

## Chapter I

### Summary of "Reason and Belief in God"

Alvin Plantinga, in a series of important essays to be found in philosophy journals and books that attend to the subject of faith and reason, has introduced a now widely discussed and influential notion in religious epistemology--that of the so-called "properly basic belief" (PBB). It is Plantinga's view that in certain circumstances God's existence can be one of those properly basic beliefs, granting it a special status among beliefs held in general. Just what that means and how this is the case will be discussed below.

This chapter is devoted to my giving something of a first approximation of Plantinga's view of PBB and its relationship to the broader topic of theistic epistemology. I will begin by summarizing Plantinga's treatment of a group of related questions that he has chosen, presumably, as a means to best articulate his own view of how a theist's epistemology ought to be structured. Accordingly, I will survey Plantinga's development of PBB within the context of what he considers a confluence of three important and determinative streams of thought, which are useful to understanding his account of PBB and the status of belief in God. Employing the pattern which Plantinga uses in "Reason and Belief in God" (RBG), I will initially summarize his views along four related areas of reflection: 1) the evidentialist objection to belief that God exists, 2) Aquinas and foundationalism, 3) the Reformed objection to natural theology, and 4) how belief in God

is properly basic.<sup>1</sup> All of this is to better understand and evaluate Plantinga's position that under certain circumstances, God's existence can be classified as a properly basic belief.<sup>2</sup>

### The Evidentialist Objection to Theistic Belief

Plantinga begins by making an initial statement as to the evidentialist objection to theistic belief. Citing a number of prominent atheologians, of which Bertrand Russell may be paradigmatic, Plantinga goes on to assert that they have argued "that belief in God is irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or somehow noetically below par...because there is insufficient evidence for it."<sup>3</sup> In order to avoid misleading construals of the term theism and wanting, perhaps, to make sure that everyone understands what he means by his use of the term God, Plantinga defines his use of it in this essay. For Plantinga belief in God is an existential belief about a person, not some mental construct (projected idea) as some hold; in short, he is speaking of the God of the Bible.<sup>4</sup> He also wants to make the distinction between belief in God (usually implying trust or commitment) and belief that God exists. Having

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<sup>1</sup>Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith\_and\_Rationality*. ed. with Nicholas Wolterstorff, (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). pp. 16-93.

<sup>2</sup>See footnote #1 of the introduction to this thesis for a clarification of how Plantinga and I are using the term God.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 17. There is a second kind of evidentialist objection that is mentioned, but not developed in RBG; it might be called the proportionality-evidentialist objection. See p. 24 in RBG where Plantinga quotes David Hume: "A wise man. . . proportions his belief to the evidence." Here the objection is more focused on the alleged lack of proportionality between the evidence for theism (considered weak) and the dimension of commitment to theistic belief (considered strong). I think there is a complicated but adequate response to this, though Plantinga does not seem to address this issue in RBG.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 19. It should be clear he is not using the term "God" to mean that God is impersonal and not transcendent to the world, as do some monists.

made that contrast, he explains that he is only talking about the latter, for the most part, when he uses the term "belief in God" in RBG.

Next he takes on a series of objections that have been used as a basis for rejection of belief in God's existence. He mentions four standard objections. First, the cognitive meaningfulness of the term "God" (often associated with logical positivism) is dismissed in a footnote.<sup>5</sup> The second objection is the charge of internal inconsistency in the broadly logical sense where, for example, God is construed as a person who has no body but nonetheless acts in the world. Though those who assert this objection claim that this is impossible, Plantinga, just to record his opinion, thinks that none of these types of arguments are at all compelling. Third, some have urged that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the amount of evil present in this world. Plantinga argues that theists, conceding the reality of evil, still insist there is no inconsistency here, and also cites the fact that those who do urge some kind of argument from the fact of evil do not do so from the deductive form of the argument. Fourth, which Plantinga discusses at much greater length than the other three (even though briefly in RBG), is the argument that the existence of God is unlikely or improbable with respect to evil or the amount of evil, which exists (or less probable than its denial).<sup>6</sup> This is a particularly illuminating rejoinder by Plantinga; it discloses to some extent an important and revealing aspect of

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 21. He does so, perhaps, because he discusses the subject extensively in his earlier *God and Other Minds*, (Ithaca: New York, Cornell University Press, 1967).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

Plantinga's methodology. Because of that virtue I shall recount Plantinga's thoughts on it in more detail.

The reader is invited by Plantinga to consider the "objector's claim that

(1) God is the omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good creator of the world is improbable or unlikely with respect to the amounts and varieties of evil we find in the world."<sup>7</sup> The problem is not in the presence of evil; it is that there is so much evil, some of which is surely gratuitous. So then (1) is improbable or unlikely given

(2) There are  $10^{13}$  turps of evil

where, as Plantinga explains, the turp is "the basic unit of evil."<sup>8</sup> This turp, then, is equal to  $1/10^{13}$  (the evil in the actual world).

As Plantinga sees it, the burden of the free-will defense is that it is possible that it was not within God's power to create a world containing as much good as the actual world contains but fewer than  $10^{13}$  turps of evil. This would be the case even if God is omniscient and omnipotent. In other words, it could be that

(3) God is the omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good creator of the world, and it was not within his power to create a world containing more good than the actual world contains but fewer than  $10^{13}$  turps of evil.

His next steps are to suppose that (3) is indeed possible, and then to refer to the probability calculus that

(4) If A entails B and B is improbable on C, then A is improbable on C.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

From that, then, if (1) is improbable or unlikely given (2), then (3) is improbable given (2). The objector is committed to supposing that (3) is unlikely or improbable given (2). Plantinga has argued elsewhere that it is implausible to think that (3) is unlikely or improbable on (2)--the so-called low-road reply--however, he chooses to defend (3) by other means.<sup>9</sup>

He argues accordingly that even if he were to grant for the purposes of argument that (1) is in fact improbable on (2), where is the objector to go from there? Does it follow that theism is false? Plantinga responds that there isn't enough here to draw that conclusion for it could be that (1) is improbable with respect to (2) but probable with respect to something else the theist might know. He illustrates how that move might be made:

(5) Feike is a Frisian, and 9 out of 10 Frisians cannot swim  
and

(6) Feike is a Frisian lifeguard, and 99 out of 100 Frisian lifeguards can swim.

It is plausible to hold that the proposition

(7) Feike can swim

is probable with respect to (6) but improbable with respect to (5). And if (5) and (6) are all we know about Feike's swimming ability then it seems that (7) is more likely or more epistemically adequate even if it is improbable with respect to (5)! So what is the evidentialist objector to do?

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

Plantinga suggests that for the objector to the likelihood of (1) on (2), what the objector may really mean to say is that (1) is improbable not just on (2) but improbable on some "appropriate body of total evidence." At this point Plantinga wants to take a step back and look at the paradigm of the probabilistic argument to see what it is trying to achieve. He presumes that the objector must be thinking that for any theist T you pick, there exists a set of propositions  $T_s$  that make up his total evidence. And that for any proposition P that he accepts, he is rational in accepting P only if P is not improbable with respect to  $T_s$ . On this reading Plantinga holds that the objector is then claiming that the existence of God is improbable with respect to  $T_s$  "for any (or nearly any) theist."<sup>10</sup>

But the key question is what sorts of propositions can be included in the theist's  $T_s$ ? Perhaps, suggests Plantinga, they are the "propositions that the theist knows to be true, or perhaps the largest subset of his beliefs that he can rationally accept without evidence from other propositions, or perhaps the set of propositions he knows immediately--knows, but does not know on the basis of other propositions."<sup>11</sup>

Then Plantinga introduces a heavily freighted question that, as I see it, reveals an important clue to understanding where he is going: why cannot belief in God be itself a member of  $T_s$ ? If that were the case then (3) would not be improbable with respect to (2) and the theist's total evidence-- $T_s$ ! Now we are getting to a fundamental concern of Plantinga--what sorts of beliefs, if any, is it rational or reasonable to start from? His point is that the objector who uses the probabilistic argument from evil supposes that

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 23, 24.

belief in God does not have that kind of epistemic status to be a part of  $T_s$ . Perhaps another important thing Plantinga wants us to see is that the epistemic status for the belief that God exists (for a theist) makes an enormous difference in assessing the burden of evidence which the theist must shoulder in order to fulfill his rational obligations. This is, as I see it, a clear indication in RBG of where Plantinga is going to go in defending theism, and it provides a clue as to the possible function of a PBB in Plantinga's schema. Why should not a theist's foundational beliefs include the belief that God exists?<sup>12</sup>

We see this point made again when Plantinga returns to making the evidentialist's objection explicit. Earlier in RBG he had referred briefly to W.K. Clifford and others, but now he seems to broaden the number of evidentialist backers a bit by including John Locke and David Hume; because of length considerations it is necessary to compress some of Plantinga's ideas here. Plantinga uses Anthony Flew and Michael Scriven as latter-day examples of people who think the debate about the existence of God should be conducted in a certain kind of way where the burden of proof is on the theist.

According to Plantinga, Flew seems to be saying something like this:

(8) It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons

and

(9) We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.

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<sup>12</sup>Plantinga's apparent defense of foundationalism may sound confusing here to the attentive reader since he has already cast grave doubt on at least one specie of it, what he calls classical foundationalism. However, as we will see, he does endorse another kind of foundationalism; the species that he adopts is sometimes called modest foundationalism.

Plantinga holds the view that this is a more moderate evidentialist position than the one that is held by Michael Scriven. According to Plantinga, Scriven holds the view that if the arguments for God's existence fail and the arguments for God's non-existence fail, then the only rational position would be not merely not believing in God; the only rational alternative is atheism, the belief that there is no God.

Plantinga tries to show that Scriven's position is a case of special pleading in the following way. Take these two propositions

(10) God exists

and

(11) God does not exist.

Suppose that there is no evidence for (10), then, according to Scriven, the rational obligation is to believe (11). But suppose there is no evidence for (11); is there a rational obligation to believe (10)? Not for Scriven, according to Plantinga. Thus (10) and (11) are not being treated with parity; but what is Scriven's justification for this move?

Scriven seems to take the view that negative existential hypotheses (supported by the failure of proofs of their contradictories) have a stronger claim or epistemic obligation upon us than do positive existential hypotheses (which are not supported by the failure of disproofs of their denials). However, this seems to Plantinga an extravagant claim; Plantinga doesn't think that Scriven has offered any good reasons to hold negative existential hypotheses in a superior epistemic status versus positive existential hypotheses. The upshot of that is to dismiss Scriven's claims and suggest (9) as the serious claim of evidentialists.

According to Plantinga there are at least two ways a theist might respond to the evidentialists concerns of the atheologian. First, he may point to the many and varied arguments that have been proposed for the existence of God. Plantinga asks, "do none of these provide evidence? Notice: the question is not whether these arguments, taken singly or in combinations, constitute proofs (demonstrations) of God's existence; no doubt they do not. The question is only whether someone might be rationally justified in believing in the existence of God on the basis of the alleged evidence offered by them; and that is a radically different question."<sup>13</sup> A second way to respond would be to question (8), that it is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.

It is this second alternative response that Plantinga explores in RBG. Why should we think that (8) is true? What Plantinga wants to do is analyze the meaning of (8) and draw out from it what the evidentialist might be saying. Plantinga suggests that there are alternative ways (8) can be construed. But it at least means that there is a normative or evaluative sense attached to it; there is a right way and a wrong way to think with respect to beliefs--we do have epistemic obligations. One way to view (8) might be to see it as a special case of beliefs that are intrinsically good or intrinsically bad or a special case of certain epistemic states that are intrinsically valuable. A second way of construing the intellectual duties might be aretaically, that is, there are valuable noetic states and there are corresponding intellectual virtues, "the habits of acting so as to produce or promote or enhance those valuable states. One's intellectual obligations then are to try to produce

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

and enhance these intellectual virtues in oneself and others."<sup>14</sup> Or third, perhaps, the intellectual obligations could be construed deontologically, but such that do not arise as obligations with respect to any connection with good or evil. They "are attach[ed] to us just by virtue of our being the sorts of creatures we are and have the sorts of noetic powers we do in fact display."<sup>15</sup> There are also, he suggests in a slightly different vein, prima facie obligations which could be overridden by other obligations "all-things-considered or on-balance (*ultima facie?*) obligations."<sup>16</sup>

When Plantinga applies these distinctions to the case of the theist's belief in God, it raises an interesting problem. If the evidentialist objector is meant to be understood as holding that one has a *prima facie* duty not to believe in God without evidence, what happens if the theist's belief in God is not within his power to cease believing? But if such a case obtains, then how could anyone demand that he comply with an obligation that is not within the theist's power to do?

Plantinga raises the rhetorical question but seems to suggest through the use of analogy that there are at least three reasons why the theist should not argue it is not within his power to refrain from believing that God exists. The first reason he gives, quoting Alan Donagan, is that one might come to believe in God carelessly or dishonestly. Second, it might be the case that the theist comes to believe in God by virtue of suppressing some natural tendency to form beliefs of good will and to develop

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

otherwise beliefs as a special act of the will (ill will). Third, Plantinga distinguishes between belief and acceptance. It may be that a believer cannot help that he believes that God exists, but it's another thing to accept that belief or become committed to it. These points are intended to be ironic; he does not mean to say in fact that this is what the theist does in forming his theistic beliefs, only that these kinds of objections could be raised to undercut the claim that the theist's belief in God was beyond her control. Plantinga doesn't think they are promising avenues to walk down.

These last three examples are possible matters of violating a *prima facie* intellectual obligation. Maybe, muses Plantinga, the theist is in some defective epistemic situation or lacks some intellectual "commonly achieved excellence."<sup>17</sup> Then the question becomes, says Plantinga, why does the evidentialist objector think these things? Does the objector mean to suggest that one must have evidence for every proposition believed? But to pull that off, one would have to believe "infinitely many propositions; and no one has time, these busy days, for that."<sup>18</sup> The important follow-up question to this is, which propositions do not need evidence to be properly believed and accepted and why can't God be one of these? The next step to answering that question leads Plantinga to reflect upon a tradition within Christian theism that has enjoyed a long and venerated status.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

### Aquinas and Foundationalism

It is not just the atheologians who think theism needs evidence to be believed, but also some theists, asserts Plantinga. The paragon example of this position is Aquinas. According to Plantinga, Aquinas has a basic picture of knowledge and that picture ". . . is this: we know what we see to be true together with what we can infer from what we see to be true by arguments we can see to be valid."<sup>19</sup> His reading of Aquinas takes an interesting turn when Plantinga discusses Aquinas' apprehension of the knowledge of God's existence. Plantinga seems to hold the position that Aquinas plays a bit on both sides of the epistemic fence on this. On the one hand, he is saying that Aquinas asserts in *Summa Theologiae* and in more detail in *Summa Contra Gentiles* that God's existence is demonstrable and His attributes follow from those demonstrations. This, according to Aquinas, is despite the fact that most theists do not know about these proofs and take God's existence on faith.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Plantinga suggests that Aquinas (SCG, III, 38) says that there is a "sort of intuitive or immediate grasp of God's existence"<sup>21</sup>

However, all this above is just the introduction to what Plantinga seems to really want to say. He asserts that what the atheist evidentialist objector and the theistic evidentialist apologist have in common is ". . . a total way of looking at faith, knowledge,

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>20</sup>Plantinga is referring to *Summa Contra the Gentiles*, I, 6.

<sup>21</sup>Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 47. It is interesting to note that Plantinga does not seem to develop this point that much here, except to humorously suggest that in this case it might be that we need to see Aquinas as an early Calvinist. Instead, for his purposes, he ignores it and proceeds with Aquinas' first thesis.

justified belief, rationality, and allied topics."<sup>22</sup> It can be fairly said that both traditions appeal to a foundationalist picture where some of the propositions are accepted based on evidence while others are properly basic--in need of no evidence. Both of these evidential traditions hold that God's existence is not one of those properly basic propositions that do not need evidence. That is to say that both traditions believe that God's existence must follow from or is in some sense probable or plausible with respect to certain properly basic premises.

Plantinga calls this picture or theory of knowledge classical foundationalism and he goes on to unpack what he takes this position to hold. Because this notion is crucial to understanding Plantinga, I shall highlight some of his important points regarding this. He maintains that classical foundationalism is a normative claim that can be construed as duties, as a statement about noetic excellence, or as statements about defects.

Furthermore he says

. . .let us say that according to foundationalism: (1) in a rational noetic structure the believed-on-the-basis-of relation is asymmetric and irreflexive, (2) a rational noetic structure has a foundation, and (3) in a rational noetic structure nonbasic belief is proportional in strength to support from the foundations.<sup>23</sup>

A fundamental feature of this picture is that it lays certain conditions of proper basicity, so that when they are obtained, they might be counted among the beliefs which themselves need no support. According to Aquinas, says Plantinga, a "proposition is

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 55.

properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident or 'evident to the senses.'<sup>24</sup>

Foundationalists that are more recent have added a clause to that: only self-evident or incorrigible propositions are properly basic. In the foundationalist's picture then, there are two claims: 1) that propositions that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses are properly basic and 2) only these are properly basic. And if properly basic beliefs are limited to those categories alone, then God's existence is not to be found among the foundations even if it is true that God does exist. Plantinga describes the classical foundationalist construal in the following form

(12) A is properly basic for me only if A is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for me.

For a starter Plantinga wants to claim that if (12) is true then enormous quantities of what we call fact are irrational. Commenting on the lessons learned from Descartes to Hume, he asserts that relative to the propositions which are either self-evident or incorrigible, most of the common everyday beliefs we operate from are not probable or "at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable."<sup>25</sup> Even changing what counts as properly basic beliefs to include what is "evident to the senses" still leaves many of our beliefs about the past and beliefs about the existence of other minds as not probable with respect to what is properly basic.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 60. Here Plantinga moves from what he calls "modern" foundationalism, which recognizes only self-evident or incorrigible beliefs as properly basic, to the "ancient" and "medieval" foundationalism that allows what is evident to the senses as properly basic. Despite that move which most philosophers would not allow, it still comes up short of giving probable grounds for a past or the existence of other minds. For example, how is it probable (or

If that is not convincing to the evidentialist, Plantinga thinks, then this next criticism should be. His next step is to try to show that the classical foundationalist picture is either false or that the classical foundationalist's acceptance of it violates his epistemic responsibilities. Briefly, if the classical foundationalist accepts (12) without argument, he would be adding to his beliefs a proposition that is either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. So then (12) should not be accepted in the absence of argument; it must meet the condition that it lays down. But no such argument can be made from principles that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible.<sup>27</sup> Trying to amend (12) in various ways, like adding a clause that allows proper basicity to include beliefs which are basic for nearly everyone, will not do, says Plantinga. There are still too many beliefs which are clearly rational to hold but which are not properly basic for others to hold. An example of a properly basic belief for me that is not properly basic for others might be the belief that I had some granola and a glass of milk for breakfast this morning. Prospects for amending (12) such that it could work are dismal and the position as such should be abandoned; it is bankrupt.

According to Plantinga, the coherence theory of proper basicity is also bankrupt because it is vague so as to make it hard to understand exactly what those who hold this theory mean; or granting them that clarity, what reason do they give to think that a theist's noetic structure doesn't display coherence? Moreover, he asks, even if there might be

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improbable) that the entire universe was created 5 minutes ago (with all the appearances of great age) versus the earth is several billion years old? How would you quantify such a disjunction?

<sup>27</sup>Because of length considerations I will refer you to the details of his argument in "Reason and Belief in God", pp. 61, 62.

some incoherence within a theist's noetic system, why suppose that changing some other belief than their belief in God might make it cohere?

So far then, Plantinga has been responding to the evidentialist atheologian and the evidentialist theologian by reflecting on a common, underlying picture of rationality. He is arguing that to the extent that both the objector and the apologist root their theory of knowledge in the classical foundationalist picture of rationality, they are both poorly rooted. And he has argued very briefly that the coherence picture of rationality is flawed, too. Plantinga's next consideration in RBG is to reflect how the Reformers may be understood in terms of their paradigm of rationality when they rejected natural theology.

#### The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

Initially Plantinga requests that we think of natural theology as the attempt to prove or demonstrate God's existence that has a long and impressive history. However, he contends, the spectrum of reaction by the Reformed influenced thinkers to the project has ranged "from tepid endorsement, through indifference, to suspicion, hostility, and outright accusations of blasphemy."<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, why?

In order to answer the question, Plantinga wants us to consider three representatives of Reformed thinking: nineteenth-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, John Calvin, and Karl Barth. Recounting five key points may summarize Plantinga's reading of Bavinck. The first is that generally speaking, proofs aren't the source of the theist's "confidence in God."<sup>29</sup> Second, argument is not needed for "rational

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

justification" even if no cogent argument exists.<sup>30</sup> Third, we not only do not come to God on the basis of argument, we cannot; the proofs don't work. Fourth, the Scripture does not prove God's existence but rather "proceeds from God as the starting point."<sup>31</sup> And fifth, Bavinck, according to Plantinga, sees that belief that God exists relevantly resembles belief in the existence of "the self and of the external world--and we might add, belief in other minds and the past."<sup>32</sup> Speaking for Bavinck, Plantinga asserts that for none of these last areas do we typically "have proof or arguments, or need proofs or arguments (to be rational)."<sup>33</sup>

Turning next to John Calvin, Plantinga wants us to take notice of essentially three things. First, according to Calvin, God has implanted in us all an innate tendency or disposition to believe that God exists. Second, this disposition is suppressed by sin. And third, this disposition to believe is triggered or mobilized by widely realized conditions. Some of those triggering conditions might be contemplating the starry heavens or the beauty of a particular flower. Not that this belief-forming process is a result of a teleological argument, but rather, it is a certain condition that triggers an innate tendency to believe that God exists.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Calvin says that in these conditions we know that

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid. The parenthetical is my remark.

<sup>34</sup>Plantinga, elsewhere, has suggested that perhaps theistic arguments or combinations of theistic arguments might be triggering mechanism for belief in God. In those situations Plantinga might hold that it was not the proof or the probability of the argument that persuaded, rather the arguments merely triggered an innate awareness of God.

God exists; to believe otherwise, depending on the arguments of natural theology, is to foster a faith that is "unstable and wavering" (no doubt from keeping abreast of the ping pong of argument and counter-argument associated with such polemic endeavors).

Turning now to Karl Barth, Plantinga describes Barth's scathing dislike for natural theology as intriguing at times. Apparently, one of those times is when Barth suggests a dilemma that the natural theologian must face. The first horn of that dilemma is

(H1) In arguing about the existence of God one must implicitly adopt a stance of the unbeliever or un-knower.

To do so the apologist in this case deserts his Christian standpoint. The other horn of that dilemma which the apologist would face would be that

(H2) He may pretend to his unbelieving interlocutor to do so.

in such a case the apologist would be dishonest, "professing to believe what in fact he does not believe."<sup>35</sup> In other words, the theist either concedes to a paradigm of argumentation that he explicitly rejects or he pretends to concede to that paradigm, in which case he is exercising bad faith. However, Plantinga thinks the natural theologian can escape these consequences by "escaping between the horns."

Perhaps the arguments do not form the basis of the natural theologian's beliefs nor does she claim that they could. Her objective in using natural theology might be to show the unbeliever that God's existence follows from what her unbelieving friends already believe. The unbeliever who wants to continue in unbelief must make a choice between

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

the beliefs he holds which lead to belief in God's existence or live with the inconsistency in his noetic structure. If this is the case, then Barth's dilemma does not hold.

Despite the failure of that supposed dilemma, what Bavinck, Calvin, and Barth have in common, says Plantinga, is that they all hold that belief in God is not based on argument. The believer is entirely within her right to believe that God exists, "without knowing any good theistic argument (deductive or inductive), even if she does not believe there is any such argument, and even if in fact no such argument exists."<sup>36</sup>

Plantinga again underlines what he takes to be the central insight of the Reformers: "the propriety or rightness of belief in God in no way depends upon the success or availability of the sort of theistic arguments that form the natural theologian's stock in trade. . . the correct way is to take belief in God as basic."<sup>37</sup> This assertion translated into the terms of the classical foundationalist amounts to a rejection of the thesis that in a rational noetic structure, basic beliefs will be only self-evident, incorrigible, or (in the case of the ancient or medieval foundationalists) evident to the senses.

What then is Plantinga's alternative? He wants to take what he sees as the insights of the Reformers, make them more explicit, and develop them into a theory of rationality. It is a Reformed theory of rationality or Reformed epistemology that he intends to articulate and defend.

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., pp. 71, 72.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

### Is Belief in God Properly Basic?

A properly basic belief, as Plantinga uses the term, is a belief that is known immediately or does not need the support of arguments in order to fulfill one's rational obligations. He first claims that belief in God should be one of those properly basic beliefs--for a theist. He does not, however, believe that holding belief in God as a properly basic belief commits one to believing that just about any other belief is basic. Secondly, that even if God's existence is accepted as basic, it is not groundless or gratuitous. Third, he will also maintain that in his holding belief in God as properly basic, he can remain open to arguments against that belief and, fourth, he claims that his position, so described, is not a species of fideism.

Plantinga, though turning from the negative task of showing why a particular understanding of rationality (evidentialism rooted in classical foundationalism) is misguided, does not turn immediately to spelling out his own necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity. In fact, he seems to steer us another way; he takes us to relevant examples. One such example is the Great Pumpkin Objection; Plantinga uses this particular case to begin to respond to the query that those who hold God's existence as a properly basic belief lack sufficient criteria to reject bizarre and superstitious beliefs. To defend against that charge, Plantinga reminds us of the logical positivists who use their criterion of meaningfulness to declare meaningless many things that were clearly meaningful. But, declares Plantinga, even though we may not be able to stipulate precise criterion for proper basicity, we can nonetheless reject the obvious nonsense of the often quoted Jabberwocky line, "T'was brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymbale

in the wabe." Similarly, a theist may not be able to declare precise necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and yet reject the notion that she is somehow forced to think just about anything could be properly basic.

And these examples and answers raise an important question about the status of properly basic beliefs. What would be the nature of these kinds of statements? Plantinga suggests that typically they are universal statements. However, citing the history of failures that these kinds of ambitious projects have amassed leads him to draw the conclusion that arriving at criteria should be "broadly speaking, inductive."<sup>38</sup>

He then briefly introduces to us what that might look like. First, the relevant set of examples might include belief-condition pairs  $\langle B, C \rangle$  such that B is justified in C and cases where B is not justified in C. Then under the pressure of theory and argument, revisions could be made (this is where, presumably, the counter-example would reign). He adds to this general strategy by suggesting that not all communities will agree on what counts as the relevant set of examples for a particular belief. Plantinga concedes that arriving at criteria for proper basicity this way (a particularist approach) "may not be polemically useful" but maintains that this does not imply there is no truth to the matter or that subjectivism is entailed by his position.<sup>39</sup>

Second, Plantinga affirms that his belief in God is not, as such, gratuitous or groundless. It is his opinion that certain characteristic sorts of experiences serve as

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

grounds for justification. These sorts of experiences are analogically similar to other experiences that ground our belief in other minds and the past, for example.

However, supposing someone accepts belief in God as basic, it does not follow that no argument could move him or cause him to give it up, Plantinga asserts. However, the theist has options. One way to respond to a potential defeater argument aimed at theism would be to assess the argument as merely showing a problem in the theist's noetic structure. Perhaps the theist might give up certain premises that infer "no God" (within his noetic structure) to avoid being labeled a dogmatist. Plantinga thinks it still does not follow that belief in God taken as basic is rational in the face of just any counter-argument or evidence. Plantinga holds the view that taking belief in God's existence as properly basic in certain justifying conditions confers *prima facie* justification, not *ultima facie* justification. "If the atheological argument(s) is convincing to me, it is a *prima facie* defeater for my basic belief in God and what is needed, says Plantinga, is (are) a defeater-defeater(s)."<sup>40</sup> But he also quick to assert that such defeater-defeaters are not to be construed as evidence for the existence of God.<sup>41</sup>

Plantinga makes an important distinction between weak *prima facie* justification-conferring conditions and strong *prima facie* justification-conferring conditions. Testimony (or training or teaching) would be an example of a weak *prima facie* justification-conferring condition, whereas "being appeared to treely" in a characteristic

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 84. Plantinga suggests that this defeater, defeater-defeater, defeater-defeater-defeater, can go on and on.

<sup>41</sup>Because of length considerations, it is not a good idea to develop this fully here. There will be more discussion of this issue of defeater-defeaters counting as evidence in the next two chapters.

experience would be an example of strong justification. He suggests that the relationships here are sometimes more subtle and complex than this.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Plantinga takes up the question as to whether his epistemic view is best construed as fideism. He divides fideism into two camps or grades: first, moderate fideism which is described as the position that relies upon faith rather than reason in religious matters, and second, extreme fideism which "disparages and denigrates reason."<sup>43</sup> Plantinga does not think Reformed epistemologists are extreme fideists because they are not committed to believing that faith and reason necessarily clash. Secondly, he thinks that whether or not one might consider a Reformed epistemologist a moderate fideist depends upon how one defines "faith" and "reason." The proper way, according to Plantinga, to construe them is to see that the "deliverances of reason include propositions taken as basic, and the deliverances of faith include propositions accepted on the basis of others." On this construal the Reformed epistemologist is a fideist only if he takes belief in God as among the deliverances of faith rather than among the deliverances of reason. However, following Calvin, Plantinga holds that the human mind has by natural instinct an awareness of divinity. So on this construal, Plantinga sees Reformed epistemology as rejecting the label of fideism. This natural knowledge of God is not a deliverance of faith nor is there any conflict between reason and faith here. Plantinga

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<sup>42</sup>I will not go into detail here because of length considerations; however, Plantinga seems to want to say that theists may be divided between those who relatively suddenly come to a belief in God through a major restructuring of their noetic structure and others who have "received" this belief via testimony or religious training. When the second group of people find themselves in a circumstance that has strong justification for believing in God, Plantinga wonders if such a condition should rightly be called knowing that God exists.

<sup>43</sup>Plantinga also seems to suggest that within these two general families of fideism exist various other grades. See p. 87 in RBG.

does not want and thinks it is not fair to consider him a fideist as a result of believing that God exists in the basic way he does.

In summary, Plantinga argues that both the evidentialist objection to theistic belief and the evidential strategy of natural theology share a common flaw--that of being rooted in the classical foundationalist's picture of rationality. The classical foundationalist epistemology fails because it would entail that much of what we think we know we do not and because it is self-referentially incoherent. The Reformed objection to natural theology is best understood as a rejection of the natural theologian's pledge to classical foundationalism. Plantinga believes that classical foundationalism's (both ancient and modern varieties) set of properly basic beliefs (self-evident, incorrigible, and evident to the senses) is too narrow; in that view much of what we believe is rational would not be rational. In criticizing its narrowness, Plantinga asserts that the Reformed epistemologist is neither committed to holding just about any belief as basic, nor that there is no justifying condition that confers basicity, nor that natural theology cannot in some way be useful to a theist. Plantinga has not defined and is in no rush to present the necessary and sufficient conditions for a properly basic belief; he believes that is a dead end. He believes instead that they should be discovered inductively on a particularist (case by case) methodology. Finally, Plantinga holds that belief in a personal God is among the deliverances of reason (similar to our knowledge of the past and our knowledge of other minds) even though many theists and non-theists alike might disagree with him about this. This picture of the rationality of belief in God is best understood as a permissive portrait; a believer in God violates no valid epistemic rules. Subjectively the believer in

God is not in a sub-standard epistemic position; the belief held as it is, is not below par in any rational sense. It is not a resolution of the truth-value of the proposition "God exists."