

Chapter III

Critical Responses: Foundationalism and the Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

Having discussed responses to Plantinga's handling of the evidentialist objection to theistic belief, we now embark on a survey of other responses to his work. The first major area of consideration in this chapter will be responses to Plantinga's characterization of foundationalism. As the term foundationalism suggests, roughly speaking, devotees to foundationalism think that a person's knowledge is built on certain foundational beliefs on which all else depends but which are themselves not dependent on any other things known. In order to narrow the scope of this investigation I will, first, evaluate responses to Plantinga's position on classical foundationalism--one particular brand of how foundationalism can be construed. Plantinga alleges this particular widely held view is self-referentially incoherent. This is a significant claim which, if properly substantiated, would be a major accomplishment. I will examine Philip Quinn and William Alston's criticism of Plantinga's work on this. Second, I will entertain another response related to foundationalism; I will investigate Hatcher's charge that Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is itself a self-referentially incoherent notion.

In the second major section I will consider responses by three Catholic scholars to Plantinga's position on the Reformed objection to natural theology.

Foundationalism

I begin where Quinn formalizes Plantinga's characterization of ancient and medieval foundationalism and modern foundationalism as follows:

(18) For any proposition p , person S and time t , p is properly basic for S at t if and only if p is self-evident to S at t or is evident to the senses of S at t .

and

(19) For any proposition p , person S and time t , p is properly basic for S at t if and only if p is incorrigible for S at t or is self-evident to S at t .¹

¹Philip L. Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," in *Faith and Philosophy*, (Vol. 2, No. 4, October 1985) p. 470.

Proposition (18) represents the ancient and medieval foundationalism and proposition (19) represents modern foundationalism. Quinn begins by noting that Plantinga focuses his argument against CF on [my (19), Quinn's (2)] and not on (18). In a surprising set of moves Quinn seems to agree that (19) is neither self-evident nor incorrigible for himself and, further, that it is ". . . never incorrigible for or self-evident to anyone."² According to Quinn this does not suffice to show self-referential incoherence. "What would be self-referentially incoherent would be to affirm the proposition by [my (19), his (2)], to assert that it is itself never incorrigible for or self-evident to anyone, and also to claim that it is itself properly basic for someone at some time."³ Quinn seems to be arguing that (19) could be justifiably affirmed by the modern foundationalist while conceding that it is itself never properly basic for anyone. The loophole Quinn sees for the modern foundationalist is that for some people at some times, (19) could be properly based on propositions which, ". . . by its own lights, are properly basic for those people at those times."⁴ And if this is true then all that Plantinga has shown is that the ". . . modern foundationalist has so far not completed the task of justifying the proposition expressed by [my (19), Quinn's (2)]".⁵

Quinn suggests the modern foundationalist might accomplish this project by taking the suggestion that Plantinga himself uses, arriving at criteria inductively from the community to whom it is responsible for receiving its set of examples. Citing the vagueness of Plantinga's description of this activity, Quinn wonders if Plantinga can be sure the modern foundationalist would fail to pull off this project.⁶

²Ibid., p. 471.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Quinn's gleeful account of the possible implications of Plantinga's inductive search for the criteria of basic beliefs is worth noting. Quinn suggests that CF could stop trying to give necessary and sufficient conditions for basicity and take Plantinga's advice of searching for the criterion inductively. Quinn suggests that not only can followers of Muhammed (sic), Buddha, or the Reverend Moon "join the fun," so can modern foundationalists, "play." See pp. 472-475. Quinn's point, I think, is that it is difficult to see in advance that the project of discovering criteria for the basic beliefs for these groups is in some way self-referentially incoherent; this being especially so since they look to their own community for its set of relevant examples.

Alston seems to be in substantial agreement with Quinn that Plantinga has not shown CF to be self-referentially incoherent. Alston begins his assessment by noting that Plantinga offers no textual support for the claim that the evidentialists he cites, Clifford and the rest, adhere to any form of CF.⁷ But Alston holds out that Plantinga may be aiming not at some evidentialists' use of CF but possibly at the idea "that this is the way it will have to be supported if it is to be rationally held."⁸ Assuming this, Alston raises the question as to whether the classical foundationalist must produce an argument. He seems to think not. Further, he argues that the evidentialist is not limited to the CF theory anyway; he could also adopt a coherence theory or a contextualist epistemology.

Nonetheless, he focuses on Plantinga's dealings with the modern foundationalists. He sees Plantinga's basic argument as focusing on their requirement for proper basicity. Alston states this position as follows:

(20) Only self-evident and incorrigible propositions are properly basic for S.⁹

He sees Plantinga as alleging the classical foundationalist has no right to (20) on his own principles; (20) is neither self-evident nor incorrigible. Plantinga, according to Alston, asserts that CF does accept (20) and uses it to judge the acceptability of other propositions; thus (20) is basic to CF.

Alston, like Quinn, asks ". . . why suppose that the foundationalist has no reason for [my (20), his (7)], or more accurately, why suppose that he does not accept [my (20), his (7)] on the basis of other beliefs?"¹⁰ Whereas Quinn suggests a possible way CF might respond, Alston simply notes that it does not lay down the epistemic status of (20). What Alston is urging is that Plantinga explore possible indirect ways CF might be justified on the basis of reasons. He thinks Plantinga has offered little in the way to support his claim that classical foundationalists cannot do so. Summarizing Alston's rejoinder, I take Alston to mean that he thinks Plantinga has raised a good question; it certainly looks like principle (20), if

⁷William Alston, "Plantinga's Epistemology of Religious Belief," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Boston: Reidel Publishing Co., 1985) pp. 289-311. See p. 295.

⁸Ibid. See also Alston's footnote on this.

⁹Ibid., p. 296.

¹⁰Ibid.

accepted by CF, would put CF in a self-defeating position (the principle looks like it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible for anyone). Alston even conveys that he thinks Plantinga is on the right track here and has made a significant contribution to the discussion simply by raising this issue. That is not good enough, according to Alston, for Plantinga to pay off his promissory note of showing CF's epistemic principle is self-referentially incoherent.

Plantinga has responded to both Quinn and Alston (separately) regarding their analysis of his self-referential argument; first Plantinga responded to Alston in a 1985 article and later to Quinn in a 1986 article.¹¹ Responding to Alston, Plantinga asserts, in review of his argumentation, that no foundationalist has ever produced a successful argument for his criteria from propositions that meet that condition. And ". . . it is extremely hard to see how such an argument could go."¹² Plantinga conjectures that if the classical foundationalist claims that she remains rational in holding the CF principle because there may be some propositions that they have not thought of which are properly basic for her and support the CF principle, then she and the theist are ironically in the same position. Both positions claim that the other side cannot show or produce propositions that are either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible that support their taking the position they do. So, initially, it appears that Plantinga stands firm on his assertion; but Plantinga does admit to confusion in his formulation of his case against CF. He concedes that he has overstated his case. Earlier he held that in order for a CF to hold:

(21) What appears to be self-evident ought to be accepted unless there are reasons to the contrary she would be obliged to accept that whatever "seems self-evident is very likely true or accept the position that most propositions that seem self-evident are self-evident."¹³ He concedes that he cannot sensibly saddle the classical foundationalist with that, but rather, like the classical foundationalist, he hopes that reason is reliable. Further, he admits that the classical foundationalist could hold on different grounds (ie.,

¹¹See "Reply to William P. Alston--Is Classical Foundationalism Self-Referentially Incoherent?" in *Alvin Plantinga*, pp. 386-390, and for a reply to Quinn, see "The Foundations of Theism: a Reply" in *Faith and Philosophy*. (Vol. 3, 1986). pp. 298-302.

¹²Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Alston," p. 386.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 388.

inductively conclude) that whatever seems self-evident is very likely true. Yet Plantinga wants to hold out that there is such a thing as committing oneself to "reason or to self-evidence as an acceptable or appropriate means of acquiring, fixing, and sustaining belief; and the classical foundationalist does it."¹⁴ The sum of this, I think, is that Plantinga wants to say that something is wrong with the classical foundationalist's position and what is wrong, is in the neighborhood of what he is asserting.

Approximately a year later he responds to Quinn's rebuttal by citing an initial problem for CF.

Propositions such as

(22) the proposition $2 + 1 = 3$ is properly basic in circumstances C

and

(23) the proposition **there is a table before me** is not properly basic in circumstances C

do not seem, according to Plantinga, to be either self-evident or incorrigible. But Plantinga supposes that Quinn means only that perhaps such propositions are self-evident or that only the classical foundationalist can sensibly take them to be so. This, it seems to Plantinga, doesn't hold much promise. However, why so?

Plantinga argues that according to Quinn, a belief is properly basic "just in the case it is basic for the person at the time and its being basic for the person at the time is contrary to no correct canon of epistemic propriety and results from no epistemic deficiency on his or her part at that time."¹⁵ What Plantinga wants to say, I think, is that persons in a certain circumstance C cannot ever really be sure they are fulfilling their epistemic obligations; and, if they can't be sure they are fulfilling those obligations, then they cannot be sure enough to believe that the propositions they have formed in that circumstance are self-evidently basic. In order to bolster his charge Plantinga cites two counterexamples to Quinn's undertaking. First he cites the example of the hypothetical theist who asserts that Freud is self-evidently wrong about his analysis of theism. In this circumstance, Plantinga cannot see how the theist can plausibly claim that Freud is self-evidently wrong. But then Plantinga anticipates Quinn by supposing that it might be plausible that a

¹⁴Ibid., p. 389.

¹⁵Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," p. 469. Underlining mine.

belief so formed is not in general self-evident; Plantinga also supposes there might be a specific set of circumstances where it is possible that it could be self-evident. But Plantinga demurs on this possibility as well. He alleges the subject could be forming these beliefs under the influence of a Cartesian evil demon (and thus display a noetic deficiency anyway). Even Quinn's example of "Jove's is expressing disapproval" as self-evidently not being properly basic is rejected by Plantinga.¹⁶ Plantinga argues that it indeed may be impossible for him not to accept the proposition on an occasion when he does accept it; "our beliefs are not for the most part within our direct control."¹⁷ Plantinga's point, I think, is that certain beliefs (like Jove exists) and their disjuncts could be properly basic; but then how could both of these self-contradictory basic beliefs be themselves self-evident?

Now in general, what Plantinga is arguing against the modern foundationalist seems plausible to me thus far. He has made some salient points. He has given sound reason to be suspicious that the modern foundationalist can deliver what she demands from the theist; that is, she demands from the theist propositions which are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible to support theism, but she cannot deliver the same for the very principle she uses to castigate the theist. Plantinga has not shown, as Quinn and Alston have documented, that she is herself without hope in a self-defeating position; but, in agreement with Plantinga, I do not think there is much hope. The option that Quinn and Alston hold out for her is that she might be basing her belief in CF's principle on other beliefs or reasons which are themselves either self-evident or incorrigible and which transfer support from themselves to her principle. At least, Alston thinks, Plantinga has not shown that she can't do something like this even though, so far, she has not made the case herself. Quinn seems optimistic that she could do so because she appeals to her own community for her set of propositions which are basic. But this seems unlikely to do the job, I think, not because she can't appeal to her own community for her set of propositions, but because her restrictive principle will clearly eliminate many of the most promising prospects for solving her difficulty. A host of memory beliefs, sensory beliefs,

¹⁶Ibid., p. 474. See this for more details on Quinn's clever counter-example.

¹⁷Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: a Reply," p. 302.

beliefs about other persons, and so on will not be usable by her (and the propositions they support) because they are neither self-evident nor incorrigible.

Let me summarize my analysis so far. I conclude that Plantinga has indeed failed to show that CF's principle is self-referentially incoherent; however, those who hold to CF as their epistemic principle have not, so far, shown that they are not in that position, and I agree with Plantinga; I find it very hard to see how they could show that. The major reason for my pessimistic assessment of that is the narrowness of what CF holds to be properly basic; such a restrictive view of what can be believed in a basic way would deny the rationality of many propositions that might provide support for its principle. It is also implausible to think that support could be generated for it in the narrow range it does accept. What is needed, I think, is a less restrictive epistemic principle.

Hatcher has raised another interesting concern. He asks the question, ". . .is the formulation of a Reformed epistemology itself self-referentially flawed?"¹⁸ Hatcher's formalization of Plantinga's position is as follows: "Person S is justified in believing that proposition P is properly basic just in case proposition P is a) self-evident to the mind or the senses or b) incorrigible, or c) based on strong immediate experience."¹⁹ He then asks whether that formalization is itself properly basic and decides it is not. He declares it is ". . .not based on strong immediate experiences, nor is it evident, nor is it incorrigible."²⁰ Hatcher does not make it clear, at least to me, what he thinks is self-referentially flawed here. He does say that Plantinga's principle is not itself properly basic; in a different vein he also seems to suggest that the rub is that on the addition of strong immediate experience to CF's principle we can still hold contradictory propositions as reasonable.²¹ That is, "it is reasonable to believe Christianity is true, or Islam is true, or

¹⁸Donald Hatcher, "Some Problems with Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology," in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, (Vol. 10, No.1, January 1989). p. 29.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 30, 31.

²¹Ibid., p. 30. See especially the last paragraph before his conclusion.

Atheism is true."²² Hatcher finds this result very problematic because he wants to think that at a minimum epistemologies should help us to go on and "decide which of competing claims should be rejected."²³

First, let us assume what Hatcher is saying is that Plantinga's principle of proper basicity is itself not properly basic and that Plantinga's epistemic principle is, therefore, self-referentially incoherent. That is the same as asking (at this point), does Plantinga's epistemic principle require that the epistemic principle itself be rejected? I think that Hatcher is correct in asserting that his formalization of Plantinga's principle is not itself self-evident, supported by incorrigible beliefs, or evident to the senses. Plantinga's epistemic criteria do not seem to be immediately formed beliefs, arrived at without inference. However, as we have seen earlier, showing self-referential incoherence is not that easily accomplished, even when the conditions of the principles are being used in a fairly restrictive sense. To begin with, Hatcher has not shown that, as Quinn and Alston suggested in regard to CF, that Plantinga's criteria could not be based on other properly basic propositions.²⁴

Maybe then the question to explore is whether Plantinga has limited or restricted his criteria such that his criteria could not be reasonably held? Actually, characterizing the nature of Plantinga's criteria is difficult to formulate. It is not made up, according to Plantinga, of necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity. Rather, Plantinga is loathe to spell out those conditions. What he does propose is that epistemic communities ought to dialogue about specific beliefs and conditions, revising the sample sets of beliefs and conditions in the light of theory and under the pressure of argument. Seen this way, it seems much more plausible to think that Plantinga's epistemic principle might, in fact, be based on other properly based beliefs (even though I'm not spelling out exactly what these might be). That is, even while it is at the same time implausible to think that CF might not be able to support its necessary and sufficient conditions by appeal to mere self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses kinds of propositions.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Is this not a case of what is sauce for the goose (Quinn's and Alston's critique of Plantinga's self-referential argument against CF) is sauce for the gander (Hatcher's self-referential argument against Plantinga's criteria)?

Plantinga's epistemic criteria, as compared to CF's, have broadened the base of acceptable basic beliefs considerably. If anyone thought CF had a chance to support its criteria with other independent propositions and reasons, all the more should be said for the plausibility of finding support for Plantinga's broad epistemic principles from other independent basic beliefs and reasons.

But perhaps Hatcher means to say that Plantinga's principle is incorrect because it allows various communities to hold as basic, differing and contradicting properly basic beliefs (Hatcher's argument would then look more like a *reductio ad absurdum*)²⁵; if he does then I think he is mistaken. I think it is correct to say that Plantinga's epistemic principle does look like it allows differing epistemic communities to hold as basic, differing and sometimes conflicting basic beliefs. But that may only mean that they have broken no rational principle in acquiring their conflicting properly basic beliefs. Plantinga concedes that criteria so arrived at (particularistically), "may not be polemically useful. . .," but that does not imply that there is no truth to the matter. In other words, Plantinga's position may concede that opposing disputants in a dialogue about conflicting basic beliefs may not be able to show the other side is incorrect. But again that is not saying there is no truth to the matter. If that is the case, then Hatcher's description of Plantinga's stance may need slight amendment; Hatcher's *reductio* works if Plantinga is attempting to solve the duty sense of rationality, but fails if Plantinga is attempting to solve the permission sense of rationality. Rather than fully develop this now, I intend to discuss this more completely in the last section of this chapter; I can say here that Plantinga claims his position does not hold that both Christianity and atheism are both prima facie reasonable to believe. If this is the case, then Hatcher may be confused about what kind of notion of rationality Plantinga is using. As I stated earlier, Plantinga seems to be arguing for the sense of rationality where rationality is understood as permission to take belief in God as properly basic rather than as a duty. Hatcher is not entirely to blame for this confusion, Plantinga could have been clearer about this distinction.

Let me summarize this first section. We have seen that Quinn and Alston have given valid reason to think that Plantinga has not accomplished the substantive claim of showing that CF is self-referentially incoherent. This is even though CF's epistemic principle is not clearly supported by self-evident

²⁵Douglas Groothuis suggested this was a *reductio ad absurdum* in an earlier draft of this thesis.

propositions or by incorrigible beliefs, or by what is evident to the senses. It may be possible that CF's epistemic principle is supported by other propositions which are "by their own lights" properly basic, even though CF's adherents have not so far spelled out how to do this. Plantinga's pessimistic evaluation of the possibility of achieving this seems likely to be correct because of the restrictive nature of CF's epistemic principle (much of what we know doesn't meet CF's conditions) and without those propositions among our stock it is hard to see how this would go.

Hatcher's charge that Plantinga's epistemic principle is self-referentially incoherent is unclear and therefore difficult to evaluate. But no matter how it is construed, it does not preclude the possibility that Plantinga's epistemic principle could be derived from other properly basic beliefs, though neither Plantinga nor I have shown exactly how this might be done. It is also important to see that such a project of rescuing Plantinga's epistemic principle from self-referential incoherence has a much greater chance of succeeding than CF's similar project. This is because Plantinga's conception of the Reformed epistemic principle has a much wider stock from which to find properly basic beliefs and propositions to support his epistemic principle. On the other hand, if Hatcher's charge is construed as a *reductio ad absurdum* then he misses the point that Plantinga is arguing for a permissive understanding of rationality rather than a duty sense of rationality. If Hatcher had realized this (or if Plantinga would have been more clear about this) then Hatcher's call should have been for more light from Plantinga on how this strategy might escape relativism.

The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology

Plantinga asks his readers to suppose that they think of natural theology as the "attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God."²⁶ Accordingly, Plantinga's description of the Reformed objection to that project is "best understood as an inchoate rejection of classical foundationalism."²⁷ Further, Plantinga states, "what the Reformers rejected is the idea that one must have arguments for the existence of God in order to be rational in believing in God. . .one can perfectly well know that there is such a person as God. .

²⁶Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 63.

²⁷Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection Revisited," in *Christian Scholar's Review*, (1983) p. 57.

.so they held that one doesn't need natural theology, either in order to be rational in believing that God exists, or even in order to know that He does."²⁸

There seems to be, I think, a fairly obvious relationship between the evidentialist objection to theistic belief and the Reformed objection to natural theology. Theists who take issue as to whether Plantinga has escaped the bonds of evidentialism (in its various forms) would be expected to also take exception to the Reformed objection to natural theology--natural theology would be their main hope of demonstrating their rationality in believing in God. Non-theists, as might be expected, object to natural theology's claim to provide sufficient warrant for belief in God and thus they might agree, at least partially, with Plantinga on this; but it is more likely they would disagree with Plantinga that God's existence is a rational belief without any or, at least, sufficient evidence. We have seen that what counts as "evidence" or "reasons to believe" is a controversial subject. Kretzmann, for example, includes "reasons to believe" as part of what an evidentialist has always thought of as an element of what constitutes evidence, while Plantinga seems to classify "reasons to believe" as providing a "ground" for belief.

In this section I will discuss the response to the Reformed objection to natural theology by three Catholic scholars--Joseph Boyle, Jr., J. Hubbard, and Thomas D. Sullivan (hereafter "BH&S"). These scholars think that while Plantinga's work in this area has been original and illuminating, yet it fails as a credible objection to natural theology.²⁹ These Catholic scholars begin by examining Plantinga's account of the Reformed objection to natural theology and conclude that an important premise of Plantinga's argument is, "the claim that belief in God is in the noetic foundations. . ."³⁰ But they see this premise could be interpreted in two ways: 1) "[i]t may be understood to mean no more than that a person is entirely rational in believing in God even if he has no argument for this belief and does not believe it on the basis of other beliefs he holds. . ." and 2) the ". . .more venturesome interpretation of the claim that God's existence is

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Joseph Boyle, Jr., J. Hubbard, & Thomas D. Sullivan, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology: a Catholic Perspective," in *Christian Scholar's Review*, (XI:3 1982). pp. 199-211.

³⁰Ibid., p. 201.

properly foundational: the theistic judgment is not merely foundational belief but foundational knowledge."³¹

With regard to the first way they propose to construe the Reformed objection, they have little to disagree on with Plantinga here. Properly basic beliefs, according to this construal, are not the same as properly basic knowledge, and thus natural theology may "well be a perfectly proper study."³² They see nothing perverse about such a project as natural theology; since in their view properly basic beliefs do not ensure truth, examination of the available evidence is useful. Plantinga, in their view, has not claimed to show that no proof is possible, even though he may think the traditional proofs do not work.

On the second construal of what Plantinga might mean by properly basic beliefs, BH&S can find no argument for it and wonder what exactly Plantinga intends to say by this. Setting that question aside, they still think natural theology is not useless. They think it might prove useful for the "less happily circumstanced" unbeliever, even if it doesn't help the more happily circumstanced believer. And they think it might be of service to the Christian philosopher whose stock and trade examines these notions carefully. They suggest that it also might be a useful aid or confirmation to the Christian theologian. In sum, they don't think natural theology is useless with regard to either understanding of what Plantinga may mean by taking God as a properly basic belief.

Now Plantinga has responded to these scholars.³³ He begins on an irenic note by stating that there is little disagreement between himself and the Catholic scholars. He agrees that though he believes natural theology isn't necessary either to believe that God exists or "even in order to know that he does"³⁴, this does not show natural theology as either impious or as useless altogether. Plantinga states that he thinks some Reformed thinkers feel it is impious ". . . to refuse to believe in God without argument; and for someone who already knows that God exists, natural theology isn't very useful--at least it isn't useful with respect to

³¹Ibid., pp. 201, 203.

³²Ibid., p. 203.

³³Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection Revisited," in *Christian Scholar's Review*, (1983). pp. 57-61.

³⁴Ibid., p. 57.

the end of enabling him to achieve knowledge of the existence of God."³⁵ Plantinga, however, affirms that natural theology might be useful in other ways. These ways include, perhaps, providing confirmations for some believers, leading some persons closer to belief in God's existence and, affording arguments of great theoretical interest in and of themselves. What Plantinga wants to say by way of the Reformed objection to natural theology is that natural theology is "needed neither for rational justification of theistic belief nor for knowledge that God exists; . . . [the Reformers'] rejection of it, therefore, should perhaps have been more nuanced than it was."³⁶ Plantinga also in the article expresses pessimism that there are any "widely successful theistic arguments. . . and the prospects aren't bright."³⁷

It is difficult to characterize what is at the heart of the disagreement between Plantinga and the three Catholic scholars. It doesn't seem to turn on their differing readings of Aquinas and Calvin on the knowledge of God, though their readings of these men's work are different. These Catholic scholars seem to say that doing natural theology helps provide a greater degree of justification for belief in God (for the believer) than belief in God in a basic way. In this interpretation of their project (and I think I'm correct in my understanding of this), they are using natural theology to strengthen their claim for a rational faith in God; they call this procedure "faith seeking understanding."³⁸ What Plantinga wants to say, "faith seeking understanding" aside, is that no matter what understanding (or evidential value) that is aimed for in natural theology, what it delivers is relatively trivial. The understanding gained would not confirm whether God existed or not and thus it would not provide greater warrant for believing that God existed in a basic way.

Plantinga seems to be making an extravagant claim here. What are his grounds for believing that natural theology delivers little by way of evidence? Plantinga returns to his stock answer to this question-- natural theology delivers only or mostly circular evidence for belief in God; and Plantinga holds that circular evidence does not provide much in the way of support for theistic belief. It is worth noting that

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., p. 58.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸These Catholic scholars are arguing that in seeking such an understanding they are not trying to fulfill the proportionality component of the evidentialist's objection.

Plantinga sees this problem of circularity affects the evidential support arguments for memory beliefs and of physical objects as well. He sees this ubiquitous characteristic as the lesson to be learned from the demise of modern philosophy (roughly Descartes to Hume). And indeed, it is hard to see, for example, how memory beliefs can be supported by beliefs which themselves depend in no way upon memory beliefs. It is the demand of providing completely independent, non-circular evidence for these paradigmatic cases that provides grounds for Plantinga's dismissal of natural theology.

However, Plantinga has not clearly shown that all of the various construals of theistic arguments taken either one at a time or in combination provide neither proof nor positive evidence which improves the epistemic status of belief in God taken as basic.³⁹ He further has not shown, so far, that the verificationist method, where God is a hypothesis to be confirmed or disconfirmed does not produce something by way of evidential support for the belief that God exists.

I'm inclined to think that philosophical projects to discount these varieties of approaches would be both lengthy and complex. There are reasons for this. First, there are many ways the standard theistic arguments have been formulated and presented in the history of thought, all of which deserve careful attention. Second, it may be that all of those construal's of the arguments are inadequate now, but with modifications and with innovative insights, they may become weightier--who is to say? Plantinga has not shown in any general way that this cannot be done. Third, it may be that a new and completely original argument may be constructed such that it provides increased epistemic status for belief in God in other than a basic way. Fourth, there are presently many creative and impressive ways to argue for God's existence other than the one argument at a time methodology (for example a cumulative case); Plantinga has yet to speak to these possibilities. Thus, Plantinga's advice to Reformed epistemologists that we remain "peeping

³⁹This seems to me to be a very difficult task because of the many relatively new, complex, and innovative ways natural theology is being presented today. For example--the verificationist method of D. E. Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Baker Book House, 1957), E.J. Carnell, *Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Michigan, Eerdmans, 1948), Gordon Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claim* (Chicago: Illinois, Moody Press, 1976), and more recently but less clearly in Basil Mitchell's, *The Justification of Religious Belief*, (New York: New York, Oxford University Press, 1981).

Thomists" seems quite appropriate.⁴⁰ Despite the qualifications above, and although I am not now able to show this, I am inclined to agree with Plantinga that the deliverances of natural theology, as I now understand them, do not escape circularity and thus do not add greater epistemic status to belief in God taken as basic.

In summary of this section, despite the irenic tone of the exchange between these particular Catholic scholars and Plantinga, and despite their agreement that natural theology might have some uses, it is evident that the Catholic scholars are much more optimistic than Plantinga as to what natural theology can accomplish. The Catholic scholars seem to hold that belief in God held as a basic belief (prima facie justified) has its epistemic standing improved when supported by the evidence of natural theology. They see this scenario as an example of faith seeking understanding. Plantinga, on the other hand, holds that basic belief in God is warranted without argument and that whatever evidence natural theology might provide (toward understanding), it is not non-circular evidence. Such circular evidence, in Plantinga's estimation, does not improve the epistemic status of belief in God taken as basic.

Plantinga has not definitely shown that all of the various construal's of theistic arguments (natural theology) taken either one at a time, or in combination, provide neither proof nor positive evidence which improves the epistemic status of belief in God taken as basic. He further has not shown, so far, that the alleged non-circular "God as a hypothesis to be confirmed or disconfirmed" approach does not produce something by way of evidential support for the belief that God exists. So the case is not closed.

⁴⁰Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in *Christian Scholar's Review*, 1980. pp. 187-198.