

1993

World-Ordering Power and Passionate Commitment

Mark S. McLeod

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/rationality>

 Part of the [Epistemology Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McLeod, Mark S., "World-Ordering Power and Passionate Commitment" (1993). *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology*. Paper 15.
<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/rationality/15>

This Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Christian Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology* by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

World-Ordering Power and Passionate Commitment

There are two goals for this final chapter. The first is to suggest another holistic principle by which Christian beliefs may be justified, thus indirectly strengthening PT_N . Although this by no means provides a full account of holism vis-à-vis theistic belief, it provides another small piece of the sketch of a map for further exploration. The second goal is simply, by way of conclusion, to summarize briefly the positions argued in this book.

1. More on Holism

All that was suggested in Chapter 11 about the holistic framework for defending PT_N dealt with confirmation understood from within the various epistemic practices. This was an attempt to meet the internal consistency requirement that is typically taken to be part and parcel of holist theories. But there is much more to holist theories of rationality than mere confirmation and consistency. There is also a comprehensiveness requirement. A holist theory of rationality must include a description of how much of our experience is taken account of by the set of beliefs taken to be justified. The most comprehensive system is the rational one, other things being equal. I say nothing further about this requirement vis-à-vis showing CP to be rationally engaged in except this brief point. To argue that CP is the most comprehensive system of religious be-

liefs would be to argue that the internal support of CP is not only equal but superior to that of other religious epistemic practices. So arguing would be doing the work required to reply more fully to the religious plurality challenge discussed in Chapter 11.

There is also what we can call the requirement of “coherence,” that is, the supposed internal relatedness of beliefs in a holist system. This requirement is notorious in that it is very difficult to say just what this relatedness comes to. Is it logical entailment, or a kind of probabilistic relation, or explanatory power, or aesthetic harmony? There is also the requirement of congruence, that is, the ability of the system of beliefs to deal with empirical data, or, put otherwise, the appropriateness of the interpretive scheme to experience. I say nothing in detail of either of these. But I do say something about one feature of our religious belief systems that is often overlooked or at least not dealt with to any degree by epistemologists. The issue touches to some degree on each of the requirements listed here, but what I have to say is not meant to be a fully developed thesis about holism.

2. Belief, Acceptance, and Commitment

As is well known, the Bible commands Christians and Jews to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, souls, and minds. Some act on this command. One question to ask is this. When they do, how is the resulting firm religious commitment epistemically acceptable, given what many, theists and nontheists alike, see as the limited amount of evidence for theistic claims? Before answering this question, I need to make some preliminary distinctions.

We can identify at least four senses of the term “belief,” labeling them as follows: (a) proposition, (b) belief, (c) acceptance, and (d) commitment. In the remainder of this chapter, I mean by “proposition” what logicians sometimes do—that which is asserted by declarative utterances or that which is either true or false. The remaining three senses of “belief” stand in relation to this first sense. A proposition is that which is believed or accepted or that to which one is committed. Thus, belief, acceptance, and commitment are all propositional attitudes. I took note of some of Plantinga’s comments about these distinctions in Chapter 6, but I said little of them

save for calling attention to them. Returning to a few of his comments illustrates more fully what I have in mind.

Plantinga lists what he thinks should be given in an account of a person's noetic structure.¹ In particular, he notes that one can distinguish between belief and acceptance:

Consider a Christian beset by doubts. He has a hard time believing certain crucial Christian claims—perhaps the teaching that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Upon calling that belief to mind, he finds it cold, lifeless, without warmth or attractiveness. Nonetheless he is committed to this belief; it is his position; if you ask him what he thinks about it, he will unhesitatingly endorse it. He has, so to speak, thrown in his lot with it. Let us say that he *accepts* this proposition, even though when he is assailed by doubt, he may fail to *believe* it—at any rate explicitly—to any appreciable degree. His commitment to this proposition may be much stronger than his explicit and occurrent belief in it; so these two—that is, acceptance and belief—must be distinguished.²

Plantinga says no more about this distinction. Nevertheless, we can extract from his example that beliefs have warmth, attractiveness, and liveliness whereas acceptances do not. Two things should be noted here. First, these characteristics are surely metaphorical. What exactly they come to, when stripped of the metaphor, is difficult to say. Perhaps these characteristics just are the fact that one believes rather than (merely) accepts. Second, whatever they come to, these characteristics surely have more to do with the psychology of the one holding the belief than they do with the propositions held.

Plantinga also seems to suggest that one can doubt that *p* is true and yet accept it, whereas (employing the same notion of doubt) one cannot doubt *p* and yet believe *p*. One can accept some proposition, in spite of its lack of warmth, liveliness, and attractiveness. This may simply be an extension of the point above; perhaps doubt simply *is* the absence of these phenomenological features, just as belief is their presence. We have, thus, an intuitive picture of belief and acceptance with which to work.

1. What follows is an incomplete list of Plantinga's suggestions; see his "Reason and Belief in God" for further information.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Plantinga also includes in his requirements for an account of a person's noetic structure both an index of degree of belief and an index of degree of acceptance. This brings us to the last sense of "belief," that is, commitment. Plantinga writes: "I believe both that $2 + 1 = 3$ and London, England, is north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; but I believe the former more resolutely than the latter."³ Presumably he would say something similar about the index of degree of acceptance. At any rate, here we have what I wish to isolate as commitment. Commitment, as I understand the term, has to do with the relative unwillingness of the epistemic subject to give up a proposition. The more unwilling one is to give up a proposition as true, the more firm one's commitment to that proposition is. So, we hold various propositions with different levels of firmness. This is true whether they are held as beliefs or acceptances; one can be more or less committed to a proposition in terms of how firmly one believes it as well as in terms of how firmly one accepts it. In short, one can be more or less strongly committed to a proposition; thus, there are levels of commitment.

Furthermore, it appears that commitment of these two types (belief- and acceptance-commitment) can be at odds with one another. In his example, Plantinga suggests that the Christian's commitment to the proposition he accepts (but has a hard time believing) is greater than his occurrent belief in that proposition. Although there are many questions one could ask of Plantinga's example, it seems clear enough that there are various levels of commitment to propositions, and this commitment is intimately related to belief and acceptance, even when belief and acceptance conflict.

Now, it is certain that the demands of the Judeo-Christian tradition involve passionate commitment. What kinds of epistemic constraints is such commitment under?

3. The Justification Maxim

Let us say that one requirement of commitment is expressed by what I call the "justification maxim." Roughly, the justification maxim is that no proposition should be given more (or less) com-

3. Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," p. 54.

mitment than its (epistemic) justification can bear. More formally, where *PA* is any propositional attitude,

Justification Maxim₁: The commitment allotted *p* by *S*, via *S*'s *PA*, ought to be commensurate with *S*'s (epistemic) justification for *p*.

Note that, so described, the justification maxim is a normative claim. Need it be? Perhaps not. Perhaps the thrust behind it could be understood in Alston's evaluative sense. Thus, one might suggest that the justification maxim is better described as:

Justification Maxim₂: It is a good thing, from the epistemic point of view, that the commitment allotted *p* by *S*, via *S*'s *PA*, is commensurate with *S*'s (epistemic) justification for *p*.

Whichever framework the justification maxim is best understood in (I work with the evaluative version here, without defending it explicitly), it suggests a certain kind of problem with theistic belief.

Theistic belief is often, if not typically, taken by the mature believer as seriously as, or more seriously than, any other belief. This frequently means that, when other beliefs conflict with theistic belief, the others lose out: the competing beliefs are modified or rejected in accordance with the demands of the theistic beliefs. This signals the extraordinary firmness of the believer's commitment toward her theistic belief. The question on which I focus here is, then, how such firm commitment is justified vis-à-vis what many people, theist and nontheist alike, take to be the relative lack of evidence for theistic beliefs.

My concern is not that theistic propositions lack evidence altogether; it seems clear enough that they do not. It is not, that is, that theists are irrational in believing or accepting certain claims. That, it seems to me, is the burden and the success of Reformed epistemology. Rather, the problem is how to provide *sufficient* evidence for one's believings and acceptings in light of the very firm, heartfelt commitment the theistic believer often has toward these propositions. In suggesting a solution to this problem, the following discussion indicates another reason to move toward a holistic

account of CP's epistemic status, as well as some principles with which to begin the conversation. Conveniently enough, some of Plantinga's claims are suggestive of a solution to the problem of theistic commitment. Thus, I once again engage Plantinga's claims directly, but that is not my primary aim. His work is simply a good place to begin. I briefly review Plantinga's criticism of classical foundationalism and then move on to a challenge to his position. I suggest a response and then use that response as a springboard for further discussion.

4. Plantinga's Criticism of Classical Foundationalism Revisited

Plantinga's response to the evidentialist challenge, insofar as it is rooted in classical foundationalism (see Chapter 6), is twofold. The first claim is that the classical account of the criterion for a belief's being properly basic is self-referentially incoherent. The second aspect of Plantinga's challenge is that the history of skepticism teaches us that, rather than being a steady rock on which to rest knowledge and rational belief, classical foundationalism has been the rock on which knowledge and rational belief founder. According to the skeptical tradition, classical foundationalism's criterion does not allow many of our ordinary beliefs to be justified. That Susan is in pain, or that there is a tree in front of us, are claims that are not properly basic according to the classical criterion for proper basicity (a belief is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses). Yet we have no argument for these beliefs or their kind; we can give no discursive account of them vis-à-vis the requirements of classical foundationalism. They are thus not properly nonbasic either, and skepticism is at the door. How can classical foundationalism remain a viable theory when many of our widespread beliefs cannot be justified in light of its demands? For Plantinga it is not viable and ought to be rejected.

If classical foundationalism is not viable, then neither is evidentialism insofar as it grows out of classical foundationalism. Thus, the evidentialist challenge to theistic belief is not viable either. As we have seen, however, Plantinga has opened the door to another theory of rationality that does not, he thinks, rule out the proper

basicity of either our widespread beliefs or the religious believer's theistic beliefs.

Since the classical criterion for proper basicity has been rejected as too narrow, whatever replacement is suggested should be broad enough to allow our widespread beliefs to be rational. In particular, Plantinga mentions beliefs about other minds, beliefs about the external world, and beliefs about the past. I do not think Plantinga would be against adding to this list beliefs about how we discover things about the world, specifically the principles of induction, deduction, the scientific method, and the like. But I see no easy way to capture such principles. Let us just say that those principles we typically use to advance our knowledge ought not to be ruled out by the replacement criterion.

With these restrictions on what we can take as an acceptable criterion, recall Plantinga's suggestion that we should use an inductive procedure to discover a criterion for proper basicity. Can this approach be successful in producing the results Plantinga desires, namely, allowing for the proper basicity of beliefs about God but ruling out a too-narrow criterion? Why, for example, can the classical foundationalist not argue that, since Plantinga's suggested procedure is person- or community-relative, it may be possible to find a group of classical foundationalists who hold the traditional classical criterion for proper basicity *and* who find it to be self-evident? This is possible on Plantinga's own grounds, they might say, for Plantinga suggests that self-evidence is a person-relative notion.⁴

Suppose, then, that the classical foundationalists do some field-work, finding a group of epistemologists who have done Plantinga's suggested inductive procedure. Furthermore, suppose this group finds the classical criterion to be self-evident. For these epistemologists (call them the "entrenched classical foundationalists"), since the classical criterion is self-evident, the self-referential criticism fails.

4. See Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?" in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), where Plantinga discusses self-evidence at length. In a delightfully humorous story, George Mavrodes, "The Stranger," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Wolterstorff, pokes fun at the notion of self-evidence as described by Plantinga. In the story, a proof for God's existence begins with the self-evident premise that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Plantinga can retort as follows. First, by suggesting that self-evidence is person-relative, he never meant that just anything can be taken to be self-evident. Generally, self-evident propositions are person-relative only in the sense that, as one's knowledge of a field grows, one's grasp of the truths in that field becomes deeper. For example, some mathematical proposition that was self-evident for Einstein is not for me. It might become self-evident for me if I study enough mathematics, but it is not right now. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that one's knowledge of epistemology will ever help one come to grasp self-evidently a proposition as controversial as the classical criterion. Unlike some mathematical propositions, even if the classical criterion is explained to me I will never self-evidently "see" it. On this basis Plantinga might ask the entrenched classical foundationalists if they really find the classical criterion self-evident or if they are only stretching to reach something that protects their favorite theory.

Second, and more important, Plantinga can fall back on the widespread belief criticism. Even if the classical criterion truly does seem self-evident to entrenched classical foundationalists, according to classical foundationalism all one's beliefs must be justified. This demand extends to principles by which we come to know things. In addition to the classical criterion, there are the principles of induction, for example. Yet the classical criterion seems to rule out their legitimate use, since they are not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Nor do they follow from beliefs that are. This problem has been a skeptical thorn in the classical foundationalist's flesh since Hume at least.

The entrenched classical foundationalists might suggest that inductive principles are themselves self-evident, but this move seems to open the foundations to just about anything being self-evident. Such a move would play into Plantinga's hands, for if that is what one means by self-evidence, why not take theistic beliefs to be self-evident (and thus properly basic) as well? As an alternative, the entrenched classical foundationalists may suggest that inductive principles ought to be understood as part of a heuristic meta-epistemological framework. By definition, however, this move is ruled out. Foundationalism requires that all rational beliefs be either properly basic or nonbasic. Belief in the principles of induction cannot be outside one's noetic structure. How then are inductive principles to be justified?

Plantinga's modified foundationalism fares better in answering this question. Caution is needed, however, for if there is one thing to be learned from the widespread belief criticism it is this: the criteria for properly basic beliefs cannot be overly strong. But it is simple enough to desire overly strong criteria. Plantinga seems to do this himself in his response to the Great Pumpkin objection, where he writes:

If belief in God is properly basic, why can't just any belief be properly basic? Couldn't we say the same about any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as basic? . . . If we say that belief in God is properly basic, won't we be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?⁵

In his response, Plantinga makes it clear that not just any belief can be properly basic but that a properly basic belief, although lacking discursive evidence, does not lack grounding. Thus, some beliefs are not properly basic for they lack grounding. Further, Plantinga claims that arriving at the criterion for proper basicity leads to charging belief in the Great Pumpkin with irrationality. But why should the Great Pumpkinite accept this? Admittedly, belief in the Great Pumpkin is not something I take to be rational, but what if we come on some tribe that believes it is? Suppose this tribe has read Plantinga, followed his inductive procedure, and takes Great Pumpkin belief as properly basic? Suppose they even specify their criterion for proper basicity and it does not lead to incoherence? What is Plantinga to say?

Perhaps Plantinga's desire to rule out Great Pumpkin belief is motivated by the fact that we do not have any natural inclination to believe in the Great Pumpkin whereas we do have a natural inclination to believe in God. Nevertheless, Plantinga qua theist would surely admit the rationality of Great Pumpkin belief insofar as such belief actually resembles theistic belief. But is this not just to say that the force of Plantinga's response is derived from the oddity of the example he chooses? Had he chosen Judaism, Islam,

5. Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," p. 58.

or Hinduism perhaps the rejection of the objection would not seem to follow quite so quickly.

How would it be possible, once the inductive procedure is completed, for Great Pumpkin belief to be rejected as irrational? First, if no one ever had Great Pumpkin experiences and simply chose arbitrarily to believe in the Great Pumpkin, no such belief would be rational. It would not be grounded. Second, if one did have Great Pumpkin experiences to ground such belief and Plantinga still rejected the belief as irrational, he must mean that *no* Great Pumpkinite's belief is rational. He must, in other words, have some independent reason for rejecting Great Pumpkin belief, namely, it fails to meet *Plantinga's* criterion. He must hold that the criteria for proper basicity are quite strong—so strong as not to be person- or community-relative. Plantinga seems to think this way, at least part of the time; if one inductively arrives at *P* as the criterion for proper basicity and *P* rules out Great Pumpkin belief, then no one's belief in the Great Pumpkin could be rational. But, with respect to Plantinga, what if the Great Pumpkinite takes his belief to be properly basic and thus arrives at a different criterion? Plantinga's response is inconsistent with his inductive procedure and its potential results. To be consistent, he must allow for such a potentiality. The Great Pumpkin objection, understood as the demand for a very liberal openness to what *might* count as properly basic, seems to stand against his theory, and thus Plantinga appears to be committed to a weaker sense of rationality than some of his comments indicate.

Since Plantinga himself struggles with the status of the criterion for proper basicity, one wonders about the proper way to understand it. We can say at least two things. First, any criterion must itself be rationally justified. Second, inductive procedures can justify some criteria. This latter point entails that the proposition expressing a criterion is nonbasic, since the proposition (or rather its belief or acceptance) is based on others. The principles of induction, on the other hand, can be either basic or nonbasic. Either way, the criterion must not be overly strong or the grounding of the principles of induction becomes impossible. If the principles are to be properly basic, the criterion cannot rule them out. If they are to be nonbasic, there must be some properly basic belief (or set of beliefs) to justify the principles of induction which is not itself

ruled out by the criterion. For our purposes, given a sufficiently weak criterion, the principles of induction can be properly basic. The following sketch shows how.

Suppose we set out to discover which of our beliefs are properly basic. We decide that, if anything is properly basic, beliefs *A*, *B*, *C*, and the principles of induction are. Of course, at this time we do not know the criterion for proper basicity. Intuitively, however, we take these beliefs as basic and properly so. We discover inductively that these beliefs all share property *P*. Property *P* is thus the criterion for proper basicity. The statement that expresses the fact that *P* is the criterion for proper basicity can be based on at least one other belief, specifically, one of the principles of induction. Thus, the statement of the criterion is nonbasic, yet *P* functions as a criterion for *A*, *B*, *C*, and the principles of induction. Induction thus legitimately justifies *P* as the criterion. The principles of induction, however, need not be discursively justified but are grounded, since they fall under the criterion discovered by the inductive approach. So, Plantinga's modified foundationalism can fare well, potentially at least, on the issue of how inductive principles are to be justified.

5. Widespread Beliefs as Fundamental Assumptions of Rationality

The above suggestions leave open the possibility of accounting for our widespread belief in the principles of induction. In fact, on the account sketched above these principles are important in discovering the replacement for the classical criterion for proper basicity and yet do not lead to the kind of self-referential incoherence found in classical foundationalism. But what about other widespread beliefs such as beliefs about other persons, the external world, or the past? Do these fare as well? I believe they do, but I do not take the time here to consider them individually. Instead, I consider why these so-called widespread beliefs are important to rationality.

It would be a mistake to think that the importance of these widespread beliefs for rationality lies in the fact that most everyone takes them to be true. First of all, it clearly does not follow from

the fact that most people hold (versions of) the widespread beliefs that the beliefs are indeed true. This is a variation of that infamous freshman fallacy of the bandwagon. But even if they were all true, their truth does not necessarily make them rational. What does? Consider these propositions. "There are other people alive." "There are real trees (or rocks, or mountains, or the like)." "I remember yesterday's events accurately." Such propositions, whether held as beliefs or acceptances, are central in our lives. One cannot imagine, at least with any seriousness, living life without them (or at least their near relatives). Why do we take them so seriously? Why do we take them as a necessary starting point for any theory of rationality? Simply stated, I believe they have the ability to greatly arrange and order our other beliefs and acceptances.

There appears to be a hierarchy of beliefs and acceptances in our noetic structures. Some we are willing to give up quite quickly; others we are not. What I have been calling widespread beliefs fall into the latter category. Another notion from Plantinga's work can help us explore the importance of this observation. He claims that in describing one's noetic structure one must include an index of "depth of ingression":

Some of my beliefs are, we might say, on the periphery of my noetic structure. I accept them, and may even accept them quite firmly, but if I were to give them up, not much else in my noetic structure would have to change. I believe there are some large boulders on the top of the Grand Teton. If I come to give up this belief, however, . . . that change wouldn't have extensive reverberations throughout the rest of my noetic structure; it could be accommodated with minimal alteration elsewhere. So its depth of ingression into my noetic structure isn't great. On the other hand, if I were to come to believe that there simply is no such thing as the Grand Teton, or no such thing as the State of Wyoming, that would have much greater reverberations. And if, *per impossible*, I were to come to think there hadn't been much of a past . . . or that there weren't any other persons, that would have even greater reverberations; these beliefs of mine have great depth of ingression into my noetic structure.⁶

6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

To give up some beliefs would radically alter one's noetic structure. The connections between beliefs can be enormous in number and complicated in kind. I suggest that the reason the so-called widespread beliefs are so important to rationality is that they have, to borrow Plantinga's phrase, the greatest depth of ingression. Perhaps more intuitive terminology would be helpful here. Let us say that such beliefs have the greatest world-ordering power.

Before moving on, it is important to clarify exactly which beliefs or acceptances have the status of being widespread, as well as the relationships between the notion of world-ordering power and notions such as level of commitment, belief, and acceptance. Obviously we cannot simply identify widespread beliefs as person-specific beliefs. For example,

(1) I am writing at a brown desk

is not widespread. Since you are reading, rather than writing, (1) is not one of your current beliefs. Neither, in all likelihood, is (1) a belief many people have right now.

It is also not the case that

(2) There is an external world

is widely held in the sense that most people now believe it. Many nonphilosophers have not even thought about it, let alone believe it. In fact, it is not belief qua propositional attitude that is important at all. Instead we should consider beliefs qua propositions.

But it is not idiosyncratic propositions that are truly central either. Rather, it is the kind of proposition that is important. Here the kind is picked out by the various contents of beliefs; there are beliefs about physical objects, others about other persons, still others about the past, and so forth. It is certain kinds of proposition that are widely held, rather than any idiosyncratic proposition. Everyone holds these kinds of proposition: physical object propositions, other-mind propositions, and so forth. And although we are willing to admit that we can be wrong about some individual members of the various kinds, we are not typically willing to admit that we can be wrong about the entire kind.

So the terminology "widespread belief" is misleading in two ways. What is important for our discussion is not beliefs qua propositional attitude. Nor is it belief qua idiosyncratic proposition. What is important is rather that certain assumptions are made by every person with ordinary beliefs. It is here, I believe, that the distinction between beliefs and acceptances becomes important. As noted, most people do not explicitly believe propositions such as "There is an external world," or "There are other minds," and the like. I have little doubt, however, that on inquiry most people would admit that they at least accept such propositions as background assumptions. These propositions are immediately entailed by the ordinary kinds of propositions we all hold. Even though many, if not most, people do not explicitly believe them (not ever having really thought about them), they do believe propositions that fall into the kinds "external world propositions," "other-mind propositions," and so forth. Our acceptance/assumption of propositions such as "There is an external world" and "There are other minds" simply expresses our commitment to our ordinary beliefs being (generally) rational.

These acceptances are greatly world-ordering. They are parts of the complex of speech and action that go into making up our shared lives together. One cannot successfully ignore or question these acceptances; questioning comes to an end. These acceptances are so deeply embedded in our noetic structures and our human culture that we simply cannot shake them off. Since we must start somewhere in giving an account of rationality, we might just as well begin with the paradigm cases that seem to be necessary for human communication and culture. These acceptances, in a way, are what make us rational.

If I am right about this, then the concerns of Plantinga's "widespread belief criticism" turn out to be concerns about giving an account of certain acceptances that all rational persons have. We all accept certain propositions about reality. Any theory of rationality that fails to explain them is to be rejected on the grounds that it overlooks fundamental constituents of rationality. In light of all this, let what I have been calling widespread beliefs now be referred to as "fundamental assumptions of rationality."

6. World-Ordering Power and Fundamental Assumptions of Rationality

I turn now to give an account of how fundamental assumptions of rationality are related to commitment and world-ordering power. First we need a more formal account of world-ordering power:

World-Ordering Power: The ability of a (change in) belief in, or acceptance of, a (given) proposition to adjust other beliefs or acceptances in *S*'s noetic structure.

All beliefs and acceptances have the power to make us adjust our noetic structures. When we take on a new belief, we make other changes as well. When we lose an acceptance, we make other adjustments to go with the loss. What I wish to propose for consideration is that world-ordering power is connected to a principle of rationality, namely, the justification maxim suggested earlier.

The justification maxim demands that no proposition be held with greater commitment than that permitted by its justification. Taking commitment to be the level of (un)willingness to give up one's propositional attitude toward a proposition, one must find some principle that connects one's commitment with one's justification for the proposition. One possibility for linking commitment to epistemic justification is to make commitment a function of world-ordering power. Let us call this the "principle of commitment."

Principle of Commitment: It is a good thing, from the epistemic point of view, if *S*'s (belief or acceptance) commitment to a proposition *p* is commensurate with the world-ordering power of *p* for *S*.⁷

Accordingly, the more world-ordering power a belief or acceptance has, the more epistemic justification it has. Thus the beliefs

7. There is also a normative account of the principle of commitment: *S*'s (belief or acceptance) commitment to a proposition *p* ought to be commensurate with the world-ordering power of *p* for *S*. Again, the version one picks depends on other considerations. Just as I elected to work with the evaluative version of the justification maxim, so I elect to work with the evaluative version of the principle of commitment.

or acceptances having the least world-ordering power are those to which the least commitment accrues, and those having the greatest world-ordering power are those with the greatest commitment, at least in a rational noetic framework.⁸ This raises the obvious question, what does the world-ordering power of a belief or acceptance have to do with its epistemic justification?

A variety of answers could be given here. I limit my discussion to two, rejecting the first. Return to the sketch in Section 4 where Plantinga's inductive procedure was used to discover a criterion for proper basicity while allowing the widespread belief in induction to be rational. There it was suggested that some property *P* is shared by all the beliefs we intuitively take to be properly basic. Thus *P* is the criterion for proper basicity. My initial answer linking world-ordering power to justification is simply that *P* may be the world-ordering power of the properly basic beliefs in question: *A*, *B*, *C*, and the principles of induction all share the same level of world-ordering power. What level? It seems that it would have to be the greatest level of world-ordering power for *S*, for, according to foundationalism, properly basic beliefs are to play a special role in one's noetic structure.

Traditionally, foundationalists thought that one's properly basic beliefs were beliefs without epistemic fault; in particular, they were thought to carry a guarantee of truth. More recent versions of foundationalism have given up the high goal of truth guarantee. Nevertheless, the assumption that basic beliefs play a special role remains. Plantinga, for example, writes: "From the foundationalist point of view not just any kind of belief can be found in the foundations of a rational noetic structure; a belief to be properly basic (that is, basic in a rational noetic structure) must meet certain conditions. It must be capable of functioning foundationally, capable of bearing its share of the weight of the whole noetic structure."⁹

What is it for a belief to be capable of functioning foundationally, to be able to bear its share of the weight? Well, on the classical model of foundationalism, it was to be self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. But, as we have seen, these sug-

8. This is contrary to the above quotation from Plantinga in which he indicates that a belief can be firmly held but be on the periphery of one's noetic structure (not greatly world-ordering).

9. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 55.

gestions are problematic vis-à-vis the demands of classical foundationalism itself, as well as in giving an account of the fundamental assumptions of rationality.

One suggestion is that to be foundational, and properly so, is to have the greatest level of world-ordering power. One can see right away, however, that this suggestion is problematic. One of the most obvious difficulties is that beliefs such as "Susan is in pain" and "There is a tree over there" (examples of beliefs that are obviously properly basic in the right conditions) do not have the greatest level of world-ordering power. One can give up one of these idiosyncratic propositions without making much change in one's noetic structure at all. Perhaps one is hallucinating, or perhaps Susan is feigning pain for sympathy.

Recall that the propositions I identified earlier as being of the most significance were not idiosyncratic propositions but rather the fundamental assumptions of rationality. On the account given to this point, only the fundamental assumptions of rationality turn out to have the greatest world-ordering power, whereas other cases of properly basic beliefs (such as "Susan is in pain") do not. It seems clear enough, then, that aligning world-ordering power with the criterion for proper basicity as a means to accounting for commitment will not do.

Since the fundamental assumptions of rationality are the propositions that have the greatest world-ordering power, it is important to provide a theory of rational noetic structures that takes this into account. My second answer linking world-ordering power to justification is that the world-ordering power of a proposition within a noetic structure is one of a number of coherence relations that hold among one's beliefs and acceptances. With this suggestion we leave a foundationalist account of rational noetic structures and move, once again, to holism.

It has been said that foundationalism is the most attractive position vis-à-vis epistemic considerations for the theist. One reason for this suggestion is the supposedly strong justification for properly basic beliefs. When a basic belief is grounded, according to foundationalism, there is a tie to the independently existing world; the belief is justified independently of the system of beliefs. This independent tie is often associated with a realist understanding,

both in metaphysics and epistemology, a view attractive to theists who typically believe that God created the world and that the world therefore exists independently of human thought about it. But if God is who the theist thinks he is, why could one not know about God in the independent way foundationalism suggests? Thus the attractiveness of foundationalism for theists.

With holism, however, one has no tie (or at least less of one) to the independent world. Holist models of epistemic justification tend to give little or minimal justification for a given belief. Rather, a belief is only justified within a given noetic structure. In fact, it is the structure that is justified rather than individual propositions. The system relativity of holism and the lack of (or weakened) tie to the supposedly independently existing world are two reasons for the theist to balk at holism.

Nevertheless, realism in metaphysics may have little to do with epistemology. Some things may be real, and independently so, and yet our access to them be limited. We may be, as finite humans, trapped within our systems of beliefs. They may not reflect reality. But if to give a holist account is the best we can do, so be it. Being a theist does not clearly, or even naturally, lead to being a foundationalist.

Furthermore, I believe the present discussion gives some reason to move to holism. Foundationalism, even Plantinga's relatively weak version, does not provide much potential for providing an account of passionate commitment or, for that matter, levels of commitment that match our experience of how religious people act vis-à-vis their religious beliefs. The account of the criterion for proper basicity Plantinga provides may give us nondiscursive justification for single, individual beliefs such as "I see a tree," but it does little to account for the fundamental assumptions of rationality. What is really important are not Plantinga's widespread beliefs understood as individual beliefs but the fundamental assumptions of rationality underlying them. These propositions, and our attitudes toward them, are what are truly central for rationality. A holist account of rationality that provides a means of accounting for levels of commitment must include some principle of rationality connecting commitment to something like world-ordering power.

7. The Justification Maxim and Theistic Belief

I have suggested that the justification maxim demands commitment commensurate with epistemic justification and that one potential principle that might provide a link between the two is the principle of commitment. By way of conclusion, I wish to make some observations about religious belief and its world-ordering power.

I have said that the fundamental assumptions of rationality are not in the typical case beliefs, but rather that they are closer to acceptances. Most people do not explicitly believe that there is an external world, or that there are other minds, and so forth. They simply accept (often unconsciously) such propositions; the propositions are fundamental assumptions of rationality. Nevertheless, the commitment people have toward these propositions is great indeed, a fact illustrated by the difficulties teachers of philosophy have in convincing their students that the problem of the external world is a real problem. Such assumptions are deeply embedded.

If this is true, then it may appear that my suggestions do not apply to religion, or at least not to Christianity, and that the central goal I set for this chapter—explaining how a theist can be firmly and passionately committed to her beliefs in the face of what appears to be insufficient evidence—are not met. Theism, after all, involves beliefs. Christianity in particular calls for belief. One is to “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” to be saved. But if belief is fundamental to theism, and yet the fundamental assumptions of rationality qua acceptances have the greatest world-ordering power, then how is it that radical, heartfelt theistic commitment can be justified vis-à-vis the justification maxim and the argument of the previous several sections?

This question can be more easily handled if broken down into two questions. First, does religion involve fundamental assumptions of rationality? The theist, and in particular the Christian theist, responds from within his or her system of belief. The answer, given the truth of Christianity, is that yes, theistic beliefs and acceptances are part and parcel of what it is to be rational. What rational person would refuse the call and demands of God, the Creator, in his or her life? The Christian may not be so bold as to suggest that someone is irrational in not being a Christian, but it

seems quite consistent to say that one is not fully rational if one lacks Christian faith.

The second question is this. The fundamental assumptions of rationality are closer to acceptances than they (typically) are to beliefs. But theistic faith involves belief, not mere acceptance. How can theistic belief then involve the great level of world-ordering power that the other fundamental assumptions of rationality do, but in particular those involving other human persons? A complete answer to this question would take another long essay. Perhaps the following suffices.

It is often noted that the nature of theistic belief is far more complicated than our more ordinary beliefs in propositions. Theistic belief is much closer to trusting one's spouse or best friend than it is merely to believing that there is a tree in the front yard. But theistic faith is complicated in another way as well. It functions, at least for the mature believer, as a grid through which other competitors for belief and acceptance are sifted.¹⁰ I think these two points are intimately connected. The following analogy aims our thinking in the right direction.

I believe in my wife, much in the same way as I believe in God. I love her, I react to her wants and desires, I listen to her, and so forth. I do likewise with God. I love him, I move on (what I take to be) his wants and desires, I listen to him, and so forth. But with my wife I also evaluate my actions and thoughts through her concerns. This is not always conscious. Neither is it always done with passionate *belief*. There are things, for example, that I simply *accept* about my wife, and that I do not necessarily believe, at least occurrently. I accept that she will act in certain ways toward me, I accept that her character will be more or less consistent over a period of time, and so forth.

It seems to me that I have not always accepted these things. Before my having come to accept them, I believed them. It was much more important for me, in the relative immaturity of our early relationship, to have these things before my mind's eye as things to which I was attracted, as things that I found warm. But it was when I moved from explicitly believing these things to accept-

10. Nicholas Wolterstorff develops this theme in some detail in *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976).

ing them that the beginnings of real maturity in my marriage became possible. It was by my very acceptance of them that I began to recognize my deep commitment to them and, by extension, to her. This is not to say that I never have the propositional attitude of belief toward these things. It is only to say that often I do not and that the lack of belief does not adversely affect the good relationship I have with my wife and, in fact, sometimes allows for an increase in the maturity of the relationship.

Likewise with belief in God. The mature believer accepts certain things about God, his nature, his character, and so forth. He or she need not believe them in the explicit, conscious sense to which I have made reference. This is why in Plantinga's example of the doubting Christian the doubter has not lost his faith. He accepts the problematic proposition; he has thrown in his lot with it. Thus there are several important parallels between theistic belief and beliefs about other individual human persons, that is, between CP and unique person practice.

Be that as it may, there is an aspect of acceptance that was overlooked in the earlier description of the distinctions between belief and acceptance. Some might think of acceptance as a less important propositional attitude than belief. This, I suggest, is not the case, at least not for all acceptances. That there is a material world, that there are other persons, that we have some principles by which knowledge can advance, are acceptances of which we are largely not conscious; our propositional attitude toward them is not as explicit as belief is. Yet we do not treat them lightly when they are challenged. The religious believer in Plantinga's example still accepts, although doubts, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Belief may come and go; it waxes and wanes with the times. But acceptance is something we do more out of a sense of necessity—the necessity of making sense of our experience of reality.

Religious faith does involve acceptances, and thus propositions involved in such faith can be members of the fundamental assumptions of rationality. As such, deep commitment given to theistic propositions is justified, at least potentially, by the great level of world-ordering power the propositions have for theists.

8. Summary and Conclusion

My objective in this book has been to explain, evaluate, and defend what I have called the parity thesis. I conclude with a brief summary of the points argued. First I explained and criticized PT_A , PT_{AS} , and PT_A^* . The first and last of these founder on Alston's failure to take into account a special role for background beliefs in the generation and justification of Christian beliefs. PT_{AS} , on the other hand, fails to be true since it does not take into account the special place for induction in the justifying argument for PP. Plantinga's basic parity thesis is PT_{PI} , but the more narrow thesis, PT'_{PI} , is the focus of my discussion, since showing the latter to be false shows the former to be false. PT'_{PI} is criticized by what I have called the universality challenge. In defending Plantinga against this challenge, I argued that Plantinga is committed to a kind of arbitrariness because of, once again, a special role for background beliefs in the generation and justification of theistic beliefs. I then argued that Alston and Plantinga are more or less in the same epistemic boat vis-à-vis background beliefs.

In the course of these analyses, I introduced a distinction between conceptual-reading and noninferential mediated practices. The latter require, according to the position taken here, background beliefs that need themselves to have justification. Thus I introduced the notion of a holist aspect to the justification for both unique person practice and CP, since both are noninferential mediated practices. In the process, I introduced a new parity thesis. Finally, I developed the notion of compartment/nonpredictive confirmation as one aspect of the holism, and, in response to what I have called the problem of commitment I suggested a holist principle connecting world-ordering power to epistemic commitment.

My initial goals were three. The first of these was to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the rationality of belief in God. I hope to have at least clarified some of the issues surrounding the parity thesis and Reformed epistemology. The second was to provide an account and analysis of various versions of the parity thesis. I have considered several such accounts and found them all wanting, more or less for the same reason—the role for background beliefs in the justification of religious beliefs. The third and final was to

introduce a new parity thesis that does not fall prey to the difficulty of the others. I have sketched some of the parallels between CP and unique person practice and attempted to argue that PT_N does not fall prey to the background belief challenge. To defend PT_N fully would require a complete and general account of holist epistemic justification. I cannot embark on that discussion here. Perhaps, however, we have now before us a few places from which to launch the raft.