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Plantinga's Parity Thesis

Alvin Plantinga's epistemology of religion is no less complex than Alston's. It can be divided into two parts. The first, both historically and in the order I consider it here (this and the next chapter), is Plantinga's development of the notion of the proper basicity of beliefs; this is his clearest defense of the parity thesis. In this context, Plantinga's chosen language is that of "epistemic justification" and "rationality." This is to be contrasted with the second part of his epistemology, in which Plantinga develops and defends his account of "epistemic warrant" or "positive epistemic status." There his concern is the quality, property, or thing, enough of which converts mere true belief into knowledge. In the essays and books in which he considers these issues, he does not explicitly consider a parity thesis. Nevertheless, I discuss this aspect of his epistemology in Chapter 9.

In defending his version of the parity thesis, Plantinga encourages us to reconsider epistemic foundationalism and its relationship to theistic belief. He further urges us to reject evidentialism, which, he claims, is rooted in a certain version of foundationalism. In this chapter my initial concern is to introduce Plantinga's earlier work on rationality, noting the major tenets of his understanding of foundationalism as well as his arguments against evidentialism and the particular foundationalist understanding of justification he claims undergirds it. From this discussion emerges a description of

Plantinga's version of the parity thesis. I then suggest a challenge to it.

1. Foundationalism

Plantinga's general concern is whether belief in God, that is, the belief "God exists," *can* be (as opposed to *is*) rational.¹ To show how it can be rational, he tries to show how it can be "properly basic" in a foundational system of justification. On Plantinga's account, epistemological foundationalism is a normative view.² One of its goals is to lay down conditions for rational belief. He writes: "According to the foundationalist, there is a right way and a wrong way with respect to belief. People have responsibilities, duties and obligations with respect to their believings just as with respect to their (other) actions." To be rational, then, "is to exercise one's epistemic powers properly—to exercise them in such a way as to go contrary to none of the norms for such exercise."³ To be rational, on this account, is something a person does; it has to do with one's responsibility or, more broadly, one's following the norms in epistemic matters. Having stated what it is to be rational, of course, does not obviously clarify the related issue of epistemic *justification* of belief. Here Plantinga is sometimes unclear. He apparently uses the terms "rational" and "irrational" interchangeably with "justified" and "unjustified." And his claims are, on the one hand, about *beliefs*: beliefs are rational (or justified). On the other hand, he talks about rational *noetic structures* (or even simply of "being rational," as in the above quotation). In the main, his concern seems to be justified belief. We can, then, pass over the notion of

1. Normally, Plantinga speaks not of the belief that God exists but of belief in God. The latter is to be understood as the former. I follow Plantinga in this convenient shorthand. Also, as it turns out, the general concern for Plantinga is beliefs about God and his activity (e.g., God's creation of the flowers), from which there is an immediate inference to "God exists." Again, for convenience, I sometimes do not distinguish between the belief that God exists and other theistic beliefs.

2. At least he thinks this in the account given in the Reformed epistemology essays published between 1979 and 1985, the essays and ideas around which this chapter is written.

3. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49–62, quotation pp. 53–54.

rationality *überhaupt* and concern ourselves with the justification or *propriety* of beliefs. We can do this safely because Plantinga's comments about rationality are tied closely to his comments about justification, both being normative notions and, presumably, the justification of (most of) one's believings being at least necessary for the rationality of one's noetic structure or more generally for one's being (epistemically) rational.

First, then, some comments about Plantinga's notion of noetic structure. He says: "A person's noetic structure is the set of propositions he believes together with certain epistemic relations that hold among him and these propositions."⁴ These relations include the basis relation (that I believe *p* on the basis of *q*), the supports relations (that one belief or set of beliefs provides evidential backing for another belief), and the propriety of beliefs (those that are inferential are "properly nonbasic" only if appropriately based on others, and those that are noninferential are "properly basic" only if certain hard-to-specify conditions are met). Plantinga also mentions strength of belief, depth of ingression, epistemic history, and relations between belief and acceptance as candidates for important aspects of noetic structures. Of all these aspects of noetic structures, I concentrate on the notion of properly basic beliefs.

Plantinga notes various types of foundationalism and isolates two in particular: classical (or strong) and weak. He writes: "Suppose we say that *weak* foundationalism is the view that (1) every rational noetic structure has a foundation [i.e., a set of properly basic beliefs], and (2) in a rational noetic structure, non-basic belief is proportional in strength to support from the foundations." Classical foundationalism, in contrast, consists of weak foundationalism plus certain specified criteria for proper basicity. What are those criteria? "Ancient and medieval foundationalists tended to hold that a proposition is properly basic for a person only if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses; modern foundationalists—Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and the like—tended to hold that a proposition is properly basic for *S* only if either self-evident or incorrigible for *S*."⁵ Plantinga sometimes identifies classical foundationalism as the disjunction of ancient and medieval with mod-

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., pp. 56–57.

ern foundationalism, but he does not always do so. In places he treats classical foundationalism simply as modern foundationalism. Unless otherwise indicated, I use the term "classical foundationalism" in the broader, disjunctive sense.

The belief that God exists is, of course, neither self-evident, nor incorrigible, nor evident to the senses. If Plantinga is to show how belief in God can be properly basic, he must show that classical foundationalism is false. One of his goals is to accomplish that task.

2. Evidentialism

By showing classical foundationalism to be false and arguing that belief in God can be properly basic in some other foundational system of justification, Plantinga may be able to show how belief in God can be epistemically justified. But the so-called irrationality (nonjustified status) of belief in God should not be seen simply as a problem arising out of classical foundationalism. In a significant way, says Plantinga, the charge of irrationality—that belief in God is not justified—is rooted in "evidentialism" and can be generally stated as the "evidentialist objection to theistic belief."⁶

Evidentialism is the view represented by the following:

- (1) There are obligations or standards of excellence with respect to belief.

Additionally, Plantinga cites a claim of W. K. Clifford:⁷

- (2) "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

How are the obligations or standards of (1) to be understood? Plantinga's earliest Reformed epistemology essays suggest several dif-

6. Just as foundationalism is a normative thesis, so is evidentialism. Some of Plantinga's claims about evidentialism are virtually identical to his claims about foundationalism. See Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," p. 53, and "Reason and Belief in God," p. 30.

7. As quoted in Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 25; from W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays*, vol. 2, *Essays and Reviews* (London: Macmillan Press, 1879), originally in *Contemporary Review*, 1877.

ferent forms the obligations might assume, but he moves in a later essay to a model employing the notion of standards rather than obligations. The motivation for this shift need not concern us here.⁸ But perhaps the following captures more of Plantinga's spirit in characterizing evidentialism:

- (2') It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.

We can understand (2') to be a more explicit expression of (2).

Plantinga gives a list of evidentialists that includes Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Blanshard, Russell, Scriven, Clifford, and Flew. What common philosophical view is shared by this otherwise varied collection of philosophers? In part it is a view about the epistemic status that belief in God must have if it is justified. Following (1) and (2'), they all agree that

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

Some evidentialists also hold a further claim:

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

Others do not. Here the evidentialist objection comes to the fore. The objection is rooted in the alleged truth of claims (1), (2'), (3), and (4) and concludes that belief in God is not justified. Thus, all evidentialist objectors are evidentialists, but the converse is not true. Evidentialism, then, is the view that minimally (1), (2'), and (3) are true. The evidentialist objection is that evidentialism is true, as is (4). Thus, the belief that God exists ought not to be held or is noetically unfortunate, untidy, or substandard.

Plantinga disagrees with the evidentialist objector on at least two

8. For obligations, see, for example, Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 31–34. For standards, see Plantinga, "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 111.

9. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 27.

accounts. First, he thinks there is evidence for the belief that God exists.¹⁰ Although this disagreement is important, I do not explore it here. Second, he thinks evidence is not needed for justified belief in God. The evidentialist responds that nothing is more reasonable than (3); if there is no evidence or reason to believe in God, one should not do so on pain of irrationality. But Plantinga does not mean by his claim that no evidence whatsoever is needed for justified belief in God. What he means by "reason" or "evidence" is not simply justification in all its varied forms. Rather, he has in mind discursive justification. We can say that a belief p is discursively justified for some person S when S holds p because of some other belief or beliefs she holds. Presumably, the truth of these other beliefs is taken by S to make p 's truth more likely than if they were not true. Plantinga does not give a complete account of the relationship between the justifying belief(s) and the justified belief, but we can surmise that it must be some sort of inferential relationship. Discursive justification does not include, then, noninferential justification. It does not include justification where p is justified by some sort of experience (e.g., my being appeared to in a certain way) or by some feature of the proposition itself (e.g., self-evidence). Thus, in the typical case, the belief that $2 + 1 = 3$ is not discursively justified but held on the grounds of self-evidence. When Plantinga speaks of evidentialists holding (3), he attributes to them the view that belief in God must be discursively justified.

A problem with Plantinga's claims arises here. Claim (2') is that evidence is needed for *any* belief to be intellectually nondefective or intellectually permissible. If Plantinga understands evidence as discursive justification and (2') is true, then every belief must be justified by some other belief. Foundational models of justification seem to be excluded. But I think this is simply a slip of the pen. Plantinga need not attribute the stronger view to the evidentialist; the evidentialist need not claim that *all* beliefs must be discursively justified. She need only claim that beliefs that cannot be (or are not) properly nondiscursive, as far as their justification is concerned, must be discursively justified. In fact, Plantinga claims, evidentialism is rooted in classical foundationalism. Thus, the beliefs

10. See, for example, the ontological argument in Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 85-112.

that are properly basic—those beliefs that are either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses—need not be provided evidence in the way (2') demands. Claim (2') should be replaced by

- (2★) It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.

Naturally, if the evidentialist objector's challenge is to make sense, the belief "God exists" must require discursive justification. Thus, (3) should be replaced by

- (3★) Since belief in God requires discursive justification, it is irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.

Our corrected picture of evidentialism is that minimally (1), (2★), and (3★) are true. The evidentialist objector believes not only that evidentialism is true but that (4) is also true. Thus, belief in God is irrational. Plantinga can now be seen as rejecting (3★) and (4).

Despite Plantinga's disagreements with (3★) and (4), he does think (1) is true. He writes that "it seems plausible to hold that there are obligations and norms with respect to belief, and I do not intend to contest this assumption."¹¹ Extrapolating from his later work, I assume he would no longer put forth this claim alone but instead make appropriate modifications in light of the demands of noetic excellence or nondefectiveness.¹² Thus, he would affirm

- (1★) There are obligations, standards of excellence, or (other) normative patterns to follow with respect to belief which, when followed, provide permissive justification for a belief.

The evidentialist thus would hold (1★), (2★), and (3★), and the evidentialist objector would add (4).

11. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 31.

12. Whether (2★) is something Plantinga believes is not clear. I presume he would not obviously disagree, but I suspect he would be hesitant to say that there is a class of beliefs whose members noetically demand discursive justification.

Two aspects of Plantinga's thought deserve special attention. First, his account of epistemic justification is an account of a normative notion of epistemic justification.¹³ Although he does not spell out the details of the position, the notion of justification with which he is concerned is in the neighborhood of permissive justification, that is, what one is permitted to believe given that one has done as much as can be expected vis-à-vis the normative requirements for belief, whether those requirements are deontologically based or otherwise. Second, he disagrees not only with the evidentialist objector but also with some of the claims of the evidentialist. Not only is there discursive evidence for belief in God, but even were there not, belief in God could nonetheless be justified. Although Plantinga holds that discursive justification for belief in God can be given, it is not required for justification, at least in the sense of permissive, normative justification. The evidentialist is wrong; belief in God does not require discursive justification.

We are not yet in a position to state Plantinga's version of the parity thesis. We do know that it involves a permissive, normative notion of justification (not unlike Alston's J_{nw} , in some respects). It also includes some reference to the fact that theistic beliefs need not be nonbasic but can be properly basic.

3. The Failure of Classical Foundationalism

Plantinga argues in two ways against classical foundationalism. Let us call these the "incoherence argument" and the "widespread belief argument." First, the incoherence argument. Plantinga captures classical foundationalism's criteria for proper basicality in this way:¹⁴

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

On the classical foundationalist's view, not only is the disjunction of the criteria sufficient for proper basicality, but it is necessary as well. Plantinga's concern is with the necessity of the criteria.

13. He may hold other understandings of justification to be plausible as well. And he certainly holds that normative justification and epistemic warrant are not the same thing; see Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," pp. 2-3.

14. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 59.

According to classical foundationalism, says Plantinga, beliefs are either properly basic, properly nonbasic, or not justified. Plantinga asks, of these alternatives, which is (5)? To be justified, (5) must be either properly basic or properly nonbasic. If it is properly basic it must be either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. It is none of these. It must, then, be properly nonbasic. To be properly nonbasic, (5) must be supported by a belief from the foundation. Is it thus supported? It is not easy to see how. In summary the challenge is this. If the statement of the criteria, that is, (5), cannot be anchored, as it were, by its own expressed criteria, how is it to be anchored? If it cannot be anchored on classical foundationalism's own grounds, it is either noetically substandard or we ought not believe it. Classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent.

The widespread belief argument simply has it that, even were it coherent to believe (5), such an account of epistemic justification would make many of our beliefs unjustified. Plantinga has in mind beliefs about the past and other minds. These follow neither deductively, inductively, nor on a probabilistic basis from the basic beliefs allowed by (5). This shows that (5) is false or at least unjustified, for surely many beliefs about other minds and the past are justified. Here Plantinga's parity thesis begins to emerge, for the development of a theory that allows us to hold that these widespread beliefs are justified leads to a theory that allows belief in God to be justified on similar grounds. He concludes that, given these two arguments, classical foundationalism is in poor shape. It is not, according to Plantinga, a viable epistemic model for normative, permissive justification.¹⁵

4. Plantinga's Nonclassical, Normative Foundationalism

The death of classical foundationalism does not signal the end of all foundational models of justification; Plantinga remains a foundationalist. Two further points are relevant in this regard. First, a belief's being neither self-evident, incorrigible, nor evident to the

15. I believe he would add that classical foundationalism is not a viable epistemic model for many other kinds of justification as well, including that justification ("warrant") needed for knowledge.

senses does not rule out its being properly basic. The rejection of the classical criteria does not leave the foundationalist with nowhere to turn. Having shown that the classical criteria do not provide necessary conditions for proper basicity does not entail the nonexistence of all criteria. Just as the critic of the verification principle of meaningfulness does not, on showing the principle false, have to admit that there are no criteria for meaningfulness, Plantinga does not have to admit that there are no criteria for proper basicity after rejecting the classical criteria.

Second, on rejecting a particular set of criteria for proper basicity one need not have a replacement in order to recognize beliefs as properly basic. One need not know what the criteria are in order to recognize that some beliefs are properly basic. Also, one need not know the criteria to recognize that something is not properly basic. Again, just as the critic of the verification principle of meaningfulness can know that "T'was brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gymbel in the wabe" is not meaningful, the critic of the classical criteria can know that some belief is not properly basic, even though neither critic is able to replace the rejected criteria. One can remain a foundationalist without an explicit account of the criteria for foundational beliefs.

What of the criteria, then? Are there criteria necessary and sufficient for proper basicity? It is less than clear that there are, for Plantinga's suggested method for discovering the criteria leads to a much more open understanding of the role of criteria for proper basicity than that provided by classical models of foundationalism. He writes in this now oft-quoted passage that

the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, *inductive*. We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter. . . . We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by references to those examples. Under the right conditions, for example, it is clearly rational to believe that you see a human person before you: a being who has thoughts and feelings, who knows and believes things, who makes decisions and acts. It is clear, furthermore, that you are under no obligation to reason to this belief from others you hold; under those conditions that belief is properly basic for you. But then (s) . . . must be mistaken; the belief in question, under

those circumstances, is properly basic, though neither self-evident nor incorrigible [nor evident to the senses] for you. Similarly, you may seem to remember that you had breakfast this morning, and perhaps you know of no reason to suppose your memory is playing you tricks. If so, you are entirely justified in taking that belief as basic. Of course it isn't properly basic on the criteria offered by classical . . . foundationalists; but that fact counts not against you but against those criteria.

Accordingly, criteria for proper basicity must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented as *ex Cathedra*, but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples. But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he doesn't accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.¹⁶

Rather than arbitrarily legislate the criteria for proper basicity, we must inductively examine our noetic structures. On the basis of what we take to be properly basic, we must come to agreement on the criteria. If we disagree on which beliefs ought to be accepted as properly basic, our criteria are different. This suggests that proper basicity and its criteria are relative, in some way, person to person or community to community.

Plantinga continues by noting that criteria arrived at in the particularistic way he suggests may not be polemically useful. If we arrive at different criteria when using the inductive procedure, we may not be able to use those criteria to reject another's examples of properly basic beliefs. He wants to deny, however, that just any belief can be properly basic. He says that in fact properly basic beliefs stand in relation to the conditions in which they are formed, and this relationship provides justification for properly basic beliefs. Properly basic beliefs are not, says Plantinga, *groundless*.

16. Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981): 41-51, quotation p. 50.

It is tempting to raise the following sort of question. If belief in God is properly basic, why cannot *just any* belief be properly basic? Could we not say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as basic? . . . If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?

Certainly not.¹⁷

One thing is clear: Plantinga wishes to reject a certain kind of arbitrariness; he wants to reject an arbitrariness in which just any belief can be properly basic, an arbitrariness in which a Great Pumpkin belief is epistemically justified.¹⁸ So, not just any belief can be taken as properly basic. A belief is properly basic only in certain circumstances—only when it is grounded. But which circumstances provide grounding?

Plantinga does not provide a formal account of the relationship between beliefs and the conditions in which they are formed. He instead provides some hints. I focus on two points. First, if one has no reason to suspect that a belief is not justified, it is justified (or perhaps, if one has no reason to doubt one's epistemic practice, e.g., one's memory, the beliefs it generates are justified). Second, if one has done all that can be expected epistemically with regard to a belief, it is justified. Plantinga also provides the following examples.¹⁹ He notes that the conditions in which the beliefs are formed may be much more complex than the examples suggest, but nonetheless "I see a tree" is properly basic if I am being appeared to treely, "that person is in pain" is properly basic when I am aware of that person displaying pain behavior, and "I had breakfast this morning" is properly basic if I seem to remember having breakfast this morning. Since these beliefs are not based on other beliefs, they are basic. They are not, however, arbitrary or groundless.

17. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 74.

18. One is tempted to call this arbitrariness "relativism," but that term is surely a loaded one. To avoid much potential confusion, I continue in my use of the term "arbitrary" (and its cognates).

19. I refer to these as the "paradigms" of justified belief or as the "paradigms" of properly basic beliefs; see Chapter 1, Section 2.

The circumstances vary the conditions in which a belief is properly basic, but if a belief is properly basic there is a true proposition of the sort:²⁰

- (6) In conditions *C*, *S* is justified in taking *p* as basic.

Certain kinds of conditions thus ground certain kinds of belief as basic. The beliefs are justified by those conditions, although one does not hold the beliefs on the basis of some other belief. Such beliefs are nondiscursively justified or properly basic.

Some clarifications are possible here. First, surely some features can be noted and agreed on which are necessarily shared by all properly basic beliefs. For example, *p* is a properly basic belief only if *p* is basic (not based on other beliefs) and proper (meets the conditions for the proper basicity of *p*). These purely formal criteria—call them “formal” or “universal” criteria—are not, apparently, of concern to Plantinga.

A second level of criteria—call them “material” or “general” criteria—can be distinguished. Self-evidence, being evident to the senses, and incorrigibility are examples. As Plantinga argues, these examples are neither severally nor jointly necessary for proper basicity. Any belief meeting one of these criteria, however, is properly basic. It may well be possible to complete the set so that a disjunction of these three criteria and some other criterion (or criteria) forms a set necessary for proper basicity. Meeting any member of the set (or combination of members of the set) would be sufficient for proper basicity, but at least one of the set must be met for a belief to be properly basic. This set, one might say, is the instantiation of the formal criterion of propriety. To be properly basic, a belief must meet at least one of the general criteria.

Finally, a third level of criteria can be distinguished—call them “particular” criteria. My having the experience of what I take to be a blue patch is an example of a particular criterion. This may be a necessary condition of the proper basicity of the belief “I see a blue patch,” although not for beliefs in general. Plantinga suggests that my being appeared to redly is necessary and sufficient for the proper basicity of the belief “I am appeared to redly.”²¹ These are

20. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” p. 79.

21. See *ibid.*, p. 77.

the *conditions* in which "I am appeared to redly" is basic and properly so. The conditions do vary from belief to belief, and perhaps from moment to moment or person to person, but there nonetheless are conditions for each properly basic belief which confer on the belief the status of epistemic propriety. When one goes through the inductive procedure to discover the conditions in which one's basic beliefs are properly basic, it seems that the general criteria are discovered only by considering the particular criteria. The general criteria may then be inferred from whatever is shared in common by sets of particular criteria for proper basicity. Plantinga uses the term "criteria" to cover both what I have called material or general criteria and particular criteria.²²

Thus Plantinga provides us with the outline of a nonclassical, normative foundationalism. There are beliefs, both basic and non-basic. The former may be properly basic under certain conditions. The discovery of those conditions is up to the community (or individual, as the case may be). The latter are, presumably, properly nonbasic when appropriately based on other properly basic beliefs or based on beliefs that are in turn based appropriately on properly basic beliefs and so forth. In all cases, the propriety or appropriateness of the beliefs is a normative one.

5. Proper Basicity, Theistic Beliefs, and the Parity Thesis

Plantinga claims that with the collapse of classical foundationalism the door is open to the possibility of belief in God being properly basic. At least there is no reason to think that belief in God cannot be. In fact, Plantinga's own version of foundationalism is specifically designed to allow belief in God to be properly basic. But is belief in God truly properly basic? Those in the tradition of Reformed Christian theology answer affirmatively, says Plantinga, and he enthusiastically concurs.²³ He says little, however, about the conditions that ground or justify belief in God as basic. He argues that classical foundationalism is false but does not replace the criteria he rejects with his own. He claims instead that even without

22. I thank Bill Forgie for helpful discussion on these distinctions.

23. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 73.

knowing the criteria for proper basicity one can know (in many cases) which beliefs are and are not properly basic. The conditions in which properly basic beliefs are provided grounding can thus be discovered inductively. From these conditions one can discover the criteria. Even though one does not know the conditions in which belief in God is properly basic, it may nevertheless be properly basic. The issue should not be decided without a close look at the beliefs of religious believers.

Plantinga does suggest that belief in God is not groundless. He compares it to grounded perceptual beliefs ("I see a tree"), memory beliefs ("I remember eating breakfast this morning"), and beliefs that ascribe mental states to other humans ("That person is in pain"). These are the paradigm beliefs, as I suggested in Chapter 1 that we call them. Plantinga argues that, in a manner analogous to the grounding of these beliefs, "God exists" may be grounded. Following Calvin, Plantinga holds that we have a disposition to believe such things as "This flower was created by God" or "This vast and intricate universe was created by God."²⁴ On doing something wicked I may form the belief "God disapproves of what I have done." On reading the Bible one may feel compelled to believe "God is speaking to me." These conditions ground the beliefs mentioned. Plantinga notes that none of these beliefs are, strictly speaking, the belief that God exists. But again, strictly speaking, what we are justified in believing is that "That person is in pain" rather than that "That person exists." We see no harm in ignoring the one step, immediate inference from the former to the latter, so it too is taken as properly basic. By analogy, there is no harm in saying that the belief that God exists is properly basic, even though there is a one step, immediate inference from the theistic claims mentioned above to the belief that God exists. This immediate inference does not, presumably, provide anything more than a minimally complex sort of discursive evidence.

It is in this general context that Plantinga's parity thesis is most clearly seen. The thesis emerges when he compares theistic beliefs to paradigm beliefs, even though the comparison's role is not well spelled out. Clearly enough, however, the comparison of (or analogy between) the paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs is no mere

24. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

convenience. It is a major tenet of Plantinga's position. As a first account of Plantinga's parity thesis, let us say that, under appropriate conditions, *S*'s belief that *p*, where *p* is a belief about God, has the same nonclassical, normative justification as *S*'s belief that *p**, where *p** is a paradigm belief. Of course, the paradigm beliefs should not be understood to be just the three examples mentioned, but any beliefs of like kind. So theistic beliefs have, according to Plantinga, at least the same kind of epistemic standing as many of our commonly accepted nontheistic beliefs, insofar as permissive, normative justification is concerned.²⁵

But, as with Alston's parity thesis, one must distinguish between having the same kind of epistemic justification and having the same level or strength of that kind. With Alston, it is clear that J_{nw} is a weaker level of J_n than is J_{ns} , and so it is evident that his concern is with level *and* kind. Alston also tells us that he is aiming at the level of epistemic justification sufficient for "rational acceptance." But with Plantinga the issue is not so clear. Perhaps, however, he means us to work with the notion of proper basicity understood as a kind of justification, namely, noninferential normative justification. It is natural then to suggest various levels within that kind. Thus we can say that the level of justification within the range of proper basicity is to be understood as the same for both theistic and paradigm beliefs. But we need to consider potential overriding conditions. For example, although there might be levels of strength of noninferential justification, they generally have to do with special circumstances, such as that the night is foggy rather than clear. The belief that there is a car ahead is properly basic when held on a clear night. The belief that there is a car ahead is also properly basic on a foggy night. But the former is more strongly justified than is the latter even though both are properly basic. (It might be two motorcycles, rather than a car. In either case, it is time to get off the road.) In this way, then, there may be a range of strengths of justification within the category of proper basicity; as well, some overrides may remove justification completely. To be clear about parity, we must allow for potential overriding conditions. Thus, given no special circum-

25. Plantinga also writes, at some length, about the defeasibility of properly basic beliefs, noting that the justification that accrues to them is *prima facie* only. This view meshes well with his normative account, as far as he has a developed account, of justification; see *ibid.*, pp. 83–85.

stances, theistic beliefs and paradigm belief can have the same level of justification—the strongest level—of the same kind of justification—noninferential normative proper basicity. Thus, a more accurate account of Plantinga's parity thesis is

Parity Thesis_{Plantinga} (PT_{PI}): Under appropriate conditions, where no overrides are present, S's belief that p , where p is a belief about God, has the same nonclassical normative proper basicity (the strongest level) as S's belief that p^* , where p^* is a paradigm belief.

Thus PT_{PI} is a broader claim than PT_A, for it includes not only perceptual beliefs, but memory beliefs and beliefs about other minds as well. But both PT_{PI} and PT_A make claims not only about the kind but also about the level of epistemic justification. They differ, however, in that Alston's is a practice-based claim rather than a belief-based claim.²⁶

Although Plantinga's discussion is broader than Alston's in that Plantinga's parity thesis makes reference to memory beliefs and to beliefs about other minds as well as to perceptual beliefs, it is easier in some contexts to discuss Plantinga's thesis if we narrow its scope. So consider a narrower version of PT_{PI}:

Parity Thesis'_{Plantinga} (PT'_{PI}): Under appropriate conditions, where no overrides are present, S's belief that p , where p is a belief about God, has at least the same non-

26. Plantinga's more recent claims, in "Justification and Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 403–26, and "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," point toward understanding positive epistemic status as the proper functioning of one's epistemic equipment. In *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*, he indicates his preference for the term "warrant" over "justification" for that thing, enough of which, together with true belief, is sufficient for knowledge. On that account, warrant is again a matter of proper functioning. The relationship between positive epistemic status as a necessary condition of knowledge and positive epistemic status as a condition of justification (in the normative sense being considered here) is not clear or, perhaps, even important. Plantinga indicated, in conversation, that his earlier work on Reformed epistemology asked the wrong questions, if one is interested in knowledge, but that perhaps there are some as yet uncovered relationships among knowledge, justification, and positive epistemic status. He does reject various accounts of normative notions of justification as necessary conditions of knowledge. It is thus difficult to know what to say about the relationship of normative, permissive justification and positive epistemic status. But then it is not clear that we need to have a position on the matter for the purposes here. I make some further comments on this topic in Chapter 9.

classical normative proper basicity (the strongest level) as S 's belief that p^* , where p^* is a perceptual belief.

Since showing that the narrower thesis is false is sufficient for showing the broader thesis false, I concentrate mostly on the narrower thesis. Hence, the majority of my discussion focuses on perceptual beliefs in comparison with theistic beliefs. I return later to comment on memory beliefs and beliefs about other minds.

We now have Plantinga's parity thesis before us. In the remainder of this chapter I present a challenge to it.

6. The Universality Challenge Explained

Plantinga's central goal is the defense of PT_{PI} . Since paradigm beliefs can be properly basic, so can theistic beliefs. (For convenience, I speak simply of proper basicity rather than the strongest level of proper basicity.) I argue that PT_{PI} or, more specifically, PT'_{PI} is incompatible with Plantinga's foundationalism, or at least with foundationalism as far as it relies on its traditional roots. Foundationalism's traditional roots are, I believe, largely evidentialist concerns. Contrary to Plantinga's suggestion that evidentialism grows out of foundationalism, foundationalism seems more naturally understood to grow out of evidentialism, that is, to grow out of the desire of the evidentialist to avoid arbitrariness, where "arbitrariness" means, roughly, the claim that just any belief can be properly basic (or, more broadly, normatively, epistemically justified). If one is to avoid this arbitrariness, if one is to follow the spirit of the evidentialist, then one approach is to be a foundationalist about justification. But I argue that PT'_{PI} , and hence PT_{PI} , is incompatible with Plantinga's foundationalist theory of justification insofar as it rests in the desire to avoid arbitrariness. This is so, I argue, because of what I call the "universality challenge."

The universality challenge is this: given an experience shared by both theist and nontheist alike, nearly everyone will be led to form a shared nontheistic (perceptual paradigm) belief, whereas only the theist will be led to form a theistic belief.²⁷ So, whereas both theist and nontheist experience awe at the beauty of the universe, only

27. This challenge is a more rigorous form of one presented in Richard Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicity: A Response to Plantinga," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983): 123-27.

the theist (and perhaps not even she in every instance) will form a belief about God's creativity. Or perhaps more telling (because avoiding potential problems with the aesthetic overtones of "awe"), when both theist and nontheist experience a tree, both will form the belief "I see a tree," whereas only the theist will (sometimes) form the belief that God made the tree.²⁸ The challenger suggests that this universality of belief formation indicates the firmly grounded nature of the perceptual paradigm beliefs, and since the experience that generates the theistic belief does not provide universality, it does not provide sufficient grounds for proper basicity.

The motivation behind this challenge is broadly egalitarian in spirit. The idea is that every fully rational human has certain belief-forming practices for producing justified beliefs. A general account of these practices might be, roughly, that if some (cognitive) input *I* is taken in by some fully rational person *S*, then *S* will form a (justified) belief *p* whose object is of kind *K*. For example, if Suzie takes in the sensory input of tree-shapedness, then she will form the justified belief that she sees a tree. The universality challenge has the background assumption that all fully rational beings have these practices and that, if one does have the practice, then one will form the corresponding beliefs. As far as justified belief is concerned, all belief formations must be universal in this sense, including theistic belief formations. If one rejects this assumption, then the universality challenge is not relevant to the parity thesis.

To flesh this assumption out somewhat, consider the following. Suppose two people are looking through their home for some object, say, a particular copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. If both were to enter the den, look toward the lower left corner of the desk, epistemic equipment in full working order, and the copy of Kant's first critique were lying on the desk in that area, would they not both form the belief "there's the copy of Kant's *Critique*"? Not clearly, and for many possible reasons. Person *S*₁ may be distracted

28. To be exact, perhaps not everyone forms the belief "I see a tree." Perhaps one is not paying attention to one's experience or is distracted by the brilliance of the green color and so does not form any belief. Nevertheless, when asked what it is one is seeing, everyone, or nearly everyone with normal experiential equipment, will say "I see a tree." The theistic belief or description is not universal in this sense. To simplify the discussion, I assume this account but refer simply to the belief's being formed.

by something else on the desk, or by his concern that he is making person S_2 late for her class, having asked her to help him search. But if S_2 picks up the book, holds it in front of S_1 's eyes, and says, "here it is," surely S_1 will form the belief in question, or something very close to it, or at least a belief that entails it. The point of the egalitarian assumption is not that we form exactly the same beliefs when given the same input, but that we are capable of forming a belief about the kind of object providing the input, and, moreover, that rational people typically do so. And the more fully rational one is, the more likely one is to form beliefs that are in agreement with other fully rational people. As far as we are fully rational, all of us have the same doxastic tendencies. We all share, qua fully rational people, the same objectification scheme for generating justified beliefs. Finally, as far as one lacks these tendencies and schemes, the fully rational person ought to be able to obtain them.

Another brief example. Suppose there is a glass of water in front of S_1 and S_2 . S_1 forms the belief that the glass is half full, S_2 that it is half empty. There is a disagreement in the beliefs formed. But presumably both would agree that one half the glass's capacity contains water. It is the fully rational person's tendency to form beliefs about a certain kind of object, given a certain input, that is the egalitarian assumption's concern, not the details of what S_1 or S_2 focuses on. If it is a glass of water in front of them, and they are concentrating on that rather than something else, they will form a belief about the glass of water. Background beliefs and attitudes may affect the details of the beliefs they generate, but the belief will be a belief about the glass and water.

So, as the theist and nontheist stand in front of the majestic mountains, both will form a belief about the mountains. Why do they not both form beliefs about God's creative activity in the mountains? Should they not both have the capacity to do so? And if not, why not?

What grounds can be produced for denying or affirming what I have been calling the "egalitarian assumption"? Kant assumed that all rational creatures share the same intuitions of space and time and the same categorical structures. Much like this, most epistemologists assume that human minds work alike. In particular, they assume that if we are all fully rational and all take in the same cognitive input we will all form beliefs of the same kind, barring

the typical epistemologist's standard special circumstances or distorting conditions (poor lighting and the like). The best argument in the assumption's favor is that it seems to capture part of our broad notion of rationality. Two rational persons, in a frame of mind to concentrate on a given object, will, being rational, form a belief about that object. If one does not, then, barring special distractions or other excuses, one is rational and the other is not in this instance. To be rational is to belong to a community of believers who, given the full human capabilities, form similar beliefs given similar inputs. The assumption thus allows for the possibility of epistemological research; without the assumption, or some broader assumption that includes it, there would be no reason to think we can talk about human knowledge *qua* human. How could we talk about whether a belief is rational, or rationally produced, unless we assume that our cognitive practices deal with a given set of data in the same way, at least in terms of output? If you can excuse yourself from the requirements of rationality simply by saying that you do not have the doxastic mechanism needed to form a given belief but yet still claim that you are fully rational, you can get away with epistemic murder. Perhaps this is reason enough to justify the assumption. Intuitively, at least, I am inclined to accept the assumption, and I do not see any reason to reject it.

Some further explanatory notes on the universality challenge are in order. First, it is important to understand that the universality challenge does not depend on the theistic belief being generated by an experience only the theist has. That would not count against the proper basicity of the theistic belief any more than your not having the experience of the tree would count against my properly basic belief that I see a tree, given my experience of the tree. Neither can the challenge find a response simply in the claim that not everyone objectifies experiences in theistic terms because one lacks the disposition to do so, lacks the conceptual scheme that allows one to do so, or, perhaps, simply lacks the ability to do so. The challenge assumes that fully rational people *do have* the same basic objectification schemes. One cannot lack the needed scheme *qua* rational being. A comparison of the universality challenge to two challenges suggested by Alston (see Chapter 2, Section 4) is helpful in understanding the former. Alston writes that PP and CP differ in that (1) the capacity for PP, and practice of it, is found univer-

sally among normal adult human beings, and (2) all normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience. Alston's response to these objections is that, although those kinds of universality are interesting and comforting to us, they are not necessary for reliability. This is shown by the fact that not everyone engages in the practice of pure mathematics. But it is important to understand why it is true that not everyone engages in pure mathematics. Here we must move beyond Alston's suggestions.

Does the mathematically inclined student, for example, have some ability or means to objectify information in mathematical terms that other students do not have? I think not. Even where we speak of students not having mathematical ability, the students in question typically have *some* ability. The ability shows up in degrees. Although there are some who may not engage in the practice, this is not because of a total lack of ability. Rather, those who do not engage in the practice of pure mathematics, even at the lowest levels, fail to do so simply because they have no need of it, never thought about it, or have never been exposed to it. For those of different cultures who do not engage in the practice, perhaps their cultures have not developed the appropriate categories even though in principle nothing stops individuals from so doing. The slave boy in Plato's *Meno* is relevant here. At first he does not engage in the practice of geometric reasoning, but he quickly learns that he can. In short, two people one of whom engages in the practice and one of whom does not should be said to differ because the latter lacks the epistemic practice pragmatically although not in principle. I suggest that this lack is the result of the fact that the one capable of engaging in the practice has the appropriate input whereas the other does not have that input. This latter case is comparable to people who have no theistic experience whatsoever and hence do not generate theistic beliefs. But how do we explain Plantinga's cases in which both theist and nontheist have the same experiential input but only one forms a theistic belief?

It could be suggested that the difference is not in experience but in conceptual schemes. The theist has a theistic conceptual scheme, the nontheist does not—rather like the *Meno*'s slave boy, who at first does not have certain geometrical concepts but later does. But surely the average atheist or agnostic has a noetic structure that

contains the concept of God, in spite of all its supposed difficulties. This raises all kinds of interesting and complex questions about the relationships between experience and the conceptual schemes used to understand or objectify them. Do experience and scheme arise together? Can one have an experience without a conceptual scheme? To what extent do conceptual schemes shape experience? But we need not answer these questions in detail to understand the thrust of the universality challenge. It is not that there are two experiences or that there are two different conceptual schemes working. The egalitarian assumption is that everyone, given the same input, will generate (roughly) the same belief, or at least a belief whose object is the same (kind of) thing. The challenge suggests, that is, that there is a close connection between the input of an epistemic practice (the experience, in most cases) and the conceptual scheme used to objectify that input. Whenever a person with normal epistemic practices takes in tree-shaped data, a tree belief is generated. Or, as with Alston's case, the notion of theistic objectification relies on an account of experience in which there is some sort of theistic content (as I argued in Chapter 2). In the experiences to which the universality challenge calls attention, however, there is no theistic content *per se*. Rather, the emphasis is on the shared but nontheistic nature of the experience and the conditions necessary to explain why the theist forms a theistic belief but the nontheist does not. Since the experience is nontheistic, it does not matter that the experiencer has a theistic conceptual scheme. No theistic scheme of objectification will generate a theistic belief if there is no experience on which the scheme can work its magic. How then does the theist legitimately generate her theistic belief when the nontheist does not, given only a shared, nontheistic experience?

The assumption that the experiences are nontheistic in content may appear to be unfair to Plantinga, but I think not. First of all, many, if not most, of his examples appear to have the feature that the experience is one that both theist and nontheist could share—looking at the flower, reading the Bible, feeling guilty. Second, an important result from the criticism of PT_A applies to Plantinga if the experiences to which Plantinga calls attention are understood as having a theistic content not shared by the nontheist. Such examples fall prey to the background belief challenge. If the experiences

allow for noninferential justification, it is not of the conceptual-reading but only of the noninferential mediated variety. Insofar as the experiences are taken to be direct experiences of God, there is nothing phenomenologically given in the experience that allows one to say truly, "this is phenomenologically an experience of God." There must be background beliefs in the justification of the belief that one's experience is an experience of God. These background beliefs provide the mitigating circumstances that potentially weaken the level of justification of the theistic belief, since these beliefs may themselves fail to have justification. Thus the antecedent conditions set out in PT_{PI} or PT'_{PI} , namely, that there are no overriding conditions, may never be met. This in itself may remove the possibility that theistic and perceptual paradigm beliefs have the kind of parity suggested by PT'_{PI} . One does not use background beliefs to form the perceptual paradigm beliefs, but one does use them in the formation of beliefs about God. In the theistic cases, as in, perhaps, any case dealing with epistemically unique individuals, one may not have the strongest level of proper basicity, for such beliefs involve a special role for beliefs as opposed to concepts alone.²⁹ In defending PT'_{PI} , Plantinga cannot retreat to unshared experiences with theistic content. Such experiences cannot be direct, conceptual-reading experiences of God, since background beliefs are part of the epistemic conditions needed for justification.

The universality challenge thus suggests that, when an experience is shared by a theist and a nontheist, both should form (roughly) the same beliefs, including theistic beliefs. If this does not occur, then that fact needs explaining. It is not sufficient to suggest that the theist has a practice by which she generates the theistic belief whereas the nontheist does not have the practice, for, by the egalitarian assumption, one should expect, given the same (cognitive) input, that theist and nontheist should both form the same belief. Of course, if the egalitarian assumption is false, then the universality challenge is irrelevant. But then some other story

29. It will not do for Plantinga to make the content of the beliefs part of the conceptual scheme as in hyper-Kantian category analogues for the reasons Forge rejects the hyper-Kantian understanding of mystical experiences (see Chapter 3, Section 3). To do so vitiates the presumption of veridicality.

needs to be told about how to keep a restraint on the formation of any belief in any set of conditions and experiences whatsoever; arbitrariness knocks at the door. The egalitarian assumption provides a kind of control over what can be legitimately taken as properly basic; it is a backdrop assumption needed for the avoidance of arbitrariness.³⁰

I have presented Plantinga's position on rationality and the proper basicity of beliefs about God. From this emerged his parity thesis. The universality challenge to this version of the parity thesis suggests that Plantinga needs to explain why we do not all generate the same beliefs, given the same experience. There are several possibilities in this regard. In the next chapter I explain four of them. Of these, the first three are unlikely candidates for giving aid to Plantinga. The last, although a better candidate, leaves Plantinga with results that are less than sanguine.

30. There may, in fact, be other ways to provide the control needed, but the egalitarian assumption is a place to begin, even if ultimately not correct. Alston has suggested to me, on several occasions, his own reluctance to admit that the egalitarian assumption is correct.