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The analogy argument for the proper basicity of belief in God

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Alvin Plantinga and others¹ argue that belief in God can be rational for a person even though that person has no argument or evidence for that belief. Such beliefs are “properly basic.” Properly basic beliefs abound, but beliefs about God have been systematically refused admittance into this class. There are several reasons for this but it is not my intention to discuss those here. Instead my focus will be on an argument attributed to Plantinga by Richard Grigg.² He argues that Plantinga is unsuccessful in showing that belief in God is plausibly taken as properly basic. Grigg distinguishes between two aspects of Plantinga’s argument, one negative and one positive. The negative aspect Grigg characterizes as the “convincing case for the claim that foundationalism is unsound” (Grigg 125). Of the positive aspect Grigg writes:

But to say that the foundationalist challenge to the properly basic character of belief in God can be rejected is not yet to say that we know that belief in God is in fact properly basic. Here is where the second, positive component of Plantinga’s argument comes in, and that second component is built upon an appeal to the obvious basicity of beliefs such as (1) [“I see a tree”], (2) [“I had breakfast this morning”], and (3) [“That person is angry”]. Now the theist may wish to claim that belief in God is as obviously basic, at least for the theist himself or herself, as are (1), (2), or (3). But it seems evident that in so far as Plantinga’s own argument is concerned, (1), (2), and (3) have a special role to play. It would not be a matter of reasoned argument at all if Plantinga were simply to assert out of the blue that belief in God can be properly basic (Grigg 125).

It is the positive aspect with which I am presently concerned.

Although Grigg takes Plantinga to be presenting a positive argument for the claim that belief in God is plausibly taken as properly basic, this claim is not without challenge. Evidence is available that Plantinga is merely showing how the burden of proof is on the critic to indicate why belief in God cannot

be properly basic. But whether Grigg is correct or not, the kind of argument he attributes to Plantinga can be fruitfully explored.

Before stating the argument, let us be clear about Plantinga's notion of a "properly basic belief". A basic belief is one "I accept but don't accept on the basis of any other beliefs (Plantinga ROTNT 54). Such beliefs are not held due to propositional evidence I have. A *properly* basic belief is a basic belief which is warranted. It is not, of course, warranted by some other belief, but such beliefs are grounded in certain conditions (Cf. Plantinga RBG 78–82).

In summary the argument Grigg attributes to Plantinga is this. Beliefs such as (1) "I see a tree," (2) "I had breakfast this morning," and (3) "that person is angry" are warranted by certain conditions and thus properly basic. Likewise, beliefs about God are supposed to be warranted by certain conditions. If the two sets of warranting conditions and beliefs are sufficiently similar, then one can infer claims about one from claims about the other. Of course, the assumption is that Plantinga believes they are sufficiently similar to justify the claim that belief in God is properly basic. Grigg examines the analogy between (1), (2), and (3) and belief in God and finds it wanting. He attempts to show three disanalogies between the paradigm beliefs and their warranting and belief in God and its warranting, each of which I examine. Of course, if the so-called disanalogies fail to be disanalogies or fail to be relevant disanalogies, then Grigg's criticism fails. Barring other relevant disanalogies, Plantinga gains an argument, one which, if never intended as an argument, he perhaps didn't know he had. I will argue that the first two disanalogies fail quite generally, but that the third fails only if Plantinga's understanding of proper basicity is correct. I suggest that his understanding of properly basic beliefs is not a particularly useful notion, and more generally that foundationalism might well be abandoned. This should not, however, be interpreted to mean that beliefs about God cannot be justified in ways similar to the justification provided for many other commonly accepted beliefs.

I

Grigg writes that

the movement from a certain experience *y* to a belief about God is not immune from bias. That is, there is obvious psychological benefit, at least for some people, in believing in God; many persons *want* to believe in God. But it can hardly be said that we ordinarily have this kind of bias in favor of the belief that we see a tree, that we had breakfast this morning, or that another person is angry (Grigg 126).

Let us say that a belief-forming practice is any means by which a person S comes to hold a proposition as true. This will include, for example, the formation of a belief by one's memory, through one's perceptual apparatuses, as a result of reasoning, etc. The exact nature of these practises is complex and need not be discussed here. We do form beliefs, however, and this description of how they are formed is intended merely as a convenient way to refer to that formation.

Now perhaps it is true that we do not ordinarily have a bias in favour of beliefs (1), (2), or (3). Nonetheless, we do have biases toward certain beliefs formed by our belief-producing mechanisms. If, as a new employee, I am trying to show my boss that I should remain in her employment, a desire to that effect may bias beliefs produced in certain circumstances. When asked by my boss whether I mailed a letter to Jones three weeks ago, I may seem to remember mailing it. The memory may, in fact, be quite strong and clear. Further, I may not be aware that I am trying to create a good impression. Nevertheless, in cases like this my desires may influence my belief-forming practises. Assuming that I am either unaware of my desire to please, or at least unaware that my desire is directly influencing my memory, the belief "I mailed the letter to Jones three weeks ago" seems properly basic, at least on Plantinga's grounds. Even if I want the belief that I mailed the letter to be true, the belief may yet be properly basic. I submit that a great many of our beliefs and belief-forming mechanisms are so influenced. We are biased in favour of certain beliefs over others.

The problem with Grigg's claim is best shown by considering beliefs like (3). It does seem *prima facie* true that "that person is angry" or "that person is in pain" are not beliefs one would desire to have, nor that would be of any psychological benefit to the believer. But to which beliefs are these being compared? Does Grigg think that one might have a desire to believe that God is angry? Surely having the Deity angry would be the last thing someone should desire. It seems more likely that Grigg has in mind the picture of God as the loving, caring father or God as the forgiver of one's sin. These could be beliefs one desires to have, but then so might the belief "that person loves me" or "that person forgives me" be desirable or psychologically helpful. Such a bias is not unlike the kind Grigg claims infects religious belief.

Is there a parallel bias toward perceptual beliefs? Perhaps one could argue that the desires are less obvious for perceptual beliefs, since nearly everyone's are met. A blind person, nevertheless, desires to see. Maybe the desire to be in contact with the world in this way is parallel to the desire to be in contact with God. If we had no contact with physical objects, perhaps we would discover that without them, or at least without the belief that they exist, one's life is much poorer.

The main point is, however, that the bias Grigg refers to does exist for some of the paradigm beliefs. The alleged disanalogy fails.

II

The second disanalogy deals with the confirmation of the reliability of the belief-forming practises. Grigg 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 (1), (2), and (3) 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 (2) 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 (Grigg 125, 126).

We can take Grigg to be claiming that the (general) reliability of the belief-forming practise is significant for the proper basicity of beliefs in that it is this reliability which provides the grounding for the beliefs formed. In other words, since most of the beliefs formed by my memory are true and I have no reason to doubt that my memory functions well on this occasion, this particular memory belief is properly basic. Further, we can understand the claim that "my memory is almost always subsequently confirmed by empirical evidence" to mean that whenever I either confirm or disconfirm my memory beliefs, I usually confirm my belief. Thus, since I generally confirm my beliefs whenever I attempt to confirm or disconfirm them, we can safely infer that the belief-forming mechanism is (generally) reliable. The question then arises, how are my beliefs confirmed?

Grigg suggests that there is an *outside* source of confirmation. He may mean, although this is an unlikely interpretation, that the confirmation is merely "outside" the particular belief being confirmed. If so, then the confirmation is straightforwardly circular. If he means, that is, that any other (relevant) belief can confirm memory belief *p*, then there seems to be no

reason why another *memory* belief can't confirm *p*. But then the reliability of the memory itself is shown by relying on the memory. Thus, the confirmation of the reliability of the memory is circular.

On the other hand, if he means that the confirmation of memory belief *p* is to be accomplished using only beliefs generated by some *other* belief-forming mechanism, i.e., not by some other memory belief (and here one might limit the discussion simply to empirical beliefs, as Grigg's examples clearly suggest), then the confirmation is also circular. The memory belief that I ate breakfast this morning is confirmed, according to Grigg, by the empirical evidence that there are dirty dishes in the sink, that there is one less egg in the refrigerator than was there yesterday, etc. These beliefs are formed, we might suggest, by the perceptual belief-forming practice, as opposed, say, to the memory belief-forming practice. It is easy to see, however, that in order to know that these beliefs provide evidence for my having eaten breakfast this morning, one must rely on memory itself; one must remember that one cleaned up the dishes in the sink from two days ago, that yesterday there were 8 eggs in the refrigerator, etc. Perhaps the circle of confirmation is somewhat larger in this case, but nevertheless, the confirmation relies upon the very mechanism to be shown reliable.

A similar story can be told of perceptual beliefs and the practice(s) which form(s) them. That I see a tree is subsequently confirmed or disconfirmed, if it is confirmed or disconfirmed, by deliverances of my perceptual apparatuses. I approach the tree more closely, I smell it, or feel it. I make sure that it is a *tree* that I am seeing and not a cleverly created fake tree from a theatrical set. This I may do by getting closer and using my sight; I need not even use one of my other senses. Although on some occasions I use outside sources of information to help confirm the beliefs formed by a given practice, I ultimately rely on the mechanism's reliability itself to confirm the results. It appears that the confirmation used for both perception and memory is circular.

I have yet to discuss the practices which form beliefs about other persons. Let us call these the "person-belief" practices. (There may or may not be a separate practice here, but to make the discussion simpler, it is convenient to speak as if the practice is separate.) Are there outside sources of confirmation for beliefs of this type? Once again, if the confirmation for a particular person-belief need only be outside the belief in question (but not outside the mechanism), then confirmation is possible in short order. If "that person is angry" is to be confirmed, one might predict that further aggravation will lead to greater anger. Of course, one forms beliefs about the greater anger through the person-belief practice. The circularity of the confirmation is apparent.

Considering the second possibility, if confirmation must be through an

outside belief-forming practise then certain other beliefs should be true in order to allow one to make the confirmation. But it is not easy to say just what else will be true if "that person is angry" is true. Perhaps his or her face will be red, or he or she will act in a certain way. But surely these are just the characteristics which allowed one's person-belief practise to form the belief in the first place. Other predictable actions or reactions will no doubt confirm the belief in question, but it seems that if the belief is to be confirmed some reliance on the practise in question will be made. Suppose it is predicted that the room will be left in shambles. Discovering later that the room was, in fact, left in shambles would seem to confirm the original belief. And we would form a belief about the state of the room not through the person-belief practise but through some other practise. Thus independent confirmation seems available. Note, however, that for this to confirm "that person is angry," one must also believe that that *person* left the room in shambles. This is a belief formed by the person-belief practise. The confirmation here is again circular. (Of course if there is no separate person-belief-forming practise, then a parallel argument can be created claiming that however beliefs about persons are formed, that to confirm a person-belief another person-belief is necessary.)

At this point it may be suggested that the mere fact of the room being left in shambles is some confirmation of the belief that the person was angry, without the further belief that the *person* in question left it that way. Similarly with the other examples discussed. Any reliance on the practises to be confirmed is not a necessary reliance, and in fact the confirmation stands independently of the background beliefs formed or relied on. If this is true the analogy argument is not lost, for all one needs for the argument's success is a good analogy between the paradigm beliefs and belief in God. What is true of the paradigm beliefs is true of the religious belief. If the paradigm beliefs are confirmed by some belief not formed by the same practise, then religious beliefs can be so confirmed, as I will argue.

What of the practises which form beliefs about God? In at least some of Plantinga's examples, and as is confirmed by another of Grigg's suggestions (cf. Grigg 126), the kind of experiences which give rise to belief in God are not abnormal or special "religious" experiences. Upon seeing the flower, one is inclined to believe that God created the flower. In this case it seems that it is the *perceptual* practise which forms the belief about God. If it is, then given our assumption about the reliability of perception, there is no reason not to take this belief about God as properly basic.

If this is unsatisfactory, i.e., if one finds difficulty with beliefs about God being formed by the perceptual belief-forming practise, then it is possible to suggest that some other religious-belief practise, a *divine sense*, if you will, forms religious beliefs. Granting that this divine sense exists, the natural

question is whether it is confirmed as a reliable belief-forming mechanism. It can be argued that such a practise is confirmed in a manner not unlike that already discussed.

According to Grigg's view, if "I had breakfast this morning" is confirmed, one finds certain other beliefs to be true. What would one find to be true when a belief about God is confirmed? What *kinds* of belief would be true? Would they be empirical? It depends, of course, on the particular belief and, perhaps, on the nature of God. Does God intervene in our personal histories? Does he reply to petitionary prayer? If so, does he give us all for which we ask? On the assumption that he does all these things, one might expect certain of the confirming beliefs to be empirical.

Suppose I pray and request to be made wealthy. I might form the belief "God is going to provide me with \$1,000,000 today." If this were formed by the religious-belief practise (and not merely by wishful thinking) then one can expect, barring special circumstances, that by midnight I will be able to afford a new Jaguar. If this kind of belief is formed by the divine sense and is confirmed, we would have empirically tested it by looking to see if we have a large enough bundle of cash or a large enough bank account, etc. at midnight.

But like the memory belief "I ate breakfast this morning," where the confirmation provided relies on the belief-forming mechanism itself, the belief "God will provide me with \$1,000,000 today" relies for its confirmation on the religious-belief mechanism. While one would not need to form a belief about God to know that one had enough money to purchase a Jaguar, one would certainly have to form a belief about God to know that the money for the Jaguar was provided by God. The religious component of the belief is significantly tied to the confirmation of the original belief about God.

It is here that one might raise the question about confirmation not needing to involve a further belief about the person behind the act. Possibly confirmation lies simply in the fact that I have enough money to purchase a Jaguar. Like the case where finding the room in shambles (without also forming the belief that the person wrecked the room) is enough to confirm that the person was angry, having enough money in the bank to purchase a Jaguar (without forming another belief about God) is enough to confirm the original belief. No disanalogy exists at this point.

This type of religious belief, nevertheless, seems not to be a likely candidate for formation. Many, if not most, theists would disallow beliefs like "God will provide me with \$1,000,000 today." They are not, the theist would say, the typical kind of belief God allows us to legitimately form.

Perhaps, following Grigg, a better example is the belief that God created the world. If this belief were confirmed, what other beliefs would be true? Grigg says that empirical evidence cannot confirm it. This is, of course, true.

But to expect empirical confirmation is to expect too much. Other beliefs about God, however, must be true if "God created the world" is true. If God created the world (that is, sustains the world), then surely God also created this flower or that tree. Beliefs like "God created the red poppies" or "God created this eucalyptus tree" would be true and could confirm the belief in question. But how would one know that these beliefs were true? Wouldn't one have to rely on the reliability of the very belief-forming practise at stake? The answer appears to be affirmative. But isn't this confirmation circular? One again, yes, but no more circular than the confirmation provided for the other belief-forming practises.

There are two final points about this aspect of Grigg's argument. First, although when discussing the paradigm beliefs he focuses on the reliability of the practises, he shifts ground when discussing religious beliefs. In dealing with the latter he seems interested in the *particular belief* "God created the world" rather than the belief-forming *practise*. Confirming a belief is not the same as confirming the practise which forms the belief. In regard to this a second point arises. Even if one cannot confirm a particular religious belief, e.g., that God created the world, similarly not all memory beliefs or perceptual beliefs can be confirmed individually. That beliefs cannot be confirmed individually does not exclude them from being properly basic. The second disanalogy fails.

III

The final disanalogy Grigg points to promises to be the most significant in terms of showing the alleged argument to be faulty. He writes that

there is a significant kind of universality which accrues to (1), (2), and (3) but not to beliefs about God. I do not mean to refer to the supposed fact that theistic belief is based upon experiences which not everyone has, while beliefs such as (1), (2), and (3) are based upon nearly universal experiences. This would not count against the basicity of theistic belief. Rather, I wish to point out that while nearly everyone who has experience *x* is led to the belief that he or she is seeing a tree, experience *y* leads some to a particular belief about God but leads many others in different directions. In other words, it seems to me that it is not necessarily the case that the theist has experiences others do not. It may well be the case, instead, that the kind of experience which gives rise to a belief about God, unlike the experiences grounding (1), (2), or (3), does not automatically give rise to one particular belief. For example, many persons have had the experience of being awed by the beauty of the universe without being led to believe in a wise creator (Grigg 126).

Grigg denies that there is anything esoteric about the experiences which form beliefs about God. The experiences are common. They are, nevertheless, to be distinguished from other common experiences which lead to the paradigm beliefs. While experiences such as "being appeared to *treely*" lead everyone to "I see a tree", experiences such as "being awed by the beauty of the universe" do not lead everyone to beliefs about God. Grigg suggests that if two people with normal experiential equipment both have experience *x*, both will form the same belief, while experience *y* will lead the same two people in different directions.

One immediate response to this suggestion is that it is by no means obviously true that "nearly everyone who has experience *x* is led to the belief that he or she is seeing a tree." One and the same experience might lead to many different beliefs. For example, the experience of "being appeared to *treely*" may lead people to have such diverse beliefs as "I see a tree," "the tree must make your back yard shady," or "I must cut down that tree." It may even lead to beliefs somewhat more removed. For example, upon having the tree-like experience one might be led to believe "trees are beautiful" or "how my grandfather loves to work in the bush." The particular belief someone is led to depend upon more than simply the phenomenological content of the experience itself.

This response, however, may miss Grigg's point. Perhaps it is best put this way. No one having experience *x* will deny that she or he sees a tree. Experience *y*, on the other hand, will not have similar results. Not everyone who has that experience is led automatically to a belief about God. Some will deny that they have any beliefs at all about God. We might say that in the one case the experiences *guarantee* the formation of a particular belief, while the other experiences do not have such a guarantee. What I mean to say is that experiences such as "being appeared to *treely*," along with my having no reason to question my belief-forming practise, will automatically lead *at minimum* to the belief that I see a tree. Anyone having that experience will at least agree that they see a tree. Let these minimal beliefs be called "first-level" beliefs. First-level beliefs are guaranteed by the experience.

Nonetheless, Grigg's suggestion seems to me incomplete for it is quite plausible that other beliefs can be (and are) formed in that very same experience and that whatever other belief a person forms beyond the first-level belief may be quite different from beliefs formed by other people. While I form the belief that I should cut the tree down, you may form the belief that it provides good shade for our summer barbeques. These second-level beliefs, as they may be called, are not guaranteed to be formed by the experience itself, and on this point Grigg seems to be correct. Although they are generated by the same experience as the first-level beliefs, other condi-

tions may be present which lead to radically different kinds of belief. "I should cut the tree down" may be formed as I consider the high winds we had last night. "The tree provides great shade" may be formed while fondly remembering the successful barbeque we had last summer. But regardless of these second-level beliefs, a first-level belief *is* going to be formed by experiences such as *x*, or, more cautiously, at least no one will deny the truth of the belief when questioned.

But on this understanding of Grigg's claims, there will be no first-level belief which follows, more or less automatically, from experience *y*. While experience *y* leads some theists to beliefs about God and others (theists and non-theists alike) elsewhere, does it follow that there is no first-level belief for experience *y*? It seems that if the experiences are shared by theist and non-theist alike then very likely there are first-level beliefs which correspond to the experience. Grigg says that many have had the experience of being awed by the beauty of the universe but yet not been led to the belief that God created it. This is undoubtedly true. But the further inference that since everyone will be led in quite different directions in terms of second-level beliefs that *there is no first-level belief* doesn't follow. Is there a first-level belief arising out of the experience? If we try hard enough, wouldn't we all describe the experience in (roughly) the same way? In the case being considered, isn't the first-level belief just that I am experiencing awe at the universe?

The answers to these questions are, I think, affirmative. There is a first-level belief for *any* experience³ and thus the distinction Grigg wants to make between the kind of experience which leads to first-level beliefs and the kind which leads elsewhere is not a significant distinction, at least if he wants to make the distinction solely on the level of the experience. In fact, one of Plantinga's own examples shows that beliefs about God (second-level beliefs) can be generated out of experiences which Grigg claims generate first-level beliefs.⁴ Plantinga says that when we behold the starry heavens above we may form the belief that God created this vast and intricate universe. No mention is made of an experience of awe. One has this simple perceptual experience and this second-level belief is formed. From this fact it does not follow that there is no first-level belief, which in this case would be "I see the starry heavens."

Even if the experiences which (supposedly) lead to beliefs about God are not different from other kinds of experience, we have discovered something of a disanalogy between the paradigm beliefs and beliefs about God; the former are what I've been calling first-level beliefs, the latter are second-level beliefs. The paradigm beliefs are beliefs which every believer with normal noetic equipment will form, or at least not deny, simply when they find themselves having a certain experience (along with, perhaps, the further

condition that they have no reason to distrust their belief-forming practises). On the account given here, these first-level beliefs are guaranteed to be formed, they are formed automatically. This grants the paradigm beliefs a certain kind of universality which belief in God doesn't have. Belief in God, unlike the paradigm belief, is more like the complex beliefs (e.g., this tree provides great shade for our summer barbeques) which are formed only when one has an experience *along with* a set of beliefs which form a complex web of background conditions.

There are three questions to be raised here. First, could one successfully argue that from any experience a group of believers might have, if the other relevant background conditions are right (that is, kept constant for the group of believers being questioned), then all members of the group of believers will form the same second-level belief? In other words, if one includes in the set of belief-generating conditions all the relevant background, would everyone in those *exact* conditions form the same belief? Is it possible for there to be *guaranteed* second-level beliefs, beliefs which will show up in, or at least not be denied by, anyone in those conditions? The second question is whether second-level beliefs can be properly basic. The third is whether some non-religious and commonly accepted second-level beliefs might be formed into a set of paradigm beliefs and then used as a basis for another analogy argument for the proper basicity of belief in God.

Grigg may attempt to answer the first of these questions by claiming that second-level beliefs are simply not available to us in the same manner in which first-level beliefs are. He might suggest that if one tries hard enough, or is prompted in the correct way, or is given the correct kind of information then, given the right experience, one will always be led to believe the correct thing so long as one does not move beyond the first-level, e.g., if one is experiencing a tree-like object and there is no reason not to trust your belief-forming practise, then one will form the belief "I see a tree". But second-level beliefs are so varied and often inconsistent with one another that no hope can be held for a similar result. No amount of correct coaching will lead everyone to the same second-level beliefs.

But why should Plantinga accept this suggestion? Does everyone have exactly the same experience? If so, then given that everyone shares the same background beliefs, is considering the same issues, and is being prompted in the correct way, why would someone be led to one belief and others to another? Upon considering the flower one is inclined to believe that God created the flower. In this experience the phenomenological content must be assumed to be the same as it is when one forms the belief, "I see a flower." If it is not, then Grigg could claim that the theist is covertly suggesting that the experience is not one in which all may share but rather a special experience, a religious experience. But Plantinga is not suggesting that some of us

are privileged and experience not only the flower but also "God-createdness" in the flower. It seems, according to Plantinga's example, that given the visual experience of seeing a flower, one is automatically inclined to believe that God created the flower. How can this be? In these conditions (experiencing the flower) everyone will form the belief "I see a flower" but not everyone will form the belief "God created the flower". How is it that some are inclined to form this belief, while others are not? It is a result of, I am suggesting, the background beliefs one holds, beliefs which, if constant for all believers having that experience, would lead to the same belief, viz., that God created the flower. Given this view, why can't Plantinga simply claim that, given the right kind of prompting, the correct information, the proper background beliefs, etc., everyone will form the same belief if they have the same experience?

It is important, of course, that the conditions for all believers are exactly the same. Just as one will not get the same first-level belief from two different experiences, one will not get the same second-level belief from two different sets of background beliefs and conditions. It is also important that all the believers have the same noetic equipment at their disposal. Just as one would not expect a blind person to form the same belief as a sighted person when the only information available is visual, one would not expect a person with very great reasoning powers to form the same belief as a person with little reasoning power, even if they are given the same information.

For example, if I am a dendrologist, having a great deal of knowledge about trees, there may be no difficulty in my recognizing that the tree before me is an oak. If I know of no reason to question my perceptual apparatus, my memory, etc., then it seems that the belief "I see an oak tree" will be properly basic for me. Of course, not everyone will form this belief, since not everyone knows what oak trees look like. Thus the belief is second-level. Nevertheless, it seems that if we were all trained dendrologists that we too would hold the belief "I see an oak tree" as properly basic, given the appropriate experience. If we had the proper background beliefs and knowledge, then why wouldn't we all be led to the same belief? Similarly, Plantinga might argue that the theist has been given the appropriate information and has the right kind of background beliefs etc., which enables her to take the belief that God created the flower as properly basic.

It may be suggested that there is a significant difference between "I see an oak tree" and "God created the flower". In the former case all one needs is the concept of "oak tree" and one can then *identify* the tree. Not so with the latter. God is not something we can identify by certain features, unlike the oak tree. Having a concept of God is not enough to bring about the same belief in everyone. Presumably atheists as well as theists have the concept "God" and yet they do not form the religious beliefs. More substantive be-

liefs are required to bring about a belief about God. The problem, of course, is that not everyone has the same background beliefs and correct information; the substantive beliefs are lacking. And even if they weren't lacking, would having this information be enough to guarantee that everyone would end up with the correct belief? While the dendrologist surely has enough information to guarantee that he will form the belief (at least if we ask him if he believes it is a oak tree he will say yes), it is not at all clear that the theist will form the belief, since so much more information is required.

Putting more meat on the description of the problem will make it more clear. Suppose I am walking down the hall and meet a friend — let's call her Mary. For me, the following belief is properly basic: I see Mary. Of course not everyone will have the information needed to identify this person as Mary, some people will be able to do no better, in terms of their beliefs, than "I see a person". What is the difference between the oak tree case and the Mary case? Just as not everyone has the information needed to identify the tree as an oak tree, not everyone has the information needed to identify this person as Mary. Is there a significant difference between the kind of information needed in the two cases? We identify *all* oak trees by using the same kind of information while only *one* object meets the description "Mary". But is the concept "oak tree" different in principle from the concept "Mary"? Perhaps, but it seems that the significant similarity in the concepts is that they are both what we might call "identificatory" concepts — we have agreed, so to speak, to call this an oak tree and this Mary. Once knowing what it is that these concepts attach to, we can recognize anything which matches the concept as being appropriately called by that term. There is no need for some further, more substantive concepts in order to recognize this experience as one in which the belief "I see Mary" or "I see an oak tree" is properly basic.

Is the experience of seeing Mary like the experience which warrants the belief that God exists? This is a difficult question. At the very least it should be noted that Plantinga does not claim that we "see" God. We are inclined to believe all sorts of things about God, e.g., God forgives me, God loves me, God created this flower, but we do not form beliefs like "I see God." In this sense, at least, the experiences or the beliefs formed in them or the relationship between the experiences and the beliefs, are quite different. So what we need is not merely an identificatory concept for God, but a set of beliefs and concepts which allows us to recognize the handiwork of God as being wrought by God. In this regard it may be instructive to see that we do not know that this painting was done by Mary unless someone tells us (perhaps Mary herself), or we see her paint it, or we are able in some way to recognize that this is like the work Mary has painted before. What of the work of God? Presumably someone has to tell us, or we must see him do it,

or we are able to recognize the work by having seen such work before. However, we have some sort of direct access to Mary — we can identify her — which enables us to recognize her work as her work and we do not seem to have such access to God. Just how would we recognize him, and unless we do, how can we ever know that this is his work? But this is precisely what is at issue. Can we recognize this experience as one of God and thus identify the person behind it as God? We come to know Mary, and hence are able to recognize her, only if someone, perhaps herself, introduces her to us, or at least points her out. Our beliefs about Mary are arrived at in a context, a context in which other information is given to us about Mary. Some of this information, in Mary's case, is not propositional, that is, it is simply visual — call this person "Mary". This enables us to identify and re-identify Mary. There is no corresponding information about God. We do not see, hear, or feel God by our normal perceptual practices. There is no one to introduce us to God as we are introduced to another human being.

How then can we recognize that God created this flower? It is already agreed by Plantinga and Grigg, that the experiences which supposedly warrant beliefs about God are common experiences which not everyone would identify as experiences in which beliefs about God are formed. Doesn't one need more than mere identificatory concepts in order to move beyond the experience, that is, in order for beliefs about God to be properly basic? The answer seems to be yes, more is needed than merely identificatory concepts, since to recognize something as matching the concept seems to require that we be able to experience the object and we cannot experience God in the requisite way. Does this fact show that beliefs about God cannot be properly basic? Only if it can be shown that beliefs about God are unique in this way. The question now is whether there are other second-level beliefs which have the same characteristics as beliefs about God, viz., have the characteristic which demands that there be more than mere identificatory concepts in order to recognize this case as a case of X.

I believe the answer to this question is yes. Suppose that you have just been married and one night upon coming home you find your spouse away. Several "clues" as to his whereabouts have been left. You discover that his car is still in the garage, but his hiking boots are missing. Further, you note that the refrigerator is minus his favourite foods. Finally, you uncover a note which appears to be in his handwriting stating that he has gone on a day hike with some of his friends. You make the inference and form the belief that he has gone hiking. In this case all kinds of background beliefs have come into play, but you have experienced nothing which enables you to identify him or his whereabouts in the direct manner you would have had he been at home watching television. In such a case one reasons to the conclusion that he has gone hiking and the belief is not basic.

Suppose, however, after having been married for some years, you have come to know him very well. As you come in the door you notice that his hiking boots are missing from the normal spot. You immediately form the belief "my husband has gone hiking." This belief depends not on your being able to identify your husband, but on a very complex set of substantive beliefs about your husband. He acts in thus and so ways, e.g., he only uses his hiking boots for hiking. On the grounds Plantinga has laid out, this belief could be properly basic and yet is a second-level belief which does not come about merely on the basis of the identificatory concept you have of your spouse. Here we have a second-level belief which relies for its proper basicity upon some fairly sophisticated background beliefs. While it may be that during the first year of one's married life one could only have reached the belief by a fairly complicated piece of reasoning, now one simply relies upon fairly substantive background beliefs and the appropriate conditions and the correct belief is formed.

Similarly, if we replace Mary's painting in the example above with a painting by a famous but deceased artist, let's say Rembrandt, an expert art critic might recognize, without discursive reasoning, that this painting is one of Rembrandt's. No identificatory concept about Rembrandt himself is being used — the art critic has never met or seen Rembrandt, but nevertheless the critic is able to form the belief that this picture was done by the artist. The concepts one uses to form the belief in question are very substantive, they have to do with the form of the painting, the kind of brush strokes, etc., but nothing with Rembrandt himself. Of course the expert only became an expert after years of study, and in her earlier days she could not have made this judgement immediately. Nevertheless, Plantinga could suggest that this belief is properly basic for the art critic now.

That Plantinga has laid out how one could count this as a properly basic belief can be seen in the following considerations from his work. First, one may first come to believe p on the basis of belief, or perhaps a very complicated set of beliefs. For example, I may come to believe that $256 + 327 = 583$ only by calculating it, but later, if I am particularly talented at arithmetic, I may just "see" that $256 + 327 = 583$. The self-evidence of beliefs is person-relative. What is self-evident to the learned is not necessarily self-evident for the unlearned. Second, a belief p may be held as properly basic by person S at time t_1 but later S may learn of some counter-evidence for p . The belief ceases to be properly basic for S at time t_2 . But upon discovering a flaw in the counter-evidence, p will be properly basic for S once again. S does not believe p on the basis of the intervening reasoning. That reasoning, says Plantinga, is not even part of the basis for p . Even though there is a complicated piece of reasoning which is part of the background for the proper basicity for p , p is basic or immediate, and not inferred.

So on the grounds he has laid out, Plantinga could claim that the belief “my husband has gone on a hike” is properly basic for the spouse in the conditions suggested above, or that the art critic has a properly basic belief in “Rembrandt created this painting”. So it is, Plantinga might suggest, with beliefs about God. A very complicated set of background beliefs may allow you to form a belief such as “God created this flower”, while there may not be any straight-forward identificatory concept for God. If you know certain things about how God would act, or the kind of thing he would make, then why wouldn’t you be able to identify this flower as one created by God?

He might go on to suggest, as some of his comments indicate he would, that as an unbeliever or an immature believer you may not yet have the appropriate information which allows the formation of the belief “God created this flower.” Nevertheless, as you come to understand more about God, you find yourself forming these beliefs quite naturally. Your epistemic background, including some very substantive beliefs, becomes essential in the formation of these religious beliefs. Indeed, one’s entire epistemic structure may become relevant in this regard. Things one was taught as a child, books one has read, movies one has seen, or generally, any experience and any belief one has formed may influence the kind of belief formed in a given set of conditions. It may be very important that one has learned and understood the concept of God (so far as that is possible) but this is not enough. Just as the spouse must know more about her husband than merely understanding him on the level of concepts, one must know more about God than merely understanding the concept “God.” And, as Plantinga points out, it may be important that one does not find the problem of evil (or any other criticism of theism) to be overwhelming evidence against theism. It may be crucial, in some circumstances, that one has been in other conditions in which another theistic belief has been taken as properly basic. This is where the significance of Plantinga’s claims about the circumstance- and condition-specific nature of rationality come into play. One is rational in one’s belief only in certain conditions. Those who are not led to the belief about God in experience *y* are not, Plantinga may suggest, in precisely the same conditions as those who are. If they were, they would be led to the same belief. One’s noetic structure and content are very important in understanding the rationality of beliefs.

One final note in regard to the experiences. Plantinga could take refuge in the suggestion the experience *y* really does have a different phenomenological content; it really is a religious experience and we have been endowed by God with a divine sense in order to gain beliefs about God through these experiences. In this case Grigg is correct in claiming that a lack of universality of the experience would not count against the proper basicity of belief in God. Were this the case, none of Grigg’s comments about the third disanalogy are relevant.

In reply to the three questions asked above, the argument concludes with affirmative answers. Can there be a guaranteed second-level belief? Yes. Can a second-level belief be properly basic? Yes, given Plantinga's description of basic beliefs. Are there second-level beliefs which can serve as the basis for an analogical argument for the proper basicity of belief in God? Yes, well at least perhaps. If one accepts the view of basicity which Plantinga holds, then perhaps we could get a set of beliefs parallel to the original paradigm beliefs. But it is not clear that one should accept Plantinga's notion of basicity. But Plantinga may very well insist that his notion is the correct one, and on his grounds an argument from analogy for the proper basicity of belief in God might be forthcoming.

IV

It has been argued that beliefs about God suffer from no greater bias in their formation than the paradigm properly basic beliefs. Neither does the religious-belief practise lack confirmation of its reliability, unless perception, memory, and the person-belief mechanism do. Finally, although the paradigm beliefs are first-level beliefs and beliefs about God are not, there are some beliefs which are second-level beliefs but also properly basic, at least on the ground laid out by Plantinga. In particular, the examples given had to do with people and their handiwork. Perhaps it is difficult to construct parallel examples of belief generated through perception or memory not having to do with people but which rely to the same extent on substantive background beliefs. If this is a weakness, and it is not clear that it is, then perhaps the best that can be done is to generate an analogical argument about the proper basicity of beliefs about God using second-level properly basic beliefs about persons.

The argument attributed to Plantinga has not, perhaps, escaped unscathed. But if one grants the description Plantinga gives of basic beliefs, then none of Grigg's disanalogies are, in the final analysis, successful and an analogical argument for the proper basicity of beliefs about God can still be advanced. There are, however, some issues to raise here. First, it is not at all clear that Plantinga's understanding of a properly basic belief is correct, or even plausible. It seems odd that the spouse's belief about her husband's having gone hiking is properly basic. It seems clearly to be an inferred belief, or at least a belief which derives its warrant from other beliefs, perhaps by some sort of coherence. Second, if one has to stretch the notion of a properly basic belief as far as the examples discussed above do, then would it not be a more judicious move to reconsider how second level beliefs are justified? Perhaps foundationalism is the wrong kind of theory to use to account for epistemic warrant. Exploring a type of coherence theory of justification might be more

fruitful, not only for the justification of religious beliefs, but for other commonly accepted beliefs as well. There may very well be an analogy between religious beliefs and other commonly accepted beliefs, but an analogy which is best shown by ceasing to work within the constraints of foundationalism.⁵

Notes

1. See, for example, the essays by William Alston and Nicholas Wolterstorff in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press) 1983. The references to Plantinga in the text are as follows: (Plantinga ROTNT) is "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology" in J.B. Brough, D.O. Dahlstrom, and H.B. Veatch, eds., *Philosophical Knowledge*, Vol. 54 of the Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association. (Plantinga RBG) is "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*.
2. Richard Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicity: A Response to Plantinga" in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983), 123–127.
3. Unless, perhaps, the experience is of the supposed ineffable kind found in certain types of mysticism.
4. In other words, an experience of type *x* leads to a second level belief.
5. I would like to thank J. William Forgie and David E. Schrader for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.