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# Confirmation and Theism

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## Confirmation and Theism

My focus has been to explain and analyze various versions of the parity thesis. One goal in this chapter is to explore a challenge to Plantinga's claim that theistic beliefs can be properly basic. In Chapter 2 I explained Alston's response to a challenge relying on the supposed lack of confirmation of theistic beliefs. In Chapter 4 I used a similar challenge to refute  $PT_{AS}$ . The challenge to Plantinga's position also rests on the notion of confirmation. The lesser part of my purpose here is to show that Alston's reply to the confirmation challenge is appropriately applied to the challenge to Plantinga's position. The more important goal is to use the discussion of confirmation as a springboard to further observations. This discussion enables me to develop, in the next chapter, a new parity thesis that does not fall prey to the challenges brought against  $PT_A$  and  $PT_{Pl}$ . Thus, in Sections 1 and 2 I present what I call the "predictive confirmation challenge" and show that it fails. Section 3 fulfills the other goal, that of making certain observations that feed into my suggestion that a holistic approach is needed for the justification of theistic belief.

### 1. The Predictive Confirmation Challenge

The challenge to Plantinga's parity thesis is brought by Richard Grigg, who writes:

Plantinga points out that a belief such as the one that I had breakfast this morning is properly basic in certain circumstances, i.e., as long as I have no reason for supposing that my memory is defective. But note that we can trust beliefs such as . . . [the paradigm beliefs] not only because we are unaware of defects in our experiential equipment but also because we constantly have outside sources for confirmation of such beliefs. Indeed, is it not only through such outside sources that we can become aware of a defect in our equipment? For example, when I return home this evening, I will see some dirty dishes sitting in my sink, one less egg in my refrigerator than was there yesterday, etc. This is not to say that . . . ["I had breakfast this morning"] is believed because of evidence. Rather, it is a basic belief grounded immediately in my memory. But one of the reasons that I can take such memory beliefs as properly basic is that my memory is almost always subsequently confirmed by empirical evidence. But this cannot be said for a belief about God, e.g., the belief that God created the world.<sup>1</sup>

Grigg's argument, briefly stated, is that paradigm beliefs are properly basic because of some type of confirmation they have, whereas belief in God is not similarly confirmed. Since according to PT<sub>P</sub> paradigm beliefs and beliefs about God are both properly basic, the lack of confirmation for beliefs about God proves the thesis false. That Grigg's confirmation challenge to Plantinga is related to the confirmation challenge to CP Alston considers is obvious. The deliverances of CP are said not to have the kinds of confirmation that the deliverances of PP have, so, although PP's results are justified, CP's are not. As we know, Alston argues that the challenge is irrelevant to his claims. For the same reasons, the challenge is irrelevant to Plantinga's claims.

Why should Grigg's disanalogy show that theistic beliefs are not properly basic? Grigg's assumption seems to be that properly basic beliefs are beliefs that are reliably produced by a mechanism or practice that generates beliefs about objects that are regular in a way that allows for predictions to be made about them. Thus, insofar as Grigg's challenge rests on the belief that confirmation is necessary for reliability, his challenge falls prey to Alston's response to similar confirmation challenges. The nature of the confirmation for which Grigg calls is not clear, however, and some clari-

1. Richard Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicity," p. 126.

ficatory terminology and distinctions are in order. At one point Grigg seems to call for the confirmation of *beliefs*, as when he suggests that "I had breakfast this morning" is confirmed by there being dirty dishes in the sink. At another point he seems to suggest that it is the reliability (where, I take it, "reliability" refers to the tendency to produce true beliefs) of the belief-generating *practice* that stands in need of confirmation. Grigg says, for example, that "my memory is almost always subsequently confirmed by empirical evidence." It is convenient to call the confirmation of a practice's reliability the "validation" of a practice, reserving the term "confirmation" for the confirmation of the truth of a belief. Confirming that a belief is in fact true, however, does not entail that it is properly basic. But one clear feature of properly basic beliefs, according to the challenge, is that their confirmation at least makes it likely that they are true and thus, perhaps, if not inferred from other beliefs, basic and properly so.

A second point is simply that not every properly basic belief is confirmed, and thus confirmation of a given belief is not necessary for its proper basicity. Two issues come to mind. First, some beliefs, even when we try to confirm them, fail to be confirmed. Nevertheless, it does not follow that such beliefs fail to be properly basic. The memory belief that I took a walk by myself in the woods yesterday may not be confirmed because no one else saw me. My hiking boots show no evidence of the walk, I brought back no evidence of the walk from the woods, and so on. So, even though many memory beliefs are confirmed, some are not. Nevertheless, such beliefs do not fail to be properly basic, at least on those grounds. The second issue deals with the simple fact that many beliefs are not confirmed because we have neither the time, the interest, nor any special reason to do so. Generally speaking, I do not concern myself with the confirmation of my memory beliefs unless there is some special reason to do so. I do not worry about whether I ate breakfast this morning, unless, for example, I am being asked by the physician just before she does surgery. If my memory seems vague on the topic, I might then try to confirm or disconfirm my memory belief. The failure of a given belief to be confirmed surely does not entail that the belief fails to be properly basic.

Two morals should be drawn here. First, the concern ought to

be not that each and every properly basic belief is confirmed but that, when, in general, one attempts to confirm certain kinds of belief, they are confirmed. There are, however, some exceptions to the rule. This brings to focus the second moral, that attention should be paid to the source of the belief to be confirmed—the epistemic practice—rather than to the belief alone. This brings Plantinga's and Alston's positions close together on the issues of confirmation and reliability. Some important relationships seem to hold between the confirmation of beliefs and the validation of the practice that generates the beliefs. One of these relationships may be, for example, that, since many beliefs generated by a given practice are confirmed, the practice is validated. If this relationship were to hold, then it might be enough for defense of Plantinga's theory against the confirmation challenge to show that, if the practice from which a belief comes is validated as reliable, then any belief generated by the practice, all other things being equal, can be legitimately taken to be properly basic. Here we find a potential explanation for the fact that we generally trust our beliefs even though not every belief can nor should be confirmed. But, as Alston correctly notes, such an approach to showing a practice reliable is epistemically circular. Thus, talk about validation on Grigg's behalf is better recast in terms of the rationality of engaging in such practices. More on this below.

We cannot yet reply to the confirmation challenge. The nature of confirmation and validation remains unclear. How exactly are we to understand the challenge? We can take one clue from W. V. O. Quine, who has taught us well that beliefs do not face the tribunal of experience alone. The web of our beliefs is complex in many ways, not the least of which is the very detailed set of confirming and disconfirming relationships that hold between one and another belief (or sets of beliefs) and between beliefs and experience. What I suggest here is that this web of belief and experience provides various understandings of the nature of confirmation from *within*, depending on the kind of belief one considers. To develop this point, we can concentrate initially on beliefs and experiences having to do with the physical world, drawing out some implications of Alston's suggestion about the practices he calls basic. Recall that a basic practice is "one that constitutes our basic access to its subject matter. [For example,] we can learn about our

physical environment only by perceiving it, by receiving reports of the perceptions of others, and by carrying out inferences from what we learn in these first two ways. We can not know anything a priori about these matters, nor do we have any other sort of experiential access to the physical world."<sup>2</sup> Alston's suggestion, in part at least, is that any judgment about the truth or falsity of a claim about the physical world (or the reliability or unreliability of a practice giving us information about the world) must be made within the epistemic practice that provides access to the physical world. There are, to be sure, some overlapping situations. For example, memory might be partly but not wholly validated by what we learn from perception (a second practice), even if the remaining parts involve appeal to memory. But the basic point stands: we think that paradigm beliefs have a link to something that makes them likely to be true only because we accept (pragmatically) the practices that generate them. It is only within the basic practices that we discover the nature of the physical world that gives the paradigm beliefs that confirming link. Alston goes further than this with his doxastic practice approach when he suggests that we should understand reliability through the notion of rationality.

Compatible with this position is the suggestion that, because of the nature of the physical world and the epistemic practices we use to form beliefs about it, we take confirmation to be predictive *in a certain way*; we take it that, when we go about confirming the truth of a certain belief, we ought to look to see if certain other things are true. We expect certain features or facts about the world to become apparent to us as we continue to use the epistemic practice (and its many subpractices) that grants us access to the physical world. If, for example, I want to confirm that I see a tree, I look again or ask someone else to look. Similarly with nonperceptual practices. If I believe that I ate breakfast (a memory belief) and I wish to confirm it, I look to see if I left dirty dishes in the sink. Since physical objects do not normally disappear from view without some reasonable explanation, and since my epistemic faculties are operating normally (as far as I can tell from within the practice), I fully expect to find my beliefs about the world confirmed when I try to confirm them. Thus, as Alston suggests, PP is self-

2. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 117.

supported; it is then *prima facie* rational to engage in PP and, furthermore, the rationality that attaches to engaging in PP extends beyond the kind that comes from the trivially supported type of self-support accruing to all epistemic practices.

## 2. The Failure of the Predictive Confirmation Challenge

Grigg's challenge, interpreted through the notion of basic practices, comes to the following. Although many of the paradigm beliefs can be confirmed (and their corresponding practices validated) in a predictive way, theistic beliefs and practices cannot. Therefore, theistic beliefs cannot be properly basic. We have already seen, in Chapters 2 and 3, that this kind of predictive confirmation challenge fails, according to Alston, because of irrelevance. Alston's response to the fact that CP lacks confirmation whereas PP does not is that the perceptual world is regular, and on the basis of this regularity we can confirm and disconfirm our beliefs. The physical world and our access to it are predictable simply because the things about which we are seeking confirmation are regular and predictable. We do not, however, find the regularities in our access to God or his activities that we find in perceptual or memory experiences. The regularities in religious experience are absent not because of any fault in our epistemic faculties but because the object about which we seek information is not regular or predictable; God is not predictable. We can say, in summary, that theistic beliefs are not confirmed and the practice by which theistic beliefs are formed is not validated—not nontrivially self-supported—simply because the attempts at validation and confirmation depend on the regularity of the objects that the beliefs are purportedly about.

This much we saw in Chapters 2 and 3. But the additional, positive claim Alston makes, which I have mentioned before but only briefly, is that if the confirming features were true of CP they would tend to show CP unreliable. Alston writes: "The reality CP claims to put us in touch with is conceived to be vastly different from the physical environment. Why should not the sorts of procedures required to put us in effective cognitive touch with this reality be equally different? Why suppose that the distinctive features of PP set an appropriate standard for the cognitive approach

to God?"<sup>3</sup> In other words, our access to God and information about him is different in an important way from our access to perceptual objects. The object of the former lacks the regularity of the object of the latter. Whereas the breakfast dishes I put in the sink remain there, enabling me to perceive them (*ceteris paribus*) when I try to, God does not act in this predictable fashion.<sup>4</sup> We do not even know which features of things, if any, God typically uses to reveal himself. For all we know, there is no typical revelation of God. But there is an explanation for this lack of regularity: God's revelation of himself is not confined by the regularities of the natural order. The lack of regularity in our experience of God, then, is no reason to reject the reliability of the practice by which we sometimes form beliefs about him or his activities. In fact, if some of the things Christians believe about God are true, then not only is predictive confirmation not necessary for the trustworthiness of the practice of forming theistic beliefs, but if we did discover great regularity in God's dealings with us we would have reason to distrust the deliverances of the practice.

Simply stated, then, the Alstonian reply is that the predictive confirmation challenge is irrelevant. An account of confirmation internal to one kind of practice cannot be relevantly applied to another kind of practice. That theistic belief-forming practices do have predictive confirmation available for their deliverances should be no surprise. Let us consider an example that illustrates the reluctance of theists themselves to appeal to predictive confirmation. The prayer of a Christian student that he score well on the medical school entrance examinations may not be answered affirmatively. Thus, a belief formed in the context of the prayer, for example, "God will help me do well on the exams," would remain unconfirmed. In this case it is not that one cannot imagine what will confirm the belief but rather that one receives more or less direct disconfirmation. This in itself is not a problem for the notion of predictive confirmation of theistic beliefs, but it does point in the general direction of a rather telling fact about the way theists deal with confirmation. Many Christian theists specifically make al-

3. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

4. There may be an object of the belief that remains regular. For example, in a case in which "God created the flower" is taken to confirm that "God created the world," the flower is regular (parallel to the dishes) although God is not. On the analysis supplied, however, the latter irregularity is the real issue.

allowances for “unanswered” prayer. Hence they would admit that prayer-related beliefs such as “God will help me to score well on the examinations” often fall into one of two categories. They are either forthrightly disconfirmed (God does not act as the theist expects, as when the prospective medical student fails the entrance exams) or they are neither confirmed nor disconfirmed (at least immediately—perhaps God makes the student wait for years to take the exams). In fact, the mature believer would say that such beliefs ought to be held with a great deal of tentativeness, if they are held at all.

This does not mean that one could never receive confirmation of this type,<sup>5</sup> and many theists do take events in their lives as confirmation that God exists or that he wants them to do one thing rather than another. Nevertheless, it points out a certain reluctance on the part of theists “to put God to the test” or to be so pompous as to think that they have this kind of access to the mind or will of God. The central point is that, although one might receive confirmation of these specific beliefs on occasion, theists are reluctant to claim that such confirmation is readily available. The question to be asked is why theists make such allowances. The lesson to be learned is that theists understand that God’s actions toward us are not always predictable, at least not in the same manner as natural phenomena. For all the importance of predictive confirmation in realms dealing with physical objects, it is clearly not as important to theists or to the practice by which they form beliefs about God. In short, basic practices can give us different, internal accounts of what confirmation should look like, and to apply the standards internal to one kind of practice to another is simply to apply an irrelevant standard. Perhaps, then, we should look for another kind of confirmation for theistic beliefs.

### 3. Nonpredictive Confirmation

I turn now to explore two examples, one theistic and one dealing with a human person. My purpose is twofold. I note both

5. As already noted, however, a great deal of such confirmation might tend to show the theistic belief practice unreliable. Still, one could receive such confirmation on occasion without it affecting one’s judgment of the practice’s reliability.

differences and similarities between the two kinds of examples in terms of confirmation and epistemic justification. I also provide further grounds for my Alstonian observation that, although the theist might know what would confirm her theistic beliefs, she does not know when or if the confirmation will occur. The main implication of this observation is that there is a kind of nonpredictive confirmation that, given the framework of basic practices developed by Alston, is exactly what one should expect given the nature of beliefs about individual persons and God.

Grigg gives an example of a theistic belief that is unconfirmed, at least in terms of predictive confirmation: God created the world. How might one approach confirmation of such a belief? It cannot be done through predictive means, for the object of the belief—God—is not predictable. So, for what kinds of things should one look? Two possibilities suggest themselves. First, it might be enough for the provision of confirmation if there were some nontheistic event or fact to which one has epistemic access; that is, it might be enough to confirm the belief that God created the world if we can discover some ordinary, nontheistic fact about the world. If this is enough, then one could have confirmation via a nontheistic belief-forming practice such as one of the paradigm practices—perception, for example. Take the mere existence of the world. After all, if God created the world, then the world must exist. And surely we can discover that the world exists. The second possibility is that we need some other theistic belief to provide confirmation. If this is the case, perhaps the practice through which one forms theistic beliefs must come into play. This, and thus that nonpredictive confirmation for theistic beliefs is a possibility, is what I argue here.

Return now to the first alternative. It perhaps provides some kind of confirmation. It seems, however, that if confirmation of theistic beliefs occurs through a nontheistic practice, the confirmation provided is very weak. Consider this analogy. Suppose it is suggested that the belief “Kirsten created this sculpture” is confirmed by the fact that this sculpture exists. Now, although it is surely true that the creation of something entails the entity’s existence (or at least entails that the thing exists for some time), the entity’s existence seems to do little to confirm the belief needing confirmation. It is best described as a fact that is necessary to the

confirmation but not sufficient for confirmation. Thus, although the sculpture's existence can immediately be inferred from Kirsten's creating it, the discovery of the sculpture does little toward confirming that Kirsten created the sculpture. The same seems to be true in the theistic case. If the existence of the sculpture were enough to provide confirmation for the belief that Kirsten created the sculpture, then the analogous theistic belief about God's having created the world would be confirmed by the existence of the world. But in neither case does the mere existence of the entity in question confirm one's beliefs about its creator. What seems to be needed is an experience of, or belief about, the world (or the sculpture) that more strongly links it to its creator.

We can now turn to the second possibility for confirming theistic belief, in which another theistic belief is needed for the confirmation. Here I appeal, once again, to Alston's notion of a basic practice. Continuing with the sculpture analogy, what is needed to confirm that Kirsten created the sculpture is some information about the sculpture that more strongly links this sculpture to Kirsten's creative touch. What could this link be?

Although many suggestions could be made, perhaps we can divide the various options into three types. First, there could be some sort of uniquely identifying features of the sculpture that allow one to judge that it is indeed Kirsten's creation. One could be an expert on Kirsten's style, for example, and be able to recognize this piece as being in her style. Second, one could rely on the authority of someone who knows that this sculpture is Kirsten's creation; perhaps an expert testifies to the claim or perhaps one is told by a friend that this sculpture comes from Kirsten's creative hand. Finally, perhaps the creator herself informs you that the sculpture comes from her hand; maybe Kirsten simply tells you that she made it. All these link this sculpture to Kirsten.

Some observations about the sculpture example can provide insight into the possibility of nonpredictive confirmation of theistic beliefs. Parallel to the sculpture case, there seem to be three possible means of linking the theistic belief to be confirmed with the world created. First, one may be an expert on God's "style" and thus be able to recognize the world as being in that style. Second, one may be told (perhaps by one's parents or one's religious community) that the world was created by God. Third, one may be told by God that he created the world.

What do we learn from these three parallel pairs of possibilities? First, on the assumption that I am an expert and that I am paying attention and trying to see whether this sculpture did indeed come from Kirsten, I should be able to find features that (more or less) uniquely identify this sculpture as Kirsten's creation. But note that at some point I have to learn that this style is Kirsten's style. There is nothing at the phenomenological level that allows me to identify this object as the unique one that is the center of my concern. Nor is there anything that uniquely connects the object to another individual qua that unique being. To return to the language developed earlier, one simply cannot develop conceptual-reading beliefs about such situations. There is always information in the background somewhere that has significant content about the individuals involved. This information is held in the form of beliefs; more than just a conceptual scheme is needed. Thus, one does not link the unique features of some object to a unique person without at some point learning about the intimate connections between the two; and what is learned has substantial belief content. So it is with God's creative work, or at least one might suspect. One cannot know that this world was created by God through unique features of the world unless one follows through with a learning process that moves beyond a conceptual-reading level.

The comparison indicates some disanalogies as well. There are two. First, what is the significance of "being an expert"? Are there any experts when it comes to recognizing God-touched features of the world?<sup>6</sup> But a more important disanalogy is that there appear to be no uniquely identifying features of the world that link its creation and God's creative touch. Unless one claims that the world's apparent design is sufficient to conclude Christian theistic creation, I see little promise here. So, although there are some interesting parallels between the Kirsten case and the case of God in terms of where one might look for confirmation (both involve background content beliefs), there is an important difference in that when it comes to God's creation of the world there appear to be no unique features of the world that can be attributed only to God (or least none to which we have epistemic access). Why the God and Father of Jesus Christ, for example, instead of Krishna?

6. It might be interesting here to look closely at how difficult it is to become an art expert and the interesting phenomena surrounding forgeries in the art world.

I suggest that in fact this disanalogy teaches us something important about CP. I have already noted (Chapter 8, Section 1) that CP needs Christian\* beliefs to generate religious beliefs with specifically Christian content. I argued that these background beliefs need justification. Where are they to be found? My argument is that such a demand leads to either an infinite regress of justification or natural theology (or other inferential reasoning) with a Christian result. Neither of these is felicitous for the Reformed epistemologists. But there is another possibility that I considered briefly (Chapter 7, Section 6): a theistic, nonlawlike externalism.

This kind of externalism is not lawlike in that its working in us is not natural (in a sense that allows for predictive possibilities) but supernatural. It depends on God's inclining himself toward us and not on some lawlike mechanism. It is rather like the reliabilism Alston rejects in arguing that justification is not simply reliability but has, rather, a reliability constraint. He says that it may be that accurate weather predictions simply pop into my head—but I have no access to their source even though they are reliable. Rather like that, perhaps God simply pops things into the theist's head. Let us call this "theistic reliabilism." But would this reliable source of belief provide the kind of justification required for Christian\* beliefs? Certainly not on Alston's account of justification, for theistic reliabilism has no internal access as Alston requires. What about according to Plantinga's view? Insofar as one is impelled to believe these God-inspired beliefs (and one has met whatever normative requirements there are), they would meet Plantinga's criteria for justification or proper basicity. But that is just to raise an important question about the extraordinarily weak notion of justification in which Plantinga's account of proper basicity is embedded. Why should we take such beliefs to be justified, even *prima facie*? Alston seems to have the happier account of justification here, and once again, the theistic reliabilism I have suggested does not specify an internalist constraint.

Why not add one? The answer is that, unlike other reliable practices in which one can return again to the practice for "retesting," it is not clear that one can do so with CP. The account of God provided by CP is one of a deity who hides himself. One can have a religious experience and never have another by which to test the first. At least with the human case—Kirsten and her sculpture—

one can check the features of Kirsten's style, or check with Kirsten herself, or ask other experts. In the religious case, can these other approaches be used to check earlier experiences? Perhaps, but another problem arises here.

Recall my distinction between CP and religious practice. Although it is true that many, if not most, Christian believers have a large number of religious experiences, they must learn to take these as *Christian* experiences since nothing in the phenomenon of the experience is explicitly Christian. What is the source of the Christian content? This brings us to the second possibility noted above, my being told by my parents that God created the world. Is this really parallel to my being told by a friend that this is Kirsten's sculpture? In the case of the sculpture there are other means of checking the story. I can appeal to features of the sculpture that pick it out as Kirsten's or I can ask Kirsten.<sup>7</sup> Can I ask God? Perhaps, but asking does not imply receiving a reply. Of course, the same is true for Kirsten; she does not have to grace us with a reply either. And here we learn something of value. The access we have to information about persons *qua* unique individuals depends in an important way on the self-revelation of the person involved or on information given to us by others. Let me expand on this.

Just as I must learn from someone to take the markings on the sculpture to be in Kirsten's style, thus connecting this sculpture to Kirsten, so I must learn to take religious experiences to be Christian. Where do we learn such things? Barring prophets and the founder of Christianity, we learn the set of Christian beliefs, symbols, and concepts from our parents, the broader Christian community, and, more generally, the entire tradition—its history, myths, and scriptures. Here what Reid calls—and the Reformed epistemologists call attention to—the "credulity disposition" is important. We all have a natural disposition to trust what others tell us. This disposition is modified as we mature as epistemic agents. We learn not to trust certain people, or not to trust them on certain issues. This disposition, I suggest, is important in the formation of Christian beliefs (as well as those of competing traditions such as

7. The former approach seems ruled out in the God case, for there may be no unique features to which I can appeal as evidence that this world was indeed created by God.



Buddhism or Hinduism). In fact for most of us—once again barring prophets and religious visionaries—this is the sole source of our Christian framework of beliefs and concepts. But one of the things we learn as we mature epistemically is that, although much of what we learn through the credulity disposition is true, when it is crucial we should check the claims of others ourselves.

Is it crucial to do so for the Christian tradition? It appears so, for the tradition is in competition with others as it claims exclusive truth for its central beliefs. And unlike other epistemic practices that are conceptual-reading practices, CP is not—it is *completely self-contained* in its belief content. By “completely self-contained” I mean that, for those in the tradition whose sole source of that belief content is the authority of others, we must either find some means of checking our employment of the credulity disposition or recognize the rather radical circularity of our Christian worldview. The former seems unlikely, for the only people who seem to have access to Christian truth by some means other than the word of other Christians are the prophets and founders. This brings us to the third possibility suggested above, that I am, or *some* human is, told by God that he created the world. But just how would God communicate such a thing? Scripture tells us, but that is little if any better than being told by a friend. And prophets are the source of Scripture. Furthermore, information we have about the prophets is largely internal to the tradition, its scriptures, and its authority; once again we must rely on the credulity disposition. Even if we could ask Jesus himself—and what better source than him to ask—if he is the Son of God, would we not have to take his word for it? Not even his miracles take us from this-worldly events to theologically laden beliefs. Although they are certainly surprising, all historical research can give us *that* they happened. What history does not give us is *why* they happened, and in particular that they happened at the hand of God. So this route seems unpromising—unless, perhaps, one wants to return to natural theology. But even here it seems that we cannot get explicitly Christian results but at best only a rather generic theism.

What of the other option—recognizing the rather radical circularity of the Christian worldview? This is the position I believe we should take, but not without noting the fact that such circularity has been thought by many to provide justification for the beliefs

the circle contains. This is a holistic kind of justification, or at least a justification with a strong holistic component. This should not, I think, be a surprise, for when I presented the account of exaggerated CP above I in effect greatly loosened the justificatory connection between the experiences that are the occasion for the generation of theistic beliefs and the resulting theistic beliefs. This is an important claim of the holist: experience is the genesis of belief but is not needed for justification. This distancing of justification from experience is no less true for CP. Although there is a religious experience at the bottom of CP, the generation and justification of the explicitly Christian reading of that experience depends wholly on other Christian beliefs. I have more to say on this below.

Now, this all seems parallel to cases of linking individual humans to their activities. It seems clear enough that the belief or experience needed for confirming that Kirsten created the sculpture is one that makes reference to Kirsten. It is not sufficient to know some “bare” fact about the sculpture, that is, a fact that stands free of some attribution of Kirsten’s activity or even, for that matter, the fact that *some person* created it. So it seems with the belief that God created the world. If the world’s existence is to be understood to confirm the belief that God created the world, there must be some information that links the world to God besides the original belief. There must be some means of access to further theistic data for the confirmation of theistic beliefs to occur. And this is, I suggest, just where the holist justification, with its reliance on the credulity disposition, comes into play.

The theist may be quite willing to suggest that she does have access to further theistic data. The theist may receive confirmation, on occasion, that God created the world. The predictive confirmation challenger can point out, however, that this access fails to have an important feature. The access to theistic data needed for confirmation does not, unlike the access to ordinary perceptual objects, allow for *predictive* confirmation. Why? Because whatever access one has to the needed information—information that has a theistic component—relies on God’s revealing himself or his activity. When trying to confirm that it is the desk in my office that had ink spilled on it, I can put myself (typically) in a position to confirm it by looking (again) to see if the ink stain is still there. But I cannot put myself in a position for God to speak to me and be in

the least guaranteed that he will. Although one can predict what event would confirm a theistic belief (e.g., God's telling us he did something), one cannot predict the occurrence of the event. Its occurrence relies on God's action, to which we have no predictive access. In summary, with perceptual beliefs and PP there appear to be (under many if not most circumstances) means by which we can predict the occurrence of happenings or events that would confirm the belief in question. Although sometimes these predictions fail, generally they do not. We believe this because the predictions rely on a certain understanding of the physical world and the epistemic practice through which we have access to that world. This understanding is internal to the set of beliefs we have about the world, the experiences we have of the world, and the practice through which these two are connected. Furthermore, the perceptual epistemic practice can become internally validated through repeated confirmations, allowing us generally to trust the practice as reliable. With theistic beliefs the case is different. We can say what (theistic) facts or events might provide confirmation, but we cannot say ahead of time when (or even if) we will have access to them; we cannot predict their occurrence. I suggest that the practices through which we have access to God, through which we form theistic beliefs, do not give an understanding of God that provides for predictive confirmation—and that is precisely as it should be. The same is true, however, for belief-forming practices that provide us with beliefs about epistemically unique, spatiotemporally nonrooted individuals, especially those with free will. There is no epistemic access to such individuals apart from the practice that generates beliefs about them. One must always turn to the same practice (or subpractices) to confirm the belief in question. And with these practices there is no predictive element. The objects of the beliefs are unpredictable, just as God is.

To complete the discussion of our examples, one further issue needs consideration. There is a sense in which any person holding the belief "God created the world" has access to the information needed to confirm theistic beliefs. For example, it follows immediately from the fact that God is the creator-sustainer of the world that God created the flowers, the hills, the trees. It might be suggested that these (theistic) beliefs provide the needed confirmation. I believe this suggestion does not suffice, for this "access" is not really access and therefore does not provide an interesting kind of

confirmation. Grigg speaks of the confirmation being "outside." Although it is less than fully clear what Grigg means by outside confirmation, it surely should not include confirmation by beliefs whose truth is known simply by an immediate, one-step inference from the belief needing confirmation.

The problem can be seen by exploring the following case. Consider meteorologist Smith who, after research, forms the belief *p* that sundogs can be seen whenever conditions *C* are met. As she continues her research, Smith discovers that conditions *C* are, in fact, about to occur. To confirm her belief, she predicts that at time *t* and location *l* a sundog will appear. Those conditions come about, the sundog appears, and Smith has confirmation of *p*. Now Smith holds the belief that sundogs appear under certain conditions. Were she merely to infer that a sundog did *in fact* appear under those conditions, without the corresponding experience, she would not have truly confirmed her belief. Armchair science is ruled out. Likewise, without some further data beyond the theistic belief "God created the world," confirmation seems unlikely. The confirming information must be generated from an "outside" source.

This raises the important issue: what exactly is the appropriate sense of "outside"? I do not think I can provide a full answer to this question. Two things can be noted, however. First, I have already suggested that to be outside is to extend beyond immediate inferences from the belief to be confirmed, beyond what can be done in the armchair. Second, in some ways confirmation is always "inside." This is where Alston's notion of basic practices, the notion of epistemically circular reasons, Alston's larger doxastic practice approach to epistemology, and the possibility of holistic justification come into play. The sculpture analogy is a case in point. What confirms the belief that Kirsten created the sculpture is an awareness of a further fact connecting the sculpture to Kirsten's creative work. The information needed for confirmation must make reference to or contain at least some of the members of the very set of notions contained in the belief being confirmed. A belief about Kirsten must be confirmed by some further information about Kirsten; a belief about God must be confirmed by further information about God.<sup>8</sup>

8. It is not clear that one can draw a hard and fast conclusion on this point. For example, the confirmation in the breakfast case does not directly rely on the notion

A somewhat different although related point is that I have access to this connecting information by Kirsten telling me, someone else telling me, or some feature "telling" me that Kirsten did indeed make the sculpture. The source of the confirming data is, presumably, the same source as (or a source closely allied with) the source from which I derived my original belief. Otherwise the content of the data is not likely to be immediately related. It seems true that there are only a limited number of means through which one has access to the needed information and also true that certain kinds of information can be discovered only by certain kinds of approach. This is in part the point of Alston's suggestion that beliefs about physical objects are formed through a basic practice. My claim is that I came to hold the belief that Kirsten created the sculpture via a belief-forming practice that relies on someone telling me (whether Kirsten or someone else) or recognizing that the sculpture is one of Kirsten's and that any confirmation I come by is not outside these practices (or closely related practices) and their related beliefs and experiences.

The lesson I wish to draw from these observations is that it appears that confirmation is circular in two senses. First, confirmation seems to rely on the fact that the confirmation available for a given belief must typically appeal to the epistemic practices and related beliefs and experiences that formed the original belief needing confirmation. Thus, if there is a link between confirmation and validation, one might begin to suspect that it is somewhat circular. Such confirmation and validation are not "outside" in any absolute sense. Second, confirmation is circular, since even how it should be conceived is dependent on the practice and the nature of the objects about which the practice provides us beliefs. For practices dealing with regular predictive things, confirmation should be predictive. For those not dealing with predictive things, confirmation should not be predictive. Accordingly, if confirmation is to have an epistemic role, one should suspect that that role has a large holistic component, especially where a noninferential mediated practice is at stake.<sup>9</sup>

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of breakfast. It does, however, seem to rely indirectly on the notion: there is one less egg in the refrigerator because I ate it for breakfast.

9. A general note on this chapter. Alston makes the point, in *Perceiving God*, pp.

I have suggested that confirmation is a holistic notion, or at least that it has strong holist components. In the next chapter I suggest a new parity thesis and defend it against two potential difficulties. In the final chapter I flesh out certain aspects of the holist position needed for the new thesis.

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211–12, as does Peter Losin in "Experience of God and the Principle of Credulity: A Reply to Rowe," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 59–70, that the checking procedures for PP make use of what is learned in PP. Their general point is, so far, in agreement with mine in this chapter, except that neither of them pushes the holist line I do. PP has its confirmation and appeals to itself for that confirmation. CP likewise has its confirmation (albeit of a different stripe) and appeals to itself for that confirmation.