* to believe in God. The sinner's "subjectivity" is such that he does not want God to exist. He does not want theistic belief to be true. Hence, he stubbornly refuses to believe it. Consider an analogy: A woman's husband is having an affair. This woman has some compelling psychological need to believe that her husband is faithful. Such a woman might tenaciously cling to the belief that her husband is faithful, even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary. Why? Because her psychological need to believe in her husband's faithfulness overwhelms any contrary rational impulses to believe what the evidence suggests.

But this cannot be the sort of explanation Plantinga has in mind. There are two reasons against it:

First , this explanation involves the assumption that we have the ability to choose our beliefs. But Plantinga insists otherwise. One does not *choose* his

beliefs.[12] Beliefs are formed in us - beyond our volitional control - by whatever noetic mechanisms are at work. In seeking to understand Plantinga, therefore, we cannot understand the noetic effects of sin in terms of rendering the sinner unwilling to *choose* to believe. That explanation is not available to Plantinga.

Secondly, this explanation involves a scenario which is not consistent with another of Plantinga's assumptions. In this scenario, the atheist's reason "delivers" belief in God to him, but he stubbornly refuses to accept it. But on Plantinga's view, theistic belief is never "delivered" to the atheist. In seeking to understand Plantinga, therefore, we cannot understand sin's noetic effects as causing the sinner to refuse a belief which his reason delivers to him. He does not refuse it; on Plantinga's view, it never gets delivered in the first place. However sin works its effects, it somehow suppresses theistic belief so that the sinner's reason never "delivers" the belief at all. How are we to understand this? That is the explanation we seek.

As we have seen, Plantinga's favorite approach to explaining the nature of theo-implicatory beliefs is to draw an analogy to beliefs of visual perception. Perhaps in this same analogy we can find the further explanation which we seek - the explanation for how improper subjectivity blocks the sinner's reason from forming theo-implicatory beliefs at all. Can we find in visual perception an analogue to the "suppressing" effects of improper subjectivity? Let's try to construct such an analogue:

What if I have some compelling need to deny the existence of trees? Is it conceivable that I could look out my window at the tree in my back yard and *not even see the tree* because my subjectivity (which involves a compelling

---

[12]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 34-38.

need to deny that trees exist) "suppresses" the otherwise natural output of my reason? No. I think not. This is directly analogous to how Plantinga describes the noetic effects of sin in relation to theo-implicatory beliefs. But, with respect to beliefs of visual perception, this makes no sense.

But there is another analogy which Plantinga likes to draw in explaining the nature of theo-implicatory beliefs - an analogy to memory beliefs. This analogy is more promising with respect to finding an analogy to the "suppressing" effects of sin. Certain forms of "inwardness" can and do suppress memory beliefs such that they never even arise - even though it would otherwise be natural for them to do so. One who has had an extremely painful experience will sometimes be completely unable to remember what happened until - after a long period of time and after the requisite provocation - he finally begins to remember. But until his memory is restored, he had no memory of the events whatsoever. He had no knowledge - no beliefs - about those particular events in his past. It is not that his memory delivered the belief - X happened - and he refused to acknowledge it. It appears to be the case that his memory delivered no such belief at all.

This suppressed-memory analogy comes the closest we can get to understanding what Plantinga has in mind by the noetic effects of sin. Just as a person can somehow suppress the memory of extremely painful events, the sinner can somehow suppress the formation of theo-implicatory beliefs. In the suppression of a painful memory, one does not and cannot know that the event X happened. One's "subjectivity" (in this case, one's personal investment in avoiding the pain) suppresses what would otherwise be a natural ability to remember X. Analogously, in the suppression of theo-implicatory beliefs, one does not and cannot know that "God made the flower," ... etc. One's "improper

subjectivity" (in this case, one's personal investment in the "relative" over the "absolute") suppresses what would otherwise be a natural ability to see God in everything that God has done. Only when one has the "proper sort" of inwardness are his noetic processes capable of delivering those theo-implicatory beliefs which form naturally in the appropriate circumstances. Otherwise, human sinfulness suppresses and blocks theo-implicatory beliefs altogether. Like suppressed memories, they do not even arise.

Summary: Plantinga's Explanation of the Noetic Effects of Sin

We have arrived at a possible explanation for the non-universality of theistic belief which is consistent with Plantinga's views on the subject: (1) atheists do not believe in God because sin suppresses the theo-implicatory beliefs which would otherwise naturally arise in the course of their experience; (2) sin has this effect because it involves "improper subjectivity" - i.e., subjective, existential commitments to which theistic belief would be inimical; and (3) the way sin has this effect can best be understood by analogy to the suppression of painful memories.

Is this a plausible explanation of the non-universality of theistic belief? I think so. There is much that is still unexplained. But that is no reason to deny the plausibility of the phenomenon which Plantinga is proposing. There is much still unexplained in the phenomenon of suppressed memory; but I don't - for that reason - deny that the phenomenon exists. If I understand that

suppressed memory can and does occur; then it is not implausible for Plantinga to suggest that suppressed theo-cognition[13] can and does occur.

---

[13] I will use the term "theo-cognition" as a convenient way of describing the formation of the appropriate theo-implicatory beliefs which should - according to Reformed epistemology - naturally occur during the course of human experience.

CHAPTER VII

BASIC BELIEFS IN PLANTINGA AND KENNY

In his book Faith and Reason, Anthony Kenny interacts directly with Plantinga's views on the rationality of theistic belief.[1] He agrees with Plantinga that classical foundationalism is found wanting. But, contrary to Plantinga, he does not reject its view that theistic belief needs to be supported by evidence. He sets out to defend a third alternative - one which, though essentially evidentialist, incorporates many of Plantinga's important insights.

Comparing and contrasting these two views is quite helpful. It forces us to clarify the concept of "basic belief" which they employ. In both their discussions, the concept of a "basic belief" lacks precision. This lack of precision (I will argue) has crucial consequences. In Kenny's case, it conceals the fact that his rebuttal to Reformed epistemology ultimately fails - for his imprecise conception of basic belief has led him to misconstrue what Plantinga is asserting. In Plantinga's case, it conceals the fact that Reformed epistemology lacks cogency; its apparent cogency is merely an illusion.

---

[1]Anthony Kenny, Faith and Reason (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 12 - "I am greatly indebted to Plantinga's work, and I intend to develop my account of rationality in belief by expounding *and criticizing* the discussion of foundationalism in a number of recent papers of Plantinga, in particular his essay 'Is Belief in God Rational?' " [emphasis mine]

Kenny Vs. Plantinga

According to Plantinga, one of the key assumptions underlying the evidentialist objection to theistic belief is that belief in God cannot properly serve as a basic belief. But if it cannot properly be a basic belief, it is rational only if it is supported by sufficient evidence. Since (according to the evidentialist objector) it lacks sufficient evidence, it is not a rational belief. One of Plantinga's key moves is to challenge the evidentialist's assumption that belief in God cannot properly be held as basic. This challenge can be characterized as follows[2]:

1. The evidentialist objection is rooted in and depends upon classical foundationalism's picture of rational belief.

2. Classical foundationalism's picture of rational belief is faulty; it is not sufficiently inclusive. Specifically, its criteria of proper basicality exclude beliefs which clearly are properly basic.

3. The evidentialist objection fails, therefore, because the picture of rational belief whereby belief in God is ruled out as properly basic is faulty and inadequate.

---

[2]This is not, in fact, an adequate characterization of Plantinga's position; but Kenny's position is offered as a rebuttal to Plantinga's position as here characterized. What is noticeably absent in this characterization is Plantinga's second criticism of the classical foundationalist picture of rational belief - namely, that it is self-referentially incoherent. Kenny is certainly aware of this aspect of Plantinga's criticism; but - though he does not dwell on it - he thinks his conception of rationality, unlike that of classical foundationalism, is not subject to this criticism. (See ibid., 27.) In any event, I deliberately ignore this aspect of Plantinga's argument in the present discussion, for it is not important to the arguments of this chapter.

4. There is no universally agreed upon picture of rational belief whereby belief in God can be ruled out as properly basic.

5. Therefore, it has not been shown that the theist is irrational to hold his belief in God as a properly basic belief.

Kenny agrees with the first three steps of this argument. He disagrees with the last two. Classical foundationalism fails; Plantinga and he agree on that. But unlike Plantinga, Kenny believes that - when the classical foundationalist picture of rational belief is adequately amended and its criteria of proper basicality are adequately revised - the fundamental tenet of evidentialism will remain: belief in God is rational *only if* there is sufficient evidence for it. Is there sufficient evidence? He is not sure; he is agnostic. But in any case, whether it is rational depends on the adequacy of the evidence. In this respect, Kenny's conclusions more closely agree with evidentialism than with Reformed epistemology.

Kenny's Revised Criteria of Proper Basicality

As we have seen, Plantinga defines classical foundationalism as the view that only beliefs which are self-evident or evident to the senses are properly held as basic. Kenny's revised conception of rational belief involves expanding this list of sufficient conditions for a belief's being properly basic:

1. In addition to a belief's being self-evident, Kenny adds that "fundamental" beliefs can properly be held as basic.[3] A "fundamental" belief is a belief which is universally held as basic. So, beliefs like "the earth has existed for many years past," "cats do not grow on trees," and "human beings

---

[3]Ibid., 28-32.

have forebears" are fundamental beliefs in the sense in which Kenny means it.[4] Fundamental beliefs are those which "could not be given up without causing havoc in our noetic structures... ."[5] They are the sorts of beliefs which "can be called into question only by something which calls itself into question."[6] In other words, fundamental beliefs are so fundamental to human language, discourse, and reasoning that to doubt or reject one of these is to doubt or reject language, discourse, and reasoning itself.

Kenny's addition of "fundamental" beliefs to the criteria of proper basicality is clearly in response to one of Plantinga's primary criticisms of classical foundationalism. Plantinga claims that classical foundationalism excludes as properly basic certain commonsensical beliefs which everyone knows can properly be held as basic. Beliefs in the existence of other minds, the past, the external world, etc. are excluded by classical foundationalism's criteria; yet everyone holds such beliefs as basic. By adding "fundamental" beliefs to his criteria, Kenny is immediately and directly opening the door (which classical foundationalism has closed) to just such commonsense beliefs. Plantinga is clearly in sympathy with the addition of such a criterion.

2. In addition to a belief's being evident to the senses, Kenny adds that beliefs which are evident to memory can properly be held as basic.[7] Here again Kenny is in agreement with Plantinga. Plantinga points out that - by the criteria of classical foundationalism - memory beliefs such as "I had breakfast

---

[4]Ibid., 28. Kenny attributes these examples to Wittgenstein.

[5]Ibid., 29.

[6]Ibid., 31.

[7]Ibid., 32-33.

this morning" could not properly be held as basic. And yet (according to Plantinga) clearly they are held as basic, and rightly so. So Kenny amends classical foundationalism's inadequate criteria, adding memory beliefs to the stock of properly basic beliefs.

3. Finally, and most importantly, Kenny proposes a radically new category to the criteria of proper basicality: another sort of belief which can properly be held as basic is a belief which can be defended by argument, inquiry, or performance.[8]

This proposal is initially very curious (and somewhat confusing). How can there be a properly basic belief which can be defended by *argument, inquiry, or performance* ? Wouldn't a belief supported by argument, inquiry, or performance be a non-basic belief, by definition? Plantinga is clear that a belief's being rationally acceptable on the basis of evidence is the defining attribute of a non-basic belief.[9] A basic belief is one which is accepted *without or apart from evidence* - and argument, inquiry, or performance - as Kenny defines them - would all constitute what Plantinga means by *evidence*. So - by Plantinga's definition - in order to be classed as basic, a belief must be accepted apart from any argument, inquiry, or performance. So, what sort of confusion is Kenny fostering when he proposes that we include beliefs *defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance* among those which can properly be held as basic? Is this not to propose that non-basic beliefs can properly be held as basic?

---

[8]Ibid., 34-45.

[9]See (for example) Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 48.

The key to making sense of Kenny's proposal is this: He is *not* suggesting that argument, inquiry, or performance is the basis upon which such beliefs are held. They are held as basic - i.e., *not* on the basis of evidence. But the fact that they are defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance is the reason they can properly be held as basic. In other words, what Kenny has in mind is a sort of belief which can, in principle, be defended as rational (by means of argument, inquiry, or performance) but which is held as basic nonetheless. What makes it basic is this simple fact: the one who holds it does not do so on the basis of the evidence by which its rationality could be defended. Rather, he holds it apart from any evidence at all. Since it is defensible in principle, it could be held either as a basic belief or as a non-basic belief. If it is held as basic, however, it is precisely because it is defensible in this way that it is a properly basic belief - i.e., a rational one. If it were not so defensible (and were also neither self-evident, fundamental, nor evident to the senses or memory), then to hold it as a basic belief would be improper - i.e., irrational.

One of Kenny's more interesting examples is his belief that Australia exists - *given that Kenny has never been there.* Kenny claims that he holds his belief in Australia as a basic belief; he does not hold it on the basis of any evidence. It is so basic - so firmly embedded in his noetic structure - that it is instead part of the very basis from which he would evaluate the rationality of other beliefs. It is not subject to evaluation or doubt. It is simply a given for him.

So, for example, if Kenny were confronted by a map with nothing but Pacific Ocean where Australia ought to be, he would not thereby be dissuaded from believing in Australia. Rather, he would alter his understanding of what the map purports to be. If at first glance he assumed it was an accurate, detailed map of the world, upon seeing the absence of Australia he would

immediately change his mind. It is a misprinted map, or perhaps a practical joke; but it is not an authentic map of the world. The point is this: his belief in Australia is so deeply embedded in his noetic structure that it is better and more firmly believed by him than any possible evidence (for or against Australia) that one might try to offer him. Kenny describes it this way -

> That is why I say that my belief in the existence of Australia is not based on reasons. There are no other beliefs which I have which could be used to support the claim that Australia exists which are better known to me, more firmly established in my noetic structure, than is that proposition itself. If there was any conflict between the types of information which I could give to support my belief in Australia ... it would be these latter, and not my belief in Australia which would have to give way. The proposition that there is an Australia sets the standard by which anything that might be offered as evidence on the topic would be judged credible or incredible. This shows that the proposition is not, in my noetic structure, related to such items in the way that conclusions are related to evidence.[10]

But whereas belief in the existence of Australia is <u>now</u> a basic belief for Kenny, it was not always so. Furthermore, it may not be a basic belief for someone else - say, for example, for his pre-school grandson.[11] There is evidence that Kenny can offer his grandson. He can pull out atlases, take him to the airport and show him planes scheduled to depart for Sydney, take him to meet an acquaintance who grew up in Perth, etc. Initially, such evidence (if not his grandfather's word for it) will be the basis upon which he believes in Australia. Later, he too will hold his belief in Australia as basic.

---

[10]Kenny, <u>Faith and Reason</u>, 20.

[11]See ibid. - "I do not claim that *no one's belief* in the existence of Australia could be based on reasons, or that *my own* was never at any time of my life based on reasons. The belief in Australia in a young child today, or of an educated European adult in the eighteenth century, rests on reasons." [emphasis mine]

Accordingly, Kenny argues that there is a whole class of beliefs - like his belief in Australia - which are properly held as basic but can be so only if they are warranted in the same way a non-basic belief is - i.e., on the basis of evidence (or "reasons"). Whereas such beliefs can be and are held as basic, at the same time, they can be defended as rational (via argument, inquiry, or performance) to anyone who does not hold them as basic. (Such a belief cannot be defended as rational to one who does hold it as basic; for if he holds it as basic, it is part of the starting point from which all rational defense begins.) This is a *major* addition to the classical foundationalist's list of properly basic beliefs.

The above example can be unnecessarily confusing. If so, it may be helpful to substitute the Statue of Liberty for the continent of Australia in his example. The latter presents some complications which the former does not. "The Statue of Liberty" clearly denotes a concrete and determinate thing. A place - like Australia - is less concrete, more abstract, and possibly less determinate. To avoid any confusion which might result - in the discussion which follows - I will often employ the Statue of Liberty example rather than the Australia example. But it is fundamentally the same example. Everything Kenny says about his basic belief in Australia would also be true of a basic belief in the Statue of Liberty: it is not held on the basis of reasons, argument, or evidence; nothing which might be offered in support of the existence of the Statue of Liberty is better known to him - more firmly established in his noetic structure - than is his belief in the statue itself; ... etc. Of foremost importance is this: though it is not held on the basis of supporting beliefs, *it is nevertheless warranted by other beliefs.* If the question of whether it is warranted should ever

arise,[12] Kenny will establish its warrant by the evidential support of other beliefs - beliefs about the reliability of human testimony, maps, and tour schedules in conjunction with beliefs like "the map shows the Statue of Liberty on it" and "here is a schedule of boat tours to the Statue of Liberty."

Epistemologically vs. Economically Basic Beliefs

There are two distinct senses in which a belief can be basic to a person. To better sort out and evaluate the respective views of Plantinga and Kenny, it is important to clearly distinguish these two different kinds of basicality.

Basic Beliefs: The Distinction

Both Plantinga and Kenny are in basic agreement as to what a basic belief is: *a basic belief is a belief which one holds apart from or without evidence.* But there are two importantly different reasons why one might, in practice, hold a belief as basic:

1. One holds it as basic because he is so completely convinced that adequate evidence for it exists that he no longer feels a need to keep that evidence in view. In other words, if the truth of belief B is a "settled issue" for person P, then P can rationally hold B as a basic belief. In other words, because he is convinced it is true, he can make it a part of the evidential support from which he derives other beliefs. He can make it part of his starting

---

[12]Such a question would not and could not arise within Kenny's own thinking. He holds it as a basic belief; and, by definition, no warrant is asked for or expected. But it could arise in discourse with another. Someone who does not hold belief in the Statue of Liberty as basic could challenge its rational defensibility and ask how it is warranted.

point for further rational inquiry. In such a case, it is rational for him to simply "take it for granted" that B.[13]

2. One holds it as basic - apart from evidence - precisely because it is warranted apart from evidence. Certain beliefs are of such a nature that they are either self-warranting or are directly warranted by experience. As such, they do not need evidential support from any other beliefs. Instead, they function as the self-warranting foundation for all one's other beliefs - providing evidential support rather than receiving it. Since such a belief is warranted apart from any evidence, clearly it will be held apart from any evidence. It will be held as basic.

Economically Basic Beliefs

Kenny's belief in the Statue of Liberty is a good example of a belief's being basic in the first sense. Clearly Kenny thinks that belief in the Statue of Liberty *can* be defended as rational. An argument can be made. Evidence exists. But yet, says Kenny, he does not hold his belief in the Statue of Liberty *because of* that evidence; rather, he holds it basically, apart from any evidence. To use my language, he just "takes it for granted," or he "just knows it."

But why does Kenny "just know" that the Statue of Liberty exists? Not (as we have seen) because there is no evidence or defense which could be offered. Kenny's whole point is that such a belief is and indeed must be

---

[13] To say that it is rational for him to simply "take it (B) for granted" must not to be understand in an overly broad sense. I mean more than that it is rational for him to "assume it" - as, for example, in "assuming it for the sake of argument." Rather, I mean it in the narrower sense that it is rational for him to claim to "just know it (B)."

"defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance." Rather, he "just knows" it precisely because its truth (and rational warrant) is such a "settled issue" for him that anything that he might consider to be evidence for it is less credible to him, less well known to him, and less embedded in his noetic structure than it is itself.

It is a fact of human knowing that there is a certain practical economy to our believing. Imagine how mired down our reasoning processes would become if every time we entered into discursive reasoning we were obligated to take nothing for granted. What if, for example, I could not take the existence of the Statue of Liberty for granted - I could not properly claim to "just know" it? What if I was required to defend my belief in its existence (and proportion my belief in it to the evidence) every time the subject came up? Human discourse would be paralyzed. Fortunately, the nature of human knowing and rational discourse allows us to take certain beliefs for granted, to "just know" that they are true. So long as we are convinced that a belief is true, we can make that belief a starting point for future reasoning. We simply assume that it is true and proceed from there. Such epistemological liberty serves the purposes of economy. If we were not allowed such liberty, the inefficiency of our reasoning processes would bring learning and growth in knowledge to a standstill.

Economically basic beliefs, then, are beliefs we hold as basic because - being utterly convinced that they are true and rationally defensible - we simply take them for granted. This label must not be misunderstood however. An economically basic belief is not one which is taken for granted as a sort of temporary, practical expedient. It is <u>not</u> a belief which one takes to be true "for the sake of argument," or for the "expediency of the moment." *It is what a person knows to be true* and, hence, is the place from which all further learning

and discovery must begin. It is a semi-permanent fixture in one's noetic structure. Its "economy" is an essential aspect to the structure of human knowing.

Epistemologically Basic Beliefs

Consider the commonsensical beliefs which Kenny categorized as self-evident, fundamental, evident to the senses, or evident to memory. All these beliefs have something in common which make them importantly distinct from Kenny's belief in the Statue of Liberty. The rational warrant for these beliefs is not derived from the rational warrant of other beliefs. They derive their warrant immediately - from some attribute which they themselves possess - not from the evidential support of other beliefs one holds. Consequently, by their very nature, these beliefs (unlike economically basic beliefs) need no warrant from any other beliefs. Not only are they held "apart from evidence"; they are also warranted apart from any evidence. Such beliefs I shall call "epistemologically basic." So, whereas economically basic beliefs are and must be defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance in order to be properly held as basic, epistemologically basic beliefs, by their very nature, need not be.

Calling these beliefs "epistemologically basic" is not arbitrary. It results from taking the concerns and insights of foundationalism (whether classical foundationalism or Plantingan foundationalism) seriously. Foundationalism is based on a simple picture of rational warrant that sees belief Z being warranted by belief Y which in turn is warranted by belief X which in turn is warranted by

belief W ... which is (eventually) warranted by belief A.[14] Given this picture of rational warrant, one of two things must be true: either (1) belief A (which is as basic as one can get - there is no belief more basic from which it could derive its warrant) is unwarranted - in which case beliefs B through Z are likewise unwarranted; or (2) belief A is warranted without deriving its warrant from some prior belief, i.e., it is self-warranting. Assuming that some of what we believe actually is warranted, it follows that some beliefs must, therefore, be the self-warranting starting point of all rational justification. Such beliefs will be distinctive; they will be self-warranting while all other beliefs derive their warrant from prior beliefs. The role of such beliefs is to give human reasoning a starting point or foundation. It is this role as foundational or "basic" which requires that they be self-warranting. Conversely, it is their self-warranting nature which makes them suited to serve as "basic" and foundational. It is this unique class of beliefs which I am trying to denote by the phrase "epistemologically basic."

Another Way to Describe the Distinction

We can approach the distinction between economically and epistemologically basic beliefs in another way. There are two senses in which we could talk about the foundations of a person's noetic structure. There is the *epistemological* foundation of one's noetic structure; and there is the *working* foundation of one's noetic structure. The working foundation of his noetic

---

[14]This is an oversimplification of foundationalism; but it is adequate for my purposes. For a helpful and more thorough discussion of the foundationalist's picture of rational warrant (esp. *vis a vis* the coherentist's picture of rational warrant), see Plantinga, "Coherentism," 118-126.

structure is composed of all those beliefs which a person takes for granted - or "just knows" to be true - and uses as the starting point for all his future reasoning and argument. The *epistemological* foundation of one's noetic structure is composed of only those beliefs which are self-warranting or immediately warranted by experience such that no argument or evidence is required for their rational defense. Very simply, then, an *economically* basic belief is a belief which functions only in the working foundation of one's noetic structure and does not and cannot function in the epistemological foundation of his noetic structure. An *epistemologically* basic belief is a belief which can and does function both in the working foundation and in the epistemological foundation of a person's noetic structure.

Further Clarification and Examples

To further clarify and focus the distinction which I am trying to draw, I will formulate concise definitions of the crucial terms and offer some examples of each of our two types of basic belief.

In agreement with Plantinga and Kenny, I define a basic belief as follows:

> *A basic belief is any belief which one holds apart from or without evidence; it is one which is so deeply embedded in one's noetic structure that it is better known to the one holding it than any possible evidence which could be offered in its support.*

But there are two kinds of basic beliefs. The first can be defined as follows:

> *An economically basic belief is a belief which - though held as basic and embedded so deeply in one's noetic structure that it is better known to the one holding it than any possible evidence which could be offered - derives its*

warrant from other prior beliefs and therefore must, in principle, be defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance before it can properly be held as basic.

Virtually any belief can function as an *economically* basic belief. All that is required in order for belief B to properly serve as an *economically* basic belief for person P is that P be convinced that B is rationally warranted and that no would-be evidence is better known to P than B itself. So, for example, any of the following beliefs could, in theory, properly function as economically basic beliefs (if only they were defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance):

Evolution is the best explanation for the origin of life on this planet.

The Trailblazers are the best team in the NBA this year.

A free-market economy is better than a centrally controlled economy.

White people are superior to black people.

My grandfather came across the Oregon Trail from Missouri.

Nothing *requires* such beliefs to be held as economically basic beliefs; they could just as well be held as non-basic beliefs. But when such a belief is so deeply embedded in a person's noetic structure that he would doubt the veracity of alleged counterevidence before he would doubt the belief itself, then it is functioning as a basic belief. And in each of these cases, it is functioning as an *economically* basic belief; for whether or not these beliefs can *properly* function as basic depends upon whether they are defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance. In principle, there is evidence either for or against each of these beliefs. If the belief cannot ultimately be defended and warranted by the evidence, it is not properly held as a basic belief.

The second sort of basic belief can be defined as follows:

An epistemologically basic belief is a belief which does not derive its warrant from prior beliefs but rather is either self-warranting or immediately warranted from experience - hence, it is a belief which does not require a defense by argument, inquiry, or performance in order to be properly held as basic.

Plantinga does not employ this category. But he would, I think, agree that each of the following are examples of epistemologically basic beliefs as I have defined them[15]:

If A is true, then not-A is false.

2 + 2 = 4.

The world is more than five minutes old.

My wife is not a cleverly-constructed robot.

I had breakfast this morning. (upon remembering that I did)

There is a raccoon in my back yard. (upon seeing a raccoon as I look out into my back yard)

There is a rose nearby. (upon smelling its aroma)

That's Bill Murray's voice. (upon tuning into the middle of a radio interview)

That's a Monet. (upon seeing a painting by Monet in an art gallery, having learned to recognize his particular style)

---

[15]The first six examples mimic examples that Plantinga himself uses. The last four reflect my own extrapolation of Plantinga's theory. I do believe, however, that Plantinga could consistently cite such examples.

That's Paul Desmond playing sax. (upon hearing a recording of a quartet with Paul Desmond on sax, having learned to recognize his distinctive style)

None of these beliefs need be proven by argument or evidence in order to be properly held as basic; they are unquestionably warranted beliefs apart from any argument or evidence. They are, in fact, either self-warranting (in the sense that they need no further warrant) or they are immediately warranted by one's experience.

The crucial difference between epistemologically basic beliefs and economically basic beliefs is this: Both of them function as basic beliefs and are held apart from any evidence or argument which warrants them. An economically basic belief, however, cannot properly and rationally be held as basic unless there does exist just such evidence or argument which warrants it and could be appealed to in its defense. An epistemologically basic belief, on the other hand, can properly and rationally be held as basic even if no evidence or argument can be brought forth in its defense.

The Concept of "Basic Belief" in Plantinga and Kenny

When Kenny speaks of a basic belief, he means it in a broad sense which includes economically basic beliefs in addition to epistemologically basic beliefs. Otherwise, his inclusion of a category of properly basic beliefs which are defensible by "argument, inquiry, or performance" would make no sense; for beliefs which are defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance are *economically* basic rather than epistemologically basic. As we have seen, an epistemologically basic belief is self-warranting or directly warranted by experience; it need not be defensible by "argument, inquiry, or performance" in order to be properly held as basic.

But what does Plantinga have in mind when he speaks of basic beliefs? When Plantinga defines the concept of "basic belief" in "Reason and Belief in God," his definition would also incorporate both economically and epistemologically basic beliefs:

> ... a proposition is *basic* for me if I believe it and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions.[16]

and later,

> Some of my beliefs, however, I accept but do not accept on the basis of any other beliefs. Call these beliefs *basic*.[17]

The distinction between epistemological and economical basicality does not appear to be in view in Plantinga's essay. Apparently, the vague and overly general conception of "basic belief" which he employs has prevented him from even noticing it. This is evidenced by the fact that Plantinga - throughout his essay - seems to actually confuse the two different senses in which a belief could be basic:

1. When Plantinga gives an example of a properly basic belief (excluding the controversial cases of belief in God and theo-implicatory beliefs), it is almost always a commonsensical belief which exemplifies an epistemologically basic belief. His examples are self-evident truths (2 + 1 = 3), memory beliefs ("I had breakfast this morning"), beliefs resulting from perception or sensation ("There is a tree in my back yard"), and fundamental beliefs ("The earth has existed for more than five minutes"). These are all *epistemologically* basic. By

---

[16]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 46.

[17]Ibid.

way of contrast, Kenny tends to cite examples of *economically* basic beliefs - like his belief that Australia exists. No similar examples come to mind for Plantinga. When looking for examples, his mind ranges over the set of *epistemologically* basic beliefs, not over the set of all possible *economically* basic beliefs.

2. On the other hand, there are passages in "Reason and Belief in God" which characterize basic beliefs in a way that can only refer to *economically* basic beliefs. For example, note this discussion -

> Furthermore, a belief can easily change status from nonbasic to basic and vice versa. *Now* the proposition that 21 x 21 = 441 is not basic for me; I accept it on the basis of the belief that I have just calculated it, and that is how it came out. Later, however, I may remember that 21 x 21 = 441 and forget that I calculated it. In that case I will simply remember it and no longer believe it on the basis of other beliefs; it will be basic for me.[18]

Clearly a non-basic belief can become an economically basic belief in the way that Plantinga's example suggests. By the very nature of an economically basic belief, it can initially be held as a non-basic belief (a belief that one does not "just know" is true) and then later - after further familiarity and habituation - it can come to be held as an economically basic belief (a belief that one does "just know" to be true) *without any change at all in the basis upon which it is warranted.* But only *economically* basic beliefs can change their status from non-basic to basic in just this way. With respect to warrant, a belief either is epistemologically basic (foundational) or it is not. Either it must derive its warrant from epistemologically prior beliefs or it is immediately warranted in some sense; but if it is the former, it cannot suddenly change into the latter.

---

[18]Ibid., 50-51.

Granted, there is another sense in which a non-basic belief could become a basic belief. One could, for example, have a non-basic belief that there is a bear nearby (i.e., a belief inferred from certain evidence) and then later - after seeing the bear - come to hold it as a basic belief. But, in this sort of case, with the shift from holding the belief as non-basic to basic there is also a shift in the grounds upon which the belief is held. (It is first held on the basis of "evidence"; later it is held on the basis of experience.) But in Plantinga's example above, the ground upon which 21 x 21 = 441 is warranted does not change. What changes is the manner in which it is functioning in one's noetic structure. This can happen - where a belief is first held as a non-basic belief and later as a basic belief without any change at all in the basis for its warrant - only if it is a belief held as non-basic becoming a belief held as *economically* basic. It could never happen that a belief I hold as non-basic could come to be held as *epistemologically* basic with no change in the ground upon which I hold it. Therefore, in the paragraph cited above, Plantinga clearly has in mind an *economically* basic belief as his example of a "basic belief."

Overall the evidence points to this: Plantinga (like Kenny) is employing a broad concept of "basic belief" which includes both epistemologically and economically basic beliefs without distinction. This has important consequences. In both cases - I will argue - their failure to note the difference between economically and epistemologically basic beliefs and their consequent failure to keep the appropriate sort of belief in view results in the failure of their respective arguments.

The Concept of "Basic Belief" Required by Reformed Epistemology

Though Plantinga does not explicitly distinguish between epistemological and economical basicality, there can be little doubt that *epistemological* basicality is primarily what he has in view. His key claim is that theo-implicatory beliefs are properly *epistemologically* basic beliefs - not that they are properly *economically* basic beliefs. The logic of Plantinga's argument requires it.

Plantinga's ultimate concern is whether theistic belief is rationally warranted. He attempts to establish its rational warrant through the radical suggestion that it is, in fact, *properly basic*. His reasoning is this: there are two ways a belief can acquire rational warrant - either by being a properly basic belief, or by being evidenced by beliefs which are properly basic. In a later essay he writes,

> ... a proposition can have or acquire warrant in at least two ways. On the one hand, it can be *properly basic* [emphasis mine]; on the other, it can acquire warrant by virtue of *warrant transfer*: by virtue of being believed on the basis of some other proposition that already has warrant.[19]

According to the evidentialist objection, theistic belief is not warranted because it is not adequately supported or evidenced by properly basic beliefs. But, argues Plantinga, "On what basis do we ignore the possibility that theistic belief is itself properly basic?" He then argues that *it is.* Theistic belief is warranted because it is, for the theist, properly basic - one of the two ways to acquire rational warrant.

---

[19]Plantinga, "Coherentism," 120.

With this as his line of reasoning, Plantinga can mean one and only one thing by "properly basic." He must mean that belief in God is properly an *epistemologically* basic belief. His whole reason for maintaining that belief in God is properly basic is to argue that belief in God is warranted apart from evidence. In other words, even if no compelling argument or evidence can be given for God's existence, belief in God is warranted anyway, for belief in God is properly basic. But this would not follow if belief in God were an economically basic belief. An economically basic belief is warranted only to the extent that it is warranted by argument or evidence. To claim that theistic belief is *economically* basic, therefore, would do nothing to advance the counterclaim he wants to make against the evidentialist objection. If anything, it would actually confirm the basis upon which it is advanced. But to claim that theistic belief is properly *epistemologically* basic would constitute a very powerful and effective counterclaim to evidentialism. It would eliminate the only basis upon which the evidentialist objection could be made.

Clearly, then, Plantinga's argument can be understood in only one way: theistic belief or - more accurately - theo-implicatory beliefs are properly *epistemologically* basic. Only then does Reformed epistemology make any sense as an alternative to classical foundationalism and as an effective counterclaim to the evidentialist objection.

Kenny's Failure to Rebut Reformed Epistemology

As we have seen, Kenny's project in Faith and Reason is to rebut Reformed epistemology - specifically, to rebut Plantinga's claim that belief in God can be rational apart from evidence. He agrees with Plantinga that classical foundationalism's conception of rational belief is faulty. Specifically,

the criteria by which it has ruled out the proper basicality of theistic belief are deficient. But Plantinga goes one step further than Kenny is willing to go. Plantinga holds that a lack of sufficient evidence cannot be a reason to reject theistic belief as properly basic. Kenny disagrees; he thinks Plantinga has been too hasty.

> I agree with Plantinga's principal point that it may be rational to accept a proposition though it is neither self-evident nor evident to the senses, nor held on the basis of any reasons. ...
>
> My complaint to Plantinga is that one must go much further that [sic] he has done if one is to make any substantial contribution to answering the question "Is belief in God rational?" "So far" he says at the end of his paper "we have found no reason at all for excluding belief in God from the foundations. So far we have found no reason at all for believing that belief in God cannot be basic in a rational noetic structure." I agree that belief in God is not shown to be irrational merely because it is a belief which is not based on reasons while not having as its object a proposition which is self-evident or evident to the senses. But Plantinga has not shown us why what goes for belief in the proposition "there is a God" may not go for belief in any proposition whatever. ...
>
> ... surely we should try harder to see whether we can give a better account of rationality. Just because the criterion for correct belief given by the classical foundationalist fails, we should not conclude prematurely that no criterion can be given which will help to distinguish between rational and irrational beliefs, between sense and folly, between sanity and madness.[20]

Kenny's strategy is to defend a conception of rational belief which, while avoiding the deficiencies of classical foundationalism, does not permit the conclusion that theistic belief can properly be held apart from argument or evidence. In place of classical foundationalism's criteria of being self-evident and evident to the senses, Kenny proposes the criteria of - (1) being self-

---

[20]Kenny, Faith and Reason, 15-17. Note that Kenny is here advancing what in an earlier chapter I labeled the *second* version of the Great Pumpkin objection.

evident or fundamental, (2) being evident to the senses or to memory, and (3) being defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance.

An Analysis of Kenny's Rebuttal

Having proposed three criteria for proper basicality, Kenny's rebuttal to Reformed epistemology runs roughly like this:

Plantinga has correctly argued that theistic belief is, for the theist, a properly basic belief. But, from the fact of its proper basicality, Plantinga infers that it *need not* be defensible by argument or evidence. By definition, basic beliefs are held without and apart from evidence. Therefore, infers Plantinga, properly basic beliefs *qua* properly basic beliefs need not be defensible by argument or evidence.

But this is a faulty inference. True, basic beliefs are held without and apart from any rational defense. And it is true of some basic beliefs (those which fit Kenny's first two criteria) that they are *properly* so held even when they are not defensible by evidence or argument. *But there are other beliefs for which this is clearly not true* (i.e., those which fit Kenny's third criterion). For these latter beliefs - the vast majority of my basic beliefs - whereas I do not hold them on the basis of evidence - nevertheless they are supportable by evidence, and indeed they require such evidence. Were they not, in principle, defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance (i.e., by "evidence"), I would not be warranted in holding them.

Now Plantinga has argued that theistic belief needs no rational defense *because it is a properly basic belief.* But, as we have just seen, being a properly basic belief is not a *sufficient* condition for its needing no rational defense. Only if it is a properly basic belief by the first two of Kenny's three

criteria would such a conclusion follow. But there is a third sort of properly basic belief; and for that sort of properly basic belief, Plantinga's conclusion would not follow. Belief in God, argues Kenny, is of this third sort. Though it can be properly basic (like belief in the Statue of Liberty), it is properly and rationally basic only if it is rationally defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance.

To summarize then: Plantinga argues - if theistic belief is properly basic, it need not be defensible by evidence. But this is fallacious; he fails to recognize the third sort of properly basic belief outlined in Kenny's criteria. There is a sort of properly basic belief which is properly basic precisely because and only if it is defensible by evidence. If theistic belief is this third sort of properly basic belief, Plantinga is wrong to conclude that it need not be rationally defensible.

The Failure of Kenny's Rebuttal

The last of Kenny's three criteria of proper basicality is crucial to his rebuttal to Reformed epistemology. Is Kenny right about this? Is there a whole class of properly basic beliefs which are properly basic only to the extent that they are "defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance"? It all depends. If we are speaking of *economically* basic beliefs, then Kenny is right: there is a whole class of economically basic beliefs which, though held as basic, are nonetheless only properly basic if they are defensible by "argument, inquiry, or performance." But if we are talking about *epistemologically* basic beliefs, then Kenny is wrong. As we saw in our earlier discussion, if belief B is properly an epistemologically basic belief, then belief B, by definition, need not be defended by evidence or rational argument. An epistemologically basic belief is rationally foundational; it is the basis from which all argument proceeds, the

source from which all warrant derives. It is not the outcome of any argument; it is the beginning point from which it must proceed. *There is no class of epistemologically basic beliefs which are properly held as basic only if they are defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance.*

A lack of precision in Kenny's discussion of basic beliefs brings about the failure of his rebuttal of Reformed epistemology. The disputed Plantingan assertion (made more precise than Plantinga makes it) is this:

> Theistic belief is an epistemologically basic belief and therefore can properly and rationally be held as basic even though it is not defensible by compelling evidence or argument.

Kenny's rebuttal (made more precise than Kenny makes it) amounts to this:

> Since economically basic beliefs (by definition) require the warrant of evidence or argument before they can properly and rationally be held as basic, the fact that theistic belief is an economically basic belief does not justify one's holding it as basic if it is not defensible by compelling evidence or argument.

It should be clear from this that Kenny's response is not relevant to the claim that Plantinga is actually making. Plantinga is not claiming that theistic belief is an *economically* basic belief for the theist. He is making a stronger claim - that theistic belief is properly *epistemologically* basic. In order to rebut this latter claim - the one which Plantinga is actually making - Kenny would have to argue that there exists a class of *epistemologically* basic beliefs which are properly held as basic only insofar as they are defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance. But as we have just seen, that cannot be. Epistemologically basic beliefs, by definition, require no evidential support in

order to be held rationally. So Kenny fails to rebut the position which Reformed epistemology actually takes.

The irrelevance of his rebuttal is not immediately obvious, however. It is concealed by the vague and overly general conception of basic beliefs which both he and Plantinga employ in their arguments. Neither of them recognizes or acknowledges the critical distinction between economical and epistemological basicality.

A Different Look at Kenny's Rebuttal

Kenny's three criteria of proper basicality can helpfully be viewed as falling into two groups of criteria. The first two of Kenny's criteria are criteria for epistemologically basic beliefs:

1. a belief is properly basic if it is self-evident or fundamental, or

2. a belief is properly basic if it is evident to the senses or to memory.

His third criterion is the criterion for economically basic beliefs:

3. a belief is properly basic if it is defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance.

As we have seen, Plantinga's key assertion is that theistic belief is properly held as an epistemologically basic belief. He disputes classical foundationalism's claim to the contrary - that theistic belief cannot properly be held as epistemologically basic because it does not meet the criteria for proper epistemological basicality. Kenny's rebuttal of Plantinga amounts to this: he proposes a new, revised set of criteria of proper basicality for epistemologically basic beliefs. According to Kenny, a belief is properly held to be epistemologically basic if -

1. it is self-evident or fundamental, or

2. it is evident to the senses or to memory.

Although it is somewhat misleading to do so, it will be helpful (to make the fundamental difference between Plantinga and Kenny clear) to present Plantinga's position in the same form - as an alternative set of criteria of proper epistemological basicality. Plantinga's criteria would look something like this: a belief is properly held to be epistemologically basic if -

1. it is self-evident or fundamental,

2. it is evident to the senses or to memory, or

3. it evident because of the *sensus divinitatis* (i.e., the natural human awareness of the divine reality lying behind the things that one sees and experiences).[21]

---

[21]This is not the definitive list of Plantinga's criteria of proper basicality. All I mean to suggest is that, were Plantinga to articulate a formal set of criteria, it would include all of these three types of criteria. Plantinga does not consider himself in any position to formally articulate a criterion of proper basicality. But that does not prevent him from knowing when a belief is properly basic and when it is not. He writes - "Must one have such a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgments - positive or negative - about proper basicality? Surely not. Suppose I do not know of a satisfactory substitute for the criteria proposed by classical foundationalism; I am nevertheless entirely within my epistemic rights in holding that certain propositions in certain conditions [eg. beliefs about the Great Pumpkin] are not properly basic." (Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 75.) Plantinga's position is *not* that he has successfully articulated a criterion of proper basicality and that according to that criterion belief in God is properly basic. Rather, his position is that the theist knows that his belief in God is properly basic and that that remains true whether a criterion of proper basicality can be successfully articulated or not.

By examining their criteria in parallel, the difference between Plantinga and Kenny becomes transparent. Plantinga accepts the *sensus divinitatis* as a criterion of proper epistemological basicality; Kenny does not.

It is its recognition of a *sensus divinitatis* which explains why Reformed epistemology holds that theistic belief needs no evidential support to be rational. The *sensus divinitatis* involves a direct, immediate warrant of one's theo-implicatory beliefs from experience. Hence, theo-implicatory beliefs are epistemologically basic; and properly so. If Kenny is to effectively rebut this position, he must explain why one should not accept the reality of the *sensus divinitatis*. But he offers no such explanation. He says nothing to refute the existence or validity of this phenomenon.[22] From Plantinga's perspective then - by refusing (without argument) to acknowledge the *sensus divinitatis* as a basis for the proper epistemological basicality of theo-implicatory beliefs - Kenny (no less than classical foundationalism) is engaging in a "bit of intellectual imperialism."

Plantinga's Failure to Show That Theistic Belief Is Basic

Reformed epistemology's crucial assertion is that theists do, in fact, hold their theistic belief as a properly basic belief - i.e., not on the basis of argumentation or evidence. They believe in God as a basic, fundamental starting point; not as the result of some rational inquiry. On the surface, this is a very plausible suggestion. Several observations tend to support it:

---

[22]He may assume that he has done so in Kenny, Faith and Reason, 53 - 61. However, if he thinks that these arguments rebut Reformed epistemology, he has not rightly understood what the *sensus divinitatis* is for the Reformed epistemologist.

1. The typical theistic believer does not hold his belief in God on the basis of proofs or arguments. In terms of temporal sequence, the typical theist comes to believe in God long before being shown any compelling arguments for God's existence. The theist typically comes to believe in God on other grounds. Only later, if ever, does he come to appreciate and be helped by proofs for God's existence.

2. The typical theist is unable to articulate any cogent arguments for God's existence. Furthermore, he is unable to articulate sound rebuttals to the alleged proofs that God does not exist. Yet he persists in holding his theistic belief nonetheless. He is not the least bit threatened by his inability to defend his belief. He feels no necessity to leave his belief in abeyance until he can adequately defend it. Rather, he is quite content (under these circumstances) to continue believing in the existence of God and to not think himself irrational, insane, or dotty to do so.

3. The typical theistic believer would not give up his belief in God even if he were confronted by a seemingly compelling argument against God's existence. Typically, before he would doubt the existence of God, he would assume that something is wrong with the argument (even though he cannot locate nor identify what it is). In other words, his belief that God exists is more sure for him than is his own judgment as to the soundness of a particular argument.

These observations about how theists typically hold their theistic belief are totally consistent with theistic belief being held as basic by theists. But this conclusion does not take into account the important distinction between economical and epistemological basicality. Which do the above observations

support? The view that theistic belief is an economically basic belief? Or the view that it is an epistemologically basic belief?

In chapter IX, I will argue that the phenomenology of holding a belief in God suggests that it is held as an economically basic belief, not an epistemologically basic belief. *If I am right about that*, Reformed epistemology is mistaken; for the correctness of Reformed epistemology hinges on theistic belief being properly epistemologically basic. As Plantinga presents it, however, it is not at all obvious that Reformed epistemology is mistaken. The vague and overly general concept of basic belief which Plantinga employs in making his case tends to obscure the fact that his argument is fallacious.

Analyzing Plantinga's Argument

The following argument represents roughly the sort of argument that Plantinga makes for the Reformed epistemological perspective -

Argument A (Plantinga's argument):

> Premise one: If belief B is a properly basic belief, then belief B is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.
>
> Premise two: Belief in the existence of God is a properly basic belief.
>
> Conclusion: Therefore, belief in the existence of God is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.

Because he does not distinguish between economical and epistemological basicality, it is unclear exactly how we are to understand this

argument. If we attempt to make clear which kind of basicality the argument has in view, we have either -

Argument B:

> Premise one: If belief B is properly an epistemologically basic belief, then belief B is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.
>
> Premise two: Belief in the existence of God is properly an epistemologically basic belief.
>
> Conclusion: Therefore, belief in the existence of God is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.

or, Argument C:

> Premise one: If belief B is properly an economically basic belief, then belief B is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.
>
> Premise two: Belief in the existence of God is properly an economically basic belief.
>
> Conclusion: Therefore, belief in the existence of God is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.

Neither of these two arguments - Argument B or Argument C - is successful. Argument B fails because (as I will argue later) the second premise is false. It simply is not true that theists hold their belief in the existence of God as an *epistemologically* basic belief. They hold it as an *economically* basic belief, but not as an *epistemologically* basic belief. Argument C fails because

the first premise is false. As Kenny's helpful discussion has shown, there is a whole class of basic beliefs (i.e., economically basic beliefs) which - though held as basic - are nonetheless rational if and *only if* a cogent rational defense can, in principle, be made for them (eg., Kenny's beliefs in the existence of Australia or the Statue of Liberty). If a cogent rational argument could not, in principle, be given for an economically basic belief, it is irrational to hold it as basic. Consequently, Premise two is false; Argument C fails.

So, indeed, neither Argument B nor Argument C is sound. Both arguments contain faulty premises. What about Argument D, where all of the premises are true?

Argument D:

> Premise one: If belief B is properly an epistemologically basic belief, then belief B is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.
>
> Premise two: Belief in the existence of God is properly an economically basic belief.
>
> Conclusion: Therefore, belief in the existence of God is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.

This is clearly not sound; it is not a logically valid argument form. The conclusion does not follow from the premises.

But notice what happens when we ignore (and therefore suppress) the distinction between economical and epistemological basicality in our presentation of Argument D. The result is something equivalent to Argument A (Plantinga's Argument) up above:

Argument A:

> Premise one (as stated): If belief B is a properly basic belief, then belief B is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.
>
> > Premise one (as understood for the purpose of evaluating its truthfulness): If belief B is properly a[n epistemologically] basic belief, then belief B is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.
>
> Premise two (as stated): Belief in the existence of God is a properly basic belief.
>
> > Premise two (as understood for the purpose of evaluating its truthfulness): Belief in the existence of God is properly a[n economically] basic belief.
>
> Conclusion (understood as stated): Therefore, belief in the existence of God is an entirely rational belief whether or not a cogent rational argument could, in principle, be given for it.

Argument A, if understood as described just above, is misleading. In its "stated" form, clearly it is a valid argument form. When we ask about the truth of each premise - if we evaluate each premise according to its "understood" form above - we find that both premises are true. Accordingly, one could easily conclude that Argument A is sound. But he would be mistaken. The "stated" form of Argument A involves a serious ambiguity which must be clarified either as Argument B, Argument C, or Argument D. As we have seen, none of these arguments is sound. So whereas Argument A (Plantinga's argument for the views of Reformed epistemology) superficially appears to be sound, in fact, it is fallacious.

As we saw earlier, Kenny's employment of the vague, overly general concept of "basic belief" and his failure to acknowledge the distinction between economical and epistemological basicality had the consequence that - though his rebuttal to Reformed epistemology was irrelevant - the fact that it was irrelevant was concealed. We now see that something similar is true for Plantinga's position. Plantinga's use of the same overly general concept of "basic belief" and his failure to distinguish economically basic beliefs from epistemologically basic beliefs has the consequence that, though Reformed epistemology is mistaken, it is not immediately obvious that that is so. Ultimately, to evaluate who is right - the Reformed epistemologist or his critics - it is absolutely essential that we recognize the important distinction between epistemological and economical basicality.

Summary

The key issue, which must be settled before one can determine whether Reformed epistemology is correct, is this: do theists in fact hold their theistic belief as epistemologically basic? Granted, they undoubtedly hold it as *economically* basic. But what Plantinga's Reformed epistemology requires is that theistic belief be properly *epistemologically* basic. From the fact that theistic belief is economically basic, it does not follow that it is therefore epistemologically basic. But if, from the outset, one does not even recognize the distinction between economical and epistemological basicality (employing only the vague concept of "basic belief"), then the fact that theists hold belief in God as economically basic could appear to be equivalent to Plantinga's contention that theists hold belief in God as epistemologically basic (even though it is not). In other words, if all that is required for Reformed epistemology

to be true is that theistic belief be a properly basic belief (without regard to what sort of properly basic belief it is), then experience clearly confirms Reformed epistemology; for theistic belief clearly is held as basic in one sense - it is *economically* basic. But, in fact, merely showing that theistic belief is properly basic (without regard to the sort of proper basicality which is involved) is not sufficient to confirm Reformed epistemology. In order for Reformed epistemology to be true, theistic belief must properly be an *epistemologically* basic belief; and that (I will argue later) is unlikely.

CHAPTER VIII

CAN BELIEF IN GOD BE DEFEATED?

A major section of Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God" is devoted to answering four possible objections to Reformed epistemology. In this chapter, I examine Plantinga's response to one of them. The particular objection in view is this: if one accepts belief in God to be a basic belief, then he must regard argument to be irrelevant to his belief in God in the sense that he will be "committed in advance to rejecting every argument against it."[1] I will argue that Plantinga's answer to this objection is surprising, that it is inconsistent with what his Reformed epistemology logically entails, and that it reveals an underlying tension in Plantinga's own mind as to the status of theistic belief.

After explaining more fully the objection to which he is responding, I first explain how a consistent Reformed epistemologist would respond to this objection; then I outline the response which Plantinga did, in fact, give and explain how it is inconsistent with what Reformed epistemology entails; and finally, I try to identify the source of Plantinga's inconsistency, arguing that Plantinga seems to be of two minds as to the status of theistic belief.

---

[1]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 82.

The Dogmatism Objection

What I want to focus on is Plantinga's response to this objection to Reformed epistemology: if belief in God is a basic belief, then no argument could ever move the theist to give it up. To understand the force of this objection as Plantinga understands it, the objection can be articulated differently: *if a theist holds his belief in God as a basic belief, then the theist holds his belief dogmatically*. Raising some questions which implicitly contain this objection, Plantinga puts it this way -

> Suppose the fact is belief in God *is* properly basic. Does it follow that one who accepts it *dogmatically* is within his epistemic rights? Does it follow that someone who is within his rights in accepting it as basic *remains* justified in this belief, no matter what counterargument or counterevidence arises?[2] (emphasis mine)

The force of the objection, as Plantinga sees it, revolves around the issue of dogmatism. Accordingly, throughout the rest of this chapter, I will refer to this objection to Reformed epistemology as the "Dogmatism Objection."

Underlying the Dogmatism Objection is an argument which involves several important and controversial assumptions. It runs something like this:

1. To hold a belief dogmatically is necessarily objectionable.

2. To hold a belief in such a way that no counterargument could ever possibly persuade me to give it up is necessarily dogmatic.

3. Therefore, to hold a belief in such a way that no counterargument could ever possibly persuade me to give it up is necessarily objectionable.

---

[2]Ibid., 83.

Applied to theistic belief, this argument suggests this: if it is inconceivable that I should ever be convinced by counterargument to abandon my belief in God, then there is something epistemically objectionable about the way I hold my theistic belief. It is held dogmatically; and that is irrational and irresponsible.

Plantinga accepts without protest the argument which underlies the Dogmatic Objection. In his mind, to hold one's theistic belief dogmatically would clearly be objectionable. Furthermore, he agrees that it is dogmatic to not be open to abandoning theistic belief in the face of compelling counterarguments. So - as Plantinga understands the force of this objection - an adequate response must show that Reformed epistemology does not lead to dogmatism. He must show that theistic belief's being basic does not entail that the theist can rightfully hold it dogmatically - i.e., in such a way that nothing could persuade him to abandon it.

The Dogmatism Objection and Reformed Epistemology

Plantinga's acquiescence to the argument and assumptions underlying the Dogmatic Objection is surprising. I would expect him to reject them. As I will try to show, his acceptance of them seems inconsistent with what Reformed epistemology espouses. But to understand this more clearly, I first need to examine the concept of "dogmatism" more carefully.

Defining Dogmatism

Everyone can agree that dogmatism - in one sense at least - clearly denotes something objectionable. In the most common use of the word - when it describes the way one holds his beliefs - it is a reprehensible stubbornness wherein one refuses to let go of his beliefs, even in the face of compelling

counterarguments. But in what exactly does its objectionableness lie? As a rough approximation, I would locate it in its underlying spirit or attitude. The stubbornness of dogmatism - the dogmatic refusal to reconsider one's beliefs - is characterized by *a spirit of complete disregard for what is true.* Or - to put it another way - by *an attitude of total disregard* for whether one has any grounds for his beliefs. Clearly this is a morally and epistemologically objectionable attitude.

For our purposes, it is not critical whether we have rightly analyzed exactly what dogmatism in this ordinary sense is. What is important is that we recognize that - whatever it is - it is rooted in some sort of intellectually (if not morally) noxious character flaw. As a way of referring to dogmatism in this ordinary sense, I will coin the phrases "objectionable dogmatism" and "objectionably dogmatic." A belief is *objectionably dogmatic* if it is held with the epistemologically objectionable spirit which we ordinarily think of as dogmatic.

The Dogmatism Objection, however, is not based on this concept of *objectionable dogmatism* as just defined. It assumes a very specific meaning of the term "dogmatism" - namely, *a belief is held dogmatically by person P just in case it is held in such a way that no conceivable argument could be offered which would persuade person P to abandon it.* Certainly one is at liberty to define "dogmatism" in this way. We cannot object if someone wants to stipulate that that is how he is going to use the word. But it is critical to distinguish this use of the word from its common use to denote what I have labeled *objectionable dogmatism.* I will refer to its use as stipulated by the Dogmatism Objection as "undissuadable dogmatism." Accordingly, a belief is *undissuadably dogmatic* just in case it is a belief which cannot be dislodged by argument.

Reformed Epistemology's Response

Now the question is this: if belief B is *undissuadably dogmatic*, does it follow that it is also *objectionably dogmatic*? The Dogmatism Objection to Reformed epistemology clearly must answer "yes." It argues: theistic belief is *undissuadably dogmatic*, therefore it follows that it must be *objectionably dogmatic*.

Reformed epistemology would give the opposite answer. It must say "no." An *undissuadably dogmatic* belief is not necessarily an *objectionably dogmatic* belief. Some beliefs, it would argue, are rightly held with undissuadable dogmatism and, hence, one is not being objectionably dogmatic to hold them so. Unlike Plantinga - the consistent Reformed epistemologist feels no obligation to show that he can be persuaded to abandon his theistic belief. In his mind, he can be undissuadable in his theistic belief without being objectionably dogmatic in it. (Indeed, theistic belief must be held with undissuadable dogmatism if it is the sort of properly basic belief which Reformed epistemology says that it is. The Dogmatism Objection is right on this score.) What the Reformed epistemologist would seek to show instead is that theistic belief is the sort of belief that is appropriately held undissuadably - that it is rightly or properly an undissuadably dogmatic belief. If he can show that, then - though he holds his theistic belief undissuadably - he does so without being objectionably dogmatic. Where the Dogmatism Objection goes wrong, he argues, is in its spurious assumption that a belief held with undissuadable dogmatism is necessarily a belief held with objectionable dogmatism. Theistic belief is one such belief where that is not the case.

(As an aside, Plantinga does not challenge the Dogmatism Objection's assumption that the theist must be open to being dissuaded by argument if he is to escape the charge of *objectionable dogmatism*. Instead [without any argument and in serious tension with what Reformed epistemology actually entails] Plantinga simply takes it for granted that the theist is and must be open to being dissuaded. This comes as a real surprise. I would have expected him to acknowledge that the theist holds his belief with *undissuadable dogmatism* and then simply ask, "What's wrong with that?" Instead - believing that it is necessarily objectionable to hold theistic belief undissuadably - Plantinga assumes that theists can be dissuaded and attempts to make the case that their being open to dissuasion is not inconsistent with theistic belief serving as a properly basic belief. In this chapter, I hope to make clear that his response here is inconsistent with the logical implications of Reformed epistemology.)

So the key to Reformed epistemology's response to the Dogmatism Objection is this: the Dogmatism Objection involves a profound confusion. It confuses being *undissuadably dogmatic* with being *objectionably dogmatic*. To put it another way, it confuses not being open to argument due to an objectionably dogmatic spirit with not being open to argument because argument is *epistemologically* irrelevant. Accordingly, it fallaciously infers from theistic belief's being held undissuadably that it is held with objectionable dogmatism.

But Reformed epistemology must do more than simply assert that such an inference is fallacious; it must somehow demonstrate it. To show the fallacy of inferring *objectionable dogmatism* from *undissuadable dogmatism*, the Reformed epistemologist would have us consider our belief in the reality of the external world.

As an ordinary person, my belief in the existence of the external world is ineluctable; I am undissuadable in it. I really cannot believe otherwise. No skeptical argument - no matter how clever or compelling - could ever persuade me to give up my belief in the external world. I am not open to counterarguments or counterevidence. Indeed, I cannot even conceive of what counterevidence would look like. In the terms we have been using, I hold my belief in the reality of the external world with *undissuadable dogmatism*.

Having said that, does that constitute any sort of reasonable objection to my belief in the external world? Am I being epistemologically naughty if I am not open to any argument that the external world is not real? Is my being closed to dissuasion on this matter *objectionably dogmatic* of me? Surely not! I don't see how. How could it be dogmatic - in any objectionable sense - to be so firm in my belief in the reality of the external world that no conceivable argument could dissuade me of it? Surely, holding this particular belief with this sort of tenacity is fully responsible and utterly consistent with intellectual integrity. So - at least with respect to this belief (in the reality of the external world) - to be an *undissuadably dogmatic* belief does not involve its being an *objectionably dogmatic* belief. The same could be said for other such commonsensical beliefs.

Now, according to Reformed epistemology, the theist's belief in God is, in this respect, in the same epistemological boat as his commonsense beliefs - like belief in the external world. The theist has the same sort of ground and justification for his theistic belief as he does for the latter beliefs - namely, it is a direct, spontaneous, and proper noetic response to some experience or circumstance. As a consequence, so long as there is no reason to question the reliability of his own noetic equipment, his belief in God will be just as

ineluctable as his belief in the reality of the external world. Just as he opens his eyes and knows that the external world exists, the theist examines the starry heavens and knows that God made it all. If Reformed epistemology is right, he can no more avoid the latter belief than he can the former. Consequently, theistic belief - like belief in the external world - will not be a belief that can be dislodged from the theist's noetic structure. No argument or evidence could conceivably dissuade him. How could it? Like his knowledge of the external world, his knowledge that God exists is the direct consequence of his experience. What argument could possibly compel him to deny what he knows directly from experience?

In the case of commonsense beliefs, I will surely reject the reliability of reasoning and argument before I will reject what I directly know to be true. So, if a skeptic produces an argument to the effect that we cannot know whether the external world really exists, and if I am unable to find any flaw in the argument, will I therefore throw away my belief in the external world? Hardly! If an apparently sound argument leads to the conclusion that the external world is not real, then so much the worse for that argument; it is obviously flawed - even if I cannot say how it is flawed.

Given Reformed epistemology's understanding of theistic belief, the same is true for it. The theist is not going to abandon his theistic belief because somebody comes up with a persuasive argument against God's existence. If I know God directly, from experience, how can *argument* persuade me he does not exist?[3] That would be like being persuaded *by the argument of some clever*

---

[3]This assumes of course a basic reliance and trust in his noetic equipment. If an argument could actually show him that his noetic equipment - that which has given rise to his belief in God in the first place - is faulty,

skeptic that my wife doesn't exist! Or, that I don't exist! Surely that is unthinkable. If Reformed epistemology is right, it is equally unthinkable to suppose that an *argument* (eg., the argument from evil) could persuade me that *God* does not exist.

My not being open to argument against God's existence is not due to irresponsible stubbornness, a disregard for truth, or some other morally noxious character flaw in me. Or, at least, it need not be. It is due to the nature of epistemologically basic beliefs (as Reformed epistemology has characterized them). The justifying ground of an epistemologically basic belief is a sort of direct experiential contact with reality - i.e., while in a particular set of circumstances, my noetic equipment forms in me the appropriate belief to put me in epistemic contact with the reality of those circumstances. Since this direct contact with reality is the ground and justification of an epistemologically basic belief, no argument can in any way undermine its justification - unless it could somehow cancel out or negate the fact of my experience (or the reliability of my noetic equipment).

All arguments must start from and build upon the foundations of one's noetic structure. (I.e., they must always assume the truth of one's basic beliefs

---

defective, or altogether untrustworthy, then he could be persuaded to abandon his theistic belief. That sort of argument would destroy the very grounds which justify his belief. The problem, however, is this: what sort of argument could conceivably convince me that my noetic equipment - the equipment I must rely upon for any and all of my knowledge - is untrustworthy? Any argument that might be given must ultimately depend upon and assume the reliability of the very noetic equipment whose unreliability it is seeking to prove. In any event, the Reformed epistemologist's argument here does not concern wholesale skepticism. It assumes - as is always the case in real life - that our native noetic equipment is trustworthy and that it can be relied upon to lead us toward true knowledge.

and proceed from there.) Hence, an argument could never challenge the truthfulness of a basic, foundational belief without at the same time logically calling its own reliability into question. It is inconceivable, therefore, that a person could ever be dissuaded via argument of a belief which is truly epistemologically basic.[4] If theistic belief is an epistemologically basic belief (as Reformed epistemology contends that it is), then it is inconceivable that a theist could ever be dissuaded by argumentation.

From the standpoint of Reformed epistemology, then, theistic belief is an *undissuadably dogmatic* belief at the same time that it is not an *objectionably dogmatic* belief. This stands in direct contradiction to the assumptions underlying the Dogmatism Objection.

How Plantinga Responds to the Dogmatism Objection

In the last section I examined what a consistent Reformed epistemologist ought to say in response to the Dogmatism Objection. In this section I examine how Plantinga, in fact, does respond.

As we have already seen, the key to Plantinga's response is his denial that holding a belief as basic entails its being held with undissuadable dogmatism. In conflict with what his own theory (Reformed epistemology) entails, Plantinga maintains that the theist can hold his theistic belief as basic *and still remain open to dissuasion through argument or evidence.*

---

[4]The case is different with economically basic beliefs. It is important to keep this distinction in mind. One can be dissuaded by argument from continuing to hold an economically basic belief. To call an economically basic belief into question does not call into question the epistemological foundations of one's noetic structure - thereby calling into question everything one believes. But such is the case with epistemologically basic beliefs. To call an epistemologically basic belief into question calls everything into question.

To hold a belief as basic - i.e., not on the basis of any other proposition or belief, but as foundational - does not mean that the belief itself is immune from reconsideration. Plantinga contends that the theist, when confronted with an argument that requires the denial of God's existence, might very well give up his belief in God - even though he held that belief as a basic, foundational belief. If the argument with which he is confronted is an argument based on propositions that he also accepts as basic, if it proceeds along lines of argument which he accepts as basic, and if he accepts those propositions and argument forms more firmly than he accepts his belief in God, then it is likely that the theist, in such a case, would give up his theistic belief. An undissuadably dogmatic believer would not. By definition, contrary evidence or argument is irrelevant to him. So the theist which Plantinga envisions - though holding his belief in God as basic - is not undissuadably dogmatic.

Even though a theist holds his theistic belief as a basic belief - if faced with an inherent contradiction in the foundations of his noetic structure, he will be open to resolving that contradiction by rejecting his belief in God. He might very well alter his noetic structure in such a way that he no longer holds belief in God as basic. Nothing requires that he reject his belief in God. He need not reject it. Instead he may reject some other propositions or make a different alteration in his noetic structure. But nothing about his holding theistic belief as *basic* requires that he continue to hold it. If rational difficulties occur which are due to a lack of concord between his theistic belief and the rest of his noetic structure, he may just as readily abandon his belief in God as any other of his

basic beliefs.[5] Theistic belief, then - even when it is held as basic - is not an undissuadably dogmatic belief.

In the situation just described, the lack of concord between theistic belief and the rest of one's noetic structure could very well occur because, while the theist holds his theistic belief as basic, he does not *properly* do so. In other words, the above example envisions a situation where theistic belief is a *basic* belief without necessarily being a *properly basic* belief. Certainly, in a situation such as that, the theist's belief - if responsibly held - will be basic without being undissuadably dogmatic for the theist; for he must to be open to any argument which shows that his theistic belief is *improperly* held as basic.

But what if theistic belief is not improperly held to be basic, and is, in fact, known to be a *properly basic* belief? Does it then follow that the theist must hold it with undissuadable dogmatism (as the Dogmatism Objection maintains)? Are argument and evidence irrelevant in this case? Again, Plantinga thinks not.

Plantinga's Argument: Proper Basicality Does Not Require Undissuadable Dogmatism

Why not? Why does it not follow from the fact that theistic belief is a *properly basic* belief that the theist will hold it with undissuadable dogmatism? Plantinga's answer goes something like this:

---

[5]It is worth noting how closely Plantinga's point here parallels the epistemic situation where two economically basic beliefs come into conflict with one another. It does not parallel the situation where two epistemologically basic beliefs seemingly come into conflict with one another - where a sense of complete befuddlement and a kind of epistemological paralysis would be the result. Plantinga's discussion here is important evidence, I think, that in this part of his discussion he has lapsed into thinking of belief in God as an economically basic belief and has lost sight of the fact that his position requires it to be an epistemologically basic belief.

The experiences we have which (according to Reformed epistemology) are the "grounds" or the "justification-conferring conditions" of theistic belief - i.e., the basis upon which theistic belief is *properly* held as basic - do not confer *ultima facie* (all-things-considered) justification on theistic belief. They confer only *prima facie* justification - i.e., they confer justification only so long as there is no overriding consideration which negates its being a justifying ground for theistic belief.

As an example of *prima facie* justification Plantinga considers a case of perceptual belief. Consider a case where being appeared to treely does not justify the belief "I see a tree" -

> My being appeared to treely gives me a *prima facie* right to take as basic the proposition *I see a tree.* But of course this right can be overridden; I might know, for example, that I suffer from the dreaded dendrological disorder, whose victims are appeared to treely only when there are no trees present. If I do know that, then I am not within my rights in taking as basic the proposition *I see a tree* when I am appeared to treely.[6]

Or, we could consider a more realistic example. My thinking that I recognize my wife across the shopping mall is *prima facie* grounds, at the time, for my believing that my wife is actually in the shopping mall. But in view of these facts - (1) she later denies being there, (2) I have no good reason not to take her at her word, and (3) it was a great distance and I did not have a particularly clear view of the woman I thought was her - then, all things considered, my thinking I saw my wife is not an adequate justification for my belief that my wife was actually there.

---

[6]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 83.

Plantinga's point is this: in the case of a perceptual belief, my seeming to see some object X is *prima facie* grounds for my belief that X is there; but it is not *ultima facie* grounds for such a belief. I am not entitled to hold on to my belief that X is there with undissuadable dogmatism as if it were an infallible belief. There are, in principle, factors which could account for how I might be appeared to X-ly without there being an X. If any such factors applied, I would not be justified in my believing that X is there. Hence, though an apparent perception of X gives *prima facie* grounds for the existential belief "there is an X," nevertheless, I remain open to counterargument and counterevidence; for I know that I could be mistaken in my particular perceptual belief.

So, Plantinga contends, the same thing is true of the grounds for the theist's theistic belief. The circumstances which serve as the grounds of theistic belief confer only *prima facie* justification on theistic belief; they do not confer *ultima facie* justification. Hence, by analogy with perceptual belief, theistic belief can be basic without being infallible; and, hence, even though it is a basic belief grounded in his direct experience,[7] the theist must hold it in such a way that he is open to counterargument and counterevidence. He has no basis for holding his belief in God with undissuadable dogmatism. Plantinga states his position this way -

---

[7]Strictly speaking, of course, if Reformed epistemology is correct, theistic belief is not a basic belief grounded in the theist's direct experience. Rather, theo-implicatory beliefs are basic beliefs grounded in the theist's direct experience and theistic belief is a non-basic belief directly and straightforwardly inferred from them. This qualification - which Plantinga is careful to point out elsewhere in his essay - is ignored by Plantinga in making his argument against theistic belief's indefeasibility. Ignoring this distinction is, as I shall try to show, one aspect of a larger confusion that affects Plantinga's views of theistic belief as a whole.

> The same goes for the conditions that confer justification on belief in God. Like the fourteen-year-old theist ..., perhaps I have been brought up to believe in God and am initially within my rights in so doing. But conditions can arise in which perhaps I am no longer justified in this belief. Perhaps you propose to me an argument for [the] conclusion that it is impossible that there be such a person as God. If this argument is convincing for me - if it starts from premises that seem self-evident to me and proceeds by argument forms that seem self-evidently valid - then perhaps I am no longer justified in accepting theistic belief. Following John Pollock, we may say that a condition that overrides my *prima facie* justification for *p* is [a] *defeating condition* or *defeater* for *p* (for me).[8]

Hence, it does not follow that because the theist holds his belief as properly basic that he must hold theistic belief with undissuadable dogmatism, or that his belief is indefeasible (i.e., not vulnerable to being defeated by a "defeater"). He need not be closed to argument or evidence against it, making such argument irrelevant to his belief. Indeed, it would be irrational for him to do so. Such would follow only if the grounds for his belief in God were taken to lead infallibly to belief in God; and this is not Plantinga's contention. Plantinga insists that the theist has grounds for his belief in God - and, hence, that he is within his "epistemic rights" to hold his belief in God as basic - but he does not wish to argue that the theist is infallible, i.e., that his belief in God is formed by an infallible noetic mechanism. At any point, his noetic equipment may have and could have failed him. Hence, counterargument and counterevidence is utterly relevant to his theistic belief. Counterevidence could serve to expose the failure of his noetic equipment in its formation of theistic belief and thereby serve to "defeat" it.

In summary, then, Plantinga's answer to the Dogmatism Objection is this: because the basis upon which the theist holds his theistic belief to be properly

---

[8]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 83-84.

basic (like the basis upon which he holds his perceptual beliefs to be properly basic) is not infallible, it can be shown to be mistaken. Therefore, the theist cannot and does not hold his theistic belief with undissuadable dogmatism even though he is clearly within his rights to hold it as properly basic. And if he cannot and does not hold his properly basic theistic belief with *undissuadable* dogmatism, then he cannot (as per the objection) be justly charged with *objectionable* dogmatism.

Reformed Epistemology's Response Revisited

I eventually want to demonstrate that there is a fundamental confusion in Plantinga's views as to the exact status of theistic belief. But in order to understand the nature of this confusion as clearly as possible, it is necessary to explore further what is and is not entailed by Reformed epistemology. Specifically, I need to clarify the implications of Reformed epistemology for the defeasibility of theistic belief. In order to do that, I need to take a closer look at exactly how Reformed epistemology would analyze perceptual beliefs and theistic beliefs respectively.

Reformed Epistemology's Analysis of Perceptual and Theistic Beliefs

I begin by considering the character of our perceptual beliefs. One thing to note is the important difference between particular perceptual beliefs formed in particular instances of perception and general propositions about the existence of perceptual objects which are ultimately warranted by the former. For example, if I look up from my computer screen and see two squirrels playing in the tree outside, I form the belief "there are squirrels in that tree right

now." Such a belief is an existential belief in a particular instance based on a particular perception. I will call such a belief an *existential belief of particular perception.* But there is another kind of perceptual belief. We form general beliefs about the existence of perceptual objects which we can infer directly from (and, in part, are supported by) our existential beliefs of particular perception. So, for example, it is a straightforward, transparent inference from "there are squirrels in that tree right now" to "squirrels exist." If over the course of time, I form hundreds or thousands of beliefs - any <u>one</u> of which straightforwardly and transparently implies "squirrels exist" (such as "there is a squirrel digging a hole in my lawn right now," and "there is a squirrel lying dead on the street right now," etc.) - then, taking them all together, the belief "squirrels exist" becomes deeply embedded in my noetic structure. This latter belief is a relatively high level and general proposition about the existence of a particular kind of perceptual object. I will refer to this latter kind of belief - "squirrels exist" - as a *general perceptual belief.*

There is an important difference between *existential beliefs of particular perception* and *general perceptual beliefs* vis a vis the questions of defeasibility and undissuadable dogmatism. Existential beliefs of particular perception can be defeated; general perceptual beliefs cannot. Or at least, they cannot be defeated in the same way and for the same reasons.

If I know that (due to a psychological defect) I have a significant predilection to hallucinate squirrels and I know that my wife - looking out the same window at the same time as I - does not see the squirrels that I am seeing, the combination of these two facts would constitute a *defeater* of my belief that "there are squirrels in that tree right now." Under these circumstances, it is <u>not</u> rational for me to believe that proposition. It is more rational for me to believe

that I am hallucinating a squirrel. Though the example is bizarre, the point is clear nonetheless: an *existential belief of particular perception* can be defeated insofar as I can come to know that my perception has misled me and is not, in the particular circumstances, to be trusted.

But what about *general perceptual beliefs*? Can they be defeated? Can my belief "squirrels exist" be defeated? Although ultimately it could be defeated, three important points need to be kept in mind:

1. The defeat of an existential belief of particular perception clearly does not constitute a defeat of the corresponding general perceptual belief. So, for example, the fact that my belief "there are squirrels in that tree right now" is defeated - making it irrational for me to believe <u>that</u> proposition - does not defeat my belief that "squirrels exist." I am not then irrational to continue believing that squirrels exist. The latter is the general perceptual belief. It is supported by a whole set of existential beliefs of particular perception - beliefs like "there are squirrels in that tree right now." This point, I think, should be obvious. One does not rationally conclude that his wife does not exist because he was mistaken when he thought he saw her in the shopping mall.

2. Indeed, the only thing that could "defeat" a general perceptual belief would be a series of "defeaters" which successfully defeated <u>every</u> existential belief of particular perception on which the general perceptual belief is based. Any <u>one</u> existential belief of particular perception alone is enough to imply the general perceptual belief which corresponds to it. So, for example, any <u>one</u> existential belief of particular perception about a squirrel is enough to imply that "squirrels exist." If only one perception of squirrels in a tree (i.e., only <u>one</u> existential belief of particular perception involving squirrels) is veridical, that is enough for me to know that "squirrels exist" (the corresponding general

perceptual belief). Every such existential belief of particular perception - down to the very last one - would have to be successfully defeated before one is irrational to continue believing that "squirrels exist" - i.e., before the corresponding general perceptual belief has successfully been defeated.

Granted, one way to accomplish the defeat of every existential belief of particular perception would be to play the skeptic and "defeat" the reliability of perception altogether. One could try to show that no existential belief of particular perception can be known to be true because we cannot rely upon the noetic mechanism which forms such beliefs. This, of course, is an extreme view. If we adopt this strategy, then we are suggesting that there is no true knowledge through perception at all. But short of such a thoroughgoing skepticism, there can be no "defeat" of a general perceptual belief except through a series of individual defeats of <u>every</u> existential belief of particular perception which implies it.

3. Finally, there is an important implication of this last point. If I am right, then a general perceptual belief can never be defeated by a general argument as to the impossibility of its object's existing. So, for example, if some clever philosopher were to lay out an argument proving the impossibility of the existence of squirrels, it would have no effect on me. I would most certainly reject his argument as fallacious before I would reject my general perceptual belief about the existence of squirrels. Whatever the philosopher's argument might seem to show, I <u>know</u> squirrels exist. I have seen them. So, if it comes down to choosing between the philosopher's argument and my own direct knowledge of squirrels, the philosopher's argument must lose. The only way I could grant any merit to his argument would be if it included defeaters to <u>each and every one</u> of the relevant existential beliefs of particular perception upon

which my belief in squirrels is ultimately based. If that could be done - i.e., if each of the relevant existential beliefs of particular perception could be defeated - then my general perceptual belief ("squirrels exist") could be defeated. But short of that, no argument - no matter how seemingly compelling - is enough to defeat a general perceptual belief which is based on my direct perceptual knowledge of experience.

To summarize, then, the only (non-skeptical) way to defeat a general perceptual belief (eg., "squirrels exist") is to defeat the many existential beliefs of particular perception (eg., "there are squirrels in that tree right now") upon which the former is ultimately based. The latter task is so formidable as to be virtually impossible. With some qualification, then, existential beliefs of particular perception can be defeated, general perceptual beliefs cannot. For all practical purposes, general perceptual beliefs are, by their very nature, indefeasible. To put it another way, a general perceptual belief is of such a nature and of such an origin as to be appropriately held with undissuadable dogmatism.

Now consider theistic belief as Reformed epistemology sees it. Theistic belief is based upon various particular theo-implicatory beliefs in the same way that general perceptual beliefs are based on existential beliefs of particular perception. Indeed, if Reformed epistemology is right, theo-implicatory beliefs are (to coin another phrase which will highlight their analogy with perceptual beliefs) "*existential beliefs of particular theo-cognition.*"[9] Following the same

---

[9]By "theo-cognition" I mean, simply, the knowledge of God which comes to one through the awareness of the divine - or *sensus divinitatis* - which Reformed epistemology posits.

sort of nomenclature, theistic belief *per se* is a "*general theo-cognitional belief.*" (Indeed, it is the one and only *general theo-cognitional belief.*)

Here is a crucial aspect of the Reformed epistemological analysis of belief in God: the general theo-cognitional belief - "God exists" - is ultimately based on scores of existential beliefs of particular theo-cognition (eg., "God made this flower," "God is to be thanked and praised," "God is speaking to me," etc.) in just the same sort of way that a general perceptual belief (eg., "squirrels exist") is based on scores of existential beliefs of particular perception (eg., "There are squirrels in my back yard"). This has a very important implication. If theistic belief and theo-implicatory beliefs are analogous to perceptual beliefs in the way that Reformed epistemology suggests, then it follows that the only way for the general theo-cognitional belief, "God exists," to be defeated is through the defeat of every last one of the existential beliefs of particular theo-cognition (theo-implicatory beliefs) upon which it is based. No general argument concluding that it is impossible for God to exist could possibly defeat theistic belief. The argument from evil (for example) would have no power to dissuade me of my belief in God. However compelling the argument might be in its own right, I have *known* through my own *sensus divinitatis* that God made a particular flower, that God was speaking to me, that God was to be thanked and praised, etc. So forget the argument from evil. Never mind what it concludes. However compelling it might seem, there has to be something wrong with it. It reaches the conclusion that God does not exist, and that can't be right! God does exist. I have known it directly for myself.

The Parallel between Perceptual and Theistic Belief

In making his case that theistic belief need not be dogmatic belief, Plantinga suggests that perceptual beliefs establish a precedent for a belief's being properly basic and yet defeasible at the same time. Yet, if theistic belief is to be analyzed in the way Reformed epistemology says it should, the parallel which Plantinga wants to draw cannot really be drawn. Perceptual beliefs and theistic belief are not really parallel in the way Plantinga suggests.

Exactly what parallel does Plantinga claim <u>does</u> exist between perceptual belief and theistic belief? If all he were claiming was that existential beliefs of particular perception (eg., "there are squirrels in that tree") are parallel to existential beliefs of particular theo-cognition (or, theo-implicatory beliefs like "God made that flower"), then his claim would be perfectly consistent with Reformed epistemology. According to Reformed epistemology, theo-implicatory beliefs and existential beliefs of particular perception are parallel; they are both epistemologically basic while being subject to defeaters.

Consider the existential belief of particular perception "there is a tree in my back yard right now" and the theo-implicatory belief "God made that flower." Both are properly held as epistemologically basic beliefs. They are both warranted directly by virtue of the justifying circumstances in which they are formed. Furthermore, they are both subject to defeaters. I may discover that what I thought was an occasion of seeing a tree was a hallucination or some sort of failed perception. Likewise, I could presumably discover that what I thought was an occasion of veridically knowing something about God was, in fact, an instance where my theo-cognition (my *sensus divinitatis*) failed me. One's *sensus divinitatis* can be generally reliable without being infallible just

as one's perception is generally reliable without being infallible. Arguably, one's *sensus divinitatis* could fail one in the same way that one's perception could fail one. So, presumably, a theo-implicatory belief (i.e., an existential belief of particular theo-cognition) is defeasible for the same sort of reason that an existential belief of particular perception is defeasible.

So, if this parallel between theo-implicatory beliefs and existential beliefs of particular perception were the parallel that Plantinga had in mind, there would be no problem. From the perspective of Reformed epistemology, to argue that theo-implicatory beliefs are basic but defeasible in the same way that existential beliefs of particular perception are basic but defeasible is essentially correct. But that is not what Plantinga is arguing. He tries to draw a different parallel. He wants to maintain that just as existential beliefs of particular perception are basic but defeasible, so is *the general theo-cognitional belief*, "God exists," basic but defeasible. But this is clearly problematic. As we have seen in the case of perceptual belief, to admit that an existential belief of particular perception ("there are squirrels in that tree right now") can be defeated is a far cry from conceding that the corresponding general perceptual belief ("squirrels exist") can be defeated. If we assume that any <u>one</u> of our existential beliefs of particular perception is veridical and undefeated, then it follows that the corresponding general perceptual belief cannot be defeated. Presumably, for similar reasons, the same thing would hold in the case of theistic belief. If we assume that any one of our theo-implicatory beliefs is veridical and undefeated, then it follows that the corresponding general theo-cognitional belief - "God exists" - <u>cannot</u> be defeated either.

The thing to note is this: with respect to its defeasibility, there is no parallel between an existential belief of particular perception and the general perceptual belief which is based on it. The former is defeasible, the other (for all practical purposes) is not. But if there is no parallel between these, why should we suppose that there would be one between an existential belief of particular perception and the general theo-cognitional belief - "God exists"? This doesn't seem right. But yet this is the parallel that Plantinga suggests is there. Just as my basic belief that I now see a squirrel in a tree may be mistaken (i.e., just as my existential belief of particular perception is defeasible), so my basic belief in God may be mistaken (i.e., my general theo-cognitional belief is defeasible). I think this is mistaken. Some sort of confusion seems to be at work. There does not appear to be the meaningful parallel here that Plantinga's argument assumes.[10]

In part, his confusion stems from a failure to make the appropriate distinctions. Specifically, he fails to note the important differences which exist between theistic belief (general theo-cognitional belief) and theo-implicatory beliefs (existential beliefs of particular theo-cognition) with respect to their defeasibility. He seems to assume that because theo-implicatory beliefs are defeasible (paralleling the defeasibility of existential beliefs of particular perception), then the theistic belief which is based on them is similarly defeasible. But this simply is not true. As we have already seen, it does not follow that because a particular belief "there are squirrels in that tree right now" is defeasible, the belief "squirrels exist" is defeasible. Similarly, it does not follow from the fact that a particular theo-implicatory belief - eg.,"I stand guilty

---

[10]See, for example, Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 83-84.

before God for what I just did"[11] - is defeasible that the belief "God exists" is defeasible.

It is not that Plantinga is unaware of the distinction between theistic belief *per se* and theo-implicatory beliefs. According to Plantinga himself, theistic belief *per se* is not a basic belief in the same way that theo-implicatory beliefs are. Plantinga argues elsewhere that it is the theo-implicatory beliefs (what I have also called *existential beliefs of particular theo-cognition*) which are, strictly speaking, properly basic beliefs for the theist. General belief in the existence of God is a belief which is, in turn, directly and transparently inferred from these theo-implicatory beliefs. Hence, theistic belief *per se* is a non-basic belief:

> ... it is not wholly accurate to say that it is belief in God that is properly basic; more exactly, what are properly basic are ... [various theo-implicatory propositions], each of which self-evidently entails that God exists. It is not the relatively high-level and general proposition God exists that is properly basic, but instead propositions detailing some of his attributes or actions.[12]

One is only "speaking loosely"[13] when one speaks of theistic belief *per se* as properly basic.

---

[11]It is not easy to see how, from theism's perspective, the standard example of a theo-implicatory belief which we have been using - "God made that flower" - could be defeasible. If God made absolutely everything, then certainly one is not mistaken to believe "God made that flower." However, this is a peculiar feature of this particular belief. Theo-implicatory beliefs, in general, are defeasible - when they do not share this unusual feature of being necessarily true if theism is true. So, "I stand guilty before God for what I just did" is a better example of a theo-implicatory belief's being defeasible. One can conceive of forming this latter belief in a particular circumstance in which, in fact, it is mistaken.

[12]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 81.

[13]Ibid., 82.

But to "speak loosely" in the context of the present discussion about the defeasibility of theistic belief is, I think, misleading. As we have seen, theo-implicatory beliefs are basic and defeasible; theistic belief *per se* is neither basic nor defeasible. By speaking too loosely, Plantinga has mistakenly attached the defeasibility of the former to the latter. He has failed to see, therefore, that (so far as Reformed epistemology is concerned) theistic belief is not defeasible and that it does not parallel beliefs of particular perception in this respect.

Summing Up the Implications of Reformed Epistemology

Perhaps we can focus our discussion by summarizing what Reformed epistemology has to say about the analysis of perceptual and theistic belief. Two implications of Reformed epistemology are noteworthy with respect to the issues of defeasibility and dogmatism:

1. *Because belief in God is a general belief implied by innumerable existential beliefs of particular theo-cognition - any one of which is sufficient to establish it as true - it follows that belief in God is, for all practical purposes , indefeasible.* If Reformed epistemology is correct, then no conceivable argument or evidence could ever "defeat" the theist's belief in God - i.e., nothing could persuade him to abandon his theistic belief. Granted, it is not absolutely indefeasible. There is, in principle, a way in which it could be shown to be mistaken. But, for all practical purposes, there is no way for the theist to be shaken from his belief.

2. *Given that the indefeasibility of the theist's belief in God is based on what it is, it is not objectionably dogmatic for the theist to be closed to dissuasion.* If theistic belief were indefeasible because of sheer stubbornness

and tenacity, then it would be objectionably dogmatic on the part of the theist to not be open to being dissuaded from his belief. But because the indefeasibility of his belief has to do with the nature of his belief's basis in experience, the theist is not epistemologically naughty to be closed to counterargument and counterevidence. It is not a case of objectionable dogmatism.

Plantinga In Two Minds

Plantinga' response to the Dogmatism Objection in "Reason and Belief in God" is quite significant. It reveals an inherent tension in Plantinga's own views.

In his response to the Dogmatism Objection - as we have seen - Plantinga makes the following two assumptions:

1. *Belief in God is, in fact, defeasible.* As we have seen, Plantinga never provides any argument for this claim. He takes it for granted. It seems clear to him from experience that theistic belief is defeasible. Behind this assumption lies a particular understanding of the facts of human experience: Theists do confront arguments which shake their faith and ultimately compel them to abandon theistic belief. Plantinga's fourteen-year-old theist, for example, will, as a matter of fact, be challenged by the argument from evil. As a matter of fact, belief in God is vulnerable to defeaters. So *whether* belief in God can be defeated is not even open to discussion. Experience shows that it is. What does concern Plantinga is another matter: given that belief in God is defeasible, *can it then be properly basic*? His concern is to defend the view that belief in God can, at the same time, be both properly basic and vulnerable to defeat by a defeater.

2. *Given that belief in God is, in fact, defeasible, to hold my belief in God undissuadably would be to hold it in a manner which is objectionably dogmatic.* This is clearly true. If belief in God is, in fact, the sort of belief that is vulnerable to counterargument and counterevidence, then to altogether ignore all counterargument and counterevidence is irrational. To continue holding theistic belief in the face of unanswered arguments against it must necessarily reflect an objectionable dogmatism.

These two assumptions are the foundation from which Plantinga responds to the Dogmatism Objection. But, as we have shown, the logical implications of Reformed epistemology (which Plantinga painstakingly defends throughout the rest of "Reason and Belief in God") stand in direct contradiction to these two assumptions. Reformed epistemology - given its epistemological theory - directly entails that: (1) *belief in God is, for all practical purposes, indefeasible*; and (2) *the theist is not being objectionably dogmatic when he holds his theistic belief undissuadably.*

We are forced to conclude that Plantinga is of two minds. On the one hand, as a proponent of Reformed epistemology, he is committed to the view that belief in God is *not* vulnerable to argument or evidence. On the other hand, as a theistic philosopher concerned that theistic belief be held responsibly, he is committed to the view that it *is* vulnerable to argument or evidence. But this constitutes a completely irreconcilable conflict. He is holding in tension too contradictory points of view.

The Source of This Irreconcilable Conflict

How could Plantinga find himself committed to two contradictory views on this subject? The answer, I think, lies in his failure to make some important

distinctions. We began to see this in the last chapter. To understand even more clearly the source of confusion, let me introduce yet another set of distinctions.

Three Different Kinds of "Basic" Belief

Assuming that Reformed epistemology's analysis of believing is essentially correct, we ought to make a distinction between three significantly different sorts of belief. All three are "loosely speaking" *basic* beliefs - and each can be *properly* basic in its own way. Yet important differences separate them from one another. I label the three sorts of belief: *truly-basic* beliefs, *quasi-basic* beliefs, and *pseudo-basic* beliefs.

I will take the following beliefs as paradigm beliefs for each of the three categories:

1. "There is a raccoon in my back yard." (A belief formed upon looking out the window into one's back yard on a particular occasion and seeing a raccoon there.) This is my paradigm of a *truly-basic belief.*[14]

---

[14]In the entire discussion which follows, I will ignore another distinction which could be made but which is not relevant to the current discussion. I could distinguish between truly-basic beliefs which are grounded in experience and truly-basic beliefs which are grounded in rationality itself. Or, to make another distinction which, I think, would denote the same set of beliefs: truly-basic beliefs which are defeasible and truly-basic beliefs which are <u>not</u> defeasible. I will be speaking of "truly-basic beliefs" when what I mean are "truly-basic beliefs which are grounded in experience" - i.e., truly-basic beliefs which are defeasible. My paradigm belief is just such a belief. A truly-basic belief which is grounded in rationality itself (say, for example, my belief in the law of non-contradiction) is not represented by the paradigm I have chosen - even though, strictly speaking, it too is a truly-basic belief. Reformed epistemology is arguing that theo-implicatory beliefs are analogous to perceptual beliefs - i.e., truly basic beliefs grounded in experience. Other kinds of truly basic belief do not play any important role in either my or Plantinga's arguments. This being so - for the sake of simplicity - I have chosen

2. "Raccoons exist." (A general belief which ultimately is based on any one of many particular instances of seeing raccoons. It is taken for granted at all times and is not limited to any particular occasion. I.e., I do not stop believing in the existence of raccoons when I am not seeing them.) This is my paradigm of a *quasi-basic belief.*

3. The Statue of Liberty exists. (A general belief taken for granted by a person who has never been to nor seen the Statue of Liberty but nonetheless believes in its existence on the basis of various indirect evidences.) This is my paradigm of a *pseudo-basic belief.*

Let us consider each of these different sorts of basic belief respectively:

Truly-Basic Beliefs

"There is a raccoon there in my back yard" is my paradigm of a *truly-basic* belief. I call it a "truly-basic" belief from the standpoint of an interest in the *warrant* of beliefs. A belief like "there is a raccoon there in my back yard" - as we saw in an earlier chapter - receives its warrant directly from our experience. It is not inferred from a more basic belief from which it derives its warrant. It is simply given as warranted by our experience itself. It is a form of what earlier I called an epistemologically basic belief. It is not the only kind of epistemologically basic belief; and, hence, it is not the only sort of truly-basic

---

to limit the reference of my term "truly-basic beliefs" to truly basic beliefs grounded in experience - such as perceptual beliefs - and to ignore any other kinds of truly-basic beliefs. This is not to deny that they exist; only to keep them out of our discussion.

belief.[15] But this represents the sort of truly-basic belief that Reformed epistemology claims theo-implicatory beliefs are. In terms of our new categories, a theo-implicatory belief such as "God made that flower" is, according to Reformed epistemology, a truly-basic belief.[16] The only difference between a theo-implicatory belief and our paradigm belief - "there is a raccoon in my back yard" - is that the latter is given to us in perceptual experience while the former is given us in our *sensus divinitatis*, our theo-cognitive experience.

Quasi-Basic Beliefs

There is another class of beliefs which, strictly speaking, are not basic beliefs at all. They are beliefs which are directly, transparently, and indubitably inferred from prior basic beliefs. Indeed, they are straightforwardly inferred from *truly-basic beliefs.* So, for example, in the case of perceptual beliefs, the belief "raccoons exist" is a straightforward and indubitable inference from any one of a number of truly-basic beliefs - eg., "there is a raccoon there in my back yard." I call such beliefs "quasi-basic" beliefs in order to reflect an important fact: though they are not basic beliefs at all, from the standpoint of warrant, they might as well be. Quasi-basic beliefs are so

---

[15]So, for example, "2 + 2 = 4" is presumably a truly-basic belief. But it does not receive its warrant from its ground in experience. At least, it is arguable that it does not. See n. 14 above.

[16]And more specifically, it is a truly-basic belief grounded in experience after the fashion of a perceptual belief like "there is a tree there in my backyard" and not a truly-basic belief grounded in rationality itself after the fashion of a belief like "A is not equal to non-A." Hence, a theo-implicatory belief is presumably a truly-basic belief which *is* defeasible rather than a truly-basic belief which is *not* defeasible. See n. 14 above.

directly and indubitably inferred from truly-basic beliefs that any and all warrant that attaches to the latter is transferred to the former. The net effect is that quasi-basic beliefs become even more deeply embedded in our noetic structure than does any one truly-basic belief. (They are not more warranted; but they are more deeply embedded.) A truly-basic belief is warranted by a single instance of a noetic procedure which (though generally reliable) we know to be fallible. A quasi-basic belief is warranted by any one of a set of *innumerable* truly-basic beliefs; each of these truly-basic beliefs has arisen from a generally reliable (though fallible) noetic procedure; and any *one* of these truly-basic beliefs, independently of the others, clearly and transparently warrants the quasi-basic belief in question. Hence, a quasi-basic belief, though receiving its warrant from other more basic beliefs, is clearly deserving of a foundational status in one's noetic structure. Few beliefs, if any, could be more certain than it is. Hence, a quasi-basic belief serves as an economically basic belief of the highest possible degree of certainty and embeddedness. Epistemologically speaking, then, it is quasi-basic. It is not strictly epistemologically basic, but it might as well be. It has virtually the same kind and degree of warrant.

Earlier in this chapter, I attempted to show that a quasi-basic belief is distinctive for its virtual indefeasibility. For all practical purposes, a quasi-basic belief cannot be defeated by any contrary evidence or counterargument. It plays too foundational and too fundamental a role in our noetic structure to be shaken by alleged evidences and clever arguments. If we know anything at all, we know that our quasi-basic beliefs are true. They cannot be overturned without, in fact, calling into question the possibility of knowledge itself.

The view which a consistent Reformed epistemologist is espousing is that a theist's general belief in the existence of God is a *quasi-basic belief.* It is not,

strictly speaking, *epistemologically* basic. It is warranted by other, more basic beliefs - theo-implicatory beliefs. But, like its counterparts in perceptual knowledge, it is directly, transparently, and indubitably inferred from any one of an innumerable set of these theo-implicatory beliefs. If any one of them is warranted, then theistic belief is warranted. Furthermore, it can be assumed that these theo-implicatory beliefs *are* warranted for the theist; for the theist has no more reason to doubt the reliability of his noetic equipment insofar as it forms his theo-implicatory beliefs than he has to doubt its reliability insofar as it forms his perceptual beliefs.

It is important to highlight again a very fundamental difference between truly-basic beliefs (of the type we are considering)[17] and quasi-basic beliefs. Truly-basic beliefs <u>are</u> - in principle - subject to defeat by defeaters. For all practical purposes, quasi-basic beliefs are <u>not</u>. Quasi-basic beliefs are more deeply embedded in one's noetic structure than any one of such truly-basic beliefs.

<u>Pseudo-Basic Beliefs</u>

Finally, the third kind of "basic" belief: the most important and serviceable sort of foundational beliefs in the noetic structure of every person are beliefs like "the Statue of Liberty exists." As we saw in an earlier chapter, such beliefs are not epistemologically basic; for they receive their warrant from other prior beliefs. Indeed, epistemologically speaking, they are non-basic beliefs. But from the standpoint of the phenomenology of human knowing, it is reasonable to call them basic. They are taken for granted, assumed to be true,

---

[17]See n. 14 above.

and hence foundational to those actual processes wherein real people reason and form beliefs about their world. It is one form of "economically basic" belief.

But a "pseudo-basic" belief - in contradistinction to a "quasi-basic" belief (another form of economically basic belief) - is not so straightforwardly and indubitably inferred from truly-basic beliefs. Its warrant is less secure, because it is less straightforwardly derived from the truly-basic beliefs from which it receives its warrant. Arguably, my belief that "raccoons exist" - warranted by any one of my innumerable sightings of raccoons - has better warrant than my belief "the Statue of Liberty exists" - which is based on the fact that everyone around me simply takes its existence for granted. But what if everyone around me simply took it for granted that black people are intrinsically inferior to white people? Would that have the same degree of warrant as my belief "raccoons exist"? If not, it is arguable that neither does my belief that "the Statue of Liberty exists." The point is this: "the Statue of Liberty exists" - like "black people are inferior to white people" - seems to be subject to defeaters in a way and to a degree that "raccoons exist" is not. The latter, so deeply embedded in one's noetic structure as to be virtually indefeasible, can reasonably serve as an unshakable foundational belief - one that I hold undissuadably. The former beliefs, it would seem, cannot. If I hold undissuadably to the beliefs that "the Statue of Liberty exists" or "black people are inferior to white people," I am being irrational.

So pseudo-basic beliefs are defeasible. But though they are defeasible, they are defeasible in a different way and for different reasons than truly-basic beliefs. Truly-basic beliefs are defeasible because the noetic equipment which forms them (though it is generally reliable) is fallible. Hence, an argument

which convincingly shows that one's noetic equipment has failed[18] in a particular situation can defeat the truly-basic belief which it formed in that situation. In the face of such an argument, one would be irrational to continue holding that truly basic belief. If it can be convincingly shown to me that a drug I took earlier in the day is responsible for my hallucinating a raccoon, then - under the circumstances - it would be unreasonable for me to continue believing that "there is a raccoon in my back yard." Pseudo-basic beliefs, on the other hand - because they are not strictly basic at all - receive their warrant from evidence - i.e., by inference from other prior beliefs. Consequently, a pseudo-basic belief is subject to defeat by any argument or evidence which can compellingly show that the evidence does not, in fact, warrant it. In other words, it is subject to defeat by contrary evidence or counterargument. So the defeasibility of pseudo-basic beliefs is of a very different sort from the defeasibility of truly-basic beliefs.

Summary

To sum up this discussion, we have three distinctively different kinds of "basic" beliefs: truly-basic beliefs, quasi-basic beliefs, and pseudo-basic beliefs. Truly-basic beliefs are epistemologically basic beliefs. Quasi-basic beliefs and pseudo-basic beliefs are economically basic beliefs. They are not, truly, epistemologically basic. Truly-basic beliefs and pseudo-basic beliefs are

---

[18]In his later essays, Plantinga defines the "failure" of noetic equipment roughly in terms of its not functioning properly - i.e., not functioning in the way that it was designed to function in the environment in which it was designed to function. See Alvin Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," in Philosophical Perspectives 2: Epistemology, 1988, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, Ca: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1988), 1-50.

both defeasible whereas quasi-basic beliefs are virtually indefeasible. However, truly-basic beliefs and pseudo-basic beliefs are defeasible for different reasons and are subject to defeat by different sorts of arguments.

Plantinga's Confusion

As we saw above, there is a confusion underlying Plantinga's account of theistic belief. Plantinga seems to be of two minds. On the one hand, his Reformed epistemology implies that theistic belief is not defeasible; on the other hand, Plantinga clearly insists that it is. Our goal here is to identify the source of this conflict. The preceding discussion of the three different kinds of basic belief has given us helpful categories for coming to understand the underlying confusion in Plantinga's account:

Reformed epistemology logically requires that general theistic belief - i.e., the theist's ongoing belief that there is a God - be a quasi-basic belief. (Plantinga is aware of this and - although he does not use exactly this category - he as much as says it.)[19] So, Plantinga the Reformed epistemologist is committed to the view that belief in God is *quasi-basic.*

As a quasi-basic belief, theistic belief would be virtually indefeasible. But here is where the confusion begins; for Plantinga denies this. He argues for the defeasibility of theistic belief. His argument that theistic belief is defeasible involves two very different perspectives on theistic belief:

On the one hand, he argues that theistic belief is analogous to perceptual beliefs and is defeasible in the same way that they are. But the only sort of perceptual beliefs which are defeasible are truly-basic beliefs - eg., "There is a

---

[19]For example, Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 81-82.

raccoon there in my back yard." Hence - if Plantinga thinks theistic belief is parallel to this sort of perceptual belief - he is here thinking of theistic belief as a sort of *truly-basic belief*, not as a quasi-basic belief (which Reformed epistemology requires).

On the other hand, Plantinga contends that theistic belief is vulnerable to being defeated by arguments (like the argument from evil). But defeasibility via argument is the sort of defeasibility to which pseudo-basic beliefs are subject. Hence, insofar as he sees theistic belief as being vulnerable to defeat by counterarguments, he is committed to theistic belief being *pseudo-basic.*

So, in the final analysis, Plantinga's response to the Dogmatism Objection reveals a fundamental confusion as to the status of theistic belief. As a consistent Reformed epistemologist he is committed to the view that theistic belief is a quasi-basic belief. But in answering the Dogmatism Objection - for part of his response he assumes that theistic belief is a truly-basic belief; for the other part he assumes that it is a pseudo-basic belief. With respect to the exact nature of theistic belief's basicality, he seems to be of <u>three</u> minds. Plantinga's double-mindedness as to the defeasibility of theistic belief (discussed above) must certainly stem from this confusion as to the exact status of theistic belief.

<u>Plantinga's View of the Status of Theistic Belief</u>

Can we sort out what Plantinga's "real" view on the status of theistic belief is? It is arguable, I think, that Plantinga's "real" view is that theistic belief is *pseudo-basic.*

It is Plantinga's failure to recognize some crucial distinctions that leads him to envision it as a truly-basic belief. At times, he is quite careful to point out

that belief in God is not, strictly speaking, a basic belief.[20] Rather, it is certain theo-implicatory beliefs which are the truly-basic beliefs.

As for theistic belief being quasi-basic: although quasi-basicality is the status which is logically required by his own epistemological theory, we see Plantinga essentially reject this conclusion in his direct response to the Dogmatism Objection.[21] Plantinga works very hard to avoid embracing the view that theistic belief is quasi-basic. That would be tantamount to holding that it is virtually indefeasible and undissuadably dogmatic; and, for whatever reasons, he clearly does not want to concede that. All indications, therefore, suggest that his preferred understanding is that theistic belief is a pseudo-basic belief. It is an economically basic belief which, while functioning as basic for theists, is nonetheless subject to being rejected as counterevidence or counterargument demands.

It would seem that, in reaching this conclusion as to the status of theistic belief, Plantinga's overriding consideration is the reality of human experience as he understands it. The reality is that a fourteen-year-old theist who is fully within his epistemic rights to believe in God, when confronted by the argument from evil, is not rationally justified in ignoring this argument or just passing it off. He must know of a defeater to the argument from evil - or, at least, he must know that such a defeater does or could exist - before he is within his epistemic rights to continue believing in God. In other words, contrary arguments are relevant to belief in God. That is the reality of the human situation. But to admit this - as

---

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., 82-87.

we have seen - is to admit that, in reality, theistic belief is a pseudo-basic belief; it is not a truly-basic belief, nor a quasi-basic belief.

So Plantinga's actual understanding of theistic belief is in tension with the epistemological theory which he defends. Plantinga knows, on the basis of epistemological reality, that belief in God is a pseudo-basic belief. Reformed epistemology (which he defends) requires that belief in God be quasi-basic. These two views exist in irreconcilable tension.

Summary

What we have seen is a collision of two competing agendas. In all but one significant portion of "Reason and Belief in God," Plantinga the Reformed epistemologist argues that theistic belief is not based on evidence or argument. He argues this point in order to support his contention that the theist is not being intellectually dishonest to believe in God in the absence of compelling evidence or argument. But in another portion of this same essay - in the section where he responds to the Dogmatism Objection[22] - Plantinga the intellectually honest theist insists that theistic belief is defeasible. He argues this point in order to support his contention that the theist is not stubbornly dogmatic and irrational in the way that he holds his belief in God.

But Plantinga fails to see how fundamentally inconsistent these two agendas are. Certain arguments purport to show that theistic belief is not warranted by the evidence. Either theistic belief can be defeated by such arguments, or it cannot. If it cannot be so defeated, then Plantinga's contention that theistic belief is a basic belief which is not based on evidence is plausible.

---

[22]Ibid.

But if it can be so defeated - if it can be undermined by arguments which show that the evidence does not warrant it - then it must be the sort of belief which requires warrant from evidence. In that case, it is not truly a basic belief. Plantinga cannot have it both ways. Either it is non-basic and defeasible or it is basic and indefeasible, but it cannot be both basic and defeasible. Plantinga rightly points out that *existential beliefs of particular perception* are both basic and defeasible; but he fails to see that there is no parallel between theistic belief and existential beliefs of particular perception. As a consequence, whereas the view supported by his epistemological theory is that theistic belief is a basic, foundational - and, therefore, indefeasible - belief, his "real" view seems to be that belief in God is a defeasible (and implicitly, therefore) non-basic belief.

CHAPTER IX

REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY: A CRITIQUE

Is Reformed epistemology right? The results of my study thus far amount to a sort of vindication of the plausibility and coherence of Plantinga's theory. If we grant Plantinga his general picture of human knowledge and believing, and if we grant him three key theological assumptions, Reformed epistemology (as we have seen) is a logically consistent and plausible account of the nature of theistic belief. Furthermore - fulfilling Plantinga's primary purpose - it is a theory which, if true, successfully vindicates theistic belief as rational in the face of the evidentialist objection. Plantinga's presentation of it is not always free of confusion; Plantinga himself - as we have seen - is sometimes reluctant to embrace the implications of his own theory; but, when all the confusion is sorted out, Reformed epistemology remains a coherent and plausible account.

But is it true? One possible problem with Reformed epistemology, of course, is that it is based on a faulty and misleading picture of human knowledge and belief from the outset. But, as I stated in chapter I, it is outside the scope of this study to criticize the general picture of knowledge and beliefs from which Plantinga begins. The purpose of this study is to criticize Plantinga's theory from inside his picture of human belief, not from outside. For the purposes of this study, then, the crux of Plantinga's theory is a set of three theological assumptions which lie at the foundation of Reformed epistemology. The truth of Reformed epistemology turns on the truth of these assumptions:

implicatory beliefs which imply it - are spontaneous deliverances of human reason? Or, in terms of our earlier discussion, we can reframe this question in a more useful form: *Is it in fact true - as Reformed epistemology requires - that belief in God is a straightforward inference from theo-implicatory beliefs which are themselves epistemologically basic beliefs*? This is clearly what Plantinga asserts; the question is - is it true?

The Basis for Plantinga's Claim That Belief in God Is Properly Basic

How does Plantinga substantiate his assertion that our theo-implicatory beliefs are epistemologically basic beliefs? Where is his proof?

If we have adequately understood what Plantinga is saying, it will be obvious that he can give no "proof." There can be no argument demonstrating that a belief is epistemologically basic. How could there be? Arguments ultimately begin from the set of epistemologically basic beliefs in one's noetic foundation. How could an argument be given which proves that a basic belief belongs in those foundations while not assuming the very thing it sets out to prove? It is not at all clear how such an argument could be found, or what it could possibly look like.

If Plantinga is right - if his noetic equipment truly does deliver a theo-implicatory belief to him as a direct, natural response to his circumstances - then, presumably, not only will he form the belief, he will also know that it has been directly given. This, at least, is Plantinga's assumption.[1] Hence, he knows that it is basic; for he knows that it is directly given to him and he knows

---

[1]Ibid., 75-78.

1. In all human beings, theo-implicatory beliefs are naturally and spontaneously delivered by their noetic equipment.

2. There exists a moral phenomenon of rebellion against God (sin) which, among other things, has the deleterious noetic effect of overriding and drowning out one's natural propensity to form theo-implicatory beliefs.

3. There exists a group of human beings in whom, by the grace of God, the noetic effects of sin have been removed.

To decide whether Reformed epistemology is true, we must determine whether these three theological claims are true.

Our task can be narrowed even further however. If God does in fact exist, the second and third assumptions are not particularly problematic. If God exists, the facts of sin and grace are clearly possible. Furthermore, if they are possible at all, it is arguable that they offer the most reasonable explanations of certain features of the reality we live in. But the initial plausibility of these doctrines is utterly dependent upon the fact of God's existence. If God does not exist, sin and grace are utterly vacuous concepts. Now, according to Reformed epistemology, belief in God's existence is ultimately based on the constant stream of theo-implicatory beliefs which our noetic equipment naturally and spontaneously delivers. Hence, if Reformed epistemology is to be accepted, it is the first of these three theological assumption which is the key. The ultimate crux for Reformed epistemology as a whole is whether belief in God is in fact among the natural, spontaneous deliverances of human reason (which is to say, whether theo-implicatory beliefs are given in a natural *sensus divinitatis*). Therefore, my critique of Reformed epistemology will focus exclusively on this issue: Is it in fact true that belief in God - and the theo-

that it functions as basic. It makes no sense for him to ask of himself how he knows that it is. He just does. That is, in part, what it means for it to be basic.

If others do not find that theo-implicatory beliefs are epistemologically basic for them - if their reason does not naturally and spontaneously deliver such beliefs to them - they will find it odd, curious, and probably even suspect that another would claim it is. But what if it is true? What if the Plantingas of the world do find theo-implicatory beliefs formed in them as epistemologically basic beliefs? How would a Plantinga "prove" to a non-Plantinga that that is his noetic experience? He couldn't; and it is unreasonable to require it of him.[2] Consequently, Plantinga cannot be expected to provide such a proof, nor can he be dismissed for not doing so. His claim that theo-implicatory beliefs are epistemologically basic for him is the sort of claim which - by its very nature - cannot be proven. It can only be asserted.

Though Plantinga cannot prove that his theo-implicatory beliefs are epistemologically basic, he can show that he is not being eccentric or *ad hoc* in making such a claim. As "evidence," he appeals to the tradition of Reformed theology, as he understands it. Here Plantinga discovers that he is not alone. His experience of finding theo-implicatory beliefs to be epistemologically basic is apparently the experience of innumerable Christian believers. At least, that

---

[2]What if half the human race was capable of seeing a color of the spectrum that the other half of the human race could not see? How could the first half prove to the other half that they see it? The first half all agree with one another that they see it; they all seem to agree on the circumstances wherein they see it. Other than pointing to this remarkable agreement, what else could they do to "prove" that they see and know what they do? Fundamentally, this is analogous to the situation the theist is in - from the standpoint of Reformed epistemology.

is how the Reformed theological tradition interprets and represents their experience.

To be more precise, Reformed theology makes two important judgments: (1) it makes a judgment as to what the authoritative Christian scriptures teach with respect to the epistemology of belief in God; and (2) it makes a judgment as to how to interpret their own noetic experience in coming to believe (and continuing to believe) in God. As it happens (and not surprisingly) their judgments on these two different questions coincide: belief in God is an epistemologically basic belief. Plantinga's contribution is to refine their judgment slightly: belief in God is a transparent inference from theo-implicatory beliefs which are epistemologically basic beliefs. Otherwise, Plantinga is in complete agreement with this tradition: the epistemological basicality of theo-implicatory beliefs is confirmed, he thinks, by his own noetic experience and by the authoritative teaching of Christian scripture.[3]

As a student of the Bible myself, I have serious reservations about Plantinga's (and Reformed theology's) interpretation of the Bible. The Bible's teaching on the epistemology of belief in God is not offered with enough precision to either confirm or disconfirm Reformed epistemology. It could be teaching that theistic belief is epistemologically basic. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that it is <u>not</u> teaching that. Its relevant statements are simply not precise enough to be determinative; it was not the purpose of those statements to take a stand on the details which distinguish Reformed

---

[3]I have assumed here that, as a Christian philosopher in the Reformed tradition, Plantinga ultimately holds to the authority of the Bible. Nothing I have read has clearly confirmed this, however. But, whether he does is irrelevant to my point here. Whether or not the scriptures are authoritative for him, they nonetheless confirm that his views are not totally eccentric.

epistemology. But this is an in-house debate for Bible students to carry on. It is outside the scope of this study to pursue that.

What is of interest to me here is Plantinga's judgment that Reformed epistemology reflects his own noetic experience. How should we respond to this claim? Is Plantinga right? Is theistic belief, in fact, epistemologically basic for him in his own noetic experience?

(It is necessary, for the time being, to join Plantinga in "speaking loosely." The position of Reformed epistemology, strictly speaking, is that theo-implicatory beliefs are epistemologically basic and theistic belief is a direct, inevitable inference from any one of a number of such beliefs. I must eventually evaluate this more accurate claim; but for now we examine the less precise claim.)

Questioning Plantinga's Claim That Theistic Belief Is Epistemologically Basic

Plantinga cannot "prove" that theistic belief is epistemologically basic for him; he can only make a judgment about his own noetic experience. Has he judged correctly? Perhaps he has misinterpreted his noetic experience?

The judgment that a belief is properly basic for me is not always an easy and straightforward judgment to make. Plantinga himself acknowledges this:

> So we cannot in this fashion [namely, by asking with respect to belief p, "What is your reason for believing p?" or "Why do you believe p?"] determine what propositions are basic for a person, *and it is not altogether easy to say just when a proposition is basic for a person.* [4] (emphasis mine)

---

[4]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 51-52.

A belief may seem to be basic for me without actually being basic. Consequently, it is legitimate - and clearly important - to raise the question: has Plantinga judged rightly about the status of theistic belief in his noetic experience?

What exactly does Plantinga have in mind when he suggests that, within his noetic experience, theistic belief is epistemologically basic for him? On the basis of what observations is that judgment made? It would appear that it is based on these observations: (1) theistic belief is foundational; (2) he does not need nor look for evidence for it; (3) it is something which is a "given" for him in his noetic experience; (4) he does not hold it based on the evidential support of other beliefs; (5) it is an assumption he uses as a starting-point for all his other reasoning and deliberations; and (6) it is a belief he holds more firmly than any other beliefs he might try to use to argue for it.[5]

Do these observations establish Plantinga's judgment that his theistic belief is epistemologically basic? No, they do not. This list of "attributes" describes an economically basic belief just as readily as it does an epistemologically basic belief. Consequently, it cannot distinguish the latter sort of basic belief from the former. To look to these traits as the basis of one's judgment that theistic belief is an epistemologically basic belief rather than an economically basic belief would, therefore, be entirely wrong-headed.

As we have seen, the economically-basic / epistemologically-basic distinction is not one Plantinga has even recognized. Consequently, he is not attuned to the possibility of confusing one for the other. In terms of his

---

[5]This list is gleaned from comments Plantinga makes about theistic belief throughout his writings.

discussion, a basic belief is a basic belief; and theistic belief is one of them. But what is required of his theory is that theistic belief be an epistemologically basic belief - and, implicitly, that is what he is claiming. I submit that he is mistaken. If I am right, theistic belief is economically basic for Plantinga, but - due to its close resemblance to an epistemologically basic belief - he has mistakenly judged it to be the latter.

However - in the spirit of his overall defense of Reformed epistemology - Plantinga could turn this charge back against me. On what basis do I say that I am right and he is mistaken? Could it not be that I have mistakenly identified an epistemologically basic belief as an economically basic belief? If they are such close look-alikes, the misidentification can go both ways. If - in response to Plantinga's claim that theistic belief is epistemologically basic for him - I am going to say that it is not, on what basis can I say that? In the absence of a criterion for distinguishing economical from epistemological basicality, Plantinga is at least "within his epistemic rights" to judge his theistic belief to be epistemologically basic.

What is needed are some phenomenological characteristics of holding a belief as epistemologically basic which distinguish it from holding it as economically basic. If we could identify such phenomenological characteristics, they could reasonably serve as criteria by which to judge what sort of basic belief theistic belief is - i.e., whether it is economically or epistemologically basic.

A Phenomenology of Holding Beliefs as Basic

In seeking to understand the phenomenology of holding beliefs as basic, it will be helpful to analyze basic beliefs not according to the rough-and-ready

categories of epistemological and economical basicality, but according to the finer distinctions we made in the last chapter. Hence, in this section I will analyze the phenomenology of holding beliefs as truly-basic, quasi-basic, and pseudo-basic, respectively. As a review: truly-basic beliefs are beliefs like "there is a raccoon in my back yard" (upon seeing it there); quasi-basic beliefs are beliefs like "raccoons exist"; and pseudo-basic beliefs are beliefs like "the Statue of Liberty exists." Truly-basic beliefs are epistemologically basic beliefs. Quasi-basic and pseudo-basic beliefs are forms of economically basic beliefs.

My analysis will consist in answering the following questions with respect to each of these three different kinds of belief: (1) Is it an ultimately-foundational belief? (2) Does it create *aporia* to be asked why I believe it? (3) Is it defeasible by argument? (4) Is it ineluctable?

Is It Ultimately-Foundational?

Plantinga defines a basic belief as one which is not believed on the basis of other propositions:

> Let us say that a proposition is basic for me if I believe it and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions.[6]

So, for Plantinga, a belief such as "I see a tree" (while beholding a tree) is a basic belief precisely because I do not infer it from any other belief I hold. I just hold it, knowing it to be true basically - without any basis or support from other beliefs.

---

[6]Plantinga, "Reason and Belief," 46.

But, to be more precise, Plantinga's view is that a belief like "I see a tree" is basic *under ordinary or typical circumstances*. There are circumstances, however, where one ceases to hold such a belief as basic and instead accepts it on the basis of an even more basic belief. So, for instance, if one's claim that he sees a tree is challenged, he may very well turn his attention to a different claim about his experience - namely, that "I *seem* to see a tree" - and look to it as the basis upon which he is justified in his belief - "I see a tree."

> It may be useful to give some examples of beliefs that are often basic for a person. Suppose I seem to see a tree; I have that characteristic sort of experience that goes with perceiving a tree. I may then believe the proposition that I see a tree. It is *possible* that I believe that proposition *on the basis of* the proposition that I seem to see a tree; in the typical case, however, I will not believe the former on the basis of the latter because in the typical case I will not believe the latter at all. I will not be paying any attention to my experience but will be concentrating on the tree. Of course I *can* turn my attention to my experience, notice how things look to me, and acquire the belief that I seem to see something that looks like *that*; and if you challenge my claim that I see a tree, perhaps I *will* thus turn my attention to my experience. But in the typical case I will not believe that I see a tree on the basis of a proposition about my experience; for I believe A on the basis of B only if I believe B, and in the typical case where I perceive a tree I do not believe (or entertain) any propositions about my experience. Typically I take such a proposition as basic.[7]

But what about beliefs which are taken as basic not just typically and under ordinary circumstances, but under *any and all* circumstances? What about beliefs which are so foundational and so ultimately basic that there is no conceivable situation in which they could ever be held on the basis of some other proposition? For example (if we accept Plantinga's view of perceptual belief), my belief that "I seem to see a tree" is such a belief. Under no conceivable set of circumstances would I hold this belief on the basis of some

---

[7]Ibid., 49.

other belief. Either I have grounds for it in my experience, or I do not. Under no circumstances will my warrant consist in an inference from another belief that I hold. Beliefs such as these are "ultimately-foundational beliefs." I define an ultimately-foundational belief thus:

> If one is never able, under any circumstances, to go back behind p to another belief which is epistemologically prior to p and upon which p is based, then p is being held as an ultimately-foundational belief. If, under any set of circumstances whatsoever, one does look back to some q - an epistemologically prior belief - as the basis for p, then p is not an ultimately-foundational belief.

Truly-Basic Beliefs

By virtue of the way I have defined them, truly-basic beliefs are clearly *ultimately-foundational beliefs*. Earlier, I defined a truly-basic belief as a belief which has its warrant immediately - from some attribute which it possesses - and does not derive its warrant from any other beliefs. Clearly, if it does not derive its rational warrant from any other belief, then *under no circumstance* will it be held on the basis of any other belief. It is an *ultimately-foundational belief.*

Quasi-Basic Beliefs

On the other hand, quasi-basic beliefs are not epistemologically basic beliefs at all. They are economically basic beliefs. As such, they are ultimately warranted by prior, more epistemologically basic beliefs. I believe that raccoons exist on the basis of several other beliefs I hold such as "I see a raccoon." Therefore, a quasi-basic belief will not be *ultimately-foundational.* Typically, it will be held as basic. But there are certain circumstances where, in principle, I would have to retreat to more epistemologically basic beliefs I

hold in order to defend it. If someone challenged my belief in the existence of raccoons, the support I would offer is - "But I have seen a raccoon." The latter belief - "I have seen a raccoon" - is more epistemologically basic than my belief "raccoons exist."

Pseudo-Basic Beliefs

Finally, the same is true for pseudo-basic beliefs. A pseudo-basic belief is an economically basic belief of which I am utterly persuaded and take its truth for granted. Clearly, it depends for its rational warrant on prior, more epistemologically basic beliefs. I believe that the Statue of Liberty exists on the basis of several other beliefs I hold. Therefore, it is not *ultimately-foundational.* As in the case of a quasi-basic belief, typically it is held as basic. But there are certain circumstances where I must appeal to the evidential support of other beliefs I hold in order to defend it. If someone challenged my belief in the Statue of Liberty, I would have to look to other more basic beliefs to show that my belief is warranted.[8]

---

[8]This is consistent with Kenny's claim in Faith and Reason that this sort of basic belief is "defensible by argument, inquiry, or performance." Granted, Kenny argues that it is its defensibility to *others* that is in view, not its defensibility to oneself. Being basic, it requires no defense to oneself. Nonetheless, it is significant that it requires "evidence" to defend it to others. That makes it clear that the basis for its warrant - even for oneself - is the evidential support of other beliefs. It would be a mistake to think that Kenny is suggesting that what warrants such a belief for others is different from what warrants it for me. *What I offer to others in the way of warrant for the belief is the same sort of thing that warrants it for me.* What I would offer to another as a satisfactory justification for the belief would satisfactorily justify it to me. What differs is the function it has in our respective noetic structures. It is basic for me; it is not basic for the others. Hence, to look to other more basic beliefs to defend a pseudo-basic belief to another through "argument, inquiry, or performance" is tantamount to an admission that its warrant is based on epistemologically prior beliefs. Regardless of the foundational status it has in

Summary

Now if p is a truly-basic belief - unlike my belief in the Statue of Liberty (a pseudo-basic belief) and unlike my belief in the existence of raccoons (a quasi-basic belief) - I will never even be tempted, under any circumstances wherein p is challenged, to look for other beliefs, epistemologically prior to p, to justify it. There are no beliefs which are more epistemologically prior - entertained or not entertained. It is as basic, as foundational, and as epistemologically prior as you can get. When I can absolutely go no further back (or down) into my noetic structure, then, and only then, can I speak of my belief as being truly-basic. Truly-basic beliefs are distinctive, then, insofar as they are ultimately-foundational. Neither quasi-basic nor pseudo-basic beliefs are ultimately-foundational.

Does Asking for Its Warrant Cause *Aporia*?

If someone were to approach me and ask how I knew that certain of my beliefs were warranted - eg., "How do you know that you exist?"; "How do you

---

my *working* noetic structure, it is *warranted* by epistemologically prior beliefs. Kenny's suggestion that his belief in Australia is "better known to him" than anything which one might cite as evidence for or against it is not inconsistent with this claim. In making this claim, Kenny is comparing the *embeddedness* of his belief in Australia to the *embeddedness* of a possible piece of evidence. Certainly his belief in Australia is more deeply embedded than any possible piece of evidence. But he does not speak to the issue of how his belief in Australia would fare if the whole network *of all his evidence for the existence of Australia* were seriously brought into question. Yet that is the relevant issue here. If there exists such a network of innumerable evidences and if one's belief in Australia is such that it would be refuted if and when (*per impossible*) this whole network of evidences was refuted - then his belief in Australia relies for its warrant on this network of evidences, beliefs which are epistemologically prior. I am suggesting that this is the case; this is how we hold our belief in Australia (when we have not been there).

know that the world exists and is not a figment of your imagination?"; or, "How do you know that a thing cannot be numerically identical with what it is not?" - I would be at a total loss to know how to answer him. Not that I am uncertain of what I know and believe; I am utterly sure of all these things. But I am nonplused by the demand to "prove" them. The challenge to establish the warrant for such beliefs creates a sort of *aporia* (a paralysis due to philosophical discombobulation) out of which I am at a loss to know how to respond. Indeed, I am at a loss to even know what an adequate response would look like.[9]

For many of my beliefs I am completely comfortable with being challenged to produce reasons for them. I understand the nature of the challenge and the reasons why it might be issued. And I understand how to go about meeting it. If someone says, "How do you know that the recession will end by October?" - I understand completely what and why they are asking me. And if I have been sufficiently thoughtful in coming to my belief in the first place, I will be able to list my reasons for believing it. Or, if someone asks me, "How do you know that the Statue of Liberty exists?" - again, fundamentally, I

---

[9]Here and throughout this chapter, the notion of *aporia* is to be understood in relation to how an ordinary, not philosophically sophisticated person might respond to various challenges. Admittedly, a philsophically sophisticated person may not be discombobulated nor "at sea" as to how to respond to various skeptical challenges. He may be able to explain the nature of the confusion which has led to the skeptic's questions or doubts in the first place and respond to them that way. But all that is beside the point of what I am trying to capture with the notion of *aporia* here. When a skeptic demands "proof" for certain beliefs which we commonsensically accept, the ordinary person <u>is</u> at a loss to know how to respond, and <u>is</u> at a loss to understand the nature of what is being asked. The test I want to apply is this then: when I am in a commonsense mode rather than a philosophical mode, how do I respond to a skeptical challenge to such-and-such a belief?

understand what I am being asked to do. I may be puzzled as to what is causing the challenge; I may find the question (and the questioner) extremely odd. But I am not utterly at a loss to know how to answer it. I may not answer it. Depending on the circumstances, I may not take the question seriously enough to answer it. But, fundamentally, I do know how.

This is an important difference in the phenomenology of holding basic beliefs. Some basic beliefs are such that *aporia* results when the belief is challenged; other beliefs are such that *aporia* does not result. As a short-hand, in the former case I will call such a belief *aporiatic.*

Truly-Basic Beliefs

Truly-basic beliefs are those that cannot be challenged without creating *aporia.* To use a Plantingan example - what if someone were to ask me how I knew that I was seeming to see a tree (when I was seeming to see a tree)? I would be totally at a loss. I would be reduced to stammering something like "I just do." What else could I say? It is in the nature of truly-basic beliefs that they are essentially self-warranting or immediately warranted from my experience. If the experience itself is what warrants them, then, having the experience, I am warranted in the belief. There is nothing else to offer as warrant. There is nothing else to say.[10] All I can do is appeal to my experience. If someone is asking for more, if he is asking me to establish the warrant for finding warrant in my experience, then I am completely confounded. I don't know what he is

---

[10]Granted, one could explain the origin of the skeptical challenge in such a way as to dismiss it, but that is outside the scope of what I mean by responding to the challenge. See n. 9 above.

asking me to do. I am utterly unable to establish the foundation beneath what is already ultimately-foundational.

Quasi-Basic Beliefs

Quasi-basic beliefs can be challenged without creating *aporia* at all. I would find it exceedingly odd that someone would want warrant for my belief in the existence of trees. I would wonder what kind of sheltered existence they had been leading that they weren't sure trees existed. Or, more likely, I would be unable to take it seriously as a sincere and honest question. But, no matter how odd it might seem, I would not be the least bit baffled as to how to meet the challenge. I could easily and readily appeal to some truly-foundational beliefs which warrant my belief in the existence of trees - eg., "I see a tree in my back yard."

Pseudo-Basic Beliefs

The same is true for pseudo-basic beliefs - except that a challenge to a pseudo-basic belief (depending upon which particular belief it is) may not even strike me as odd. If someone wanted to know how I knew that the Statue of Liberty exists, that might seem a bit odd. But if someone wanted to know why I believed that democracy was superior to aristocracy, that would not be odd. In neither case am I at a loss to know generally how to answer. I understand what it is I am being asked for. By the nature of what they are, pseudo-basic beliefs do not create *aporia* when challenged.

Summary

Truly-basic beliefs, in contradistinction to both quasi-basic and pseudo-basic beliefs, are aporiatic. If warrant for a truly-basic belief is requested, *aporia* is the result. By the nature of what a truly-basic belief is, a demand to explain why I believe it doesn't even make sense to me. But if warrant for a quasi-basic or for a pseudo-basic belief is requested, *aporia* does not result. What is being requested is basically understandable.

Defeasibility by Argument

Another important consideration with respect to basic beliefs is whether the belief can be defeated by an argument. In other words, can an argument which one might make against it dissuade me from holding it? I discussed this "attribute" at length in the last chapter. Here I will simply offer a summary review of the conclusions I reached in that discussion:

Quasi-basic beliefs are not defeasible by argument and are virtually indefeasible in any sense whatsoever. Truly-basic beliefs and pseudo-basic beliefs are defeasible by argument; but they are defeasible for very different reasons and by very different sorts of argument. A pseudo-basic belief in the existence of leprechauns, for example, is vulnerable to being defeated by an argument proving the impossibility or unlikelihood of leprechauns.[11] Such an argument would be based on the inadequacy of the evidence, the incoherence of the concept, or any other philosophical reasoning whatsoever. On the other

---

[11]On the assumption that there are no indisputable sightings of leprechauns which serve to warrant the belief. If there were, it would be a quasi-basic belief; not a pseudo-basic belief.

hand, the truly-basic belief "I am seeing a tree" could never be defeated by an argument proving the impossibility of trees. The only sorts of argument which could defeat a truly-basic belief would be arguments which demonstrate that: (1) in the particular instance in question, my noetic equipment has failed me in some significant way, or (2) my noetic equipment is systematically flawed and hence generally unreliable. Accordingly, though truly-basic beliefs and pseudo-basic beliefs are both defeasible, they are defeasible by very different sorts of arguments and for very different reasons.

Ineluctability

Finally, there is a fourth important "attribute" that a basic belief can have. Some basic beliefs are impossible not to hold. How would one ever not believe that "2 + 2 = 4", or "I am seeing a tree" (while looking at a tree), or "I had lunch" (when one remembers eating it)? One could assert the contrary, certainly. So for example, one could assert that "2 + 2 does not = 4." But how could one actually fail to believe it - even as he was asserting that he did not believe it? Indeed, what would it look like for one not to believe it? It is such an odd thing to contemplate; I cannot even conceive of what it would mean. I will call such a belief "ineluctable."

A belief is ineluctable when it is so basic that it is impossible to sincerely and honestly reject it in fact. Even if I were to deny it in word, I would prove *by my practice* that I did not really deny it at all. Everything I did would be predicated on its truth. I might *assert* my disbelief in the law of non-contradiction or the law of identity, for example. But every time I rode home on *my* bicycle (as distinct from *another's* bicycle) I would prove, in practice, my belief in the law of non-contradiction.

Truly-Basic Beliefs

Truly-basic beliefs are, by their nature, ineluctable. A truly-basic belief is so much a part of a person's very rationality itself that it is impossible for a person to deny it and still remain sane and rational. Ineluctability, then, is an important distinctive feature of a truly-basic belief.

Quasi-Basic Beliefs

Quasi-basic beliefs are also ineluctable; but they will be ineluctable for a different reason. A quasi-basic belief (for example, a belief like "trees exist") is a transparent, straightforward, ineluctable inference from other truly-basic beliefs which are ineluctable. But, since it is an ineluctable inference from an ineluctable foundational belief, it too will be ineluctable.

Pseudo-Basic Beliefs

Among basic beliefs, only pseudo-basic beliefs are not ineluctable. Some pseudo-basic beliefs may be nearly so. If a belief follows quite plainly and unmistakably from more basic beliefs and those other more basic beliefs are virtually certain, then it will have a sort of ineluctability or inevitability about it. But a belief is only truly ineluctable if it follows ineluctably from truly ineluctable beliefs. A pseudo-basic belief, as such, cannot be ineluctable in this way. By its very nature, a pseudo-basic belief is only as believable as the perceived warrant it receives from other beliefs more basic than itself. If I perceive that it is adequately warranted, I hold it. If I perceive that it is not adequately warranted, I do not. But, being dependent on the perceived

adequacy of its warrant, a pseudo-basic belief will not be ineluctable. Whether or not I hold it depends entirely on how I perceive the status of its warrant.[12]

Summary

For different reasons, truly-basic beliefs and quasi-basic beliefs will both be ineluctable. Pseudo-basic beliefs are not ineluctable. Hence, if the phenomenology of holding a particular belief is such that it is conceivable that I might not hold it, it follows that (if it is a basic belief at all) it is a *pseudo-basic* belief. In the case of either a truly-basic belief or a quasi-basic belief, it is inconceivable how one could ever fail to hold it.

A Phenomenology of Holding Basic Beliefs: A Summary

In the following schema, I summarize the above analysis of the phenomenology of holding basic beliefs. I do not presume that my analysis is complete and exhaustive. My sole purpose has been to discover *some* of the distinctive differences in how these different beliefs are held. Ultimately, I will argue that Plantinga - in maintaining the basicality of theistic belief - has confused one kind of basicality for another. The analysis in the table below should be adequate for demonstrating that point (see Table 1).

The foregoing analysis of the phenomenology of holding basic beliefs will prove useful for determining what sort of basic belief theistic belief is - or, alternatively, for determining what sort of basic beliefs theo-implicatory beliefs

---

[12]Again, this is not inconsistent with Kenny's discussion of his belief in the existence of Australia. Kenny's discussion of that belief's foundational nature is related to its embeddedness in his noetic structure, not to its warrant. But I am talking about warrant here, not embeddedness. Cf. n. 9 above.

are. Each of the three different sorts of basic belief shows a different pattern of phenomenological attributes. If I analyze the phenomenology of holding theistic belief as basic and find that its pattern of attributes conforms to the pattern of a truly-basic belief, then (I submit) I have a fairly strong indication that I hold it as a truly-basic belief. On the other hand, if I find that its pattern of attributes conforms to the pattern of a pseudo-basic belief, I have a strong indication that I hold it as a pseudo-basic belief.

TABLE 1. Comparison of the phenomenology of holding different sorts of basic beliefs

	Truly-basic beliefs	Quasi-basic beliefs	Pseudo-basic beliefs
Ultimately-foundational?	yes	no	no
Aporiatic?	yes	no	no
Defeasible by argument?	yes[a]	no	yes[b]
Ineluctable?	yes	yes	no

[a]Only by argument showing noetic equipment to have failed or to be unreliable.

[b]By argument showing inadequate warrant from evidence.

In the remainder of the chapter, I first analyze the phenomenology of holding theistic belief *per se*. I next analyze the phenomenology of holding theo-implicatory beliefs. And finally, I draw my conclusions as to whether Reformed epistemology is true.

The Phenomenology of Holding Theistic Belief

In the last chapter I gave considerable attention to the question of what Plantinga's "real" view of the status of theistic belief was. As we saw in that discussion - to be consistent with his own Reformed epistemology - we would expect him to view theistic belief as a quasi-basic belief. But, as a matter of fact, he vigorously argues for a picture of theistic belief which is more consistent with its being a pseudo-basic belief. His "real" attitude, therefore, seems to be that theistic belief is pseudo-basic.

To summarize those arguments: Plantinga argues forcefully for the defeasibility of theistic belief by argument (such as the argument from evil). He clearly does not view theistic belief as the kind of belief wherein *aporia* would result when asked to supply reasons for it. He clearly holds that theistic belief is not ultimately-foundational; for it is based on theo-implicatory beliefs. And less clearly - but arguably - he does not hold theistic belief to be ineluctable. This pattern is clearly the pattern of a pseudo-basic belief, not a quasi-basic belief (see Table 2).

I agree with Plantinga's portrait of theistic belief here. The theist, I believe, typically holds his belief as pseudo-basic. But if this is so - as we argued in the last chapter - his theistic belief is <u>not</u> basic in the sense that Reformed epistemology requires. For Reformed epistemology to be right, theistic belief must be a belief which is directly and immediately grounded in

TABLE 2. Comparison of the phenomenology of holding theistic belief on Plantinga's view with the phenomenology of holding pseudo-basic and quasi-basic beliefs

	Pseudo-basic beliefs	Theistic belief as Plantinga sees it	Quasi-basic beliefs
Ultimately-foundational?	no	no	no
Aporiatic?	no	no	no
Defeasible by argument?	yes[a]	yes[a]	no
Ineluctable?	no	no	yes

[a]By argument showing inadequate warrant from evidence.

that which is truly-basic. And that would be the case only if theistic belief were a quasi-basic belief.[13] Therefore, Plantinga's own actual view as to how theistic belief is held - a view with which I tend to agree - is inconsistent with what is required by Reformed epistemology. If Plantinga's judgment that the theist holds his theistic belief as pseudo-basic is correct, then Reformed epistemology is wrong.

But perhaps Plantinga's mistake is not in espousing Reformed epistemology, but in judging theistic belief to be pseudo-basic. Perhaps

---

[13]Throughout this study I have consistently ignored the only other alternative: namely, that theistic belief is a truly-basic belief which is not rationally warranted nor justified precisely because coming to believe it is intrinsically non-rational. It is neither rational nor irrational; it just is. (It could be implanted as a gift from God, for example.) Such a non-rational belief could also function as a truly-basic belief. But (as I mentioned in chapter I) for the purposes of this study, I have intentionally not given consideration to this possibility. It is not a direction that Plantinga seems willing to go.

Reformed epistemology is right and theistic belief is a quasi-basic belief directly warranted by a set of truly-basic theo-implicatory beliefs. To determine whether Reformed epistemology *per se* is true, we must determine whether - in the reality of the theist's noetic experience - theo-implicatory beliefs function as truly-basic. If so, it is plausible that theistic belief is a quasi-basic belief which is based on them.

The Phenomenology of Holding Theo-Implicatory Beliefs

To make the above determination, it will be necessary to analyze the phenomenology of holding theo-implicatory beliefs. In what follows, I will try to include the results of three different analyses of theo-implicatory beliefs: (1) my own analysis, (2) Plantinga's analysis, and (3) the analysis of theo-implicatory beliefs which is required by Reformed epistemology.

Are Theo-Implicatory Beliefs Ultimately-Foundational?

Consider first whether theo-implicatory beliefs are ultimately-foundational. If, while gazing at a flower, I form the belief "God made this flower," do I do so as an ultimately-foundational belief? In my own case, "no." I do not hold such a belief as ultimately-foundational. I hold the belief "God made this flower" on the basis of other beliefs more basic than itself.

If I were challenged by a religious skeptic - how do you know God made this flower? - I am not likely to answer, "I just do; it's just obvious." More likely, I would seek to warrant it on the basis of beliefs more basic than it. I might base it on a belief that the flower shows evidence of design by a rational designer. Or - believing that my belief in God is more basic than my belief that God made the flower - I might base it on the former. (There exists a creator of all things,

therefore God made this flower.) In any case, it is likely that I would seek warrant for it. It is unlikely that I would respond, "if you cannot see it for yourself, there is nothing I can do to make you see it." But this latter response is the sort one must make to the skeptic if this belief is an ultimately-foundational belief.

If we seek Plantinga's judgment as to the phenomenology of holding theo-implicatory beliefs, we run into trouble. It is easy to see what Reformed epistemology requires; it requires that theo-implicatory beliefs be truly-basic beliefs which are, therefore, ultimately-foundational. Theo-implicatory beliefs are directly given in one's *sensus divinitatis*; they are not based on any beliefs more foundational than they. But what is Plantinga's own personal judgment apart from the implications of his theory? We just cannot say. We saw in the last chapter how Plantinga was of two minds with respect to the status of theistic belief. On the one hand, his epistemological theory requires that it be an indefeasible quasi-basic belief; on the other hand, his own personal judgment is that it is a defeasible, pseudo-basic belief. We must allow for the same possibility with respect to theo-implicatory beliefs. What he wants to say, in conformity to his theory, and what he actually thinks as a matter of his own personal judgment could be two very different things. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing. In the only places where Plantinga's discussion might give us a clue, it is not clear what is the object of his discussion: theo-implicatory beliefs or theistic belief *per se*. It is clear that Plantinga does not hold theistic belief *per se* to be ultimately-foundational. But it is not clear exactly what he thinks about theo-implicatory beliefs. There is no context where he addresses that specific issue in an unambiguous way.

Are Theo-Implicatory Beliefs Aporiatic?

Next , consider whether theo-implicatory beliefs are aporiatic. Judging from my own case, again, I have to say "no." I am not dumbfounded and nonplused when someone asks me why I believe that God made that flower. If someone were to ask me - "how do you know that a thing is identical to itself?" or "how do you know that you are seeming to see a tree?" - I would have no idea how to even understand the question - let alone know how to begin answering it. But that is not my experience when challenged, "how do you know that God made that flower?" This latter challenge strikes me as a fair and reasonable question, not an absurd or silly demand. I understand the sort of thing that is being asked; and I know what sorts of things I can say in response. If there is any sense in which I feel incapable of answering, it is not because the question makes no sense to me. Rather, it is because the sort of answer that is needed is highly complex and involved. I may very well feel overwhelmed - at a loss as to how to organize my thoughts and formulate my response. Indeed, I may feel totally inadequate to the task. But being overwhelmed in this way does not qualify this belief as aporiatic (as I have defined that). My inability to answer is not due to an epistemological inappropriateness of the question. It is due to the complexity of my belief's warrant and to the limited ability I have to self-consciously analyze my own reasons for holding it.

How Plantinga would address this question would prove very revealing. Would Plantinga say that the challenge - "why do you believe that God made this flower?" - creates *aporia* in him? If so - if Plantinga could honestly and sincerely say that it does - we would have an important piece of evidence that

theo-implicatory beliefs are, for him, truly-basic beliefs. If, on the other hand, Plantinga's experience conforms to mine, then it is inconsistent with a claim that theo-implicatory beliefs are truly-basic. Unfortunately, once again Plantinga is silent on this specific question.[14]

Are Theo-Implicatory Beliefs Ineluctable?

Consider ineluctability next. Based on my own experience, again, I would say that theo-implicatory beliefs are not ineluctable. There is nothing irresistible and inevitable about my belief that "God made that flower." Certainly it is not ineluctable in the same way that "the flower exists" is ineluctable. I can easily conceive of not holding such a belief.

At first glance, it might seem that it must be ineluctable for the theist. How could a theist *fail* to believe "God made this flower" without rejecting his theism? Obviously, he couldn't. But that would not make "God made this flower" ineluctable in the sense in which I mean it here (and in the sense required for a belief to be a truly-basic belief). To be ineluctable in the requisite sense, whether one is a theist or not will not matter. An ineluctable belief would be unavoidable either way. If the theist can even conceive of being an atheist who does not believe that "God made that flower," then the latter belief is not ineluctable to him in the relevant sense.

---

[14]Again, Plantinga's giving an account of the *sensus divinitatis* and the noetic effects of sin is outside the scope of what I mean by a response to "prove" or "justify" a theo-implicatory belief. That would be a philosophical account of why the skeptical challenge has arisen and can arise, but it doesn't really serve to give the skeptic an understanding of what my own grounds are for my theo-implicatory belief. If that is what the skeptic is asking for, I am at a loss to know how to supply it. And Plantinga does not tell us what he thinks on this subject. See n. 9 above.

Much that Plantinga says suggests that he holds theo-implicatory beliefs not to be ineluctable. But that can be misleading. For Plantinga, the noetic effects of sin override the nisus to believe in God. As a consequence, though it may not be inevitable that everyone without qualification forms the belief "God made that flower," it may nonetheless be ineluctable for anyone in whom God's grace has removed the noetic effects of sin. In the final analysis, then, it is not exactly clear what Plantinga would say about this. Does he think that theo-implicatory beliefs are ineluctable for the theist whose nisus to form such beliefs is not being overridden by sin? That is what his epistemological theory would require. But is that how he would describe his own experience of coming to hold theo-implicatory beliefs? We just cannot say. Plantinga has not addressed himself specifically to this issue.

Are Theo-Implicatory Beliefs Defeasible?

Are theo-implicatory beliefs defeasible by argument? On the basis of my experience, I would say "yes." If someone could prove to me that God's existence is rationally impossible or unlikely - because unsupported by the evidence - I would readily abandon my belief that "God made that flower." As we saw in the last chapter, Plantinga seems to agree (in complete contradiction to the entailments of Reformed epistemology).

Reformed epistemology requires that theo-implicatory beliefs be truly-basic. As truly-basic beliefs, theo-implicatory beliefs would be defeasible - though only by particular sorts of argument. They would be defeasible only by arguments which demonstrated either a fortuitous failure of one's noetic equipment, or a systematic unreliability of that equipment. But, if they are - in fact - truly-basic, then no other sort of rational argument can possibly defeat

them. Therefore, Plantinga's concession that his theo-implicatory beliefs are defeasible by an argument such as the argument from evil is inconsistent with his holding them to be truly-basic. It is strong evidence that - in his "real" perspective - he does not hold them to be truly-basic.

Summary

The schema shown in Table 3 summarizes my understanding of various analyses of the phenomenology of holding theo-implicatory beliefs. I include five different analyses in this summary: (1) my own understanding of the phenomenology of holding theo-implicatory beliefs, (2) my understanding of the phenomenology of holding pseudo-basic beliefs, (3) what we can know about how Plantinga, based on his own noetic experience, analyzes the phenomenology of his holding theo-implicatory beliefs, (4) how Reformed epistemology must logically analyze the holding of theo-implicatory beliefs, and (5) my understanding of the phenomenology of holding truly-basic beliefs. (See Table 3 below.)

In my judgment, theo-implicatory beliefs are not ultimately-foundational; they are not aporiatic; they are not ineluctable; and they are defeasible by all and any sort of rational argument. This cluster of "attributes" which characterizes the way I hold my theo-implicatory beliefs is consistent with the analysis I have given as to how I hold pseudo-basic beliefs; and it is not consistent with my analysis as to how I hold either truly-basic beliefs or quasi-basic beliefs. Therefore, this supports my judgment that I hold my theo-implicatory beliefs as pseudo-basic beliefs, and not as truly-basic beliefs.

TABLE 3. Comparison of the phenomenology of holding theo-implicatory beliefs according to me, Plantinga, and a consistent Reformed epistemology

	Pseudo-basic beliefs	Theo-implicatory beliefs as seen by			Truly-basic beliefs
		Me	Plantinga	Reformed epistemology	
Ultimately-foundational?	no	no	?	yes	yes
Aporiatic?	no	no	?	yes	yes
Defeasible by argument?	yes[b]	yes[b]	yes[b]	yes[a]	yes[a]
Ineluctable?	no	no	?	yes	yes

[a]Only by argument showing noetic equipment to have failed or to be unreliable.

[b]By argument showing inadequate warrant from evidence.

Conclusion

If this judgment is right - if I do hold my theo-implicatory beliefs as pseudo-basic and not as truly-basic beliefs - then I stand as a counterexample to what Reformed epistemology asserts. I am one theist who does not hold theo-implicatory beliefs in the way that Reformed epistemological theory requires. Therefore, if I have not misjudged my own noetic experience, and if my noetic experience is representative of the noetic experience of all theists, then Reformed epistemology is simply wrong. It has misconstrued the nature and status of the theist's theo-implicatory beliefs and the theistic belief which is logically contained in them.

Even if I have not misjudged my own noetic experience, there is still the question of how representative my noetic experience is. Perhaps my noetic experience simply differs from Plantinga's noetic experience and that of others in the Reformed tradition. Perhaps, in Plantinga's noetic experience, theo-implicatory beliefs clearly are truly-basic in that they clearly are ultimately-foundational, ineluctable, aporiatic, and defeasible by only particular sorts of argument. If so, then, his noetic experience simply differs from mine; and we are forced to conclude that the rational basis of his theistic belief is quite different from the rational basis of mine. In that case, Reformed epistemology would accurately analyze the noetic experience of some theists even if it did not accurately represent the noetic experience of all theists. It would capture the rational basis of belief in God for Plantingan theists while failing to capture it for Crabtreean theists.

But in order to rest here - admitting that there is at least one stripe of theist whose noetic experience is represented by Reformed epistemology - I would have to be persuaded that there do in fact exist theists whose noetic experience is different from mine. More specifically, Plantinga must show me that there are theists who hold their theo-implicatory beliefs in just the way that Reformed epistemology requires. But Plantinga has not made this case.

What would it take to persuade me? If Plantinga had offered significantly detailed analyses of the phenomenology of his holding theo-implicatory beliefs and the phenomenology of his holding truly-basic beliefs, and if those analyses had looked convincingly similar to one another, then I could grant him that he holds his theo-implicatory beliefs as truly-basic. At least, he could then make a plausible claim that he does. And in that event, Reformed epistemology would appear to truly represent his noetic experience. But Plantinga has not done

this. Plantinga has not convinced us that the way he holds his theo-implicatory beliefs is, for him, distinctively like the way he holds his truly-basic beliefs. In terms of my analysis, for example, he has not shown us that he holds his theo-implicatory beliefs to be ineluctable, ultimately-foundational, aporiatic, and defeasible by only a certain sort of argument. He has not even acknowledged these latter categories of course; so it is not surprising that he fails to make these specific claims. But neither has he shown - *by any sort of categories* - that he holds his theo-implicatory beliefs in a manner which is distinctively like the way in which he holds his truly-basic beliefs.

In the absence of this, I have no way to be confident that Plantinga has accurately and adequately understood his own noetic experience. Given the rough-and-ready categories that Plantinga does use when he discusses these issues, why should I think they have led him to an accurate and adequate understanding of his noetic experience rather than to a misunderstanding and faulty analysis of that experience? He has done nothing to show me that he is anything but confused about the character of his own belief in God. The only distinction that Plantinga employs is a distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs. I hope that I have shown what a blunt instrument this distinction is. It is too blunt to dissect his experience in a way that will reveal its true epistemic character. Indeed, from Plantinga's own discussion, we cannot reconstruct a particularly clear picture of what Plantinga actually believes about his own noetic experience. All we know, ultimately, is what Reformed epistemology would require that experience to be.

So - if Plantinga had worked out an adequate typology of basic beliefs, if he had developed an adequate phenomenology of holding basic beliefs, and if he had then claimed that - according to that phenomenology - theo-implicatory

beliefs could be judged to be truly-basic beliefs in his noetic structure, then his claim that Reformed epistemology describes the theist's noetic experience would be plausible. It would still be a mysterious claim to a theist such as I; for I cannot make the claim that theo-implicatory beliefs function as truly-basic beliefs in my noetic structure. But at least, then, his claim would be plausible. As it is, however, Plantinga has done nothing to convince me that he has done anything but misunderstand and mis-analyze his own noetic experience.

My sincere belief is that Plantinga has, in fact, misinterpreted his own noetic experience. In "Alvin Plantinga: Self-Profile," Plantinga indicates that he initially thought that the right way to approach the question "Is belief in God rational?" *was by way of considering the evidence.*

> When I began writing God and Other Minds, I took it for granted that the right way to approach the question: is belief in God rational? was by way of considering the evidence for and against the proposition there is such a person as God.[15]

Now, why did that approach not immediately strike him as odd? Would he have ever taken it for granted that the right way to approach the question - am I really seeing a tree? (as he looked at a tree) - was "by way of considering the evidence for and against the proposition"? Of course not. This would seem to suggest that - at least at one point in his life - Plantinga himself did not hold his belief in God as truly-basic, nor as quasi-basic. For if he had held his belief in God as quasi-basic when he began to write God and Other Minds, the classical foundationalist's picture of rational belief could not have possibly made any sense to him, nor have appealed to him in any way. So the fact that -

---

[15]Plantinga, "Self-Profile," 390.

by his own admission - it did make sense to him and did appeal to him suggests very strongly that his theistic belief has not always been the direct inference from truly-basic beliefs that his theory claims it is. Now it would be very odd indeed if it was transformed into a quasi-basic belief only later in his life. There is a more likely explanation: *theistic belief is not and never has been a belief he holds by immediate inference from truly-basic beliefs.* But if not, then Reformed epistemology is a misinterpretation of his own noetic experience.

In the end, I cannot be certain. It may very well be that, in direct response to my discussion, Plantinga might say: "Yes, I understand my theo-implicatory beliefs to be exactly what you have called truly-basic beliefs; and I understand my theistic belief to be exactly what you have called a quasi-basic belief." If so, then Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is an accurate analysis of his own noetic experience and consequently he is absolutely right in all that he has said about Reformed epistemology *vis a vis* his own theistic belief - eg., that he is within his epistemic rights to believe in God. But if so, then (unless I am the one who misunderstands his own noetic experience) I am a different sort of theist; for I cannot make these claims about my theistic belief. There would, then, be two different kinds of theists.

I find this problematic. It makes no sense to me that there would be two different kinds of theists. In the end, my view is that Plantinga has probably made a mistake; he has misjudged his own noetic experience. Without realizing it, he has articulated his noetic experience according to the demands of an ingenious theory rather than according to an accurate and careful assessment of the facts of his own experience. When all is said and done, I am not convinced that there are any theists for whom theo-implicatory beliefs are

truly-basic and belief in God is the quasi-basic belief which is entailed by them. But if not, then Reformed epistemology is wrong.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

The truth of Plantinga's theory ultimately rests on a two-part factual claim: (1) our noetic equipment is so constructed that particular beliefs about God are formed as a direct response to our experience - i.e., certain truly-basic beliefs about God (i.e., theo-implicatory beliefs) are immediate, natural responses to our experience; and (2) the theist's belief in the existence of God is an immediate inference from innumerable such truly-basic beliefs about God.

There is no question but what Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is an ingenious theory of theistic belief which - if true - demonstrates how belief in God can be eminently rational and well-grounded in experience even though there are no successful arguments or evidences which can prove it. His theory is both coherent and plausible. It is a well-reasoned theory devoid of any serious internal contradictions or tensions; and it is a plausible account of the grounds upon which a theist might actually base his belief in God. But is it true? That depends on the truth of the factual claim upon which his theory hinges. If it is true that our noetic equipment is so constructed that it can immediately and directly deliver theo-implicatory beliefs to us, and if it is true that such is the actual basis for the theist's belief in God, then Reformed epistemology is true.

I have not successfully refuted Plantinga's Reformed epistemology in this study; I have only cast doubts on it. My position is that, though I cannot refute the key factual claim, I have serious reasons to doubt that it is true:

1. I do not believe it accurately describes my personal noetic experience and the basis for my own personal belief in God. Theo-implicatory beliefs, in my experience, certainly act more like interpretations of my experience based on my prior assumption that God exists than they do like beliefs which are formed directly and immediately in response to my experience.

2. There are reasons to think that they do not describe Plantinga's noetic experience either. As I have pointed out, Plantinga admits that - earlier in his life - he assumed that the right approach to the question of whether God exists was to "consider the evidence" for it.[1] If Reformed epistemology is right, it is difficult to understand how Plantinga could ever have considered such an approach. If one just naturally knows - directly and immediately - that "God made that flower," "God is to be thanked and praised," and all the other things that Reformed epistemology says the theist can directly and immediately know, then how could Plantinga possibly feel any need for evidence? It is unthinkable that the theist described by Reformed epistemology could feel any need whatsoever to look for "evidence" of God's existence. His grounds for knowing God exists are all around him everyday. Why, then, does Plantinga not immediately find this approach odd? If Reformed epistemology is right, this approach is utterly unthinkable. So, what should we conclude from the fact that - admittedly - it was not unthinkable for Plantinga? I think it may suggest that

---

[1]Ibid.

Plantinga's belief in God is not - in the end - the sort of basic belief for him that Reformed epistemology says it is. Perhaps we should chalk Plantinga's flirtation with evidence up to some faithless rebellion. Or, perhaps we should chalk it up to the seductive power of the classical foundationalist's picture of rationality. But neither, I think, is an adequate explanation. It makes more sense that theistic belief simply isn't the sort of thing that Reformed epistemology says it is.

3. Plantinga's account is seriously deficient in a number of respects. His analysis of his own noetic experience is not precise and thorough enough to give me the confidence that he has accurately assessed his experience - nor the experience of any other theist. The conceptual categories by which he comes to that assessment are overly vague; they blur several important distinctions. To ignore those distinctions could easily mislead him in his appraisal of his own epistemic experience. If I have no basis for confidence in his assessment of the theist's noetic experience, then I have no basis for thinking that the central factual claim (mentioned above) is correct. Indeed, as I have shown, I even have reason to think that it is false.

For these three reasons, Plantinga has not convinced me that he or any other theist holds his belief in God as the result of a direct inference from truly-basic theo-implicatory beliefs. And, indeed, he has made observations that would seem to count against such a view. But if this matter of fact is wrong - if theists do not hold belief in God as an indubitable inference from truly-basic theo-implicatory beliefs - then Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is wrong. So, as for a critique of Reformed epistemology, this is where my study brings

us: *We have been given no reason to think that Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is true.*

As I have argued, Plantinga's analysis of the epistemology of theistic belief suffers from his not distinguishing between economically and epistemologically basic beliefs and, even further, from his not distinguishing between truly-basic, quasi-basic, and pseudo-basic beliefs. It is quite easy to lose sight of these important distinctions. In the realities of our epistemic experience, a *basic* belief looks, feels, and acts like a *basic* belief. It seldom makes any difference in our experience *what sort of* basicality it has. It still acts and functions like a *basic* belief. So, even if theistic belief is ultimately a pseudo-basic (economically basic) belief - as I would suggest it is - it nevertheless functions in the theist's everyday life as a basic, *foundational* belief. (Just as the atheist's rejection of God's existence functions as a basic, *foundational* belief for him.) Accordingly, much that Plantinga says accurately describes life in the real epistemic world. So even if Reformed epistemology is wrong, Plantinga has nonetheless brought some extremely important things to our attention. In closing, I will highlight two of the most important insights that Plantinga's Reformed epistemology brings to our attention:

1. *Even if theistic belief is ultimately irrational, it is not <u>obviously</u> irrational (as many modern atheists and secularists suppose); and it is not irrational for the reasons that they suppose.* If I am right, theistic belief is an economically basic belief. As such, it is nonetheless a basic belief. As a basic belief, it serves as the starting point of the theist's reasonings, not as their outcome. So, if pressed for reasons, evidences, or arguments for his belief, the theist will undoubtedly come up short. Belief in God is typically where he starts, not

where he ends. He will likely be ill-prepared to supply any such arguments; for they are not normally important to him. Plantinga's Reformed epistemology argues for a stronger claim. Not only will the theist be unable to supply reasons *in practice*; but, according to Reformed epistemology, *there are no such reasons in theory*. With that I cannot agree. But this disagreement aside, Plantinga is absolutely right about the realities of the theist's epistemic experience. He does not have reasons for his belief; for he holds his belief as (economically) basic. It is therefore hasty and unfair to charge the theist with irrationality if he cannot readily produce evidences or arguments. As Plantinga rightly points out, what atheist could meet that challenge *vis a vis* his basic beliefs? Are we to judge those beliefs irrational for the same reason? If not, then neither should we charge the theist with irrationality when his only crime is to hold a *basic* belief in a manner consistent with its being *basic* for him.

2. *The theist and the atheist are more or less at a stalemate.* Neither will readily be able to persuade the other to embrace his point of view. Our economically basic beliefs are so deeply entrenched, so firmly embedded in our noetic structures that it is very difficult to dislodge them. The different noetic structures which the atheist and theist possess are tantamount to different sets of "eyes" with which they see the world. As a consequence, what looks like evidence for his point of view to the theist will look like no such thing to the atheist; and vice versa. The theist and the atheist will not even agree on what is and is not rationally compelling. In a very real sense, they do, functionally, have different rationalities. In the sense that all their reasoning begins from very different assumptions, they do not have the same conception of sound reasoning at all. This difference is great. Realistically, there is little hope of the theist and atheist finding any common ground from which either could persuade

the other. They are doomed to talk past each other, to be mystified by one another, and to perpetually misunderstand one another. That is simply how life must be when two people differ so radically in the basic beliefs which make up the *economical, working* foundations of their noetic structures. Plantinga, of course, is making a stronger claim: that theists and atheists differ with respect to the truly-basic beliefs which make up the *epistemological* foundations of their noetic structures. This claim I reject. But the practical consequences of having different basic beliefs in the *economical* foundations of one's noetic structure will not be substantially different. In either case, for all practical purposes, a functionally different conception of rationality is the result. And with such different conceptions of what is soundly rational, a meeting of the minds is extremely difficult.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited:

Askew, Richard. "On Fideism and Alvin Plantinga." International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 23 (1988): 3-16.

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 1972 ed. S.v. "Fideism" by Richard Popkin.

Evans, C. Stephen. "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs." Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 1 (January 1988): 25-39.

Feenstra, Ronald J. "Natural Theology, Epistemic Parity, and Unbelief." Modern Theology 5, no. 1 (1988): 3-12.

Grigg, Richard. "Theism and Proper Basicality: A Response to Plantinga." International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 14 (1983): 123-127.

Hanink, James G. "Some Questions About Proper Basicality." Faith and Philosophy 4, no. 1 (January 1987): 13-25.

Hatcher, Donald. "Plantinga and Reformed Epistemology: A Critique." Philosophy and Theology: Marquette University Quarterly 1 (Fall 1986): 84-95.

Johnsen, Bredo C. "Basic Theistic Belief." Canadian Journal of Philosophy 16, no. 3 (September 1986): 455-464.

Kenny, Anthony. Faith and Reason. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Losin, Peter. "Reformed Epistemology: Three Replies." The Reformed Journal 32 (April 1982): 21-23.

McKim, Robert. "Theism and Proper Basicality." International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 26 (August 1989): 29-56.

McLeod, Mark. "Can Belief in God Be Confirmed?" Religious Studies 24 (September 1988): 311-323.

Penelhum, Terrance. God and Skepticism: A Study in Skepticism and Fideism. Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, vol. 28. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers Group, D. Reidel Publishing Co, 1983.

Plantinga, Alvin. "Advice to Christian Philosophers." Faith and Philosophy 1 (July 1984): 253-271.

_____. "Alvin Planginga: Self-Profile." In Alvin Plantinga, ed. James E. Tomberlin, 3 - 97. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985.

_____. "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God." In Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, 109-138. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

_____. "Epistemic Justification." Nous 20 (March 1986): 3-18.

_____. "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" Nous 15 (March 1981): 41-51.

_____. "Is Belief in God Rational?" In Rationality and Religious Belief, ed. C. F. Delaney, 7-27. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979.

_____. "Justification and Theism." Faith and Philosophy 4 (October 1987): 403-426.

_____. "On Reformed Epistemology." The Reformed Journal 32 (January 1982): 13-17.

_____. "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function." In Philosophical Perspectives 2: Epistemology, 1988, ed. James E. Tomberlin, 1-50. Atascadero, Ca: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1988.

_____. "Reason and Belief in God." In Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicolas Wolterstorff, 16-93. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

_____. "Reformed Epistemology Again." The Reformed Journal 32 (July 1982): 7-8.

_____. "The Reformed Objection Revisited." Christian Scholar's Review 12, no. 1 (1983): 57-61.

Robbins, J. Wesley. "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 14 (1983): 241-248.

Van Hook, Jay. "Knowledge, Belief, and Reformed Epistemology." The Reformed Journal 31 (July 1981): 12-17.

Veatch, Henry B. "Preliminary Statement of Apology, Analysis, and Critique." In Thomistic Papers IV, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy, 5-63. Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988.

Other Works Consulted:

Alston, William P. "Planginga's Epistemology of Religious Belief." In Alvin Plantinga, ed. James E. Tomberlin, 289 - 311. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985.

Appleby, Peter C. "Reformed Epistemology, Rationality, and Belief in God." International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 24 (November 1988): 129-141.

Audi, Robert. "Direct Justification, Evidential Dependence, and Theistic Belief." In Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright,139-166. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Bassinger, David. "Hick's Religious Pluralism and 'Reformed Epistemology': A Middle Ground." Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 4 (October 1988): 421-448.

Boyle, Joseph, Jr., J. Hubbard, and Thomas D. Sullivan. "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: A Catholic Perspective." Christian Scholar's Review 11, no. 3 (1982): 199-211.

DePaul, Michael R. "The Rationality of Belief In God." Religious Studies 17 (September 1981): 343-356.

Echeverria, Edward J. "The Fate of Theism Revisited." The Thomist 51 (October 1987): 632-657.

Gilman, James E. "Rationality and Belief in God." International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 24 (November 1988): 143-157.

Goetz, Stewart C. "Belief In God Is Not Properly Basic." Religious Studies 19 (December 1984): 475-484.

Gutting, Gary. "The Catholic and the Calvinist: A Dialogue on Faith and Reason." Faith and Philosophy 2, no. 3 (July 1985): 236-256.

Helm, Paul. "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism." In Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition, ed. Hendrik Hart, Johan Van der Hoeven, Nicholas Wolterstorff, 71-89. Lanham: University Press of America, 1983.

Hick, John. "A Concluding Comment." Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 4 (October 1988): 449-455.

Hoitenga, Dewey. "Faith and Reason in Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God." In Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition, ed. Hendrik Hart, Johan Van der Hoeven, Nicholas Wolterstorff, 17-39. Lanham: University Press of America, 1983.

Keller, James A. "Method in Christian Philosophy: Further Reflections." Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 2 (April 1988): 165-167.

_____. "Reflections on a Methodology for Christian Philosophers." Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 2 (April 1988): 144-158.

Konyndyk, Kenneth. "Faith and Evidentialism." In Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, 82-108. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Lee, Patrick. "Reasons and Religious Belief." Faith and Philosophy 6, no. 1 (January 1989): 19-34.

Malino, Jonathan. "Comments on Quinn." Faith and Philosophy 2, no. 4 (October 1985): 487-492.

Partee, Charles. "Calvin, Calvinism and Rationality." In Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition, ed. Hendrik Hart, Johan Van der Hoeven, Nicholas Wolterstorff, 1-15. Lanham: University Press of America, 1983.

Plantinga, Alvin. "Chisholmian Internalism." In Philosophical Analysis, ed. David F. Austin, 127-151. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988.

_____. "A Comment on the Strategy of the Skeptic." In Faith and the Philosophers, ed. John Hick, 226-227. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964.

_____. "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply." Faith and Philosophy 3, no. 3 (July 1986): 298-313.

_____. "God and Rationality." The Reformed Journal 24 (January 1974): 28-29.

_____. "Method in Christian Philosophy: A Reply." Faith and Philosophy 5, no. 2 (April 1988): 159-164.

_____. "On Taking Belief in God as Basic." In Religious Experience and Religious Belief, ed. Joseph Runzo and Craig K. Ihara, 1-17. Lanham: University Press of America, 1986.

_____. "Rationality and Religious Belief." In Contemporary Philosophy of Religion, ed. S. Cahn and D. Shatz, 255-277. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

_____. "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology." Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association 54 (1980): 49-62.

_____. "Replies." In Alvin Plantinga, ed. James E. Tomberlin, 313 - 396. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1985.

Quinn, Philip L. "In Search of the Foundations of Theism." Faith and Philosophy 2, no. 4 (October 1985): 469-486.

Talbot, Mark R. "Is It Natural to Believe in God?" Faith and Philosophy 6, no. 2 (April 1989): 155-171.

Tomberlin, J. "Is Belief in God Justified?" Journal of Philosophy 67, no. 2 (January 1970): 31-38.

Van Hook, Jay. "'Knowledge' in Quotes." The Reformed Journal 32 (June 1982): 8-9.

Wisdo, David. "The Fragility of Faith: Toward a Critique of Reformed Epistemology." Religious Studies 24 (September 1988): 365-374.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. "The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics." In Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright, 38-81. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

_____. "Thomas Reid on Rationality." In Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition, ed. Hendrik Hart, Johan Van der Hoeven, Nicholas Wolterstorff, 43-70. Lanham: University Press of America, 1983.