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# The Universality Challenge and the Resurrection of Evidentialism

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## The Universality Challenge and the Resurrection of Evidentialism

The universality challenge is this: since the experiences that generate theistic beliefs are shared by theist and nontheist alike, Plantinga must explain why only theists generate theistic beliefs whereas (nearly) everyone generates the nontheistic, perceptual paradigm beliefs. I consider several possible responses to this challenge here. The first three of these fail to provide aid to Plantinga. In the last several sections I present and discuss a response which, although successful, leads to the resurrection of evidentialism and the evidentialist objection to theistic belief.

### I. A First Response to the Universality Challenge

To respond successfully to the universality challenge one must provide an account of experience and belief formation such that both theist and nontheist can share the experience but which allows the theist alone to form a theistic belief that is properly basic. Is it enough to generate the challenge if there is a common core to the experience that both theist and nontheist share? Two "common core" cases can be suggested. Both theist and nontheist can admit, for example, that they are awed by the universe, that the flower is beautiful, or that the Bible is profound. But the theist can then either claim to interpret the experience differently from the nontheist or claim to experience something more, a divine awe, a di-

vine beauty, or a divine profundity. In either case, the experience leading the believers to different beliefs could be said to be shared only insofar as there is a common aspect or part of the experience. The first case does not help Plantinga, for although there is a common core of experience, there is an interpretation added to it. Presumably this is inferential and we are no longer considering a properly basic belief. In the second case—in which, for example, both theist and nontheist experience the common core of “awe at the universe” but the theist also experiences “the hand of God” alongside the common core—the aspect of the experience that is *not* common is the theistic part. But the theistic aspect of the experience, insofar as it is theistic and unshared, falls under the censure of challenges already discussed. Insofar as what is not common in the experiences constitutes an additional unshared experience, the universality challenge is not even applicable. At best the case falls under the background belief challenge to direct experiences of God, and at worst the case is irrelevant to Plantinga’s goals.

## 2. A Second Response to the Challenge

A more promising line is suggested by the notion of supervenience. Two examples spell out the account. First, it is widely held that moral facts are supervenient on physical facts. W. D. Hudson provides an intuitive account of supervenience: “You would puzzle your hearers if you said that two things, A and B, are alike in every respect except that A is good and B is not; or if you said that two actions, C and D, were exactly the same except that C was right, or obligatory, and D was not. They would insist that there must be some other difference to account for this one.”<sup>1</sup> This “some other difference” is often taken to be a difference in physical fact. For instance, if two cases of a knife being raised above a child and then plunged into his flesh are not both to count as murder, there must be a physical difference in the two cases; perhaps one is done in the context of the operating room but the other is not. The difference may also be one of intention, so, for example, the person raising the knife intends to murder the unfortunate recipient.

1. W. D. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 164–65.

According to this position there is no difficulty in claiming that moral beliefs are objectively true or false and epistemically justifiable even though the moral facts making them true supervene on physical facts. Further, it is consistent with this position that there be two people, both of whom have exactly the same experience of the physical facts but one of whom does not form the same moral belief as the other. This second person, indeed, does not form any moral beliefs at all. Ethicists sometimes call such a person "amoral." Here we have a case in which the experience of both persons is the same—they experience the same physical events or things—but in which one is led in quite a different direction in terms of belief. One requirement for a counterexample is met: the experience is the same.

But there is a second requirement for a counterexample: the beliefs must not only be generated from the same experience but must also be properly basic. Are moral beliefs properly basic? It seems clear enough that moral beliefs are neither reducible to physical beliefs nor inferred from them. Yet they are typically treated as justified. Thus, it seems plausible enough that some moral beliefs are properly basic, and if so the second requirement for a counterexample is met.

But some may suggest that the claim that moral beliefs are properly basic is arguable, and perhaps a nonmoral example is best. John Rawls, in "Two Concepts of Rules," writes: "Many of the actions one performs in a game of baseball one can do by oneself or with others whether there is the game or not. For example, one can throw a ball, run, or swing a peculiarly shaped piece of wood. But one can not steal base, or strike out, or draw a walk, or make an error, or balk; although one can do certain things which appear to resemble these actions such as sliding into a bag, missing a grounder and so on. Striking out, stealing a base, balking, etc., are all actions which can only happen in a game."<sup>2</sup> There are new facts brought into existence by the practice of baseball. There would be no such thing as stealing second base were it not for the game of baseball. Baseball facts are supervenient on physical facts; stealing second base is supervenient on a person running from one sandbag to another.

2. John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," in *Ethics*, ed. Judith J. Thomson and Gerald Dworkin (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 128.

Now, suppose that I am ignorant of baseball and its rules but you are not. As we sit to watch the game, we both have the same experience of the physical facts. We both see some person running from one bag to another. You form the belief that the runner just stole second base; I do not. Furthermore, your belief that the runner stole second base is quite plausibly properly basic. Here we have a counterexample that appears to meet both criteria for success. The believers both share the same experience, but one is led to a belief that is properly basic and the other person is not.

The supervenience account applies to the theistic case in this way. First, the theist and nontheist both have the same experience—being awed by the beauty of the universe. Second, the theistic facts are supervenient on the physical (or aesthetic) facts. The theist is led to a theistic belief, the nontheist is not, just as the morally aware person and the person who knows baseball are led to moral and baseball beliefs, whereas the amoral person and the person ignorant of baseball are not led to moral or baseball beliefs. We have then allowed for the areligious (or atheistic) person, one who simply does not see the religious point of view, and the challenge appears to be met on its own grounds. There is a shared experience along with the generation of a nonuniversal but properly basic belief.

So the universality challenge appears to be met. But we need to look more closely here. First of all, there probably is no separate epistemic “baseball practice.” Where beliefs about supervenient facts are generated, I suggest, the generation is because of the larger belief practices we all share. The difference appears to be that the non-baseball believer fails to have certain concepts the baseball believer has. Thus the supervenience cases seem to provide a *prima facie* counterexample to the egalitarian assumption lying behind the universality challenge. But I do not believe these cases provide true counterexamples. Apparently not everyone sharing the same experience will generate the same belief. As noted, some people grasp concepts that others do not. But this is not to say that their conceptual schemes are fundamentally different or, for that matter, that their belief-forming practices are fundamentally different. Surely we all have the ability to generate beliefs about supervenient facts. Nevertheless, we need to explain the nonuniversality of belief formation about supervenient facts. I believe the best explana-

tion is that not all people share the same *concepts* (although they do all share roughly the same conceptual scheme). This failure to have certain concepts is a pragmatic failure, however, and thus, as in Alston's case of the practice of pure mathematics, it does not indicate that we should be epistemically suspicious of the practice itself.

Does this work for theistic belief formation? Can theistic beliefs be understood as beliefs about supervenient facts? One might suggest that the nontheist is epistemically deficient in just the way the non-baseball believer is: she lacks theistic concepts. The problem here is that many nontheists apparently have the requisite theistic concepts. How one is to explain the lack of theistic belief generation in their case is difficult. These observations suggest that we need to look elsewhere to explain the nonuniversality of theistic belief formation.

Furthermore, even if the supervenience cases do meet the universality challenge, for the theist the supervenience approach qua supervenience is an unwise direction in which to seek solace. The problem arising with understanding theistic facts to be supervenient on natural facts is one of ontology. According to the generally accepted account of supervenience, (significant) change in the physical facts leads to change in the supervenient facts. And if there is a change in the supervenient facts, there must be a corresponding change in the physical facts. As far, then, as the ontology of the matter goes, the supervenient facts are inextricably related to the physical facts. In the supervenience account of moral facts, for example, the moral state of affairs, although not reducible to the physical state of affairs, would have no ontological status without the physical state of affairs. And a stealing of second base would never occur if no one ran around a diamond-shaped field touching sandbags.

So it would be in the religious case. If the experience shared by the theist and nontheist were of the same natural facts, and the theistic facts supervened on those natural facts, then the theistic facts would be inextricably bound up with the natural facts. But in the commonly accepted picture of theism, God is ontologically independent of the physical world. That facts about God are supervenient on physical facts presents us with an ontologically inferior God, an unhappy state of affairs for the Christian theist and hence

for Plantinga. At best this account allows a type of pantheistic God whose ontological status is not independent of the physical universe.

Thus, although there may be counterexamples to the underlying claims of the universality challenge (and even this I am not willing to admit), they are not of a variety that rescues Plantinga's parity thesis from the grip of the challenge. To make this point explicit one need only consider the following modification of the challenge. Instead of "all properly basic beliefs are universal" being the central claim of the challenge, it can be replaced by "all properly basic beliefs about nonsupervenient facts are universal." Since theistic beliefs are not about supervenient facts, they must be universally formed. The challenge is not yet met. One must show how theistic beliefs can be nonuniversal and yet properly basic.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. A Third Response to the Challenge

A final possible but unsuccessful response to the challenge relies on the notion of a gestalt shift. Two analogies to the theistic case bring out this possibility.<sup>4</sup> First, suppose I have a defect in my eyes so that I see only the dots on a surface covered with red and white dots. You, and everyone else without this peculiar defect, see a pink surface. Your experience, then, is infused with pinkness. There is a gestalt shift that I simply do not make. Thus we both see

3. Hidden in these comments may be the beginning of a way to avoid certain difficulties with the egalitarian assumption. Perhaps the practices surrounding supervenient beliefs are not universal, as the egalitarian assumption suggests, and perhaps this is because of background beliefs. There are, in fact, many cases each day of perceivers having the same experience but not generating the same beliefs. Perhaps some of these happen because of supervenience conditions that involve background beliefs, and perhaps others are not supervenience cases but still involve background beliefs—like the Tim and Tom Tibbetts case of identifying twins. But recall that the universality challenge, supported by the egalitarian assumption, is concerned with beliefs formed in an immediate way—unlike the Tim and Tom Tibbetts case. If there is a way background beliefs can play a noninferential role in belief formation, perhaps a reply to the universality challenge can be developed. I explore issues related to these suggestions in the following chapter.

4. I have Francis W. Dauer to thank for these examples. He was also helpful in my thinking about the issue of supervenience. The suggestion that a supervenience understanding of religious experience provides only for an ontologically inferior God is his.

something different and form different beliefs. Can we both be said to experience the same thing?

Two suggestions are available. On the one hand, one might argue that there is a common core to our experience—the white and red dots. In fact, if you pay very close attention to the surface, you too see the red and white dots. Nevertheless, it seems that the experiences that generate the corresponding beliefs are phenomenologically quite different. You will not generate the pink surface belief unless you have the phenomenological experience of pinkness. And unless you make a special effort, your experience is one of being appeared to pinkly whereas mine is one of being appeared to dottedly. Our experiences are thus quite different. On the other hand, suppose your experience is so infused with pinkness that you simply cannot see the dots no matter how close you get to the surface. In this case, we do not at all share the same experience. In either case, the analogy does not suffice to reply to the universality challenge.

Second, suppose you and I are at the symphony. You hear only a succession of musical notes played by the orchestra whereas I hear a melancholy melody. It is implausible that we both have the same core of experience but that I experience something more. Our experiences are the same: we both seem to hear the musical notes. Yet our beliefs are quite different. Further, I do not hear the melancholiness of the music above and beyond the musical notes or form the belief about the melancholy melody by inference.

There are two ways of understanding this example, neither of which provides much ammunition against the universality challenge. First, the melancholy melody may be understood as a quality or feature that supervenes on the pattern of musical notes. This interpretation does not provide an alternative to the conclusion reached about supervenience earlier. Second, the experience I have of the melody may be explained by a type of gestalt shift, as in the former case in which one sees pink where there are, in fact, only red and white dots. Thus, just as in the former case in which you are appeared to pinkly, in this case I am appeared to in a melancholy-like manner. This understanding of the case challenges the claim that our experiences are the same, putting it on no better footing than the pink-surface case in which the perceivers have two different experiences.



Of the two interpretations, the second seems the weaker, for there appears to be a difference between the dot case and the melody case. In the red and white dot case, the belief that one sees a pink surface is tied to the phenomenological content of being appeared to pinkly. To see the surface as covered with red and white dots, one presumably must “shake off” the apparently pink phenomenological experience. One must replace, so to speak, one experiential content with another. But in the melody case I do not have to shake off the apparent melancholiness in order to hear the musical notes. Somehow the melancholiness rests in the musical notes, and I hear both, which is not to say that there is no phenomenological difference between hearing the music as melancholy and not.

The argument here does not, fortunately, rest on our making a choice between the alternative interpretations. Whether one takes the supervenience interpretation or the gestalt interpretation, the example does not help Plantinga reply to the universality challenge. He must turn elsewhere.

#### 4. Exaggerated Alstonian Epistemic Practice

As we saw in Chapter 2, Alston suggests that one way to avoid the difficulties with the bifurcation of belief formation into experience and explanation is to understand belief formation in terms of what he calls objectification. He uses the term “objectify” to stand for “taking a certain kind of experience as an experience of something of a certain sort.” In the physical object case, we take perceptual experiences as experiences of physical objects (rather than psychological data). He suggests, then, that just as we form physical object beliefs directly on the basis of perception, so we form theistic beliefs directly on the basis of theistic experience.

Recall the suggestion that the “certain range of experience” objectified by CP must have, on Alston’s own grounds, a theistic content not, presumably, experienced by the nontheist. As in the case of PP, in which there appears to be a link between how the experiencer would describe the experience and the belief generated by it—a lingo-conceptual link—so it is with CP. It is here that  $PT_A$  falls prey to the background belief challenge that relies on the distinction between conceptual reading and noninferential mediated

beliefs, for the latter seem more weakly justified than the former. For a theistic belief to be formed, given Alston's account of direct experiences of God, the generation of the belief must rely on background beliefs as opposed to a mere conceptual scheme.

In Plantinga's case, however, I suggest an even stronger reliance on background beliefs, for with his generation of theistic beliefs the experience and the belief generated through it are not linked in the lingo-conceptual manner suggested with regard to Alston's position. Hence, there is nothing in the experience alone that even hints at a theistic belief. The theistic content of the generated belief appears to derive solely from the background beliefs. I suggest, in other words, that Plantinga could not simply adopt Alston's account of CP but could use only a modified, exaggerated version. This, in turn, brings the necessity of justification for the background beliefs into clear focus.

It is possible that the theist's objectification of certain experiences in theistic terms does not rely on a lingo-conceptual link or a related underlying theistic experience as suggested by Alston's account. Although objectification of an experience in physical concepts perhaps must rely on an experience that is describable in physical object language, in the exaggerated practice I am suggesting, objectification of an experience in theistic concepts does not demand the possibility of a description of the experience in theistic object language. Rather, background beliefs may allow the theist to objectify *any* perceptual (or aesthetic or moral, etc.) experience into theistic language and beliefs. The reason some do not objectify their experiences in this way is just that not everyone shares the same set of background beliefs.<sup>5</sup> We all objectify perceptual beliefs in terms of physical object language because we all share the physical object conceptual scheme. We do not all share the theistic background beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

5. Here I call attention to the fact that the objectification must be noninferential. If it were otherwise, the resulting belief would not be basic and the case would not be significantly different from an interpretive common core type of experience and belief formation suggested in Section 3.

6. Someone might raise an egalitarian-assumption question about this whole idea. This exaggerated CP does not solve the universality challenge, the critic might say, since it does not meet the egalitarian assumption driving the universality challenge. The reply to this suggestion is that the egalitarian assumption—that everyone has (roughly) the same epistemic practices and hence given the same input will generate the same beliefs—does not come into play here. It associates a

Consider the following examples analogous to this kind of theistic objectification. Suppose Letitia recently married and one afternoon on coming home finds her spouse, Jack, away. He left several clues as to his whereabouts. She discovers that his truck is still in the laneway, but his bush boots are missing. Further, she notes that Jack's favorite foods are missing from the pantry. Finally, Letitia finds a note in Jack's handwriting stating that he has gone to the bush. Letitia makes the inference and forms the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. All kinds of beliefs come into play, and she reasons to the conclusion that Jack has gone to the bush. Here the belief is clearly not basic, it is inferred. Suppose, after a lengthy marriage, however, that Letitia comes to know Jack very well. As she comes in the door, Letitia notices Jack's bush boots missing from the normal spot. She immediately forms the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. In these circumstances the belief depends on a complex set of (background) beliefs about Letitia's husband—he acts in thus and so ways, for example, he only uses his bush boots for trips to the bush—but Letitia does not reason to it. Such a belief formation seems more than plausible; in fact, we form beliefs in like manner many times each day. When we are very familiar with circumstances and hold the relevant background beliefs, we do not reason to the belief we form; we form it immediately. Furthermore, there appears to be no lingo-conceptual link, or at least the same kind of link, between the experience of the boots being missing and the belief that Jack has gone to the bush.<sup>7</sup> The belief

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certain kind of content, say, physical object content, with a certain kind of belief. In the case of PP, for example, physical object experiential content generates, via the physical object conceptual scheme, physical object beliefs. The egalitarian assumption does not just claim that everyone forms the same beliefs given the same input, but also that everyone has roughly the same practices and conceptual schemes available to them. Presumably the same (kind of) practice is available to everyone, as the examples that follow in the text indicate, but the practice is so widely variant in its application that just about any experience can generate just about any belief. The difference between the beliefs one person forms as opposed to another are not because of a different practice or different concepts but because the application of the practice depends on one's background beliefs (and not merely a conceptual scheme).

7. I say there is not a lingo-conceptual link, but there may be some kind of link between the experience of the missing boots and the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. There may be a link as well between experiencing a beautiful flower and the belief that God created it. But in neither case is it the same kind of link as that between "I see a tree" and "being appeared to treely." When I believe "I see a

formed is not about the boots' being missing but about Jack. Nevertheless, such a belief is basic, since Letitia does not infer it.

That this example would be acceptable to Plantinga can be defended in the following manner. Plantinga writes that "a belief can easily change status from nonbasic to basic and vice versa."<sup>8</sup> His example is that I may now believe that  $21 \times 21 = 441$  on the basis of calculation but later I merely remember it. It is at first nonbasic but later basic. He also claims that self-evidence is relative to persons, and thus that what is self-evident to you may not be to me. It can therefore be suggested that what is at first nonbasic because not self-evident may later become basic because it becomes self-evident. For example, I may come to believe that  $256 + 327 = 583$  only by calculating it, but later, if I am particularly talented at arithmetic, I may just "see" that  $256 + 327 = 583$ . It is not that I merely remember that  $256 + 327 = 583$ . Rather, I have become so adept with arithmetic that I know that  $256 + 327 = 583$  much like I know that  $2 + 3 = 5$ . What is self-evident to the learned is not necessarily self-evident to the unlearned. We form all types of beliefs without reasoning to them, and, although it might be argued that we reason subconsciously that  $256 + 327 = 583$  or that my husband has gone hiking, this seems to be little more than an ad hoc defense. So, for Plantinga, a belief's being basic for a person seems to come to little more than the fact that the person has not inferred it; it is a psychological fact about that person. If it is inferred, it is nonbasic; if not, then basic.

Furthermore, it appears that a belief formed in the context of other background beliefs can be basic even when that belief was once inferred from the background beliefs. Plantinga says simply that for a belief to be basic one must not hold it because one inferred it by discursive reasoning; that is, one must not hold it on the basis of other beliefs, one must not consciously infer it from those beliefs. In the case of the wandering spouse and the bush boots imagined above, Letitia does not believe on the basis of evi-

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tree," I also admit, when questioned, the truth of "I am being appeared to treely"; but Letitia need not admit the truth of "I am being appeared to missing-bootedly" whenever she has the belief "Jack has gone to the bush." Neither is it the case that I always admit to the truth of "I am appeared to beautiful-flowerly" when I believe "God created the flower."

8. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 50.

dence that her husband has gone hiking, if what is meant by evidence is that she inferred from some of her other beliefs that Jack went hiking. Letitia did not infer anything at all. It is simply a matter of fact that some beliefs require, for their formation, a complicated set of background beliefs, and yet beliefs formed against that complicated background can be basic. She merely objectifies her experience in terms of Jack's having gone hiking.

In cases such as Letitia's, not everyone who has the same experiences will form the same beliefs. I may experience the spot where the bush boots should be as empty and not form any belief at all about Jack. What we have here is a noninferential mediated epistemic practice with a twist. The beliefs in question are generated in the context of experiences and sets of background beliefs in which the burden of the work is on the background beliefs. By breaking the lingo-conceptual link between the experience and the generated belief I have, in effect, moved the role of the experience away from a justificatory toward a genetic position. The experiences are much more the occasion for the belief generations, and their content is less important epistemically.<sup>9</sup>

How do these suggestions and examples help with the universality challenge to PT<sub>1</sub>? First, the suggestion allows the theist to have exactly the same experience as the nontheist. We both experience the same flower and the same beauty (and in a parallel fashion the same lack of bush boots). Second, it begins to explain, although admittedly in an extremely cursory fashion, how the theistic belief comes to be held. It is not inferred and hence it is basic.<sup>10</sup> I do not infer from the flower's beauty that God created it anymore than Letitia infers from the missing bush boots that Jack has gone to the bush. The experience initiates a complex, noninferential belief-forming process that leaves me with the belief, an objectification of the experience in theistic language. Third, the experience need not lead to the same belief for everyone. Both of us may see

9. Perhaps this could be understood as a kind of holistic justification rather than a foundational one, or at least a justification with a strong holist component. I return to this suggestion in the final three chapters.

10. Here one should compare note 9 and the account Plantinga gives of coherentism in "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," p. 125, in which he argues that coherentism is really a kind of foundationalism where all justified beliefs are foundational.

the beautiful flower but only one of us be led to believe that God created it, just as we may both experience the lack of bush boots but only one of us be led to the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. It seems, then, that there is a least one possible solution to the universality challenge.

## 5. Evidentialism and the Intuitive Results

Although the exaggerated Alstonian response appears to supply the features needed for a reply to the universality challenge, the response is not without its difficulties. These have to do with the thrust behind evidentialism, and thus a brief review of evidentialism's tenets may be helpful.

Evidentialism, recall, is the view that claims the following:

- (1★) There are obligations, standards of excellence, or (other) normative patterns to follow with respect to belief that, when followed, provide permissive justification for belief.
- (2★) It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.
- (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.

The evidentialist objector holds (1★), (2★), and (3★) along with this denial:

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

Plantinga, recall, rejects not only (4) but (3★) as well.

One central motivation behind the evidentialist understanding of justification is the desire to avoid arbitrariness in what should be taken as justified. Not just any belief should be taken as justified; there must be some good reason or ground. Plantinga himself follows this general spirit when he rejects the Great Pumpkin objection as not applying to his theory. But the evidentialist objector goes one step beyond merely requiring grounds and requires dis-

cursive grounds for belief in God. Since it has no discursive grounds, the objector says, belief in God is arbitrary and hence not justified. Plantinga denies that it must have discursive grounding.

According to Plantinga, foundationalism is the theoretical support for evidentialism. The historical motivation behind the foundationalist account of justification is the search for some means of tying our beliefs to the independently existing world. The motivation is a drive toward a guarantee of truth, the avoidance of arbitrariness. But more recent foundational accounts, Plantinga's included, are not quite so bold. They do not seek such a guarantee. Nevertheless, the closer the foundational beliefs are to providing the link to the independent world, the more likely it is that the belief system built on those foundations is not arbitrary. We can sum up the thrust of the foundationalist/evidentialist platform with the claim that both attempt to avoid arbitrariness with respect to justified belief. Insofar as Plantinga strives to remain a foundationalist, we can understand his goal to be to escape the arbitrariness evidentialism seeks to avoid.<sup>11</sup>

But the spirit of the evidentialist seems to haunt the halls of the foundationalist mansion Plantinga builds for us. Doing away with classical foundationalism is not sufficient to do away with evidentialism, or at least its central thrust. If the reply to the universality challenge provided in the earlier parts of this chapter is a representative account of how Plantinga must reply to the challenge, the evidentialist is surely going to press the arbitrariness charge against Plantinga's position. Three problems immediately come to mind.

First, the account allows virtually any experience to be objectified into theistic language and belief, since there is no mandatory lingo-conceptual link between the experience or its content and the belief formed. An experience of any event, object, or person potentially leads to a theistic belief. Now, Plantinga himself denies that just any belief can be legitimately taken as properly basic. Properly basic beliefs are formed in certain kinds of difficult-to-specify but nonarbitrary conditions. But he fails to spell out these conditions, and the pressure brought to bear against the parity thesis by the universality challenge questions the likelihood that

11. Plantinga does admit to a kind of polemical relativism but does not seem to take this result to be of great importance.

Plantinga *can* spell out any conditions that rule out arbitrary beliefs. His claim that not just any belief can be legitimately formed seems somewhat idle.

Second, the background beliefs that allow the objectification of any experience into theistic language and belief are extremely individualized. Consider the following analogous case. Suppose some person, Norm, is not at all attentive to the amount of milk left in the refrigerator. Frequently his wife asks him to bring milk home, but he, being distracted by another hundred details in his life, fails almost as frequently to bring milk home. After being chastised many times for his failings, Norm begins to connect the experience of driving past Mike's Milk Store, and seeing the sculpted plastic milk jug in the front, to the belief that he should bring milk home.

At first Norm has to use his seeing the sculpted plastic milk jug as a cue to his memory, not as to whether he was asked to bring milk home but rather to what belief his seeing the jug is to be connected to. He must, therefore, reason along the following lines: "That jug is supposed to remind me of something. What is it? Oh, yes. It's a milk jug. Why a milk jug? Probably has to do with milk. Oh, yes. I remember. I should bring milk home." But after a while Norm does not reason this way. He simply sees the sculpted milk jug and forms the belief "I should bring milk home." Here it is not Norm's memory at work but rather an idiosyncratic belief-forming mechanism.

Whatever goes on in Norm's mind, it seems so conditioned by his unique background and experience that a criticism of the justification of the belief may be impossible by someone who does not have the same background or experience. It might just as well have been an experience of a telephone or automobile that triggered the belief that Norm should bring milk home. The lack of commonality among background beliefs suggests a minimal likelihood of common ground for an evaluation of the justification of the belief. In other words, the general drift of the exaggerated Alstonian account suggests that such an individualized picture of the ground of belief formation makes it highly unlikely that we can ever agree on a set of criteria for justification. Plantinga admits that there may be no generally shared set of criteria when he suggests an inductive procedure to discover it. He even suggests that the criteria will not be polemically useful in coming to agreement on the grounds for



justification, at least across theistic–nontheistic lines. But this admission seems only to indicate the need for wariness. If Plantinga's only defense against the universality challenge is the exaggerated Alstonian defense, then extreme caution is suggested, for on that account even if there is a community to which one can appeal for shared examples of proper basicity (in the sense, say, of a Christian community) there is no guarantee that everyone in that community uses the same or even similar sets of background belief in their generation of theistic beliefs. This may be a more radical result than one with which Plantinga is willing to live.

Finally, the plausibility that the belief "Jack has gone to the bush" is properly basic seems to derive from the fact that Letitia once reasoned to the belief. When she does not reason to it, what justifies it? Is there some experience that provides justification? One is tempted to suggest, following the spirit of the evidentialist, that if her belief is ever to be justified it must, at least somewhere back in her personal epistemic history, have been inferred. If this is so, the notion of a belief being basic may come to no more than an account of one's own psychology, and we can discover the basicity of beliefs merely by conducting an empirical survey. "Did you infer the belief consciously on this occasion?" "No." "Then it is basic." But thus far this has nothing to do with the propriety of the belief. On what grounds is a belief such as "Jack has gone to the bush" taken to be proper? Without some discursive grounds, it seems quite likely that it is not proper. So far, the account given only provides us basicity but not propriety.

The exaggerated Alstonian view suggests that the background beliefs enable the objectification of experience into belief. Thus these beliefs are important. Following through with the example, it is natural to suggest that the role these beliefs play is something like this. What justifies the belief "Jack has gone to the bush" is that if Letitia's background beliefs were transcribed into discursive form they would provide reasons for her belief or, when taken together, they would provide an argument for the belief. If this is true, whence derives the propriety of properly basic beliefs? As suggested earlier, it appears that we can cash out being basic simply in terms of not being consciously inferred. Thus, basic beliefs may be beliefs held without discursive evidence but which must have been discursively held in the past. If what really provides

epistemic justification is the background beliefs or some relationship between the supposed basic beliefs and the background beliefs, the evidentialist ghost begins to appear.

These issues raise the suspicion that Plantinga's theory commits him to a type of arbitrariness insofar as he wishes to retain the parity thesis. But suspicions are only suspicions. We now need a more rigorous account of the problems; we need an explicit statement of the revitalized evidentialist challenge.

## 6. The Resurrection of Evidentialism

The intuitive charge against the exaggerated Alstonian apparatus is that it results (theoretically) in any belief counting as properly basic. There is, in short, a kind of arbitrariness that results from Plantinga's theory. The only way Plantinga can protect his position against the charge of arbitrariness is to return to an evidentialist approach to theistic beliefs.<sup>12</sup> But to do so is to give up the parity thesis, for perceptual paradigm beliefs are then possibly properly basic, not needing background beliefs, whereas theistic beliefs are not.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that there is a way a noninferred belief is justified for a person when she has appropriate background beliefs as in exaggerated Alstonian objectification. Insofar as Plantinga must use the objectification approach to avoid the universality problem, he must appeal to certain background beliefs. What is the status of these beliefs? First, it is clear that they have theistic content. It is hard to see how background beliefs that make no reference to God at all can be used to objectify theistically neutral experiences into theistic beliefs. For ease of discussion, let us call these background beliefs "theistic\* beliefs." Theistic\* beliefs are the background beliefs needed to objectify an experience into theistic belief, and they are fairly high-level beliefs in terms of their theistic content. Second, theistic\* beliefs stand in need of justification.<sup>13</sup> Consider the following. Suppose I arbitrarily believe (without justification) that there is a Great Pumpkin; I develop Great

12. Or, as a secondary response, to retreat to a kind of holist justification for theistic beliefs; see Chapters 10–12.

13. I do not mean that I have to justify them but rather that I am justified in them.

Pumpkin\* beliefs. Suppose further that I then begin to objectify my everyday experiences in terms of Great Pumpkin beliefs. If I have no justification for these background beliefs, surely my objectifications (although perhaps basic) are unjustified. So it is with theistic\* beliefs. These background beliefs must be justified if the objectifications resulting from them are to result in properly basic beliefs. The central issue is, then, how theistic\* beliefs are justified. I present several options here briefly, then return to them below.

Theistic\* beliefs could be properly nonbasic, that is, they could result from an inferential procedure. This option is not attractive to the Reformed epistemologist; if one needs natural theology (or some other inferential means, e.g., inferential appeal to authority, Scripture, or tradition) to justify the very beliefs needed to allow for objectification, the Reformed epistemologist has only put off the evidentialist objection one step. The other options fall within the proper basicity camp. There is first the possibility that theistic\* beliefs are generated by another application of theistic objectification; that is, at some time in the past one formed theistic beliefs via objectification of some experience. These beliefs then became part of one's noetic structure and are now the theistic\* beliefs used to objectify other experiences into theistic beliefs. This option has the obvious difficulty of generating an infinite regress. The final possible source of justification for theistic\* beliefs is some externalist principle. It should not surprise us that Plantinga may need to appeal to some externalist principle, for it seems that all versions of foundationalism ultimately appeal to externalism.<sup>14</sup> This claim needs defending, however, so an argument is in order.

One can distinguish among internalist and externalist theories of justification. Many foundationalists rely on an internalist picture of justification. They say, for example, that it does not suffice for *p*'s justification that it be the result of some reliable belief-forming mechanism outside my awareness or access. The evidence I have for *p* must be evidence in reach of my awareness and not merely some causal or lawlike connection between the fact of the matter and my

14. Perhaps an internalism constrained by reliabilist requirements would do the trick here; see Alston's version of internalism discussed in Chapter 4. The important point is that at some stage the epistemic principles allow one to *be* justified in holding a belief or using a practice without also demanding that one *has to* justify the belief or practice.

holding a belief about the fact. Hence, the emphasis on (conscious) discursive reasoning is a significant part of the justificatory procedure.

But there is a sense in which all viable versions of foundationalism rely on externalist principles.<sup>15</sup> Typically this appeal to externalist principles occurs for properly basic beliefs. But then, since properly nonbasic beliefs rely on properly basic beliefs for their justification, the whole edifice collapses without an externalist principle (or principles) at the bottom. To see the need for externalist principles, consider the following strong understanding of internalism:

Internalism<sub>1</sub>: *S* is justified in believing *p* if there is some causal or lawlike connection between *p*'s truth and *S*'s believing *p* and *S* is justified in believing that there is such a connection.

This account can be made more general. Where  $\phi$  is some property that connects the truth of *p* to *S*'s believing *p*, consider the following:

Internalism<sub>2</sub>: *S* is justified in believing *p* if *p* has some property  $\phi$  and *S* is justified in believing it does.

This general version of internalism results fairly quickly in an infinite regress the foundationalist will be quick to reject.

The infinite regress is generated since on this strong kind of internalism the only justified beliefs are those for which I have justification for accepting the justification. Any foundational belief of mine must have its justificatory principles justified for me. But that justification must itself be justified, and so forth. The regress begins early and perhaps the only way to avoid it while holding either version of internalism is to move to a holist model of justification in which justification is not foundational. Thus, this version of internalism begs the question against the foundationalist and against the idea of proper basicity.

There must then be some externalist principle to which the foundationalist appeals without also being required to provide jus-

15. I thank Francis Dauer for helpful discussion on this point.

tification for it. Any foundationalist must accept some externalist principle of this form:

Externalist Principle<sub>1</sub>: If *p* meets such and such (externalist) criterion, then *S* is justified in believing *p*.

One should not add to what is required for *p*'s justification that *S* must be justified in holding to any externalist principles of the form suggested by this principle. To do so would be to add the strong internalist requirement that *S* must be justified in believing the principle before she is justified in believing any belief it delivers.

An example helps clarify the point. The following principle meets the above form:

Externalist Principle<sub>2</sub>: If *p* is self-evident for *S*, *S* is justified in believing *p*.

There are no epistemic requirements in the antecedent; *S* need not believe or be justified in believing that *p* is self-evident. If this were required, the regress would begin; for *S* must then be justified in accepting the principles on which *p*'s justification rests, and to do that *S* must be justified in accepting the justification for the justificatory principles themselves, and so on. One cannot have Alston's *full reflective* justification. This second externalist principle merely claims that, if *p* is self-evident for *S*, then *S* is justified in believing it and need not be justified in holding the principle itself. To demand a thoroughgoing internalism would be to demand too much of the foundationalist and hence of Plantinga. All viable foundational models must rely on some externalist principles.

Returning now to the main argument, it is clear that there must be some source of justification for the needed theistic\* beliefs. In light of the externalist requirement, a brief review of the options for this source of justification is in order, for one can now more clearly see the folly of several of the approaches to theistic\* beliefs noted above.

First is the possibility of properly nonbasic status for theistic\* beliefs. Given that there somewhere (typically at the base) needs to be an appeal to externalist principles, one might suggest that theistic\* beliefs result from discursive reasoning at the bottom of which are at least some beliefs whose justification derives from externalist

principles. These beliefs are not theistic in content; they are garden-variety beliefs about the world. This suggestion amounts to a return to natural theology (or some other kind of inferential justification procedure), but my supposition is that Plantinga *qua* Reformed epistemologist cannot appeal to inferences to generate and justify theistic\* beliefs.

A second possibility is to claim that theistic\* beliefs are properly basic. Here one can claim that they might result from the exaggerated Alstonian practice presented above; that is, theistic\* beliefs might themselves be objectifications of nontheistic experiences. This possibility, however, has the obvious disadvantage of raising more forcefully the question with which we began: how are theistic\* beliefs justified given the requirement that appeal must be made to externalist principles? The present suggestion seems only to lead to an infinite regress we can now recognize as similar to that which the foundationalist is attempting to overcome via the appeal to externalist principles.

Two things seem clear. First, the justification of theistic\* beliefs must itself appeal to some externalist principle. In other words, one cannot put off an appeal to externalist principles for some other belief (a belief nontheistic in content) and then expect to derive theistic\* beliefs from it. To avoid evidentialism, theistic\* beliefs must be generated out of, and justified by, some fact or experience directly. Second, the justification of theistic\* beliefs must be nondiscursive. This, naturally, is part and parcel of the move to an externalist justification for theistic\* beliefs, but it is also a reminder that natural theology or other inferential procedures are not available to the Reformed epistemologist.

How then are we to understand this externalist generation and justification of theistic\* beliefs? Suppose we model our understanding of theistic externalist principles after the less controversial, nontheistic varieties suggested by epistemological externalists. Typically the suggestion is that externalist principles rely on some causal or lawlike relation between the world and one's belief. More specifically, one moves from an experience of the world to a belief about the world. A person takes in cognitive input *i* and forms belief *p*. In the typical perceptual model, *i* is some visual, tactile, olfactory datum which then, following lawlike or causal principles, generates a belief about the physical world. Further, it is important

to remind ourselves of the lingo-conceptual link between the experience and the formed belief. Earlier I suggested that the experience leading to a physical object belief is typically described by borrowing from physical object language; for instance, the experience generating "I see a tree" is described by "I am being appeared to treely" (or some near relation of this language).

The exaggerated Alstonian practice of theistic belief generation does not have this lingo-conceptual link, at least not in every instance. In fact, it cannot be required to have the link insofar as one is to have an account of theistic belief formation and justification which answers the universality challenge. The exaggerated Alstonian practice is a successful solution to the universality challenge only insofar as it disconnects the content of the experience (and hence its lingo-conceptual description) from the generated belief. This is the case since the universality challenge suggests that from a shared experience both theist and nontheist ought to generate the same belief. Since they do not, an explanation is needed. The explanation is simply that the experience can be objectified in any way the belief framework of the perceiver allows. There need be no lingo-conceptual link tying experience to generated belief. The relevance of all this is just that, since theistic\* beliefs also have theistic content, one must ask about the nature of the conditions that generate them. Can the conditions be described completely in nontheistic terms, or must they be described in theistic language; is the experience nontheistic in nature or is it theistic? If the conditions are nontheistic, the lingo-conceptual link is lacking; in theistic cases it is not.<sup>16</sup>

If the experience is theistic in nature, the difficulties raised in Chapters 2 and 3 reappear. Any account of nondiscursive epistemic justification for theistic beliefs supposedly grounded in theistic experience alone needs to recognize the role of background beliefs in

16. My suggestions here assume that it is legitimate to extend the claims about the exaggerated Alstonian practice to externalism. Is this move in fact legitimate? I believe so. For even if the externalist were to argue that the cognitive perceptual input is reducible to certain patterns of colors or shapes, or even to certain patterns of energy (light waves and the like), there is still at some level a description of the input that is conceptually tied to the output, the physical object belief. With theistic belief formation, at least with varieties that avoid the difficulties raised by the universality challenge, the parallel does not hold. There need not be a conceptual link between the belief formed and the (description of the) experience.

the generation of the beliefs. One should therefore wonder about the epistemic value of theistic experiences taken independently of other complex sets of beliefs—one's epistemic base or background beliefs. The problem of noninferential mediated beliefs and practices is pressed once again. In short, it is difficult to see how so-called theistic experiences can legitimately provide an increase in epistemic justification for theistic\* beliefs without reintroducing the very question with which we began. The move from theistic experience to theistic belief via externalist principles is questionable.

What of the case in which the lingo-conceptual link between experiential input and belief is lacking? Can one move by externalist principles from some nontheistic information to a theistic\* belief? Given the universality challenge, it is hard to see how. Once again, one can simply reintroduce the challenge at this new level, raising the same questions of theistic\* beliefs as were raised of theistic beliefs.

Here it is relevant to consider the supposed lawlike nature of the externalist principles. If everyone has the same (nontheistic) input, why do we all not share the same theistic or theistic\* beliefs? It is also important to remember why theistic\* beliefs were first introduced: the solution to the universality challenge was that we do not all share the same background beliefs and thus do not all objectify experiences in the same way. As can readily be seen, this reply cannot be used here, for the question now is how theistic\* beliefs—the background beliefs themselves—are justified. As we have already seen, to appeal to further theistic\* beliefs begins Plantinga on an infinite regress. There appears to be little promise for an externalist justification of theistic\* beliefs, at least insofar as one uses a kind of lawlike externalism as a model.

Perhaps one can develop an alternative view of externalism not patterned after the less controversial, nontheistic varieties put forth by externalist epistemologists. Perhaps theistic externalism does not rely on the typical lawlike mechanism model. Perhaps all that is necessary for externalism is something like the following:

Externalist Principle<sub>3</sub>: If *p* has property  $\phi$  (that links up, in some reliable way, *p*'s truth with *S*'s believing *p*), then *S* is justified in believing *p*.



Maybe, for example,  $\phi$  is simply the property of having been formed by God in *S*. God does this for persons to whom he wishes to reveal himself. Here the "mechanism" is not a natural one about which lawlike predictions can be made. Indeed, there is no mechanism at all. The formation of the belief is simply a result of a sort of divine telepathy, a supernatural action; it is God following through on his intention to reveal himself to at least some humans. Being God, he guarantees the truth of the belief, but he need not supply theistic beliefs for all. His actions are not lawlike and neither is the formation of theistic beliefs. There is nothing in us, the human knowers, to account for any pattern in the formation of beliefs. It is entirely God's doing. Our minds or noetic structures need not be understood in one way or another for God to do his work.<sup>17</sup>

The critic may reply that, although this seems possible, it does not provide a particularly attractive account of theistic belief. Why does God create theistic belief in some but not in others? Perhaps sin or spiritual blindness could be introduced here. But one must be careful to point out that the fault is not with us or with our noetic equipment. God can overcome any obstacle we set up. The reason God shows himself to some and not others must be a reason *God* has. We are dealing with God's intentions and motivations, not with faulty mechanisms. As long as this is understood, God may be justified in not revealing himself to all.

The critic may continue with a second point. This is, he may say, a strange kind of externalism. It is difficult to see, for example, how this type of externalism, if it can be so called, gives us justified belief. For the lawlikeness of the mechanism seems to be exactly what is attractive about externalism as an understanding of the criteria for justified belief. It enables us to explain why so many beliefs we typically take to be justified are held by most people.

17. Consider these comments of Alston, in "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," pp. 109–10: "Unlike justification, reliability of belief formation is not limited to cases in which a belief is based on adequate grounds within a subject's psychological states. A reliable mode of belief formation *may* work through the subject's own knowledge and experience. Indeed it is plausible to suppose that all of the reliable modes of belief formation available to human beings are of this sort. But it is quite conceivable that there should be others. I might be so constituted that beliefs about the weather tomorrow which apparently just 'pop into my mind' out of nowhere are in fact reliably produced by a mechanism of which we know nothing, and which does not involve the belief being based on anything."

In reply it could be suggested that the only important thing about externalism is that the formation of a belief, no matter how it occurs, is reliable. Since God is the source of the beliefs, and since he is reliable, the source is reliable. Is the predictive, lawlike mechanism really as important as the critic suggests? Perhaps not. Perhaps what is really important is that from within a developed set of beliefs and experiences there is some account of how the formation of theistic beliefs could be reliable even if they are not lawlike. I consider such an account in some detail in Chapter 10, so I suspend further commentary until then.

The avoidance of arbitrary results via an externalist formation and justification of theistic<sup>\*</sup> beliefs seems unlikely, unless we return to the natural theology (or otherwise discursive) approach. In order, then, to understand the justification of the required background beliefs by externalist principles, one must understand them as being basic but nontheistic beliefs on which the arguments of natural theology (or some other inferential argument) must be constructed. But this is to return Plantinga directly into the hands of the evidentialist and perhaps into the hands of the evidentialist objector. To avoid arbitrariness with Plantinga's foundationalist account of justification, one must rely on evidentialism's claims. Natural theology, discursive justification, is necessary to avoid just any belief being taken as properly basic on strictly foundationalist grounds.

Plantinga's parity thesis fails because it does not take into account the role of background beliefs in the formation and justification of theistic beliefs. His position, however, appears to be more precarious than Alston's since Plantinga seems to need an exaggerated Alstonian approach to explain why we do not all form the same beliefs given the same input. But this approach leaves Plantinga's position open to arbitrariness which, in turn, demands a return to some type of discursive provision of evidence. In the next chapter I consider whether Alston's position is really any stronger and explain why Alston himself finally moves away from the parity thesis.