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BELIEF IN GOD IS NOT PROPERLY BASIC

I

In this article I shall concern myself with the question 'Is some type of justification required in order for belief in God to be rational?' Many philosophers and theologians in the past would have responded affirmatively to this question. However, in our own day, there are those who maintain that natural theology in any form is not necessary. This is because of the rise of a different understanding of the nature of religious belief. Unlike what most people in the past thought, religious belief is not in any sense arrived at or inferred on the basis of other known propositions. On the contrary, belief in God is taken to be as basic as a person's belief in the existence of himself, of the chair in which he is sitting, or the past. The old view that there must be a justification of religious belief, whether known or unknown, is held to be mistaken. One of the most outspoken advocates of this view is Alvin Plantinga.¹ According to Plantinga the mature theist ought not to accept belief in God as a conclusion from other things he believes. Rather, he should accept it as basic, as a part of the bedrock of his noetic structure. 'The mature theist *commits* himself to belief in God; this means that he accepts belief in God as basic.'²

In what follows I would like to examine and question the arguments Plantinga uses to support the view that religious belief ought to be basic in a person's epistemological structure. I will argue that belief in God *ought* not to be considered as basic because it *cannot* be. Belief in God is not basic because it is inferred, and thus based on a more basic proposition held to be true by the person doing the believing. In short, I shall maintain that an inference is needed if belief in God is to be considered rational.

II

According to Plantinga, both the traditional natural theologian's (e.g. Aquinas, Descartes, Locke *et al.*) and the traditional nontheist's (W. K.

¹ Alvin Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Rational?', in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 7-27; 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?', *Nous* xv (1981), 41-51; and 'The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology', *Christian Scholars Review* xi (1981), 187-98. My discussion of Plantinga's views rests upon these articles.

² Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?', p. 41.

Clifford is Plantinga's chief example) position with regard to belief in God is based on some form of epistemological evidentialism. The evidentialist claims that belief in God is '...irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or noetically substandard...' unless there are sufficient reasons for it.¹ Thus the evidentialist denies that belief in God is, in Plantinga's terms, 'properly basic'.² In an evidentialist epistemology a proposition p is properly basic for a person S if and only if p is not accepted on the basis of any other beliefs or propositions. Plantinga maintains that the evidentialist position is rooted in a foundationalist epistemology. Basic propositions, which form the foundational set F of a person's noetic structure are propositions which are not inferred from other propositions. The propositions in F are supposed to compose the evidential set of propositions E such that a person's belief in God is rational if and only if it is evident with respect to E. What Plantinga wants to know is how a proposition gets into the set F and why it is wrong to think (as most people have thought) that a belief in God is itself in F. A person knows the propositions in the foundation set F of his noetic structure, but not in virtue of other propositions, and Plantinga wants to know why belief in God cannot be a member of F.

Plantinga argues that if the evidentialist is to support his view of religious belief he must produce some necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and show that belief in God does not satisfy those conditions. People whom Plantinga terms 'classical foundationalists' have traditionally held that a proposition p is properly basic for a person S if and only if p is either self-evident or incorrigible for S (modern foundationalism) or either self-evident or 'evident to the senses' for S (ancient and medieval foundationalism). Examples of self-evident propositions are

- (1) $2 + 1 = 3$,
- (2) No man is both married and unmarried,
- (3) Redness is distinct from greenness,

and

- (4) The whole is greater than the part.

An example of an incorrigible proposition is

- (5) I seem to see a red book.

Propositions that are evident to the senses are

- (6) There is an ashtray on my desk,

and

- (7) I am wearing shoes.

The outstanding characteristics of self-evident propositions are that they are necessary truths and are such that one simply sees them to be true upon

¹ Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Rational?', p. 27.

² It seems fair to assume that when Plantinga speaks of beliefs being properly basic he is using 'belief' for what is believed, the propositional content, rather than any psychological state of belief.

grasping or understanding the meanings of their terms. Moreover, a self-evident proposition is person-relative; that is, what is self-evident to one person might not be to another. An incorrigible proposition is one which a person could neither mistakenly believe nor disbelieve. Propositions that are evident to the senses are known immediately and grounded in a use of one's senses.

According to Plantinga, the classical foundationalist's criterion for proper basicity is something like the following:

- (8) For any proposition A and person S, A is properly basic for S if and only if A is either incorrigible for S or self-evident to S, or evident to the senses for S.

Now how can a person know a proposition like (8) to be true? Certainly, says Plantinga, (8) is neither self-evident nor incorrigible. If it is not, it is not basic. How, then, can the classical foundationalist lay it down as a criterion for proper basicity? He cannot simply take it to be true. He might try to produce some argument for it from premises that are self-evident or incorrigible. But it is very difficult to see how he might do this. If he cannot, or until he does, there is no reason why anyone should accept (8) as true.

III

I think Plantinga has posed a serious problem for the classical foundationalist. But as Plantinga himself tells us, classical foundationalism is not the only form of foundationalism. There is also a weak foundationalism.¹ In such a foundationalism, one requirement for a proposition being properly basic is that it not be inferred from or dependent upon another proposition or propositions. This is just what it means to be properly basic.² However, a problem apparently presents itself for weak foundationalism. Given that there are no criteria for proper basicity like those suggested by the classical foundationalist, apparently anyone can include anything in his basic noetic structure, despite what any opponent might say or think. Plantinga calls this the 'Great Pumpkin objection'.³ In response to this objection he suggests an inductive procedure for arriving at criteria for proper basicity. Moreover, he correctly notes that one need not have a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgements about proper basicity. Even if I do not know of a satisfactory substitute for the criteria of the classical foundationalist,⁴ I am still entitled to hold that certain propositions are or are not properly basic.

However, contrary to Plantinga, I want to maintain that belief in God

¹ 'The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology', pp. 193, 194. Plantinga notes that many Reformed thinkers have endorsed weak foundationalism.

² Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?', pp. 48 ff.

³ Plantinga, 'The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology', pp. 195-8.

⁴ I doubt that there are any criteria for proper basicity. If there are, I am convinced that they will involve propositions about states or events of myself.

is not properly basic. I will try to show that this is the case, not by proposing some criteria which any proposition must meet in order to be properly basic (which is what Plantinga says I must do), but by maintaining that there is another proposition which is properly basic and which is incompatible with belief in God being properly basic. Because of this incompatibility, one or the other cannot be properly basic, and I am contending that it is belief in God which is not so characterized.

IV

Plantinga cites the following group of propositions as examples of those which the theist might consider to be properly basic:

- (9) God is speaking to me,
- (10) God has created all this,
- (11) God disapproves of what I have done,
- (12) God forgives me,

and

- (13) God is to be thanked and praised.

Now it is, says Plantinga, consistent with the truth of (9) to (13) to hold that the proposition

- (14) There is such a person as God,

is neither properly basic nor taken as basic by those who believe in God. They might consider (9)–(13) as basic and believe in (14) on the basis of these. On this view it is not strictly correct to say that belief in God is properly basic.

Plantinga suggests that we compare this with our belief in perceptual objects. Here, too, he claims, it is a relatively specific proposition rather than its more general associate that is properly basic. That is, the proposition

- (15) There are trees,

which is to be similar to proposition (14), is based on its more foundational associate

- (16) I see a tree,

which is supposed to parallel propositions (9)–(13). Thus, because a proposition like (15) is not genuinely properly basic, yet we take it as true, we should accept proposition (14) as true since it is based on the genuinely basic propositions (9)–(13).

However, are propositions (9)–(13) parallel to proposition (16)? I do not think that they are precisely parallel. Proposition (16) explicitly states a fact involving my awareness of an object. If propositions (9)–(13) are to parallel (16) in the relevant respects they must be rephrased to include a phrase about my awareness of God. Thus, we will have:

- (9') I am aware of God speaking to me,
- (10') I am aware of God as having created all this,
- (11') I am aware of God disapproving of what I have done,

(12') I am aware of God forgiving me,
and

(13') I am aware that I should thank and praise God.

Now, when I am aware of an entity of any kind I must be aware of some of its properties. When I see the tree I am aware of its position in relationship to me, and I am also aware of its colour, that it is swaying in the breeze, etc. These properties enable me to individuate it. If I am aware of God I must also be aware of some of the properties that enable me to individuate him. In propositions (9)–(12) the properties of God of which Plantinga says I am aware involve certain of God's activities. (Proposition (13) does not state an activity of God but rather what my response to God should be because of the activities like those mentioned in (9)–(12).) In other words, God is personally active in revealing himself directly to me or by means of his activities in the world about me of which I am aware. Now Plantinga, being a theist, holds that God is a being with distinctive properties, and it is these that make God God and enable me to individuate him as God. For example, God is a necessary being, all-powerful, all-knowing, etc. Granted this concept of God, in what way can he reveal himself to me? Does he say 'Stewart (or "Alvin"), I am God'? If he does, he is assuming that *prior* to his revealing himself I already know the meaning of the name 'God', and that I associate certain individuating properties with it. Or does he say 'Stewart, I forgive you' (proposition (12)) or 'Stewart, I disapprove of what you have done' (proposition (11)) or 'Stewart, I am to be thanked and praised' (proposition (13))? These means of self-revelation will also, I suggest, require the possession on my part of the concept of God prior to his revelatory acts to me. At minimum it will require that I think of him as a person. Moreover, in these cases the properties manifested in God's revealing himself will not be distinctive enough and thus will not enable me to individuate him. For example, in the case of the first two statements, the activities involved are not distinctive activities of God, but can be performed by any person I know. Thus I will not directly believe (which I must do if these propositions are properly basic) that it is God performing them (assuming that I have a knowledge of *only* these activities). It seems wrong, then, to consider propositions (9)–(13) as properly basic, for each involves the prior possession by me of some knowledge or beliefs about the person or concept of God.

In order to clarify this point, consider my wife and myself. On various occasions she says to me, 'Stewart, I forgive you'. In these situations I am able to know that it is my wife forgiving me because in addition to her saying 'I forgive you', I know other properties of her that enable me to individuate her. She has a body which now is the only body two feet in front of my body, two feet to the left of the table which is on my right, etc. Compare this with Plantinga's example. He tells us that God forgives him. But how does Plantinga know that it is God forgiving him? I presume that other people

also forgive him at different times. If God is an immaterial being without a body, Plantinga cannot fill out a description of what God looks like and where he is standing (as I can with my wife when she forgives me); a description which would display a sufficient knowledge of various properties of his that are individuating in nature. If there is a voice involved in this act of forgiveness how does Plantinga know that it is God's voice? Can Plantinga rely solely on the sound of the voice – it has the resonance of God's voice? Again I do not think so, unless, on previous occasions, the sound of the voice has been associated with a set of individuating descriptions like those just mentioned regarding my wife. A voice in and of itself bears no self-authenticating marks of its owner. Thus, in Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles Saul hears a voice and queries 'Who are you?'. It turns out to be the voice of Christ (whom Trinitarians consider to be divine).

Now consider the case of my thanking and praising God. The activities of thanking and praising, considered in and of themselves, are done by me towards a vast number of persons and not just towards God. Thus not only will there have to be a reason for my giving the particular person involved the appropriate praise and thanks due to him, but I will also have to be able to individuate this person. Or consider proposition (9). How do I know that it is God speaking to me? As we have just seen the saying of things like 'I forgive you' or 'I disapprove of what you have done' will not alone lead me to believe that it is God speaking to me. Why not, then, think that my dead uncle is speaking to me? Presumably, in Plantinga's case, he does not think that his dead uncle is speaking to him because the voice (if there is one) does not sound like his uncle's voice, the content of what is said could not have been known by his uncle, etc. However, reference to such factors as these involves an appeal to distinctive properties possessed by God and his dead uncle. In short, if God is to successfully reveal himself to me (or Plantinga) and, just as important, if I am to recognize him, I must know certain of his individuating properties that will ground my assent to his being God, and one or more of these properties will have to be manifested in the revelatory situation. For example, because I believe that God has the property of being a necessary being the manifestation of this property in a revelatory situation will ground my assent to the proposition that God is involved. Thus the Christian theist sees the resurrection of Jesus Christ as having the marks of God's presence because it was impossible to keep Christ in the grave. Or consider the following proposition:

- (17) I am aware that God will mutilate my wife and child for no good reason.

I doubt that Plantinga would regard this proposition as properly basic. But why not? In so far as it is a proposition about God it seems no different from propositions (9)–(14). I suggest that Plantinga would not regard proposition (17) as properly basic because he does not think that God would commit

an act like that described in (17). But why does he believe that this is so? Must he not have a reason? Must not his rejection of (17) as properly basic be based on some prior knowledge of what God is like? I believe that a reasonable theist would answer affirmatively.¹ For the same reason I think a reasonable theist would not claim that propositions (9)–(14) are properly basic.

The question which I now want to consider is whether I can have a knowledge of God's properties which allow me to individuate him when he reveals himself to me, without having performed any type of *inference* to obtain a knowledge of these properties. If I cannot know these properties and recognize him without such an inference, then propositions like (9)–(13) cannot be properly basic. They will presuppose an inference of some form, an inference by means of which I obtain a knowledge of what God is like. If such an inference is performed, what might be its basis?

I think that if I (or Plantinga) am to believe or know that God exists and is related to me and the world in the ways Plantinga suggests, then I need to make certain inferences about God based upon a knowledge of myself. One thing that I know about myself is that I am contingent, that is, I know that (i) I exist but not necessarily (I am not a necessary being), and (ii) because of the truth of (i), my existence needs an explanation. By 'necessary being' I mean a being for which it is not possible that it not exist. For purposes at hand I shall understand a necessary being to be a factually necessary being (as opposed to a logically necessary being).

Now suppose, for the sake of argument, that I were God and thus a necessary being. What would I think of propositions like (9)–(14)? Could I accept them as properly basic? Clearly I could accept (14) as properly basic because of the fact that I myself was the person to whom the proposition was referring. (14) would be properly basic for me because I would know immediately that I possessed the property of being a necessary being. Propositions (9)–(13), however, would not be properly basic, unless I was speaking to myself, forgiving myself, etc. (And if I am God I cannot, for example, forgive myself, because I cannot sin.) Yet, Plantinga tells us that a proposition like (14) is based upon (9)–(13). It appears in this case that I have a properly basic proposition based upon non-properly basic propositions, indeed, on propositions which are now not even true.

In other words, what is properly basic is, in Plantinga's words, person relative. Without mentioning any beliefs about my own nature, merely claiming that propositions (9)–(14) are properly basic can lead to some

¹ For example, the theist might reject proposition (20) by making use of the concept of a contingent being. He could infer that a being who can create contingent beings is all-powerful. Because he is all-powerful he cannot perform an evil act, for he would have no reason for performing such an act. A person performs an evil act because he needs or wants something he cannot have or obtain through legitimate means, and the needs or wants provide the reasons for the act. But a being with the power to create things could never need or want anything it could not just create.

strange and, I think, undesirable conclusions. To prevent those problems from arising I must include within my foundational noetic structure F some propositions about *myself*. I will need to include at least the following two propositions:

(18) I exist,

and

(19) I am a contingent being.

Proposition (19) is particularly important for it will prevent me from identifying myself with the being referred to in propositions (9)–(14). But if proposition (19) is properly basic, can propositions (9)–(14) likewise be properly basic?¹ I do not think so. I want to maintain that if proposition (19) is properly basic it automatically excludes (9)–(14) from that status because it entails and I infer from it propositions, at least one of which is either identical with or contradictory to (14). And if something is inferred it is not properly basic.

What propositions do I infer from proposition (19)? One is that

(20) A necessary being exists.²

Who or what is this necessary being? Consider proposition (19). I am a contingent being. To what does the term 'I' refer in this proposition? If I am a materialist I will think that it refers to my body. If I am a dualist I will think that it refers to an immaterial soul or mind.³ Take the first alternative. If I am identical with my body it is possible for me to regard the ultimate components of my body as necessary beings. My existence will be contingent in the sense that it depends upon the collection and organization of the necessary beings composing it. Should this collection and organization break down I will cease to exist. In this sense I am *naturally* contingent.

A belief such as this will pose insuperable problems for Plantinga's claim that proposition (14) is properly basic. For Plantinga maintains that the God of (14) is the creator of the material universe (see proposition (10)). The material universe in his view of things is contingent. But if I believe that I am contingent and that I am composed out of my body, and the ultimate material components of my body are necessary, then I cannot accept proposition (14) as properly basic. For (10) (and, consequently, (14)), contradicts what I believe and have inferred from proposition (19).

Nevertheless, there is another alternative. I may again think that the term 'I' refers to my body and that I am thus composed out of material entities.

¹ Is proposition (19) properly basic like proposition (18)? It might be maintained that I can only know (19) is true subsequent to my knowing that (18) is true. For purposes of discussion, however, I will assume (19) is properly basic. If it is not it is still more basic than proposition (14).

² 'I apprehend there are very few cases in which we can, from principles that are contingent, deduce truths that are necessary. I can only recollect one instance of this kind – namely – that, from the existence of things contingent and mutable, we can infer the existence of an immutable and eternal cause of them.' Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay vi, Chapter 5, *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 2 vols. ed. Sir William Hamilton (Edinburgh: Maclachlan and Stewart, 1863), 1, 442.

³ This is Plantinga's view. See his *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 65–9.

This time, however, I think that the ultimate material particles composing my body are themselves contingent. Because they are contingent they must be caused to exist. Their cause or creator is a necessary being and their contingency is a *metaphysical* contingency. Now either the cause of these material particles is identical with the God of proposition (14), or it is not. If it is then I have inferred that the God of (14) exists and thus (14) cannot be properly basic. If it is not identical with the God of proposition (14) then I have again inferred a proposition which contradicts proposition (10). (For if this other being is the cause of all this, (10) cannot be true of God.) As a result I cannot accept (14) as properly basic.

The situation is no different if I think that I am a metaphysically contingent immaterial mind. I will infer a necessary cause of my existence just as I did in the case where the material entities composing my body are metaphysically contingent. And the same type of problem for propositions (10)–(14) will ensue. Thus, if the cause of my existence which I infer is not identical with the God of proposition (14), then the latter cannot cause my existence. If it is identical with the God of proposition (14), then (14) cannot be properly basic.¹

If the foregoing reasoning is sound I ought not to accept belief in God as properly basic. Without knowing that proposition (19) truly describes the nature of my own self, I might both accept proposition (14) as properly basic and think that it is true of myself. This would be, at the least, severe megalomania. I must accept proposition (19) as properly basic in order to avoid this situation. But once I accept (19) as properly basic I cannot accept (14) as properly basic. And since I cannot accept it as properly basic, I ought not to accept it.

It should also be noted that the inference made on the basis of proposition (19) provides the solution for a problem noted earlier in this section. I pointed out there that in order for God to successfully reveal himself to me, I must have a working concept of God which will enable me to recognize him. If I am correct in my analysis of the role played by proposition (19) in my noetic structure, I do have such a concept of God.

One further comment is appropriate. In arguing for the proper basicity of religious belief, Plantinga has attempted to draw certain analogies between being aware of a tree (proposition (16)) and being aware of God (proposition (14)). I think that Plantinga has failed to notice that the two are different in a crucial respect. I am not aware that the tree exists in the same way that I am aware that a necessary being or beings exist. The difference stems from

¹ I have stated that if proposition (19) is properly basic, it excludes propositions (9)–(14) from that status. I have explicitly outlined how (19)'s being properly basic affects the status of (10) and thus (14). I think that the status of (10) has implications for the status of (11), (12), and (13). Take (13). Why is God to be thanked and praised? One of the reasons theists give is that God has created us. I am grateful to God because he has given me existence. But giving me existence is an activity encompassed by proposition (10). Thus (10) is related to (13).

self-knowledge. I can know myself without inferring (or knowing) that any other contingent entity like the tree exists. I might be the only contingently existing being. But I cannot know myself without inferring that a necessary being exists, for in knowing myself I know that I am contingent. The existence of a contingent being implies the existence of a necessary being, but the existence of a contingent self need not imply the existence of another contingent being.

v

I conclude that Plantinga is wrong in regarding belief in God as properly basic. One can only maintain that belief in God is properly basic by ignoring one's own contingency. I contend that anyone who believes in God must acknowledge his contingency and that his knowledge of his contingent nature enables him to infer the existence of a necessary being or beings. I do not claim that any person who believes in God will be able to explicate his knowledge of his contingency in philosophical terms like 'contingency' and 'necessity'. Most people acknowledge their contingency in terms of questions like 'Why do I exist?' and 'What will happen to me when I die?'

My argument against Plantinga rests upon talk of necessary and contingent beings. Some philosophers and theologians might feel uncomfortable with such talk. Plantinga should not, however, for few have done more in our day than he to re-establish the integrity of talk about essential and accidental properties and contingent and necessary beings. Of course someone might grant the legitimacy of such talk but argue that I am wrong to think that a proposition such as (19) is in the foundation set F of my noetic structure. I cannot, he might argue, know (19) immediately. This, however, I find incredible. As Arnauld wrote to Descartes:

that I cannot proceed from myself positively and as it were from a cause I deem it to be so evident to the light of nature that its proof would be vain, a proving of the known by the less known.¹

¹ R. Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols. trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: At the Univerisity Press, 1931), II, 88–9.