

On “Proper Basicity”

ALVIN PLANTINGA
University of Notre Dame

There is much to applaud in Evan Fales’ penetrating discussion of the nature of basic belief and allied topics.¹ He usefully begins by putting the whole topic in historical perspective; and his discussion of the epistemic status of such beliefs as that all crows are black is unusually sensitive to the actual complexities of belief formation. Fales intends “to examine the notion of proper basicity, and the criteria by means of which properly basic propositions are to be distinguished from non-basic ones;” and he means to do so “with an eye directed in particular towards evaluating Plantinga’s claim that what one might have thought were decidedly nonbasic beliefs can be basic, and, indeed, properly so” (375). The beliefs to which he refers are specifically Christian beliefs, such as that Jesus of Nazareth was in fact the divine son of God, that he suffered and died to redeem human beings from their sinful condition, that he rose from the dead, and the like. As Fales says, in *Warranted Christian Belief* I argued that such beliefs can indeed be properly basic; Fales aims to ‘call this into question’, as they say. Along the way, he makes trouble for nearly everyone in the neighborhood: classical foundationalist, internalist, externalist, and coherentist—anyone, in short, who endorses and relies on the distinction between beliefs that are basic and those that are not. I won’t try to defend all of these worthies; they can take care of themselves. What I aim to do instead is defend my claim about the possible proper basicity of Christian belief.

I. Evidentialism and The Dialectical Context

But first, we must note the dialectical context of my argument that Christian belief *is* (more exactly, can be) properly basic. This context includes *evidentialism*, the widely accepted idea that Christian belief (as well as theistic belief more broadly) can be held rationally

¹ Evan Fales, “Proper Basicity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68, pp. 373-83.

(or justifiably) only on the basis of evidence—*propositional* evidence. What is it, exactly, to accept or believe a proposition *p* on the basis of propositional evidence? In the paradigm case, you accept *p* on the basis of propositional evidence only if you have an *argument* for *p*—something like one or more of Aquinas’s five ways, for example—and you accept *p* on the basis of that argument. So the evidentialist thought—the thought I meant to dispute—is that you can’t rationally accept Christian belief unless you have an argument² for its truth.

Of course there must be certain amendments, nuances, qualifications. Perhaps I’d be all right, from the evidentialist point of view, if today I believed in God on the basis of a powerful argument that I mastered yesterday, even if at the moment I can’t remember the details (I’d have to go back and consult my notes), but do remember that I saw it to be sound. And what about a child who accepts the belief in question on the basis of testimony from her elders, but doesn’t herself have any such argument—or indeed, any argument at all? We could hardly claim that she is irrational. After all, we human beings constantly accept a great deal on the basis of testimony and authority—without, ordinarily, making an independent check on the reliability of the alleged authority in question. So perhaps (and this would be a more modest evidentialism³) theistic or Christian belief is rationally acceptable, for me, if I accept it on the basis of testimony or authority, the testifiers or authorities or at least someone in the relevant community being in possession of good evidence or arguments for it. Something similar goes, of course, for scientific beliefs: you need not yourself have done the experiments to be rational or justified in believing, say, special relativity.

This evidentialist claim is clearly rooted in some kind of foundationalism. According to the latter, there are *some* propositions—those that are self-evident, perhaps, together with perceptual propositions and those that record one’s own conscious mental life—such that it is rational or justified to accept them in the basic way, that is, without having propositional evidence for them; but other beliefs are rightly accepted only on the basis of argument, propositional evidence—evidence that ultimately traces back to beliefs of the first sort. And the claim was (is) that Christian belief obviously belongs in the latter category. Christian beliefs are rationally acceptable only if there are good arguments (available to the believer or not) for

² Perhaps one like that proposed by Richard Swinburne in his *Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), chapters 5-8.

³ See Stephen Wykstra, “Towards a More Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of ‘Needing Evidence’” in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, second edition, ed. William Rowe and William Wainwright (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989).

them—arguments, ultimately, from premises that are themselves rationally acceptable without argument. My main aim was to contest and refute this claim. I wanted (and want) to hold that theistic belief in general and Christian belief in particular *can be* accepted with perfect rationality even if the believer doesn't have any good arguments for this belief, and even if *there aren't* any such arguments; further, if Christian belief is *true*, then it (probably) is often rationally accepted in that way. The rational acceptability of theistic and Christian belief does not depend on the availability of propositional evidence in the form of arguments for it.

Now Fales makes two kinds of trouble: general trouble for foundationalists (internalists as well as externalists) and specific trouble for my claims about the possible proper basicity of Christian belief. The main thrust of Fales' general trouble-making is that the distinction between basic belief and nonbasic belief isn't (or hasn't been made) clear enough; some attempts to make it clear, furthermore, wind up with a distinction without much of an epistemological difference. This is a challenge to foundationalism. It is not necessarily, however, a challenge to my thesis that theistic and Christian belief can be rationally accepted even if there aren't any good arguments for them. As far as that central thesis goes, it doesn't really matter whether or not there is a clear, important and precise distinction between basic and nonbasic belief. It doesn't really matter whether attempts to make such a distinction are deconstructible. For the question whether someone in the community has a good theistic argument seems to be a reasonably clear question, whatever the vagaries of the notion of basicity; and my claim was that Christian and theistic belief can have positive epistemic status even if there is no such argument in the relevant community. (In the same way, I take it that belief in other minds and belief in the existence of material objects can have positive epistemic status even if none of us has good arguments for the existence of material objects or other minds.) So Fales' general challenge to foundationalism is not a problem for my response to evidentialism.⁴ Indeed, it may be more of a problem for the evidentialist, insofar as his evidentialist strictures are rooted in one or another brand of foundationalism.

⁴ And perhaps that challenge is in any event a bit exaggerated; while I can't go into the matter here, I should think we could take a *basic* belief to be one in the formation of which no inferences (conscious, or unconscious, if there are such things as unconscious inferences) have occurred. We could then add that S's belief that p is properly basic with respect to justification (rationality, warrant) just if S's belief that p is basic and is justified (rational, has warrant).

II. Problems for Foundationalism?

In *Warranted Christian Belief* (hereafter WCB), I concentrated on three kinds of positive epistemic status: justification, taken in its original deontological sense,⁵ rationality, taken in the sense of proper function,⁶ and warrant, the property or quantity enough of which distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief. A belief will be properly basic, with respect to any of these properties, if it is held in the basic way and displays the property. It should be fairly uncontroversial, I suppose, that a wide variety of beliefs, including Christian belief, can be properly basic with respect to justification. After all, it is clear that a child who accepts Christian belief on the authority of her elders can be within her intellectual rights; she need flout no intellectual duties, obligations or correct maxims in so doing. Similarly, an adult for whom the truth of such belief just seems clearly and obviously *true*, can hardly be faulted for holding it—indeed, it may not be so much as within his power to reject it.

As for rationality (in the above sense of absence of cognitive dysfunction), here too it should be relatively uncontroversial that many different sorts of beliefs can be properly basic. One main reason for this is just the fact that a wide variety of beliefs can be accepted, without cognitive dysfunction, on the basis of testimony, at least as long as the believer isn't aware of defeaters.⁷ The vast bulk of what I believe, I believe on the basis of testimony; the same, I dare say, goes for you. That I live in the US, that there is such a state as South Dakota—indeed, that my name is Alvin Plantinga—all of these things I believe on the basis of testimony. (Maps, birth certificates, histories of South Dakota are all, of course, forms of testimony.) Christian belief too, clearly enough, can be accepted on the basis of testimony without cognitive malfunction. Christian belief, therefore, can be basic with respect to rationality.

But the demands of warrant—to a first approximation, the property or quantity enough of which is sufficient, along with truth, for a belief to constitute knowledge—are more stringent. A rough first approximation: a belief B has warrant, as I see it, for a person S if and only if B is produced by properly functioning belief-producing processes or faculties in an appropriate environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief.⁸ By way of illustration,

⁵ See my *Warrant: the Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), chapter 1.

⁶ See *Warrant: the Current Debate*, pp. 136-37.

⁷ See my *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) (hereafter 'WPF'), chapter 4.

⁸ See WPF, chapters 1 and 2. For refinements and corrections, see my *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), chapter 5.

consider Freud's claim that theistic belief is an illusion, in his technical sense, a device whereby humanity protects itself from the grim perception of our actual place and prospects in the world (nature delivers to us turmoil, pain, suffering, and finally demands our death). From the perspective of atheism, something like this could be correct; but illusions do not necessarily involve malfunction. It may be part of our design plan to form certain beliefs, where the purpose involved isn't that of producing true beliefs, but beliefs with some other desirable property—perhaps (as Freud thinks) the property of enabling us to carry on in this cold, cruel world. Such beliefs would be rational, in the current sense; but because the processes that produce them aren't aimed at the production of *true* belief, they would lack warrant. Beliefs resulting from illusion, then, would lack warrant; they needn't lack rationality.

Now the claim that Christian belief can have *warrant* in the basic way is more controversial. The basic idea—for details consult WCB, chapters 8 and 9—begins with the observation that there are various original sources of warrant. There is perception, to be sure, but also memory, *a priori* intuition (so I think, anyway), something like induction, whereby we learn from experience, perhaps Reid's sympathy, whereby we learn about other persons, and the like. In WCB I argued that if Christian belief is true, then, probably, it too has an original source of warrant: something like 'the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit' (Calvin), or 'the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit' (Aquinas). If Christian belief has such a source, then not all of its warrant comes by way of argument or inference from beliefs arising from other sources; like perceptual belief (or belief about other minds) it can have warrant even if there aren't any good arguments for it from premises that get their warrant from other sources. If all this is so, then if Christian belief is in fact true, it is or can be properly basic with respect to warrant.

This broader picture does, of course, rely on the distinction between beliefs that have warrant in the basic way and those that do not. Now Fales finds a problem here: can't just about any belief turn out to be basic, and, at least from an externalist perspective, properly basic with respect to warrant? That is, from that perspective, can't just about any belief have warrant, even if accepted in the basic way? Consider, he says, that paragon of a belief that isn't properly basic,

(C) it's probable that all crows are black;

isn't that belief ordinarily accepted in the basic way? Fales can't remember any specific occasions on which he saw black crows; nor can

he remember ever making any kind of inductive inference about crows; and in this he is probably no different from the rest of us. But then, he says, “So it seems that, so long as the mechanisms by means of which my acceptance of (C) came about are reliable ones, we should count (C) as (for me) a properly basic belief” (378)—and this, he thinks, ought to disturb any foundationalist.

Well, he certainly seems to be right about the phenomena; we don’t ordinarily form beliefs of that sort on the basis of inductive inference (either implicit or explicit) from our own experience. For the most part, I suppose, we form such beliefs on the basis of testimony. I’ve read, or been told, that all crows are black (except for ones that have been spray painted by post-modern troublemakers intent on impugning one of philosophy’s most cherished generalizations); this jibes with my own experience of crows insofar as I remember it; so I believe (C). But then doesn’t it follow that (C) is properly basic—wouldn’t any externalist, at any rate, be obliged to think so? First, it certainly *seems* to be a basic belief. It isn’t accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions; there is no inference, (conscious, anyway) from other beliefs to this one. But is it *properly* basic? Here we must make a couple of distinctions. It is, clearly enough, properly basic with respect to justification; no epistemic duties or obligations are being flouted when it is accepted in this way. It also seems to be properly basic with respect to rationality: surely there is no cognitive malfunction or dysfunction in my accepting it in this way.

What about warrant? Now Fales suggests that according to the externalist, a belief is properly basic if “it is not derived from any other beliefs, and so long as the processes which produced it, whether the subject knows anything of them or not, meet some reliability condition” (375). Let’s suppose the process of believing something on the basis of testimony is indeed a reliable belief-producing process. That’s not sufficient, however (at any rate on my account), for the belief in question to have warrant. I believe your claim to have climbed the Grand Teton this summer; however, my belief will have warrant only if you *also* hold this belief, and hold it in such a way that it has warrant for you. If you make the claim just to impress your audience and have never done any such thing, then my belief is properly basic with respect to justification and rationality, but not with respect to warrant. A belief accepted on the basis of testimony has warrant only if the testifier held the belief in question, and only if that belief had warrant for her.⁹ (Near enough: we can perhaps think of arcane exceptions, but they won’t be presently relevant.) So suppose I believe on the basis of your testimony that

⁹ See WPF, pp. 85-88.

the first American immigrant had an extra toe; this belief won't have warrant if you were just guessing, or teasing, or believed it on the basis of a made up story in the *National Inquirer* (it's right next to that report about Hillary Clinton's having an affair with an extraterrestrial).

How about memory? Memory can be thought of, in the present context, as a special case of testimony. Perhaps I calculate 44×44 , memorize the proposition that $44 \times 44 = 1936$, and forget the calculations—and indeed the fact that I calculated it. When next I think $44 \times 44 = 1936$, is this belief on that occasion basic for me? Is it properly basic? Here we can see memory as a limiting case of testimony. I'd say the testifier was my *earlier* self, except that this would encourage *outré* ideas according to which you are really just a string of momentary selves (or perhaps the current bead on that string). And here, just as in the case of testimony, the belief in question will have warrant for me now only if it had warrant for me then (WPF, pp. 63ff.).¹⁰ It may be justified and rational, even if it hadn't had warrant for me earlier on, but it won't be warranted now unless it was warranted then. And this is so whether or not memory is a reliable belief-producing process.

Fales' claim, then—that “externalist epistemologies have the remarkable feature that, in principle, it seems that *any* proposition could be properly basic for a subject, just so long as no other beliefs play a justifying role in its formation, and the reliability condition is met” (375) ignores important distinctions. As far as *my* externalist epistemology goes, at any rate, that claim is true if it's proper basicity with respect to justification or rationality that is at issue, but false if what we're thinking of is proper basicity with respect to warrant. Let's say that a belief is 'warrant non-basic' just if the only way in which it can be basic with respect to warrant, for a person S, is by way of testimony or memory,¹¹ and 'warrant basic' otherwise. If I just find myself believing, not on the basis of testimony or perception or propositional evidence of any sort, that the first person to cross the land bridge from Asia to America was left-handed and had an extra toe, that belief won't have warrant for me.¹² The same goes for the belief that dinosaurs roamed the plains of South Dakota a couple of hundred million years ago. Beliefs of that sort aren't warrant basic for us human beings.

¹⁰ WPF, p. 61, note 22.

¹¹ Hence of course if such a belief is basic with respect to warrant for someone, then on some occasion someone will have had to form that belief on the basis of propositional evidence.

¹² Or for anyone else in roughly my historical condition. Things are different for the first person to cross that land bridge.

Of course that is true with respect to *us* (at least if our understanding of our own cognitive design plan is accurate); things may go differently for other creatures. Whether a belief be warrant basic depends on the design plan of the cognitive system under consideration. That there are electrons isn't (originally) warrant basic for us; other cognitive systems might work very differently. Perhaps angels know in the basic way propositions for which we human beings need evidence. Perhaps for God every belief is warrant basic. God is such that necessarily, he believes a proposition just if that proposition is true; he needs neither inference nor testimony. There are also creatures less cognitively favored than we; perhaps among them are some who require inference for what is immediately obvious to us. (We have no trouble just seeing that $6 + 5 = 11$; there may be creatures less arithmetically talented who must go through a laborious process of inference to hold this belief with warrant.)

III. Proper Basicity and Christian Belief

So for us human beings, not nearly every proposition is warrant basic. Of course my claim was that Christian belief—that Jesus arose from the dead, for example—*can* have warrant in the basic way for us. More exactly, what I said was that if Christian belief is *true*, then very likely it *is* warrant basic; and in WCB I proposed a process or mechanism whereby that would indeed be so. According to the model proposed there, Christian belief has warrant, and has it in the basic way. Drawing on Aquinas and Calvin, the model has essentially three elements: Biblical teaching, the internal testimony or instigation of the Holy Spirit (the third member of the Trinity), and faith, the set of beliefs produced in the believer. Beliefs produced in accordance with the model are properly basic with respect to justification, rationality and warrant. What I claimed for this model is that it is possible, and for all we know, correct; furthermore, if Christian belief is true it or something like it is probably true.

According to Fales, “Dialectically, the attractiveness of this view is plain: it simply short-circuits all those tiresomely repeated and—so Plantinga himself admits—unanswerable objections to CCBs [Christian creedal beliefs] on the grounds that they cannot be supported by appropriately cogent evidence” (381-82). Well yes, I guess I do ‘admit’ that—just as I admit that perceptual beliefs and beliefs about other minds are subject to precisely similar “unanswerable objections.” We have perceptual beliefs: in general, there won't be ‘appropriately cogent evidence’ for these beliefs by way of beliefs that are themselves evidentially independent of perceptual beliefs. The same goes for the beliefs

about the past, inductive beliefs, beliefs about other minds, and the like. In each of these cases, there is a source of warranted belief; and beliefs produced by the source in question can't in general be provided with that "appropriately cogent evidence" from beliefs emanating from some other source. But of course that is nothing against them. It is also nothing against Christian belief, if in fact Christian belief is true, and there is such a source of warranted belief.

Fales has another complaint about my model. He seems to think that this process whereby, on the model, a person comes to hold Christian belief never involves testimony—that, on the model, the believer always comes to believe suddenly, and with nothing by way of relevant antecedent condition:

The picture Plantinga manages to convey in *Warranted Christian Belief* is that a person simply finds herself believing, say under the stimulus of reading Scripture, Christian creedal claims (381).

But, he says,

. . . this is implausible. As an account of the generation of her state of belief, it ignores the believer's history: her Christian upbringing, the pervasive presence of Christian beliefs within her culture, the social pressures from peers or missionaries, and so on (382).

In the model as in real life, some people come to Christian belief by way of sudden, overwhelming, blindingly powerful conversions. But that is only one way in which (according to the model) this process works. To quote myself, ordinarily bad form, but perhaps excusable here,

So faith may have the phenomenology that goes with suddenly seeing something to be true: "Right! Now I see that this is indeed true and what the Lord is teaching!" Or perhaps the conviction arises slowly, and only after long and hard study, thought, discussion, prayer. Or perhaps it is a matter of a belief's having been there all along (from childhood, perhaps) but now being transformed, renewed, intensified, made vivid and alive. This process can go on in a thousand ways; in each case there is a presentation or proposal of central Christian teaching, and, by way of response, the phenomenon of being convinced, coming to see, forming of a conviction . . . (WCB 251).

Fales' objection was that my model "ignores the believer's history: her Christian upbringing, the pervasive presence of Christian beliefs within her culture, the social pressures from peers or missionaries, and so on" (382). But first, according to my model, the process can go on in a

thousand ways: how then can Fales sensibly suggest that the model excludes what he thinks the phenomenology of Christian belief actually amounts to? And second, the processes he mentions “her Christian upbringing . . .” are all examples of *testimony*. Far from ignoring testimony, my model explicitly invokes it: in each case, I said, (so far as the phenomenology is concerned) there is a presentation or proposal of central Christian teaching, and then in response, the belief formed. This presentation, of course, would ordinarily be by way of testimony, by way of Christian upbringing, or encountering examples of Christian belief, or the preaching and testimony of friends or missionaries or preachers. And this process is certainly not incompatible with Fales’ idea that “underlying the acquisition of such beliefs is a long process of explicit and implicit thought.” So I am at a loss to understand why Fales thinks that my model doesn’t fit with the actual phenomenology of coming to Christian belief.

Finally, Fales apparently claims that as a matter of fact my entire model of the formation of Christian belief, with its special divine activity, is implausible: “On the face of it, conversion is the product of processes much more nearly analogous to those underlying belief in (C) [that all crows are black] or acceptance of views about what motivates Republicans; and it is problematic indeed whether we should accord these proper basicity” (382). But this is to ignore, not refute, my argument. If you don’t think Christian belief is *true*, then it might be sensible or even *de rigueur* for you to think that such belief is the product of processes of the sort Fales mentions. But of course that’s quite compatible with what I argued in WCB. What I argued is that if Christian belief is *true*, then (probably) it is warrant basic, and warrant basic by way of processes like the ones in the A/C model. So here it isn’t clear that Fales and I disagree—or if we do, it must be by virtue of the fact that he thinks that even if Christian belief is true, it is *still* likely to be the product of the processes he mentions. If that *is* what he thinks, I invite him to consider the argument I gave (WCB 268-286) for the contrary conclusion.