

## THE EVIDENTIALIST CHALLENGE

Plantinga and Swinburne both respond to what has been called the “evidentialist challenge.” Critics of theism have often charged that centuries of diligent effort by theistic philosophers have produced a negligible yield of evidence. Plantinga thinks that the evidentialist challenge is expressed by these two claims:

1. It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.
2. We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists. (Plantinga 1983: 27)

He responds by arguing that it is reasonable to believe that God exists even if there are no arguments, reasons, or evidence for the claim that God exists. In short, Plantinga’s response to the evidentialist challenge is to reject the challenge. Swinburne, on the other hand, accepts the challenge and offers a defense of theism as a well-confirmed hypothesis.

## PLANTINGA ON EVIDENTIALISM AND CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONALISM

Plantinga claims that evidentialism is motivated by classical foundationalism, the epistemological framework underlying much of Western philosophy (Plantinga, 1983: 39–63). Foundationalist epistemologies distinguish between basic and nonbasic beliefs. A belief is basic if it is not inferred from any other belief or beliefs. A belief is nonbasic if it is inferred from some other belief or beliefs. For instance, my belief that you look pale might be a basic belief for me. I do not infer that you look pale; I just *see* that you do. I might then form the nonbasic belief that you are not feeling well by inferring this from my basic belief that you look pale and my further belief that people who look pale often are not feeling well.

Having made the distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs, foundationalism offers a thesis about how our beliefs are justified. “Justification” (i.e., *epistemic* justification) is a slippery term that takes on different shades of meaning for different epistemologists. For foundationalists, and internalist epistemologies in general (see below), justification is, roughly, a matter of someone being aware of reasons that are sufficient to authorize acceptance of a given belief by that person at that time. Perhaps a more helpful way of understanding justification in this sense is in terms of epistemic rights and duties. Being rational means that we have certain duties with respect to our beliefs – such as the duty to strive to base our beliefs on adequate evidence and not to cling

to them obstinately when they are discredited. If I violate an epistemic duty in holding a belief, then my belief is thereby irrational. However, if I violate no epistemic duties in holding a belief, then I am within my epistemic rights in believing it, and my belief is therefore rational. In short, rational beliefs are those that are *permissible*; that is, in holding them one flouts no epistemic duties.

For foundationalists, nonbasic beliefs are justified by being correctly inferred from other justified beliefs. If I am justified in thinking that you look pale, and my belief that people who look paler than usual are often not feeling well is also justified for me, then I am justified in inferring that you are not feeling well. If, however, one belief can be justified by inference from another, and that in turn by another, and so on, the question immediately arises: Where does the chain of justifying beliefs end?

Foundationalists think that the chain cannot extend ad infinitum or there would be no justification, so the sequence of justifying reasons cannot go on forever, but must terminate with *properly basic beliefs*. To say that a belief B is properly basic for a person S is to say that B is held by S, S did not infer B from any other belief, and B is justified for S. These properly basic beliefs therefore constitute the *foundation* of our entire body of knowledge inasmuch as all our justified beliefs are either properly basic or ultimately derived by deductive or inductive inference from properly basic beliefs.

No rational scheme of justification will allow just *any* sort of belief to count as properly basic. According to Plantinga, classical foundationalism (CF) is chiefly a thesis about what sorts of beliefs can count as properly basic (Plantinga 1983: 59). CF holds that a belief B is properly basic for a person S (i.e., basic and justified for S) if and only if B is (a) self-evident, (b) incorrigible, or (c) evident to the senses for S. It follows that, since for CF it is rational for a person S to hold a belief B only if B is justified for S, the only sorts of beliefs that it is *rational* for S to hold as basic beliefs are those that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Further, it is rational to accept a nonbasic belief if and only if it is either inferred immediately from properly basic beliefs or is a link in a chain of correct inference stretching back to properly basic beliefs.

Evidentialists, working within the framework of CF, observe that the proposition "God exists" is not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, and they conclude that the belief that God exists is not a properly basic belief. They also argue that God's existence cannot be inferred from beliefs that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. They conclude that theism cannot be justified and so cannot be rationally believed.

Since, in Plantinga's view, evidentialism is grounded in CF, he rejects CF and replaces it with an epistemological framework friendlier to theism. Plantinga's first version of such a "Reformed" or "Calvinist" epistemology was published in 1983. The most distinctive feature of this new epistemology was that it permitted the statement "God exists" to count as a properly basic belief. In 2000 Plantinga offered a revised view, based on an entirely different epistemological framework, which also argued for the proper basicity of theistic belief.

#### THEISM AS PROPERLY BASIC: 1983 VERSION

Plantinga says that the basic problem with CF is that it is self-defeating because it cannot meet its own standards (Plantinga 1983: 60). Consider the proposition P that asserts the conditions of proper basicity for CF: "A belief B is properly basic for a person S if and only if B is (a) self-evident, (b) incorrigible, or (c) evident to the senses for S." Does P express a belief that is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses? Clearly not, says Plantinga. Therefore, a classical foundationalist who accepted P as basic would therefore be guilty of irrationality on his own account. Can P be justified by inferences from properly basic beliefs, that is, can it be correctly inferred from beliefs that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses? Plantinga asserts that it cannot (Plantinga 1983: 61). Plantinga therefore concludes that it is not reasonable to accept the conditions of proper basicity stipulated by CF. Of course, some philosophers have objected that this argument is facile and that foundationalism can easily be reformulated in a non-self-refuting way (see Kenny 1983), but we cannot linger over these points.

Though he repudiates CF, Plantinga agrees that some, and only some, kinds of beliefs should count as properly basic and that these will serve the same sort of justifying function that basic beliefs do for foundationalists. He also agrees with CF that there need to be *some* criteria for proper basicity; we cannot just say that "anything goes" as properly basic. Plantinga recommends that these criteria be determined by an *inductive* procedure (Plantinga 1983: 76). That is, we begin with instances of *obviously* properly basic beliefs, and after compiling many such examples, we try to generalize from these. We tentatively formulate criteria for proper basicity, and then test these against further beliefs that are candidates for properly basic status. Sometimes we repudiate those candidates on the basis of our criteria, and sometimes we modify our criteria when they conflict with our intuitions about what is and what is not properly basic. This procedure of hypothesis testing and revision should eventually lead to the formulation of a consistent, useful, and intuitively valid set of criteria for proper basicity.

But which beliefs are *obviously* properly basic? There is no reason to think that these will be the same for everybody. Why, Plantinga asks, cannot Christians make “God exists” one of their examples of properly basic beliefs (Plantinga 1983: 77)? Atheists might disagree, but so what? Christians have to be responsible to *their* examples, not some other group’s (Plantinga 1983: 77). If “God exists” is a properly basic belief for some person S, then, by definition, it is a *rational* belief for S. Further, S is under no obligation to defend his or her belief that God exists by adducing reasons, arguments, or evidence for that belief.

Another way to express Plantinga’s claim is to assert that Christians are within their epistemic rights in taking “God exists” as properly basic. In his 1983 work, Plantinga understands rationality in terms of epistemic duties and rights (Plantinga 1983: 30). Plantinga claims that Christians are within their epistemic rights in regarding theistic belief as basic, and so it is rational for them to believe in God even if they can offer no arguments, reasons, or evidence for that belief.

Further, Plantinga says that there are particular sorts of circumstances when it is entirely right and proper for Christians spontaneously to form the belief that God exists. God’s existence will be obviously properly basic for Christians in such circumstances. For instance:

Upon reading the Bible one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God’s sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I have done*. Upon confession and repentance I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgives me for what I have done*. (Plantinga 1983: 80; emphasis in original)

So Plantinga argues that there are many circumstances in which God’s existence will be obviously properly basic for Christians. Such persons will therefore be within their epistemic rights in asserting God’s existence, and that belief will be rational for them even if they can offer no reasons, arguments, or evidence for God’s existence.

#### ASSESSING PLANTINGA’S 1983 ARGUMENT

The obvious objection is that Plantinga’s argument makes the conditions of proper basicity so absurdly easy to meet that just about anything, however bizarre, could count as properly basic for someone. Plantinga recognizes this potential problem and refers to it as the “Great Pumpkin” objection (Plantinga 1983: 74–78). The other characters in the Peanuts comic strip ridicule Linus because he believes that every Halloween the Great Pumpkin returns to bestow gifts on good children. If Christians can declare that God’s existence is obviously properly basic for them,

what is to keep Linus from declaring that the existence of the Great Pumpkin is obviously properly basic for him?

Plantinga replies that just because the belief that God exists is properly basic for Christians does not mean that this belief is *groundless*. The same belief can be obviously properly basic in some circumstances but not in others. For me it would be obviously properly basic to believe that there is a tree right in front of me in certain circumstances – including the circumstance of being appeared to in certain tree-like ways – but not in many other circumstances. What are the circumstances that supposedly ground Christians' claim that God's existence is obviously properly basic for them? They are the sorts of circumstances that Plantinga mentioned: feeling guilty and then feeling forgiven upon repentance and confession, being inspired by Scripture, and so on. Plantinga says that such circumstances are frequently realized, whereas, outside of the comic strips, nobody encounters circumstances where it would be natural to form spontaneous beliefs about the Great Pumpkin. Belief in the Great Pumpkin would therefore be utterly gratuitous and groundless. Therefore, just because Christians rationally form the basic belief that God forgives them, or cares for them, or is inspiring them (and hence that God exists) in a variety of common circumstances, they are under no obligation to regard just *any* belief in *any* circumstances as properly basic (Plantinga 1983: 74).

Another response to the Great Pumpkin objection is that there exists a natural community, the community of Christians, who endorse and authorize certain beliefs as properly basic. James F. Sennett continues the argument:

Now, when applied to the Great Pumpkin objection, this community requirement is decisive. There *is* no Great Pumpkin community. There is no body of believers that will endorse Linus's belief or give him permission to hold it basically. But clearly there is such a community for the theist. This disanalogy shows the Great Pumpkin objection to be illegitimate and ineffective. (Sennett 2003: 227).

Now there might be no Great Pumpkin community, but there are unquestionably innumerable communities that endorse beliefs that, to outsiders, sound every bit as bizarre as the Great Pumpkin. Why cannot the core beliefs of members of such groups be properly basic *for them* just as the core beliefs of Christians are allegedly properly basic for Christians? For instance, if "God forgives me" is properly basic for Christians who feel a strong sense of atonement, why couldn't "Moloch demands that we sacrifice more of our children" have been properly basic for the Carthaginians when they were hard pressed by the Romans? If Christians are within their epistemic rights in basing their criteria of

proper basicity on what seems obvious only to them, then innumerable other groups have that right too.

The critic of the 1983 version of reformed epistemology can therefore offer the following *reductio ad absurdum*:

- (1) "God exists" is a properly basic belief for Christians. (assumption for *reductio*)
- (2) If "God exists" is a properly basic belief for Christians, then innumerable patently irrational beliefs are properly basic for the groups that endorse them.
- (3) Innumerable patently irrational beliefs are properly basic for the groups that endorse them. (from 1 and 2 by *modus ponens*)
- (4) But this is absurd.
- (5) Therefore: The assumption "God exists" is a properly basic belief for Christians" must be rejected.

Since (1) is the assumption for the *reductio*, and (3) follows from (1) and (2) by *modus ponens*, reformed epistemologists would need to reject (2) or (4). If they reject (2), then they have to explain why they are not thereby guilty of a blatant case of special pleading. What kind of argument could guarantee that core Christian claims are properly basic in certain circumstances, but that "Moloch wants us to sacrifice more of our children" was never properly basic for anyone in any circumstances?

Rejecting (4) looks like a much better bet. After all, surely anthropologists are right that many beliefs that sound absurd to Western, scientifically conditioned ears were in *some* sense perfectly rational for people of other times and places. Belief in the existence of Moloch, Odin, or Baal, or belief in the teachings of tribal Shamans, or belief in Zande witchcraft lore, and so on was surely rational for the members of some culture at some time. Perhaps tolerant and broad-minded people should not hasten to condemn even very strange-sounding beliefs, like voodoo. Voodoo-believers may be doing their epistemic best, that is, doing their best to form rational, responsible beliefs given their epistemic circumstances. In fact, in a reply to a Great Pumpkin-like argument made by Michael Martin (1990: 272–73), Plantinga admits that voodoo beliefs *are* justified for members of the community that practices voodoo; that is, members of that community are within their epistemic rights in accepting voodoo beliefs (Plantinga 2000: 346). Surely, though, reformed epistemologists need to make a stronger claim than that belief in God is equally rational to belief in Moloch or voodoo. If not, atheists should greet these arguments with a yawn and a shrug. The loudest objections are likely to come from other Christians who have traditionally wanted to make *much* stronger claims on behalf of their beliefs. In later writings Plantinga does argue that core Christian claims might not merely

be justified for believers, but rational in a much stronger sense, so let's turn to those arguments.

#### THEISM AS PROPERLY BASIC: 2000 VERSION

Writing in the 1990s, Plantinga extended his critique of foundationalism to a rejection of all "internalist" epistemologies and adopted an "externalist" view (Plantinga 1993). Internalist epistemologies hold that a belief is rational for a person if and only if that belief is justified for that person. Further, a belief is justified for someone if and only if that person is aware of reasons, grounds, or evidence that adequately support that belief. Externalist epistemologies reject this whole account of rationality and the concomitant concepts of epistemic rights and duties. Plantinga now holds that a belief is rational if and only if it is "warranted." Warrant is an objective matter; it has nothing to do with anyone's subjective awareness of justifying reasons. The objective conditions of warrant are complex and cannot be spelled out in detail here. Briefly and roughly, Plantinga holds that a belief is warranted if and only if it is produced by the proper functioning of a cognitive faculty in the circumstances in which that faculty was designed (by God or evolution) to operate effectively. For instance, if it is broad daylight, my eyes are open, there is a tree right directly in front of me, there is nothing distracting me or blocking my view, and my optical and cognitive faculties are operating as designed, then my belief that there is a tree in front of me is warranted (in the remainder of this chapter, I mean "warrant" in this externalist sense).

The proper functioning of our faculties in appropriate circumstances sometimes produces beliefs that are "warrant basic," that is, beliefs that are both basic and warranted. Since warranted beliefs are, by definition, rational beliefs, a belief that is warrant basic will be properly basic. My belief that I called my wife a few minutes ago, given that my memory is functioning properly and as designed, is a warranted, and hence rational, proper, and basic belief.

Plantinga, following theologians such as John Calvin, believes that among our cognitive faculties is a *sensus divinitatis*, a faculty that, when operating properly and in an appropriate circumstance, will provide us with the warrant basic belief that God exists (Plantinga 2000: 167–86). In fact, Plantinga says that the awareness of God that the *sensus divinitatis* produces, if not strictly a case of *perceiving* God, is very like perception in the sense that the awareness of God it imparts is immediate and *palpable* for the one receiving it (Plantinga 2000: 181). Why doesn't *everyone* have such an immediate and perception-like awareness of God? Because, says Plantinga, *sin* has so corrupted the *sensus divinitatis*

faculty of some persons that it no longer functions properly (Plantinga 2000: 184–85). Therefore, unbelief is a product of epistemic malfunction, just as blindness can result from damage to the eye. Since Plantinga's externalist epistemology defines "rational" in terms of proper function, and atheism is a result of malfunction, atheism cannot be rational.

But *is* there a *sensus divinitatis* that imparts warrant basic belief in the existence of God when functioning properly in the right circumstances? Very probably, if God exists, says Plantinga; very probably not, if there is no God (Plantinga 2000: 186–90). As Sennett puts it: "Regardless of whether or not theistic belief is properly basic, one thing seems clear: if the theistic God exists, it only seems obvious that He would form the world and human beings in such a way that they could rationally believe that He exists – indeed that they could *know* that He exists" (Sennett 2003: 230). On the other hand, if there is no God, there will be no *sensus divinitatis*, and it seems very unlikely that any other faculty would produce the warranted but false belief that God exists. The upshot, says Plantinga, is that the question of the *rationality* of the belief that God exists cannot be separated from the question of whether that belief is *true* (Plantinga 2000: 191). Plantinga contends that critics such as Marx and Freud who criticize the rationality of theistic belief will fail unless they also provide arguments that theism is *in fact* false. In other words, anyone who wants to argue that theistic belief is irrational will have to show that it is unwarranted, and, since it is highly probable that belief in God is warranted if God exists, the would-be critic must move beyond the realm of epistemology and offer substantial arguments against theism. Reformed epistemology therefore says that if God exists, there will be many persons whose belief in God is warrant basic and therefore rational in the strong sense that their belief is the product of a cognitive faculty operating properly in the circumstances in which it was designed to impart true beliefs. The belief that God exists, if true, will therefore constitute *knowledge* for such persons.

#### ASSESSING PLANTINGA'S 2000 ARGUMENT

As Sennett notes, Plantinga's reformed epistemology has a rather ironic conclusion (Sennett 2003: 230). Plantinga started off in 1983 arguing that theistic belief is rational, that is, justified in the internalist's sense, and indeed is properly basic, even if believers can offer no arguments, evidence, or reasons for the truth of theism. Now he argues that theistic belief is very likely warranted and properly basic, in the externalist sense, but only if theism is in fact true. This means that believers are in no position to argue that their belief in God is warrant basic unless they can adduce reasons, arguments, or evidence for the existence of God.

So we seem to have come full circle. Well, maybe not quite. Perhaps reformed epistemology has at least succeeded in shifting some of the burden of proof from theists to atheists. If theistic belief is defended in the context of an externalist epistemology, atheists cannot blithely invoke foundationalist criteria and defy theists to justify their belief in God on that basis. Plantinga might argue that the tables are now turned and that anyone wanting to convict theists of irrationality must *first* show that God does *not* exist, since if God exists, theistic beliefs very likely have warrant. In other words, it now looks like any objection to the rationality of theistic belief must *presuppose* that God does not exist.

Tyler Wunder notes the obvious fallacy of this reasoning:

[I]f God does exist, *then* very probably theism is warrant-basic; obviously by *modus tollens* the antecedent of this conditional can be negated if the consequent can. Therefore an epistemic argument (epistemic because it concerns the presence or absence of the epistemic concept warrant) could successfully *conclude with*, not *presuppose* a negative answer to the de facto question [i.e., the question of the *truth* of theism]. (Wunder 2002: 110; emphasis in original)

In other words, the atheist can stand Plantinga's argument on its head and argue that the fact that theistic belief is not warrant basic shows that there probably is no God! Further, when it comes to arguments questioning the rationality of theism, Marx and Freud are now the least of theists' worries. A number of recent works offer challenging naturalistic accounts of religious belief in terms of neuroscience, anthropology, and evolutionary theory (see, e.g., Guthrie 1993; Alper 2001; Boyer 2001; Wilson 2002; Broom 2003). If the arguments of these authors are cogent – and Plantinga gives no reason why they cannot be (unless we *presuppose* theism true) – then there is excellent reason to doubt that theistic belief is warrant basic, for such belief will have natural, nonrational causes – and not be caused by the proper functioning of a cognitive faculty designed to produce true beliefs. If the rationality question is contingent on the reality question (and vice versa), as Plantinga claims, these arguments will be doubly dangerous. Arguments against the *rationality* of theistic belief now become arguments also against the *truth* of theism. Reformed epistemology does indeed have an ironic conclusion: Its net effect is to multiply the arguments against the existence of God.

#### SWINBURNE ON THE CONFIRMATION OF THEISM

Since the scientific revolution, the natural sciences have enjoyed a reputation as the purest, surest, and most productive of human cognitive enterprises. Consequently, defenders of every sort of claim have