

Reason and Belief in God

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Belief in God is the heart and center of the Christian religion—as it is of Judaism and Islam. Of course Christians may disagree, at least in emphasis, as to how to think of God; for example, some may emphasize his hatred of sin; others, his love of his creatures. Furthermore, one may find, even among professedly Christian theologians, supersophisticates who proclaim the liberation of Christianity from belief in God, seeking to replace it by trust in “Being itself” or the “Ground of Being” or some such thing. It remains true, however, that belief in God is the foundation of Christianity.

In this essay I want to discuss a connected constellation of questions: Does the believer-in-God accept the existence of God by *faith*? Is belief in God contrary to reason, unreasonable, irrational? Must one have *evidence* to be rational or reasonable in believing in God? Suppose belief in God is *not* rational; does that matter? And what about proofs of God’s existence? Many Reformed or Calvinist thinkers and theologians have taken a jaundiced view of natural theology, thought of as the attempt to give proofs or arguments for the existence of God; are they right? What underlies this hostility to an undertaking that, on the surface, at least, looks perfectly harmless and possibly useful? These are some of the questions I propose to discuss. They fall under the general rubric *faith and reason*, if a general rubric is required. I believe Reformed or Calvinist thinkers have had important things to say on these topics and that their fundamental insights here are correct. What they say, however, has been for the most part unclear, ill-focused, and unduly inexplicit. I shall try to remedy these ills; I shall try to state and clearly develop their insight; and I shall try to connect these insights with more general epistemological considerations.

Like the Missouri River, what I have to say is best seen as the confluence of three streams—streams of clear and limpid thought, I hasten to add, rather than turbid, muddy water. These three streams of thought are first, reflection on the evidentialist objection to theistic belief, according to which belief in God is unreasonable or irrational because there is

insufficient evidence for it; second, reflection on the Thomistic conception of faith and reason; and third, reflection on the Reformed rejection to natural theology. In Part I I shall explore the evidentialist objection, trying to see more clearly just what it involves and what it presupposes. Part II will begin with a brief look at Thomas Aquinas' views on faith and knowledge; I shall argue that the evidentialist objection and the Thomistic conception of faith and knowledge can be traced back to a common root in *classical foundationalism*—a pervasive and widely accepted picture or total way of looking at faith, knowledge, belief, rationality, and allied topics. I shall try to characterize this picture in a revealing way and then go on to argue that classical foundationalism is both false and self-referentially incoherent; it should therefore be summarily rejected. In Part III I shall explore the Reformed rejection of natural theology; I will argue that it is best understood as an implicit rejection of classical foundationalism in favor of the view that belief in God is properly basic. What the Reformers meant to hold is that it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all; in this respect belief in God resembles belief in the past, in the existence of other persons, and in the existence of material objects. I shall try to state and clearly articulate this claim and in Part IV to defend it against objections.

The attentive reader may note two styles of print: large and small. The main lines of the argument are to be found in the large print, where technicalities and side issues will be kept to a minimum. The sections in small print will amplify, qualify, and add detail. I hope what I have to say will be of use to the philosophical and theological neophyte as well as to those with more training and experience. Readers interested just in the main line of argument are invited to skip the sections in small print; readers who find the large print too cursory and simplistic are invited to consult the small.

PART I: THE EVIDENTIALIST OBJECTION TO BELIEF IN GOD

My first topic, then, is the evidentialist objection to theistic belief. Many philosophers—W. K. Clifford,¹ Brand Blanshard,² Bertrand Russell,³ Michael Scriven,⁴ and Anthony Flew,⁵ to name a few—have argued that belief in God is irrational or unreasonable or not rationally acceptable or intellectually irresponsible or somehow noetically below par because, as they say, there is *insufficient evidence* for it. Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say if, after dying, he were brought into

the presence of God and asked why he had not been a believer. Russell's reply: "I'd say 'Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence!'"⁶ We may have our doubts as to just how that sort of response would be received; but Russell, like many others, held that theistic belief is unreasonable because there is insufficient evidence for it.

A. *How Shall We Construe "Theistic Belief"?*

But how shall we construe "theistic belief" here? I have been speaking of "belief in God"; but this is not entirely accurate. For the subject under discussion is not really the rational acceptability of belief *in* God, but the rationality of belief that God exists—that there *is* such a person as God. And belief in God is not at all the same thing as belief that there is such a person as God. To believe that God exists is simply to accept as true a certain proposition: perhaps the proposition that there is a personal being who has created the world, who has no beginning, and who is perfect in wisdom, justice, knowledge, and power. According to the book of James, the devils do that, and they tremble. The devils do not believe *in* God, however; for belief in God is quite another matter. One who repeats the words of the Apostles' Creed "I believe in God the Father Almighty, . . ." and means what he says is not simply announcing the fact that he accepts a certain proposition as true; much more is involved than that. Belief in God means *trusting* God, accepting God, accepting his purposes, committing one's life to him and living in his presence. To the believer the entire world speaks of God. Great mountains, surging ocean, verdant forests, blue sky and bright sunshine, friends and family, love in its many forms and various manifestations—the believer sees these things and many more as gifts from God. The universe thus takes on a personal cast for him; the fundamental truth about reality is truth about a *person*. So believing in God is indeed more than accepting the proposition that God exists. But if it is more than that, it is also at least that. One cannot sensibly believe in God and thank him for the mountains without believing that there *is* such a person to be thanked and that he is in some way responsible for the mountains. Nor can one trust in God and commit oneself to him without believing that he exists; as the author of Hebrews says, "He who would come to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of those who seek him." (Heb. 11:6)

So belief in God must be distinguished from the belief that God exists. Having made this distinction, however, I shall ignore it for the most part, using "belief in God" as a synonym for "belief that there is such a person as God." The question I want to address, therefore, is the ques-

tion whether belief in God—belief in the existence of God—is rationally acceptable. But what is it to believe or assert that God exists? Just which belief is it into the rational acceptability of which I propose to inquire? Which God do I mean to speak of? The answer, in brief, is: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Jewish and Christian revelation: the God of the Bible.

To believe that God exists, therefore, is first of all to hold a *belief* of a certain sort—an existential belief. To assert that God exists is to make an *assertion* of a certain sort—an existential assertion. It is to answer at the most basic level the ontological question “What is there?” This may seem excessively obvious. I would not so much as mention it, were it not for the fact that some philosophers and theologians seem to disagree. Oddly enough, they seem to use the phrase “belief in God” and even “belief that God exists” in such a way that to believe in God is not to hold any such existential beliefs at all. Much of what Rudolph Bultmann says, for example, seems to suggest that to believe in God is not at all to believe that there exists a being of a certain sort. Instead, it is to adopt a certain attitude or policy, or to make a kind of resolve: the resolve, perhaps, to accept and embrace one’s finitude, giving up the futile attempt to build hedges and walls against guilt, failure, and death. And according to the philosopher Richard Braithwaite, a religious assertion is “the assertion of an intention to carry out a certain behavioral policy, subsumable under a sufficiently general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit statement, but not necessarily the assertion, of certain stories.”⁷ But then it looks as if according to Braithwaite when the Christian asserts “I believe in God the Father Almighty” he is not, contrary to appearances, asserting that he believes that there exists a *being* of a certain kind; instead he is asserting that he intends to carry out a certain behavioral policy. As I use the phrase “belief in God,” however, that phrase denotes a *belief*, not a resolve or the adoption of a policy. And the assertion that God exists is an *existential* assertion, not the assertion of an intention to carry out a certain policy, behavioral or otherwise. To believe or assert that God exists is to believe or assert that there exists a being of a certain very special sort.

What sort? Some contemporary theologians, under the baneful influence of Kant, apparently hold that the name “God,” as used by Christians and others, denotes an *idea*, or a *concept*, or a *mental construct* of some kind. The American theologian Gordon Kaufman, for example, claims that the word ‘God’ “raises special problems of meaning because it is a noun which by definition refers to a reality transcendent of and thus not locatable within experience.”⁸ In a striking echo of one of Kant’s

famous distinctions, Kaufman distinguishes what he calls the “real referent” of the term “God” from what he calls “the available referent”:

The real referent for “God” is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content.⁹

For all practical purposes, it is the *available referent*—a particular imaginative construct—that bears significantly on human life and thought. It is the “available God” whom we have in mind when we worship or pray; . . . it is the available God in terms of which we speak and think whenever we use the word “God.” In this sense “God” denotes for all practical purposes what is essentially a mental or imaginative construct.¹⁰

Professor John Hick makes a similar suggestion; in his inaugural address at the Claremont School of Theology he suggested that when Christians speak to God, they are speaking of a certain *image*, or *mental construction*, or *imaginative creation* of some sort.

Now these are puzzling suggestions. If it is Kaufman’s “available referent” “in terms of which we speak whenever we use the word ‘God,’” and if the available referent is a mental or imaginative construct, then presumably when we say “there is a God” or “God exists” we are affirming the existence of a certain kind of mental or imaginative construct. But surely we are not. And when Christians say that God has created the world, for example, are they really claiming that an image or imaginative construct, whatever precisely that may be, has created the world? That seems at best preposterous. In any event, the belief I mean to identify and discuss is not the belief that there exists some sort of imaginative construct or mental construction or anything of the sort. It is instead the belief, first, that there exists a *person* of a certain sort—a being who acts, holds beliefs, and has aims and purposes. This person, secondly, is immaterial, exists *a se*, is perfect in goodness, knowledge, and power, and is such that the world depends on him for its existence.

B. Objections to Theistic Belief

Now many objections have been put forward to belief in God. First, there is the claim that as a matter of fact there is no such thing as belief in God, because the sentence “God exists” is, strictly speaking, nonsense.¹¹ This is the positivists’ contention that such sentences as “God exists” are unverifiable and hence “cognitively meaningless” (to use their charming phrase), in which case they altogether fail to express propositions. On this view those who claim to believe in God are in the pitiable position of

claiming to believe a proposition that as a matter of fact does not so much as exist. This objection, fortunately, has retreated into the obscurity it so richly deserves, and I shall say no more about it.¹²

Second, there is the claim that belief in God is *internally inconsistent* in that it is impossible, in the broadly logical sense, that there be any such person as theists say God is. For example, theists say that God is a person who has no body but nonetheless acts in the world; some philosophers have retorted that the idea of a bodiless person is impossible, and the idea of a bodiless person *acting* is *obviously* impossible. Some versions of some of these objections are of great interest, but I do not propose to discuss them here. Let me just record my opinion that none of them is at all compelling; so far as I can see, the concept of God is perfectly coherent. Third, some critics have urged that the existence of God is incompatible with other beliefs that are plainly true and typically accepted by theists. The most widely urged objection to theistic belief, the deductive argument from evil, falls into this category. According to this objection the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God is *logically incompatible* with the presence of evil in the world—a presence conceded and indeed insisted upon by theists.¹³ For their part, theists have argued that there is no inconsistency here;¹⁴ and I think the present consensus, even among those who urge some form of the argument from evil, is that the deductive form of the argument from evil is unsuccessful.

More recently, philosophers have claimed that the existence of God, while perhaps not inconsistent with the existence of the amount and kinds of evil we actually find, is at any rate *unlikely* or *improbable* with respect to it; that is, the probability of God's existence with respect to evil is less than that of its denial with respect to evil. Hence the existence of God is improbable with respect to what we know. But if theistic belief is improbable with respect to what we know, then, so goes the claim, it is irrational or intellectually improper to accept it. Although this objection—the probabilistic argument from evil—is not of central concern here, it bears an interesting relation to one of my main topics—the question whether belief in God is properly basic. So suppose we briefly examine it. The objector claims that

- (1) God is the omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good creator of the world

is improbable or unlikely with respect to the amounts and varieties of evil we find in the world. Perhaps *some* of the evil is necessary to achieve certain good states of affairs, but there is so *much* evil, much of which seems, on the face of things, utterly gratuitous. The objector claims, therefore, that (1) is improbable or unlikely, given

(2) There are 10^{13} turps of evil

where the turp is the basic unit of evil—equal, as you may have guessed, to $1/10^{13}$ (the evil in the actual world).

The burden of the free-will defense is that it is *possible* that it was not within God's power to create a world containing as much good as the actual world contains but fewer than 10^{13} turps of evil—and this even if God is omniscient and omnipotent. That is, it *could* be that

(3) God is the omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good creator of the world, and it was not within his power to create a world containing more good than the actual world contains but fewer than 10^{13} turps of evil.

Let us suppose, for the moment, that (3) is indeed possible. It is a familiar theorem of the probability calculus that

(4) If *A* entails *B* and *B* is improbable on *C*, then *A* is improbable on *C*.

Hence if (1) is improbable or unlikely on (2), then (3) is improbable on (2). The objector is therefore committed to supposing that (3) is unlikely or improbable on (2).

Now I have argued elsewhere¹⁵ that it is quite implausible to suppose (3) unlikely or improbable given the truth of (2), and hence implausible to suppose that (1) is improbable on (2). Call this response to the objector "the low-road reply." Here I want to pursue instead the *high-road* reply.

Suppose we stipulate for purposes of argument that (1) is in fact improbable on (2). Let us agree that it is unlikely, given the existence of 10^{13} turps of evil, that the world has been created by a God who is perfect in power, knowledge, and goodness. What is supposed to follow from that? How is this to be construed as an objection to theistic belief? How does the argument go from there? It does not follow, of course, that theism is false. Nor does it follow that one who accepts both (1) and (2) (and, let us add, recognizes that (1) is improbable with respect to (2)) has an irrational system of beliefs or is in any way guilty of noetic impropriety. For it *could* be, obviously enough, that (1) is improbable with respect to (2) but probable with respect to something else we know. I might know, for example, both that

(5) Feike is a Frisian, and 9 out of 10 Frisians cannot swim,

and

(6) Feike is a Frisian lifeguard, and 99 out of 100 Frisian lifeguards can swim;

it is plausible to hold that

(7) Feike can swim

is probable with respect to (6) but improbable with respect to (5). If, furthermore, (5) and (6) are all we know about Feike's swimming ability, then the view that he can swim is epistemically more acceptable for us than the view that he cannot—even though we know something with respect to which the former is improbable.

Indeed, we might very well *know* both (5) and (7); we might very well know a pair of propositions A and B such that A is improbable on B . So even if it were a fact that (2) is evidence against (1) or that (1) is improbable on (2), that fact would not be of much consequence. But then how can this objection be developed? How can the objector proceed?

Presumably what he means to hold is that (1) is improbable, not just on (2) but on some appropriate body of *total evidence*—perhaps all the evidence the theist has, or perhaps the body of evidence he is rationally obliged to have. The objector must be supposing that there is a relevant body of total evidence here, a body of evidence that includes (2); and his claim is that (1) is improbable with respect to this relevant body of total evidence.

Suppose we step back a moment and reconsider the overall structure of the probabilistic argument. The objector's claim is that the theist is irrational in accepting belief in God because it is improbable with respect to (2), the proposition that there are 10^{13} turps of evil—a proposition whose truth the theist acknowledges. As we have seen, however, even if the existence of God is improbable with respect to (2), that fact is utterly insufficient for demonstrating irrationality in the theist's structure of beliefs; there may be many propositions A and B such that even though A is improbable on B , we can nonetheless accept both in perfect propriety. What the objector must be supposing, then, is something like this. For any theist T you pick, there is a set of propositions T_s that constitute his *total evidence*; and now for any proposition A the theist accepts, he is rational in accepting A only if A is not improbable with respect to T_s . And the objector's claim is that the existence of God is improbable with respect to T_s for any (or nearly any) theist.

Suppose we say that T_s is the theist's *evidential set*. This is the set of propositions to which, as we might put it, his beliefs are responsible. A belief is rationally acceptable for him only if it is not improbable with respect to T_s . Now so far we have not been told what sorts of propositions are to be found in T_s . Perhaps these are the propositions the theist *knows* to be true, or perhaps the largest subset of his beliefs that he can rationally accept without evidence from other propositions, or perhaps the set of propositions he knows *immediately*—knows, but does not know

on the basis of other propositions. However exactly we characterize this set T_s , the presently pressing question is this: Why cannot belief in God be itself a member of T_s ? Perhaps for the theist—for some theists, at any rate—belief in God is a member of T_s , in which case it obviously will not be improbable with respect to T_s . Perhaps the theist is entirely within his epistemic rights in *starting from* belief in God, taking that proposition to be one of the ones probability with respect to which determines the rational propriety of *other* beliefs he holds. If so, the fact, if it is a fact, that theistic belief is improbable with respect to the existence of evil does not even begin to show that the theist is irrational in accepting it. The high-road reply to the probabilistic argument from evil, therefore, leads directly to one of the questions I am fundamentally concerned with: What sorts of beliefs, if any, is it rational or reasonable to *start from*? Which beliefs are such that one may properly accept them without evidence, that is, without the evidential support of other beliefs? One who offers the probabilistic argument from evil simply *assumes* that belief in God does not have that status; but perhaps he is mistaken.

C. *The Evidentialist Objection Stated*

Now suppose we turn explicit attention to the evidentialist objection. Many philosophers have endorsed the idea that the strength of one's belief ought always to be proportional to the strength of the evidence for that belief. Thus, according to John Locke a mark of the rational person is "the not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant." According to David Hume "A wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence." In the nineteenth century we have W. K. Clifford, that "delicious *enfant terrible*" as William James calls him, insisting that it is wicked, immoral, monstrous, and maybe even impolite to accept a belief for which you do not have sufficient evidence:

Whoso would deserve well of his fellows in this matter will guard the purity of his belief with a very fanaticism of jealous care, lest at any time it should rest on an unworthy object, and catch a stain which can never be wiped away.¹⁶

He adds that if a

belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. Not only does it deceive ourselves by giving us a sense of power which we do not really possess, but it is sinful, because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our body and spread to the rest of the town. (184)

And finally:

To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. (186)

(It is not hard to detect, in these quotations, the "tone of robustious pathos" with which James credits him.) Clifford, of course, held that one who accepts belief in God *does* accept that belief on insufficient evidence and has therefore defied his duty to mankind. More recently, Bertrand Russell has endorsed the same idea: "Give to any hypothesis which is worth your while to consider," he says, "just that degree of credence which the evidence warrants"; and in his view the evidence warrants no credence in the existence of God.

1. A. Flew: The Presumption of Atheism

Still more recently Anthony Flew has commended what he calls Clifford's "luminous and compulsive essay" (perhaps "compulsive" here is to be understood as "compelling"); and Flew goes on to claim that there is, in his words, a "presumption of atheism." What is a presumption of atheism, and why should we think there is one? Flew puts it as follows:

What I want to examine is the contention that the debate about the existence of God should properly begin from the presumption of atheism, that the onus of proof must lie upon the theist.

The word 'atheism,' however, has in this contention to be construed unusually. Whereas nowadays the usual meaning of 'atheist' in English is 'someone who asserts there is no such being as God,' I want the word to be understood not positively but negatively. I want the original Greek preface 'a' to be read in the same way in 'atheist' as it is customarily read in such other Greco-English words as 'amoral,' 'atypical,' and 'asymmetrical.' In this interpretation an atheist becomes: not someone who positively asserts the non-existence of God; but someone who is simply not a theist.¹⁷

What the protagonist of my presumption of atheism wants to show is that the debate about the existence of God ought to be conducted in a particular way, and that the issue should be seen in a certain perspective. His thesis about the onus of proof involves that it is up to the theist: first to introduce and to defend his proposed concept of God; and second, to provide sufficient reason for believing that this concept of his does in fact have an application. (14-15)

How shall we understand this? What does it mean, for example, to say that the debate "should properly begin from the presumption of atheism?" What sorts of things do debates begin from, and what is it for one to begin from such a thing? Perhaps Flew means something like this: to speak of where a debate should begin is to speak of the sorts of premises to which the affirmative and negative sides can properly appeal in arguing their cases. Suppose you and I are debating the question whether, say, the United States has a right to seize Mideast oil fields if the OPEC countries refuse to sell us oil at what we think is a fair price. I take the affirmative and produce for my conclusion an argument one of whose premises is the proposition that the United States has indeed a right to seize these oil fields under those conditions. Doubtless that maneuver would earn me few points. Similarly, a debate about the existence of God cannot sensibly start from the assumption that God does indeed exist. That is to say, the affirmative cannot properly appeal, in its arguments, to such premises as that there is such a person as God; if she could, she would have much too easy a time of it. So in this sense of "start" Flew is quite right: the debate cannot start from the assumption that God exists.

Of course, it is also true that the debate cannot start from the assumption that God does *not* exist; using "atheism" in its ordinary sense, there is equally a presumption of atheism. So it looks as if there is in Flew's sense a presumption of atheism, alright, but in that same sense an equal presumption of aatheism. If this is what Flew means, then what he says is entirely correct, if something of a truism.

In other passages, however, Flew seems to understand the presumption of atheism in quite a different fashion:

It is by reference to this inescapable demand for grounds that the presumption of atheism is justified. If it is to be established that there is a God, then we have to have good grounds for believing that this is indeed so. Until or unless some such grounds are produced we have literally no reason at all for believing; and in that situation the only reasonable posture must be that of either the negative atheist or the agnostic. (22)

Here we have a claim much more contentious than the mere suggestion that a debate about the existence of God ought not to start from the assumption that indeed there is such a person as God; here Flew is claiming that it is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of arguments or evidence for the existence of God. That is, Flew claims that if we know of no propositions that serve as evidence for God's existence, then we cannot rationally believe in God. And of course Flew, along with Russell, Clifford, and many others, holds that in fact there are not suffi-

The debate
can't start
from
atheism.

cient grounds or evidence for belief in God. Flew, therefore, seems to endorse the following two principles:

- (8) It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons

and

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

2. *M. Scriven: Atheism Is Obligatory in the Absence of Evidence.*

According to Michael Scriven, if the arguments for God's existence fail, then the only rational posture is not merely not believing in God; it is atheism, the belief that there is no God. Speaking of the theistic proofs, he says, "It will now be shown that if they fail, there is no alternative to atheism."¹⁸ He goes on to say: "we need not have a proof that God does not exist in order to justify atheism. Atheism is obligatory in the absence of any evidence for God's existence. . . . The proper alternative, where there is no evidence, is not mere suspension of belief, e.g., about Santa Claus; it is *disbelief*". (103) But Scriven's claim seems totally arbitrary. He holds that if the arguments *for* God's existence fail and the arguments *against* God's existence *also* fail, then atheism is rationally obligatory. If you have no evidence *for* the existence of God, then you are rationally obliged to believe there is no God—whether or not you have any evidence *against* the existence of God. The first thing to note, then, is that Scriven is not treating

- (10) God exists

and

- (11) God does not exist

in the same way. He claims that if there is no evidence for (10), then the only rational course is to believe its denial, namely (11). But of course he does not propose the same treatment for (11); he does not suggest that if there is no evidence for (11), then we are rationally obliged to believe *its* denial, namely (10). (If he *did* propose that (11) should be treated like (10), then he would be committed to supposing that if we had no evidence either way, the rational thing to do would be to believe the denial of (10), namely (11), and *also* the denial of (11), namely (10).) Why then does he propose this lack of parity between (10) and (11)? What is the justification for treating these propositions so differently? Could not the theist just

as sensibly say, "If the arguments for *atheism* fail and there is no evidence for (11), then theism is rationally obligatory"? Scriven's claim, initially at any rate, looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism.

Scriven speaks of *obligations, duties*, with respect to belief: in the absence of evidence, he says, atheism is *obligatory*. What sorts of principles of epistemic obligation underlie this claim? Obviously we cannot sensibly hold that for *any* proposition *A*, if *S* has no evidence for *A*, then *S* is rationally obliged to believe $\sim A$; for then if *S* has no evidence for *A* and also none for $\sim A$, *S* will be obliged to believe both *A* and $\sim A$. Some of what Scriven says suggests that it is just *existential* propositions with respect to which *S* is obliged to toe this very demanding line:

Recalling that to get even a little evidential support for the existence of a Being with supernatural powers will require that that little be of very high quality ('little' does not mean 'dubious'), we see that the failure of all the arguments, i.e., of all the evidence, will make even agnosticism in the wide sense an indefensible exaggeration of the evidential support. (105)

He then adds, via a footnote:

Technical note: attempts to formulate the general principle of evidence involved here have usually run into difficulties related to those made familiar in the paradoxes of confirmation. For example, negative existential hypotheses in natural language can be supported by the failure of proofs of their contradictories; but positive existential hypotheses are not made plausible by the failure of disproofs of their denials. (105)

Perhaps the last sentence is the key: Scriven believes that positive existential hypotheses have a very different standing from negative existential hypotheses. In the absence of evidence, he seems to think, one is obliged to believe the denial of a positive existential hypothesis, whereas of course the same does not hold for negative existential hypotheses. It is hard to see any reason for thus discriminating against positive existential hypotheses — why should they be thought of as less credible, *ab initio*, than negative existential hypotheses? Indeed, according to Carnap and many of his followers, universal propositions have an a priori probability of zero; since the negative existential $\sim (\exists x)Fx$ is equivalent to a universal proposition $(x) \sim Fx$, it too would have an a priori probability of zero, so that its positive existential denial would have an a priori probability of 1.¹⁹ Now it is no doubt a bit excessive to claim that the a priori credibility of positive existential propositions is 1, but is there any reason to suppose that in the absence of evidence either way, negative existentials have a stronger claim on us than positive existentials? It is at the least very hard to see what such reason might be.

In any event Scriven's suggestion is entirely unsuccessful. Consider

(12) There is at least one human being that was not created by God.

It is a necessary truth that

(13) If God exists, then God has created all the human beings there are.

(If you think (13) *is not* necessary, then replace "God" in (12) and (13) by "the being who is identical with God and has created all the human beings there are.") (12) is a positive existential proposition; hence on Scriven's suggestion we ought to believe its denial unless we have evidence for it. Hence if the arguments for (12) fail, we should accept its denial. But any argument for (12), given the necessity of (13), can be transformed into an argument for the nonexistence of God—an argument which is successful if the original argument for (11) is. So if the arguments for the nonexistence of God fail, then so do the arguments for (12). But, by Scriven's principle, if the arguments for (12) fail, we are rationally obliged to believe its denial, that is,

(14) Every human being has been created by God.

On this principle, therefore, if the arguments *against* the existence of God fail, we are rationally obliged to believe that every human being has been created by God; and if both the arguments for and the arguments against the existence of God fail, then we are obliged to believe both that God does not exist and that we have all been created by him. No doubt Scriven would view this as an unsatisfactory result.

Scriven's extravagant claim, then, does not look at all promising. Let us therefore return to the more moderate evidentialist position encapsulated by

(8) It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons

and

(9) There is no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.

3. *The Evidentialist Objection and Intellectual Obligation*

Now (9) is a strong claim. What about the various arguments that have been proposed for the existence of God—the traditional cosmological and teleological arguments for example? What about the versions of the *moral* argument as developed, for example, by A. E. Taylor and more recently by Robert Adams? What about the broadly inductive or probabilistic arguments developed by F. R. Tennant, C. S. Lewis, E. L. Mascall, Basil Mitchell, Richard Swinburne, and others? What about the ontological argument in its contemporary versions?²⁰ Do none of these provide evidence? Notice: the question is not whether these arguments, taken singly or in combinations, constitute *proofs* of God's existence; no doubt

they do not. The question is only whether someone might be rationally justified in believing in the existence of God on the basis of the alleged evidence offered by them; and that is a radically different question.

At present, however, I am interested in the objector's other premise — the claim that it is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of evidence or reasons. Why suppose *that* is true? Why should we think a theist must have evidence, or reason to think there is evidence, if he is not to be irrational? Why not suppose, instead, that he is entirely within his epistemic rights in believing in God's existence even if he has no argument or evidence at all? This is what I want to investigate. Suppose we begin by asking what the objector means by describing a belief as *irrational*. What is the force of his claim that theistic belief is irrational, and how is it to be understood? The first thing to see is that this objection is rooted in a *normative* view. It lays down conditions that must be met by anyone whose system of beliefs is *rational*, and here "rational" is to be taken as a normative or evaluative term. According to the objector there is a right way and a wrong way with respect to belief. People have responsibilities, duties, and obligations with respect to their believings just as with respect to their actions, or if we think believings are a kind of action, their *other* actions. Professor Brand Blanshard puts this clearly:

everywhere and always belief has an ethical aspect. There is such a thing as a general ethics of the intellect. The main principle of that ethic I hold to be the same inside and outside religion. This principle is simple and sweeping: Equate your assent to the evidence.²¹

and according to Michael Scriven

Now even belief in something for which there is no evidence, i.e., a belief which goes beyond the evidence, although a lesser sin than belief in something which is contrary to well-established laws, is plainly irrational in that it simply amounts to attaching belief where it is not justified. So the proper alternative, when there is no evidence, is not mere suspension of belief, e.g., about Santa Claus; it is disbelief. It most certainly is not faith.²²

Perhaps this sort of obligation is really just a special case of a more general moral obligation; perhaps, on the other hand, it is unique and *sui generis*. In any event, says the objector, there are such obligations: to conform to them is to be rational and to go against them is to be irrational.

Now here what the objector says seems plausible; there do seem to be duties and obligations with respect to belief, or at any rate in the general *neighborhood* of belief. One's own welfare and that of others sometimes depends on what one believes. If we are descending the Grand Teton

and I am setting the anchor for the 120-foot rappel into the Upper Saddle, I have an obligation to form such beliefs as *this anchor point is solid* only after careful scrutiny and testing. One commissioned to gather intelligence – the spies Joshua sent into Canaan, for example – has an obligation to get it right. I have an obligation with respect to the belief that Justin Martyr was a Greek apologist – an obligation arising from the fact that I teach medieval philosophy, must make a declaration on this issue, and am obliged not to mislead my students here. The precise nature of these obligations may be hard to specify: What exactly *is* my obligation here? Am I obliged to believe that Justin Martyr was a Greek apologist if and only if Justin Martyr *was* a Greek apologist? Or to form a belief on this topic only after the appropriate amount of checking and investigating? Or maybe just to tell the students the truth about it, whatever I myself believe in the privacy of my own study? Or to tell them what is generally thought by those who should know? In the rappel case, do I have a duty to believe that the anchor point is solid if and only if it is? Or only only if it is? Or just to check carefully before forming the belief? Or perhaps there is no obligation to *believe* at all, but instead an obligation to *act on* a certain belief only after appropriate investigation. In any event, it seems plausible to hold that there are obligations and norms with respect to belief, and I do not intend to contest this assumption.

These duties or obligations with respect to belief – call them “intellectual duties” – may assume a wide variety of forms. There may be duties with respect to *acquiring* belief; perhaps there are ways of acquiring belief such that one is rationally obliged to try not to acquire belief in those ways. There may be duties pertaining to the *sustaining* of a belief; perhaps there are conditions under which one is obliged to try to maintain a belief, other circumstances in which one ought to be willing to consider giving it up, and still others in which one’s epistemic duty is to try to divest oneself of it. There may be other sorts of epistemic duties: duties having to do with the strength of belief, with one’s openness to the influence of one’s elders and betters, and the like.

Furthermore, these duties can be understood in several ways. First, we could construe them teleologically; we could adopt an intellectual utilitarianism. Here the rough idea is that our intellectual obligations arise out of a connection between our beliefs and what is intrinsically good and intrinsically bad; and our intellectual obligations are just special cases of the general obligation so to act as to maximize good and minimize evil. Perhaps this is how W. K. Clifford thinks of the matter. If people accepted such propositions as *this DC10 is airworthy* when the evidence is insufficient, the consequences could be disastrous; so perhaps some of us, at any rate, have an obligation to believe that proposition only in the presence of adequate evidence. The intellectual utilitarian could be an *ideal* utilitarian; he could hold that certain epistemic states are intrinsically valuable – knowledge, perhaps, or believing the truth, or a skeptical and judicial temper that is not blown

about by every wind of doctrine. Among our duties, then, is a duty to try to bring about these valuable states of affairs. Perhaps this is how Professor Chisholm is to be understood when he says:

Let us consider the concept of what might be called an "intellectual requirement." We may assume that every person is subject to a purely intellectual requirement: that of trying his best to bring it about that, for every proposition that he considers, he accepts it if and only if it is true.²³

Of course a person could fulfill this obligation just by trying to bring it about that he considered only a few utterly obvious propositions; he might ask his friends, perhaps never to mention to him any but the most obvious truths—truths of elementary arithmetic, for example. Presumably something must be said about a willingness to consider many propositions and many different kinds of propositions. But that there is something like the obligation Chisholm mentions is surely plausible.

Second, we could construe intellectual obligations *aretically*; the objector could adopt what Professor Frankena calls a "mixed ethics of virtue" with respect to the intellect. There are valuable noetic or intellectual states (whether intrinsically or extrinsically valuable); there are also the corresponding intellectual virtues, the habits of acting so as to produce or promote or enhance those valuable states. One's intellectual obligations, then, are to try to produce and enhance these intellectual virtues in oneself and others.

Third, we could construe intellectual obligations *deontologically*; we could adopt a pure ethics of obligation with respect to the intellect. Perhaps there are intellectual obligations that do not arise from any connection with good or evil but attach to us just by virtue of our being the sorts of creatures we are and having the sorts of noetic powers we do in fact display. The above quotation from Chisholm could also be understood along these lines. Intellectual obligations, therefore, can be construed *variously*, and of course there will be intellectual *permissions* corresponding appropriately to the obligations.

Now perhaps the evidentialist objector thinks there are intellectual obligations of the following sorts. With respect to certain kinds of propositions perhaps I have a duty not to believe them unless I have evidence for them. Perhaps I have a duty not to accept the denial of an apparently self-evident proposition unless I can see that it conflicts with other propositions that seem self-evident. Perhaps I have a duty to accept such a proposition as *I see a tree* under certain conditions that are hard to spell out in detail but include at least my entertaining that proposition and my having a certain characteristic sort of visual experience along with no reason to think my perceptual apparatus is malfunctioning.

Of course these obligations would be *prima facie* obligations; in special sorts of circumstances they could be overridden by other obligations. I have an obligation not to take bread from the grocery store without per-

mission and another to tell the truth. Both sorts of obligation can be overridden, in specific circumstances, by other obligations – in the first case, perhaps, an obligation to feed my starving children and in the second (when the Nazis are pounding on the door) an obligation to protect a human life. So we must distinguish *prima facie* duties or obligations from *all-things-considered* or *on-balance* (*ultima facie*?) obligations. I have a *prima facie* obligation to tell the truth; in a given situation, however, that obligation may be overridden by others, so that my duty, all things considered, is to tell a lie. This is the grain of truth contained in situation ethics and the ill-named “new morality.”

And *prima facie* intellectual obligations, like obligations of other sorts, can conflict. Perhaps I have a *prima facie* obligation to believe what seems to me self-evident, and what seems to me to follow self-evidently from what seems to me self-evident. But what if, as in the Russell paradoxes, something that seems self-evidently false apparently follows, self-evidently, from what seems self-evidently true? Here *prima facie* intellectual obligations conflict, and no matter what I do, I will violate a *prima facie* obligation. Another example: in reporting the Grand Teton rappel I neglected to mention the violent electrical storm coming in from the southwest; to escape it we must get off in a hurry, so that I have a *prima facie* obligation to inspect the anchor point carefully, but another to set up the rappel rapidly, which means I cannot spend a lot of time inspecting the anchor point.

Thus lightly armed, suppose we return to the evidentialist objector. Does he mean to hold that the theist without evidence is violating some intellectual obligation? If so, which one? Does he claim, for example, that the theist is violating his all-things-considered intellectual obligation in thus believing? Perhaps he thinks anyone who believes in God without evidence is violating his all-things-considered intellectual duty. This, however, seems unduly harsh. What about the 14-year-old theist brought up to believe in God in a community where everyone believes? This 14-year-old theist, we may suppose, does not believe in God on the basis of evidence. He has never heard of the cosmological, teleological, or ontological arguments; in fact no one has ever presented him with any evidence at all. And although he has often been told about God, he does not take that testimony as evidence; he does not reason thus: everyone around here says God loves us and cares for us; most of what everyone around here says is true; so probably *that is* true. Instead, he simply believes what he is taught. Is he violating an all-things-considered intellectual duty? Surely not. And what about the mature theist – Thomas Aquinas, let us say – who thinks he *does* have adequate evidence? Let us suppose he is wrong; let us suppose all of his arguments are failures. Nevertheless he has re-

flected long, hard, and conscientiously on the matter and thinks he *does* have adequate evidence. Shall we suppose he is violating an all-things-considered intellectual duty here? I should think not. So construed, the objector's contention is totally implausible.

Perhaps, then, the objector is to be understood as claiming that there is a *prima facie* intellectual duty not to believe in God without evidence. This duty can be overridden by circumstances, of course, but there is a *prima facie* obligation to believe propositions of this sort only on the basis of evidence. The theist without evidence, he adds, is flouting this obligation and is therefore not living up to his intellectual obligations. But here too there are problems. The suggestion is that I now have the *prima facie* duty to comply with the following command: either have evidence or do not believe. But this may be a command I cannot obey. I may not know of any way to acquire evidence for this proposition; and of course if the objector is right, there is no adequate evidence for it. But it is also not within my power to refrain from believing this proposition. My beliefs are not for the most part directly within my control. If you order me now, for example, to cease believing that the earth is very old, there is no way I can comply with your order. But in the same way it is not now within my power to cease believing in God now. So this alleged *prima facie* duty is one such that it is not within my power to comply with it. But how can I have a duty, *prima facie* or otherwise, to do what it is not within my power to do?

4. *Can I Have Intellectual Obligations If My Beliefs Are Not within My Control?*

This is a difficult and vexing question. The suggestion here is that I cannot now have a *prima facie* obligation to comply with a command which it is not now within my power to obey. Since what I believe is not normally within my power, I cannot have an obligation to believe a certain proposition or to refrain from believing it; but then, *contra* the objector, I do not have an obligation to refrain from believing in God if I have no evidence. This response to the objector is, I think, inadequate. In the first place the response is unbecoming from the theist, since many of those who believe in God follow St. Paul (for example, Romans 1) in holding that under certain circumstances failure to believe in God is culpable. And there are cases where most of us—theist and nontheist alike—do in fact believe that a person is culpable or condemnable for holding a given belief, as well as cases where we hold a person responsible for *not* accepting certain beliefs. Consider the following. Suppose someone comes to believe that Jews are inferior, in some important way, to Gentiles. Suppose he goes on to conclude that Jews should not be permitted to share public

facilities such as restaurants and hotels with the rest of us. Further reflection leads him to the view that they should not be provided with the protection of law and that the rest of us have a right to expropriate their property if that is convenient. Finally, he concludes that they ought to be eliminated in order to preserve the purity of the alleged Aryan race. After soul-searching inquiry he apparently believes in all honesty that it is his duty to do what he can to see that this view is put into practice. A convincing sort, he gets the rest of us to see things his way: we join him in his pogroms, and his policy succeeds.

Now many of us will agree that such a person is culpable and guilty. But wherein does his guilt consist? Not, presumably, in doing what he believes he ought to do, in trying to carry out his duty as he sees it. Suppose, to vary the example, he tries to encourage and institute these abhorrent policies at considerable cost to himself: he loses his job; his friends turn their backs on him; he is finally arrested and thrown into prison. Nonetheless he valiantly persists. Does he not deserve moral *credit* for doing what he sees as his duty? His guilt, surely, does not consist solely in his taking the *actions* he takes; at least part of the guilt lies in accepting those abhorrent views. If he *had not* acted on his beliefs—out of fear of the consequences, perhaps—would he not have been guilty nonetheless? He would not have caused as much trouble, but would he not have been guilty? I should think so. We do in fact sometimes think that a person is guilty—has violated norms or obligations—by virtue of the beliefs he holds.

We might suppose, following Alan Donagan,²⁴ that a person is blameworthy for his beliefs only if he has arrived at them *carelessly* or *dishonestly*. But the fact is, I think, that if someone held the sort of heinous views I mentioned above, we would consider him blameworthy and guilty even if appearances supported his claim that he arrived at these views only after careful, conscientious, and soul-searching inquiry.

Further, suppose we did hold that a person could not be guilty by virtue of accepting beliefs he is led to by conscientious and honest inquiry. What is the importance of the qualifying clause? Well, we think that the person who arrives at his noxious views by such inquiry has at any rate done his best; and even if he arrives at the wrong views, we can ask no more of him than that he do his best. On the other hand, the person who arrives at similar views *carelessly* or *thoughtlessly* is in the wrong for not having exercised sufficient care. But what if a person holds the view that honest and careful inquiry nearly always leads one astray? What if he believes that those views are nearest the truth that have been arrived at, not by inquiry, honest or otherwise, but on impulse? Or suppose he holds that *how* one arrives at beliefs is of no consequence; what counts is only the depth and passion and persistence with which one holds them. Suppose he then holds his offensive beliefs with depth and passion and persistence; can he be guilty by

virtue of holding beliefs he has acquired and holds in just the way he thinks beliefs ought to be acquired and held? Is he not then doing his best, and can we expect more of him? If *doing one's best* excuses holding heinous beliefs arrived at through honest inquiry, then does it not equally excuse *S's* holding heinous beliefs arrived at in whatever way *S* thinks beliefs ought to be arrived at—no matter *what way* *S* thinks beliefs ought to be arrived at? But could a person really escape guilt for offensive racial views, for example, by pleading that while he had arrived at these views impulsively and without thought, that is how he thought such views *ought* to be arrived at? And what about the person who accepts the view that there really are no moral distinctions—that the whole institution of morality is a confused and superstitious remnant of the infancy of our race? Could a person escape accountability for his actions by virtue of his failure to believe in accountability? These are difficult questions, but I think the answer in each case is No. A person who carelessly arrives at morally repugnant beliefs is guilty even if he holds that beliefs should be arrived at carelessly. A person who does not accept morality at all can nonetheless be guilty.

Or so, at any rate, we ordinarily think. Part of the explanation of our so thinking, I believe, lies in our views as to what sorts of beliefs a person of good will *can* virtuously acquire. We do not think any normal human being could honestly arrive at the view that it does not matter how one treats his fellows, that if inflicting severe pain on someone else affords a certain mild pleasure, then there can be no real objection to so doing. We do not believe anyone of good will could honestly come to the conclusion that, say, an entire racial group could rightly be eliminated to avoid the possibility of racial contamination. It is not, of course, that we think it logically impossible that someone should honestly arrive at this view; it is rather that we think it simply would not or could not happen, given what is in fact the makeup of human beings. If we are theists, we will perhaps believe that God has created us in such a way that we can simply see that heinous actions are indeed heinous; and if a normal person comes to believe that such actions are perfectly right and proper, it must be because of some fault in him. Perhaps at some time in the past he *decided* to accept these views, and the pressure of that commitment has brought it about that now in fact he does believe them. A part of what is involved in our blaming people for holding corrupt beliefs, I think, is our supposing that the normal human condition is to reject them, just as the normal human condition is to accept *modus ponens*, say, as valid. We think a normal human being will find injustice—the sort depicted, for example, in the story the prophet Nathan told King David—despicable and odious. In the face of this natural tendency or prompting, to accept the view that such behavior is perfectly proper requires something like a special act of will—a special act of *ill* will. Such a person, we think, *knows better*, chooses what in some sense he knows to be wrong. And if we think a person really *lacks* this inclination to see some actions as morally wrong, then we do not hold him responsible; we think instead that he is in some way defective. According to the McNaughton Rule, one who does not know the difference between right and wrong is in fact *insane* and accordingly cannot be brought to trial. One who cannot see the difference between right and wrong is like someone who was born blind, or is unable to do elementary arithmetical calculations, or cannot see that *modus ponens* is valid.

So we do find some opinions and views morally objectionable. We also object, from a moral point of view, to some kinds of conscientious action; we hold that a person may be doing what is wrong or wicked in acting a certain way, even if he thinks that way of acting is morally permissible—even, indeed, if he thinks that way of acting is his duty. Our objection here is that we believe he *ought not* to think that way of acting is permissible or obligatory; the fact that he *does* think so shows that if he is a normal, well-formed human being, then at some point he has made a morally wrong decision. We think those whom we hold responsible for their views *really know better*. They have rejected what is plain to anyone of good will. They have ignored or suppressed the promptings and leadings of nature—the natural tendency to find unjust behavior reprehensible, for example—and have instead chosen a different route—perhaps one that legitimizes a desire for self-aggrandizement, one that gives free rein to that perverse and aboriginal sin, *pride*. Even if our beliefs are not directly within our control, therefore, most of us recognize that a person can be guilty or culpable by virtue of the beliefs he holds.

The theist, accordingly, should not reply to the evidentialist objector by claiming that since our beliefs are not within our control, we cannot have a *prima facie* duty to refrain from believing certain propositions. But there is a second reason why this response to the evidentialist is inadequate. I have been using the terms “accept” and “believe” interchangeably, but in fact there is an important distinction they can nicely be used to mark. This distinction is extremely hard to make clear but nonetheless, I think, important. Perhaps we can make an initial stab at it as follows. 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.

Take another example. A person may accept the proposition that alleged moral distinctions are unreal, and our tendency to make them is a confused and superstitious remnant of the infancy of our race—while nonetheless sometimes finding himself compelled to believe, for example, that gross injustice is wicked. Such a person adopts as his position the proposition that moral distinctions are unreal, and he accepts that proposition; but (at certain times and in certain conditions) he cannot help believing, *malgré lui*, that such distinctions are not unreal. In the same way, someone with solipsistic inclination—acquired, perhaps, by an incautious

reading of Hume—could *accept* the proposition that, say, there really is no external world—no houses, horses, trucks, or trees—but find himself, under certain conditions, regularly believing that there are such things.

Now I am quite aware that I have not been able to make this distinction between acceptance and belief wholly clear. I think there is such a distinction in the neighborhood, however, and I believe it is important. It is furthermore one the objector may be able to make use of; for while it is plausible to hold that what I believe is not within my direct control, it is also plausible to suppose that what I *accept* is or can be at least in part a matter of deliberate decision, a matter of voluntarily taking up a certain position. But then the objector can perhaps restate his objection in terms of *acceptance*. Perhaps (because of an unfortunate upbringing, let us say) I cannot refrain from believing in God. Nevertheless it is within my power, says the evidentialist objector, to refuse to *accept* that proposition. And now his claim that there are duties with respect to our beliefs may be reconstrued as the claim that we have *prima facie* duties with respect to our acceptances, one of these duties being not to accept such a proposition as *there is such a person as God* in the absence of evidence.

Finally, while we may perhaps agree that what I believe is not *directly* within my control, some of my beliefs are indirectly within my control, at least in part. First, what I accept has a long-term influence upon what I believe. If I refuse to accept belief in God, and if I try to ignore or suppress my tendency to believe, then perhaps eventually I will no longer believe. And as Pascal pointed out, there are other ways to influence one's beliefs. Presumably, then, the evidentialist objector could hold that it is my *prima facie* duty not to accept belief in God without evidence, and to do what I can to bring it about that I no longer believe. Although it is not within my power now to cease believing now, there may be a series of actions, such that I can now take the first and, after taking the first, will be able to take the second, and so on; and after taking the whole series of actions I will no longer believe in God. Perhaps the objector thinks it is my *prima facie* duty to undertake whatever sort of regimen will at some time in the future result in my not believing without evidence. Perhaps I should attend a Universalist-Unitarian church, for example, and consort with members of the Rationalist Society of America. Perhaps I should read a lot of Voltaire and Bertrand Russell and Thomas Paine, eschewing St. Augustine and C. S. Lewis and, of course, the Bible. Even if I cannot now stop believing without evidence, perhaps there are other actions I can take, such that if I were to take them, then at some time in the future I will not be in this deplorable condition.

So far, then, we have been construing the evidentialist objector as holding that the theist without sufficient evidence—evidence in the sense

of other propositions that prove or make probable or support the existence of God—is violating a *prima facie* intellectual obligation of some sort. As we have seen, the fact that belief is not within direct control may give him pause; he is not, however, without plausible replies. But the fact is there is a quite different way of construing the evidentialist objection; the objector need not hold that the theist without evidence is violating or has violated some duty, *prima facie*, *ultima facie*, or otherwise. Consider someone who believes that Venus is smaller than Mercury, not because he has evidence, but because he read it in a comic book and always believes everything he reads—or consider someone who holds this belief on the basis of an outrageously bad argument. Perhaps there is no obligation he has failed to meet; nevertheless his intellectual condition is defective in some way; or perhaps alternatively there is a commonly achieved excellence he fails to display. Perhaps he is like someone who is easily gulled, or has a serious astigmatism, or is unduly clumsy. And perhaps the evidentialist objection is to be understood, not as the claim that the theist without evidence has failed to meet some obligation, but that he suffers from a certain sort of intellectual deficiency. If this is the objector's view, then his proper attitude toward the theist would be one of sympathy rather than censure.

But of course the crucial question here is this: Why does the objector think these things? Why does he think there *is* a *prima facie* obligation to try not to believe in God without evidence? Or why does he think that to do so is to be in a deplorable condition? Why is it not permissible and quite satisfactory to believe in God without any evidence—proof or argument—at all? Presumably the objector does not mean to suggest that *no* propositions can be believed or accepted without evidence, for if you have evidence for *every* proposition you believe, then (granted certain plausible assumptions about the formal properties of the evidence relation) you will believe infinitely many propositions; and no one has time, these busy days, for that. So presumably *some* propositions can properly be believed and accepted without evidence. Well, why not belief in God? Why is it not entirely acceptable, desirable, right, proper, and rational to accept belief in God without any argument or evidence whatever?

PART II: AQUINAS AND FOUNDATIONALISM

In this section I shall give what I take to be the evidentialist objector's answer to these questions; I shall argue that his answer is not in the least compelling and that the prospects for his project are not bright. But it is not only evidentialist objectors that have thought theists need evidence if

their belief is to be rational; many Christians have thought so too. In particular, many Christian thinkers in the tradition of natural theology have thought so. Thomas Aquinas, of course, is the natural theologian *par excellence*. Thomist thought is also, as it seems to me, the natural starting point for philosophical reflection on these topics, Protestant as well as Catholic. No doubt there are mountains between Rome and Geneva; nevertheless Protestants should in these matters be what Ralph McInerny calls “peeping Thomists”—at any rate they should *begin* as peeping Thomists. We must therefore look at some of Aquinas’ views on these matters.

A. Aquinas and Evidentialism

1. Aquinas on Knowledge

According to Aquinas it is possible for us to have scientific knowledge — *scientia* — of the existence and immateriality, unity, simplicity, and perfection of God. As Aquinas sees it, *scientia* is knowledge that is inferred from what is *seen* to be true:

Any science is possessed by virtue of principles known immediately and therefore seen. Whatever, then, is an object of science is in some sense seen.²⁵

Aristotle suggests that the principles of a science must be *self-evident*; and Aquinas sometimes seems to follow him in holding that *scientia*, properly speaking, consists in a body of propositions deduced syllogistically from self-evident first principles — or perhaps *scientia* consists not just in those syllogistic conclusions but in the syllogisms themselves as well. Logic and mathematics seem to be the best examples of science so thought of. Consider, for example, propositional logic: here one can start from self-evident axioms and proceed to deduce theorems by argument forms — *modus ponens*, for example — that are themselves self-evidently valid in an obvious sense.²⁶ Other good examples of science, so thought of, would be first order logic and arithmetic.²⁷ And here it would be the *theorems*, not the axioms, of these systems that would constitute science. *Scientia* is *mediate* knowledge, so that one does not have *scientia* of what is self-evident. Strictly speaking, then, only those arithmetical truths that are not self-evident would constitute science. The proposition $3 + 1 = 4$ is unlikely to appear as an axiom in a formulation of arithmetic; since it is self-evident, however, it does not constitute *scientia*, even if it appears as a theorem in some axiomatization of arithmetic.

Of course the “first principles” of a science — the axioms as opposed to the theorems, so to say — are also *known*. They are known *immediately*

rather than mediately, and are known by “understanding.”

Now a truth can come into the mind in two ways, namely, as known in itself, and as known through another. What is known in itself is like a principle, and is perceived immediately by the mind. And so the habit which perfects the intellect in considering such a truth is called ‘understanding’; it is a firm and easy quality of mind which sees into principles. A truth, however, which is known through another is understood by the intellect, not immediately, but through an inquiry of reason of which it is the terminus.²⁸

Like many of Aquinas’ distinctions, this one comes from Aristotle:

Now of the thinking states by which we grasp truth, some are unfailingly true; others admit of error—opinion, for example, and calculation, whereas scientific knowledge and intuition are always true; further, no other kind of thought except intuition is more accurate than scientific knowledge, whereas primary premises are more knowable than demonstrations, and all scientific knowledge is discursive. From these considerations it follows that there will be no scientific knowledge of the primary premises, and since, except intuition, nothing can be truer than scientific knowledge, it will be intuition that apprehends the primary premises. (*Posterior Analytics*, II,19)

Following Aristotle, then, Aquinas distinguishes what is self-evident, or known through itself (*per se nota*), from what is known through another (*per aliud nota*); the former are “principles” and are apprehended by understanding, while the latter constitute science. Aquinas’ central point here is that self-evident propositions are known *immediately*. Consider a proposition like

$$(1) 2 + 1 = 3$$

and contrast it with one like

$$(2) 281 \times 29 = 8,149.$$

We know the first but not the second *immediately*: we know it, and we do not know it by way of inference from other propositions or on the basis of our knowledge of other propositions. Instead, we can simply see that it is true. Elsewhere Aquinas says that a proposition that is self-evident to us (*per se notam quod nos*) is such that we cannot grasp or apprehend it without believing, indeed, knowing it. (2), on the other hand, does not have this status for us; few of us can simply see that it is true. Instead we must resort to calculation; we go through a chain of inferences, the ultimate premises of which are self-evident.

Of course self-evident propositions are *known*, even though they do not constitute *scientia* in the strict sense. Indeed, their epistemic status, according to Aquinas, is higher than that of propositions known by demonstration. More exactly, *our* epistemic condition, in grasping a truth of this sort, is superior to the condition we are in with respect to a proposition of which we have knowledge by demonstration. The emerging picture of scientific knowledge, then, is the one to be found in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*: we know what is self-evident and what follows from what is self-evident by self-evident argument forms. Knowledge consists of *scientia* and *intellectus*, or understanding. By understanding we grasp first principles, self-evident truths; from these we infer or deduce further truths. What we know consists in what we find self-evident together with what we can infer from it by logical means. And if we take this picture seriously, it looks as if knowledge is restricted to what is necessarily true in the broadly logical sense.²⁹ Presumably a proposition is *per se nota* only if it is necessarily true, and any proposition that follows from necessary truths by self-evident argument forms will itself be necessarily true. As Aristotle puts it, "Since the object of pure scientific knowledge cannot be other than it is, the truth obtained by demonstrative knowledge [Aquinas' *scientia*] will be necessary." (*Posterior Analytics*, I, 3)

As a picture of Aquinas' view of science, however, this is at best incomplete; for Aquinas obviously believes we have knowledge, scientific knowledge, of much that is not logically necessary. He thinks there is such a thing as natural science (*scientia naturalis*), whose subject matter is changeable material objects:

On the other hand there is the fact that demonstrative knowledge (*scientia*) is found in the intellect. Had the intellect no knowledge of material things, it could not have demonstrative knowledge (*scientia*) of them. Thus there would be no natural science (*scientia naturalis*) dealing with changeable material beings. (ST, Ia, 84, 1)

Aquinas means to say, furthermore, not merely that in natural science we know some necessary truths about contingent and changeable objects (as we do in knowing, for example, that whatever is moved is moved by another); he means that among the truths we know are such contingent propositions as that there is a tree outside the window and that its branches are moving in the wind.

Thus he objects to Plato's view that what we know are the forms or ideas rather than the sensible objects around us: "This may be shown to be false for two reasons. Because first, since the ideas are immaterial and unchanging, demonstrative knowledge of change and matter (such as is characteristic of natural sci-

ence) would be ruled out, as would any demonstration in terms of material or changeable explanatory principle." (ST, Ia, 84, 1)

According to Aquinas, therefore, we have *scientia* of what changes, and presumably some of this *scientia* involves contingent propositions. Indeed Aquinas elsewhere holds that the kind of knowledge most characteristic of human beings and most proper to them is knowledge of material objects:

Cognitive faculties are proportioned to their objects. For instance, an angel's intellect, which is totally separate from corporeal reality, has as its proper object intelligible substances separate from corporeal reality, and it is by means of these intelligible objects that it knows material realities. The proper object of the human intellect, on the other hand, since it is joined to a body, is a nature or whatness (*quidditas*) found in corporeal matter – the intellect, in fact, rises to the limited knowledge it has of invisible things by way of the nature of visible things. (ST, Ia, 84, 8 Resp.)

We know incorporeal realities . . . by analogy with sensible bodies, which do have images, just as we understand truth in the abstract by a consideration of things in which we see truth. (ST, Ia, 84, 8, ad 3)

There are two sorts of propositions whose truth we simply *see*. First, there are those that are self-evident, or *per se nota*; these are the object of *intellectus* or understanding, and we see their truth in the way in which we see that $2 + 1 = 3$. Second, there are propositions "evident to the senses," as he puts it: "That some things move is evident to the senses" (ST, Ia, 2, 3), as is the proposition that the sun moves.³⁰ His examples of propositions evident to the senses are for the most part propositions whose truth we determine by *sight*. Although of course Aquinas did not think of vision as the only sense yielding knowledge, he did give it pride of place; because it is immaterial, he says, it is "more of a knower" than the other senses. It is not easy to see just what Aquinas means by "evident to the senses," but perhaps the following is fairly close: a proposition is evident to the senses if we human beings have the power to determine its truth by looking at, listening to, tasting, touching, or smelling some physical object. Thus

(3) There is a tree outside my window,

(4) The cat on the mat is fuscous,

and

(5) This wall is yellow

are propositions evident to the senses.

In the first place, then, there are those propositions we simply see to be true; in the second place there are those propositions we see to follow from those in the first group. These propositions can be deduced from

those in the first group by arguments we see to be valid.³¹ So the basic picture of knowledge is this: we know what we see to be true together with what we can infer from what we see to be true by arguments we can see to be valid.

2. Aquinas on Knowledge of God

Now Aquinas believes that human beings (even in our earthly condition here below) can have knowledge, *scientific* knowledge, of God's existence, as well as knowledge that he has such attributes as simplicity, eternity, immateriality, immutability and the like. In *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas sets out his famous "Five Ways," or five proofs of God's existence: in *Summa Contra Gentiles* he sets out the proof from motion in much greater detail; and in each case he follows these alleged demonstrations with alleged demonstrations that God possesses the attributes just mentioned. So natural knowledge of God is possible. But the vast majority of those who believe in God, he thinks, do not have knowledge of God's existence but must instead take it on faith. Only a few of us have the time, inclination, and ability to follow the theistic proofs; the rest of us take this truth on faith. And even though God's existence is demonstrable—even though we are capable of *knowing* it—nevertheless it is appropriately proposed to human beings as an object of faith. The reason, in brief, is that our welfare demands that we believe the proposition in question, but *knowledge* of it is exceedingly hard to come by:

For the rational truth about God would have appeared to only a few, and even so after a long time and mixed with many errors; whereas on knowing this depends our whole welfare, which is in God. (ST, Ia, I,1)

From all this it is clear that, if it were necessary to use a strict demonstration as the only way to reach a knowledge of the things we must know about God, very few could ever construct such a demonstration and even these could do it only after a long time. From this it is evident that the provision of the way of faith, which gives all easy access to salvation at any time, is beneficial to man.³²

So most of those who believe in God do so on faith. Fundamentally, for Aquinas, to accept a proposition on faith is to accept it on God's authority; faith is a matter of "believing God" (ST, IIa, IIae, ii, 2): "for that which is above reason we believe only because God has revealed it" (SCG, I, 9). Now what about those who believe in God on faith even though they do not know that God exists? How can that be a rational procedure? So far as I know, Aquinas does not explicitly address this question. He

does discuss a closely related question, however: the question whether those who believe (take on faith) what is “above reason” are irrational or foolish, or in his terms, “believe with undue levity”:

[1] Those who place their faith in this truth, however, “for which the human reason offers no experimental evidence,” do not believe foolishly, as though “following artificial fables” (II Peter 1:16). For these “secrets of divine Wisdom” (Job 11:6) the divine Wisdom itself, which knows all things to the full, has deigned to reveal to men. It reveals its own presence, as well as the truth of its teaching and inspiration, by fitting arguments; and in order to confirm those truths that exceed natural knowledge, it gives visible manifestation to works that surpass the ability of all nature. Thus, there are the wonderful cures of illnesses, there is the raising of the dead, and the wonderful immutation in the heavenly bodies; and what is more wonderful, there is the inspiration given to human minds, so that simple and untutored persons, filled with the gift of the Holy Spirit, come to possess instantaneously the highest wisdom and the readiest eloquence. When these arguments were examined, through the efficacy of the above-mentioned proof, and not the violent assault of arms or the promise of pleasures, and (what is most wonderful of all) in the midst of the tyranny of the persecutors, an innumerable throng of people, both simple and most learned, flocked to the Christian faith. In this faith there are truths preached that surpass every human intellect; the pleasures of the flesh are curbed; it is taught that the things of the world should be spurned. Now, for the minds of mortal men to assent to these things is the greatest of miracles, just as it is a manifest work of divine inspiration that, spurning visible things, men should seek only what is invisible. Now, that this has happened neither without preparation nor by chance, but as a result of the disposition of God, is clear from the fact that through many pronouncements of the ancient prophets God had foretold that He would do this. The books of these prophets are held in veneration among us Christians, since they give witness to our faith. (SCG, I, 6)

Here the point, I think, is the following. It is of course totally proper and entirely sensible to take a belief on God’s say-so, to accept it on his authority. Clearly I am not foolish or irrational in believing something on the authority of my favorite mathematician, even if I cannot work it out for myself. I may thus come to believe, for example, that the four-color problem has been solved. But then a fortiori I would not be foolish or irrational in accepting a belief on the basis of *God’s* authority. If I know that God proposes p to me for belief, then, clearly enough, it is eminently sensible to believe p . The question is not whether it is foolish

to believe something on God's authority, but whether it is foolish to believe that God has in fact proposed a given item for my belief. Obviously, if he *has*, then I should believe it; but what is my reason or motive for supposing that in fact it is *God* who has proposed for our belief, for example, the teaching of the Trinity?

This is the question Aquinas addresses in the above passage; he means to argue that it is not foolish or irrational to take it that God has proposed for our belief just those items Christians suppose that he has — the articles of faith. What he means to say, I think, is that to believe in the mysteries of the faith is not to be foolish or to believe with undue levity, because we have *evidence* for the conclusion that God has proposed them for our belief. This evidence consists in the fulfillment of prophecy and in the signs and wonders accompanying the proclamation of these mysteries. Aquinas refers here to "works that surpass the ability of all nature," such as "wonderful cures of illness," "the raising of the dead," and the like. The greatest miracle of all, he says, is the marvelous rapidity with which the Christian faith has spread, despite the best efforts of tyrants and despite the fact that "In this faith there are truths preached that surpass every human intellect; the pleasures of the flesh are curbed; it is taught that the things of the world should be spurned."

I think he means to suggest, furthermore, that if we did *not* have this evidence, or some other evidence, we would be foolish or irrational in accepting the mysteries of the faith. It is just because we have evidence for these things that we are not irrational in accepting them. Here by way of contrast he cites the followers of Mohammed, who, he says, do not have evidence: "It is thus clear that those who place any faith in his words believe foolishly." (SCG, I, 6)

What is important to see here is the following. Aquinas clearly believes that there are some propositions we are rationally justified in accepting, even though we do not have evidence for them, or reason to them from other propositions, or accept them on the basis of other propositions. Let us say that a proposition is *basic* for me if I believe it and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions. This relationship is familiar but hard to characterize in a revealing and nontrivial fashion. I believe that the word "umbrageous" is spelled u-m-b-r-a-g-e-o-u-s: this belief is based on another belief of mine, the belief that that is how the dictionary says it is spelled. I believe that $72 \times 71 = 5112$. This belief is based upon several other beliefs I hold: that $1 \times 72 = 72$; $7 \times 2 = 14$; $7 \times 7 = 49$; $49 + 1 = 50$; and others. Some of my beliefs, however, I accept but do not accept on the basis of any other beliefs. Call these beliefs *basic*. I believe that $2 + 1 = 3$, for example, and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions. I also believe that I am seated at my desk, and that

there is a mild pain in my right knee. These too are basic for me; I do not believe them on the basis of others. Now the propositions we are rationally justified in accepting as basic, thinks Aquinas, are the ones we see to be true: those that are self-evident or evident to the senses. As for the rest of the propositions we believe, we are rational in accepting them only if they stand in a certain relationship to those that are properly basic. Among the nonbasic propositions we rationally accept, some we see to follow from those that *are* basic; these are the propositions we know. Others are not known to us, do not follow from basic propositions, but are nonetheless rationally acceptable because they are *probable* or likely with respect to them. I believe Aquinas means to hold, more generally, that a proposition is rationally acceptable for us only if it is at least probable with respect to beliefs that are properly basic for us—that is, with respect to beliefs that are self-evident or evident to the senses. And hence on his view, as on the evidentialist objector's, belief in God is rational for us only if we have evidence for it.

Here I should point out that there are suggestions of another line of thought in Aquinas: he sometimes suggests that there is a sort of *intuitive* or *immediate* grasp of God's existence:

It remains to investigate the kind of knowledge in which the ultimate felicity of an intellectual substance consists. For there is a common and confused knowledge of God which is found in practically all men; this is due either to the fact that it is self-evident that God exists, just as other principles of demonstration are—a view held by some people, as we said in Book One—or, what seems indeed to be true, that man can immediately reach some sort of knowledge of God by natural reason. For when men see that things in nature run according to a definite order, and that ordering does not occur without an orderer, they perceive in most cases that there is some orderer of the things that we see. But who or what kind of being, or whether there is but one orderer of nature, is not yet grasped immediately in this general consideration. (SCG, III, 38)

Aquinas would also hold, presumably, that someone who has such immediate and intuitive apprehension of God's existence is not irrational in believing that there is a God. It is not entirely easy to see how to fit this suggestion into his generally Aristotelian way of looking at the matter; perhaps here we must see Aquinas as an early Calvinist. See below, Part III, sections A and C.

B. Foundationalism

Aquinas and the evidentialist objector concur, then, in holding that belief in God is rationally acceptable only if there is evidence for it—only

if, that is, it is probable with respect to some body of propositions that constitutes the evidence. And here we can get a better understanding of Aquinas and the evidentialist objector if we see them as accepting some version of *classical foundationalism*. This is a *picture* or total way of looking at faith, knowledge, justified belief, rationality, and allied topics. This picture has been enormously popular in Western thought; and despite a substantial opposing groundswell, I think it remains the dominant way of thinking about these topics. According to the foundationalist some propositions are properly basic and some are not; those that are not are rationally accepted only on the basis of *evidence*, where the evidence must trace back, ultimately, to what *is* properly basic. The existence of God, furthermore, is not among the propositions that are properly basic; hence a person is rational in accepting theistic belief only if he has evidence for it. The vast majority of those in the western world who have thought about our topic have accepted some form of classical foundationalism. The evidentialist objection to belief in God, furthermore, is obviously rooted in this way of looking at things. So suppose we try to achieve a deeper understanding of it.

Earlier I said the first thing to see about the evidentialist objection is that it is a *normative* contention or claim. The same thing must be said about foundationalism: this thesis is a normative thesis, a thesis about how a system of beliefs *ought* to be structured, a thesis about the properties of a correct, or acceptable, or rightly structured system of beliefs. According to the foundationalist there are norms, or duties, or obligations with respect to belief just as there are with respect to actions. To conform to these duties and obligations is to be rational; to fail to measure up to them is to be irrational. To be rational, then, is to exercise one's epistemic powers *properly*—to exercise them in such a way as to go contrary to none of the norms for such exercise.

Although for ease of exposition I am taking the relevant foundationalist claim as one about *duties*, or *norms*, or *obligations*, it could also be construed as a claim about *excellence*. So taken, the foundationalist claims that to achieve a certain characteristic excellence, a system of beliefs ought to be structured in a certain way. The claim could also be construed as about *defects*, as the claim that a system of beliefs not structured in that way is defective.

I think we can understand foundationalism more fully if we introduce the idea of a noetic structure. A person's noetic structure is the set of propositions he believes, together with certain epistemic relations that hold among him and these propositions. As we have seen, some of my beliefs may be based upon others; it may be that there are a pair of propositions

A and B such that I believe B , and believe A on the basis of B . An account of a person's noetic structure, then, would specify which of his beliefs are basic and which nonbasic. Of course it is abstractly possible that *none* of his beliefs is basic; perhaps he holds just three beliefs, A , B , and C , and believes each of them on the basis of the other two. We might think this improper or irrational, but that is not to say it could not be done. And it is also possible that *all* of his beliefs are basic; perhaps he believes a lot of propositions but does not believe any of them on the basis of any others. In the typical case, however, a noetic structure will include both basic and nonbasic beliefs. It may be useful to give some examples of beliefs that are often basic for a person. Suppose I seem to see a tree; I have that characteristic sort of experience that goes with perceiving a tree. I may then believe the proposition that I see a tree. It is *possible* that I believe that proposition *on the basis of* the proposition that I seem to see a tree; in the typical case, however, I will not believe the former on the basis of the latter because in the typical case I will not believe the latter at all. I will not be paying any attention to my experience but will be concentrating on the tree. Of course I *can* turn my attention to my experience, notice how things look to me, and acquire the belief that I seem to see something that looks like *that*; and if you challenge my claim that I see a tree, perhaps I *will* thus turn my attention to my experience. But in the typical case I will not believe that I see a tree on the basis of a proposition about my experience; for I believe A on the basis of B only if I believe B , and in the typical case where I perceive a tree I do not believe (or entertain) any propositions about my experience. Typically I take such a proposition as basic. Similarly, I believe I had breakfast this morning; this too is basic for me. I do not believe this proposition on the basis of some proposition about my experience—for example, that I seem to remember having had breakfast. In the typical case I will not have even considered *that* question—the question whether I *seem* to remember having had breakfast; instead I simply believe that I had breakfast; I take it as basic.

Second, an account of a noetic structure will include what we might call an index of *degree* of belief. I hold some of my beliefs much more firmly than others. I believe both that $2 + 1 = 3$ and that London, England, is north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; but I believe the former more resolutely than the latter. Some beliefs I hold with maximum firmness; others I do in fact accept, but in a much more tentative way.

Here we might make use of the personalist interpretation of probability theory; think of an index of degree of belief as a function $B_s(A)$ from the set of propositions a person S believes or disbelieves into the real numbers between 0

and 1. $B_s(A) = n$, then, records something like the degree to which S believes A , or the strength of his belief that A . $B_s(A) = 1$ proclaims S 's utter and abandoned commitment to A ; $B_s(A) = 0$ records a similar commitment to not- A ; $B_s(A) = .5$ means that S , like Buridan's ass, is suspended in equilibrium between A and not- A . We could then go on to consider whether the personalist is right in holding that a rational noetic structure conforms to the calculus of probability. I have argued elsewhere that he is *not* right.³³

Third, a somewhat vaguer notion: an account of S 's noetic structure would include something like 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 firmly, but I could give them up without much change elsewhere in my noetic structure. I believe there are some large boulders on the top of the Grand Teton. If I come to give up this belief (say by climbing it and not finding any), that change need not 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 is not great. On the other hand, if I were come to believe that there simply is no such thing as the Grand Teton, or no mountains at all, or no such thing as the state of Wyoming, that would have much greater reverberations. And suppose I were to come to think there had not been much of a past (that the world was created just five minutes ago, complete with all its apparent memories and traces of the past) or that there were not any other persons: these changes would have even greater reverberations; these beliefs of mine have great depth of ingression into my noetic structure.

We must note that basicity, degree of belief, and depth of ingression are not related in any simple way. Some propositions I take as basic I believe with maximum firmness— that $2 + 1 = 3$, for example, or that I seem to see a blue pen in my hand. Others I accept much less firmly. I believe I visited a certain university in northern England five years ago. I do not believe this proposition on the basis of others (for example, propositions about what my journal says or what my wife remembers or thinks she remembers), so this proposition is basic for me. But I do not believe it nearly as firmly as that $2 + 1 = 3$. Thus there are substantial differences in the degree to which I believe propositions I take as basic. Furthermore, there are some propositions I believe on the basis of others, that I believe more firmly than some I take as basic. The belief that I visited that university in northern England is basic for me, but I do not believe it as firmly as that $21^2 = 441$ or that "umbrageous" is spelled u-m-b-r-a-g-e-o-u-s, neither of which is basic for me. In the same way basicity and depth of ingression can vary inversely, as can the latter and degree of belief.

Furthermore, a belief can easily change status from nonbasic to basic and vice versa. Now the proposition that $21 \times 21 = 441$ is not basic for me; I accept

it on the basis of the belief that I have just calculated it, and that is how it came out. Later, however, I may remember that $21 \times 21 = 441$ and forget that I calculated it. In that case I will simply remember it and no longer believe it on the basis of other beliefs; it will be basic for me. The same may happen for "umbraeous." Having just looked it up, I believe that it is spelled that way on the basis of my belief that that is how the dictionary says it is spelled; later I may remember that it is spelled that way but no longer remember having looked it up.

Finally, it might be thought that we can determine what a person takes as basic by asking a Chisholm-like³⁴ question: perhaps something like "What is your reason for believing p ?" or "Why do you believe p ?"³⁵ But this, I think, is incorrect. Suppose I seem to see a tree and believe that I do see a tree; you ask me what my reasons are for thinking that I see a tree. The first thing to note is that the question can be taken variously. I may take it as a request for my reason for thinking it is a *tree* that I see rather than, say, a large cactus. I might then respond by saying that it looks to me like a tree (and not like a cactus). I might also interpret your query as a request for my reasons for believing I *see* a tree (as opposed, for example, to hearing or smelling one); again I might respond by citing some proposition about my experience. Or I might take your query as a request to give *you* a reason for believing there is a tree there. You cannot see the tree—you have broken your glasses or you have the hiccups and have adopted the folk remedy of putting a brown paper bag over your head; I know that you believe that when I am appeared to treely, then 99 chances out of 100 there is a tree lurking in the neighborhood. So I might take your question variously, and many ways of taking it are such that if I do take it that way, then I will respond by citing a proposition about my experience.

But does it follow that I believe the proposition *I see a tree* (call it "T") on the basis of that experiential proposition? I should think not. Surely it does not follow that at t , the time of the query, I believed T on the basis of the experiential proposition. At t perhaps I did not even *believe* the experiential proposition; I may have been concentrating on the tree rather than on my own experience; and surely it is not possible that at a time t I accept a belief B on the basis of a belief A if at t I do not even believe A . Of course at t^* , the time of my response, I do presumably accept the experiential proposition; does it follow that at t^* I believe T on the basis of that experiential proposition? No. As I said, I might be trying to give you a reason to believe that there is a tree there, or I might be explaining why I believe I *see* as opposed to hear or smell a tree, or explaining why I think I see a *tree* as opposed to a large cactus. In these cases I might respond by citing an experiential proposition, but why suppose that I am believing that I see a tree *on the basis of* the experiential proposition, or indeed, on the basis of any other proposition? Again, suppose you ask me what my reasons are for believing that $2 + 1 = 3$ or that *modus ponens* is a valid form of argument. I may very well reply, "Well, it just seems self-evident." Must we conclude that my belief that $2 + 1 = 3$ is based upon a proposition about my experience? I should think not. Does the fact that I cite an experiential proposition when queried in this way show that I do not take *modus ponens* as basic? Surely not. So we cannot in this fashion determine what propositions are basic for a person, and it is not altogether

easy to say just when a proposition *is* basic for a person. But we can say at least this much. A *necessary* condition for *S*'s believing *A* on the basis of *B* is *S*'s believing both *A* and *B*, and a sufficient condition is *S*'s believing *A*, believing *B*, believing that *B* is good evidence for *A*, and believing that he believes *A* on the basis of *B*.

Now foundationalism is best construed, I think, as a thesis about *rational* noetic structures. A noetic structure is rational if it could be the noetic structure of a person who was completely rational. To be completely rational, as I am here using the term, is not to believe only what is true, or to believe all the logical consequences of what one believes, or to believe all necessary truths with equal firmness, or to be uninfluenced by emotion in forming belief; it is, instead, to do the right thing with respect to one's believings. It is to violate no epistemic duties. From this point of view, a rational person is one whose believings meet the appropriate standards; to criticize a person as irrational is to criticize her for failing to fulfill these duties or responsibilities, for failing to conform to the relevant norms or standards. To draw the ethical analogy, the irrational is the impermissible; the rational is the permissible.

Here I am taking "rationality" in terms of *duty*, but as we have seen, we could in addition or alternatively take it as the possession of an epistemic excellence or the avoidance of an epistemic defect.

A rational noetic structure, then, is one that could be the noetic structure of a wholly rational person; and foundationalism, as I say, is a thesis about such noetic structures. We may think of the foundationalist as beginning with the observation that some of our beliefs are based upon others. According to the foundationalist a rational noetic structure will *have a foundation*—a set of beliefs not accepted on the basis of others; in a rational noetic structure some beliefs will be basic. Nonbasic beliefs, of course, will be accepted on the basis of other beliefs, which may be accepted on the basis of still other beliefs, and so on until the foundations are reached. In a rational noetic structure, therefore, every nonbasic belief is ultimately accepted on the basis of basic beliefs.

Perhaps we can put the matter as follows. According to the foundationalist the basis relation is, first, a one-many relation; a belief *A* will often be based upon *several* beliefs $B_1 \dots B_n$. Second, in a rational noetic structure this relationship is *irreflexive*. It may be doubted whether anyone is so benighted as to believe *A* on the basis of *A*, but even if it could be done, it should not be. For in a rational noetic structure, if *A* is believed on the basis of *B*, then *B* is in an important sense *prior* to *A*; and no proposition is prior to itself. From this point of view the term "self-evident" is something of a misnomer. A self-evident proposition — $2 + 1 = 3$,

for example—is not one for which we have good evidence, but for which the evidence is *itself*; it is, instead, a proposition that is evident, or known, in itself, *without* evidence. That means that one does not believe it on the basis of other propositions. $2 + 1 = 3$ is self-evident; this is not to say that it is its own evidence, but that no evidence is needed for it.

Third, according to the foundationalist the basis relation is *asymmetric* in a rational noetic structure; if my belief that *A* is based upon my belief that *B*, then my belief that *B* must not be based on my belief that *A*. More exactly, suppose *N* is a rational noetic structure. Then if the belief that *A*, in *N*, is based upon $B_1 \dots B_n$, none of the B_i will be based upon *A*. So for example, if I am rational and my belief that the Bible is authoritative is based upon my belief that God is its author and whatever God says is true, then my belief that God is the author of the Bible will not be based upon the beliefs that the Bible is authoritative and says that God is its author.

So the first main thesis of foundationalism is that the basis relation in a rational noetic structure is irreflexive and asymmetric. The second main thesis is one we have already met. In a rational noetic structure some beliefs will not be based on any other beliefs; some beliefs will be *basic*. These beliefs are the foundation of that noetic structure.

Perhaps we can see a bit more of the articulation of a rational noetic structure as follows. Let us say that a belief *B* is an *immediate basis* of a belief *A* in a noetic structure *N* if *A* is based on *B* in *N* and there is no belief *C* such that *C* is based on *B* in *N* and *A* is based on *C* in *N*. Then in a rational noetic structure

(6) Every nonbasic belief has an immediate basis.

Let us say further that a belief is *0th level* in *N* if it is basic in *N*, *1st level* in *N* if it is immediately based on some belief that is *0th level* in *N*, and, in general, *n + 1st level* in *N* if it is immediately based upon at least one belief that is *nth level* in *N*. In a rational noetic structure *N*

(7) Every belief *B* in *N* will belong to a highest level in *N*;

that is, there will be some level such that *B* belongs to that level and to no higher level. (7) guarantees that no belief is immediately based upon itself. For suppose *B* were immediately based on *B*. By (7) *B* belongs to a highest level *l*. But since *B* is immediately based upon *B*, it also belongs to a higher level *l + 1*, which is impossible. Similarly, (7) guarantees that the immediate-basis-of relation is asymmetric. One more piece of terminology: say that *the level* of a belief *B* in a noetic structure *N* is the highest level of *B* in *N*. Then in a rational noetic structure *N*

(8) If *A* is based on *B* in *N*, then the level of *A* is higher than the level of *B*.

We might put this by saying that if *A* is based on *B* in *N*, then *B* is *prior* to *A* in *N*; this is the respect I mentioned in which the basing proposition is prior to the based proposition. From (8) it follows that the basis relation is asymmetric and irreflexive.

In a rational noetic structure every nonbasic belief will be immediately based on some beliefs $A_1 \dots A_n$, each of these will be immediately based on some other

beliefs $B_1 \dots B_n$, and so on until the foundations are reached. So from any nonbasic belief B there is a path downward through the noetic structure to the foundations—typically several different paths, terminating in several different basic beliefs. Perhaps we can put this more precisely as follows. A *path from A to B in N* is a set of propositions A, B_n, \dots, B_1, B such that, in N , A is immediately based upon B_n , B_n is immediately based upon $B_{n-1} \dots$, B_2 is immediately based on B_1 , and B_1 is immediately based on B . A *path from A in N* is any path in N from A to any other proposition. A path from A to B can be extended to a path from A to C if there is a path from B to C . And a path from A terminates at C if it can be extended to a path from A to C and there are no paths from C . Then in a rational noetic structure N

- (9) If A is believed on the basis of B in N , then there is a path from A to B in N .

In such a noetic structure, furthermore,

- (10) If A is nonbasic in N , then there is a path from A to some belief B that is basic in N ;
- (11) If there is a path from A to B in N , and B is nonbasic in N , then the path from A to B can be extended to a path from A to C , where C is basic in N ;

and

- (12) Every path from a nonbasic belief A terminates in the foundations.

According to the foundationalist, therefore, every rational noetic structure has a foundation, and all nonbasic beliefs are ultimately accepted on the basis of beliefs in the foundations. But a belief cannot properly be accepted on the basis of just *any* other belief; in a rational noetic structure, A will be accepted on the basis of B only if B supports A or is a member of a set of beliefs that together support A . It is not clear just what this relation—call it the “supports” relation—is; and different foundationalists propose different candidates. Presumably, however, it lies in the neighborhood of *evidence*; if A supports B , then A is evidence for B , or makes B evident; or perhaps B is likely or probable with respect to A . This relation admits of degrees. My belief that Feike can swim is supported by my knowledge that nine out of ten Frisians can swim and Feike is a Frisian; it is supported more strongly by my knowledge that the evening paper contains a picture of Feike triumphantly finishing first in the fifteen-hundred meter freestyle in the 1980 summer Olympics. And the foundationalist holds, sensibly enough, that in a rational noetic structure the strength of a nonbasic belief will depend upon the degree of support from foundational beliefs.

There is a great deal more to be said about this supports relationship, but no space to say it here. Things would be neatest for the foundationalist if the

supports relation could be seen as like the probability relation, as a function from pairs of beliefs into the real numbers between 0 and 1. Then perhaps he could explain Locke's *dictum* that strength of belief ought to be proportional to strength of evidence as follows: If S 's noetic structure is rational, then for any nonbasic belief A , $P(A/F) \geq B_s(A)$; that is, the support afforded to A by the foundation of S 's noetic structure is at least as strong as S 's belief that A . Problems arise for knowledge (as opposed to rational belief), however. Suppose we agree that if the support from the foundations for each of a pair of propositions A and B is sufficient for knowledge, then the support for their conjunction, A and B is also sufficient for knowledge. Then the lottery paradox shows that if the supports relation conforms to the probability calculus, there will be no degree of support (less than 1) such that a proposition's being supported to that degree is sufficient (so far as support goes) for knowledge. There are further perplexities here but the foundationalist will certainly hold that there *is* such a supports relationship, and that in a rational noetic structure, strength of nonbasic belief is a function of support from the foundations.

By way of summary, then, let us say that according to foundationalism: (1) in a rational noetic structure the believed-on-the-basis-of relation is asymmetric and irreflexive, (2) a rational noetic structure has a foundation, and (3) in a rational noetic structure nonbasic belief is proportional in strength to support from the foundations.

C. Conditions on Proper Basicity

Next we note a further and fundamental feature of classic varieties of foundationalism: they all lay down certain conditions of proper basicity. 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. Thus Thomas Aquinas, as we have seen, holds that a proposition is properly basic for a person only if it is self-evident to him or "evident to the senses."

Suppose we take a brief look at self-evidence. Under what conditions does a proposition have it? What kinds of propositions are self-evident? Examples would include very simple arithmetical truths such as

$$(13) 2 + 1 = 3;$$

simple truths of logic such as

$$(14) \text{No man is both married and unmarried;}$$

perhaps the generalizations of simple truths of logic, such as

(15) For any proposition p the conjunction of p with its denial is false; and certain propositions expressing identity and diversity; for example,

(16) Redness is distinct from greenness,

(17) The property of being prime is distinct from the property of being composite,

and

(18) The proposition *all men are mortal* is distinct from the proposition *all mortals are men*.

There are others; Aquinas gives as examples:

(19) The whole is greater than the part,

where, presumably, he means by “part” what we mean by “proper part,” and, more dubiously,

(20) Man is an animal.

Still other candidates—candidates which may be less than entirely uncontroversial—come from many other areas; for example,

(21) If p is necessarily true and p entails q , then q is necessarily true,

(22) If e^1 occurs before e^2 and e^2 occurs before e^3 , then e^1 occurs before e^3 ,

and

(23) It is wrong to cause unnecessary (and unwanted) pain just for the fun of it.

What is it that characterizes these propositions? According to the tradition the outstanding characteristic of a self-evident proposition is that one simply sees it to be true upon grasping or understanding it. Understanding a self-evident proposition is sufficient for apprehending its truth. Of course this notion must be relativized to *persons*; what is self-evident to you might not be to me. Very simple arithmetical truths will be self-evident to nearly all of us, but a truth like $17 + 18 = 35$ may be self-evident only to some. And of course a proposition is self-evident to a person only if he does in fact grasp it, so a proposition will not be self-evident to those who do not apprehend the concepts it involves. As Aquinas says, some propositions are self-evident only to the learned; his example is the truth that immaterial substances do not occupy space. Among those propositions whose concepts not everyone grasps, some are such that anyone who *did* grasp them would see their truth; for example,

- (24) A model of a first-order theory T assigns truth to the axioms of T .

Others— $17 + 13 = 30$, for example—may be such that some but not all of those who apprehend them also see that they are true.

But how shall we understand this “seeing that they are true”? Those who speak of self-evidence explicitly turn to this visual metaphor and expressly explain self-evidence by reference to vision. There are two important aspects to the metaphor and two corresponding components to the idea of self-evidence. First, there is the *epistemic* component: a proposition p is self-evident to a person S only if S has *immediate* knowledge of p —that is, knows p , and does not know p on the basis of his knowledge of other propositions. Consider a simple arithmetic truth such as $2 + 1 = 3$ and compare it with one like $24 \times 24 = 576$. I know each of these propositions, and I know the second but not the first on the basis of computation, which is a kind of inference. So I have immediate knowledge of the first but not the second.

But there is also a phenomenological component. Consider again our two propositions; the first but not the second has about it a kind of luminous aura or glow when you bring it to mind or consider it. Locke speaks, in this connection, of an “evident luster”; a self-evident proposition, he says, displays a kind of “clarity and brightness to the attentive mind.” Descartes speaks instead of “clarity and distinctness”; each, I think, is referring to the same phenomenological feature. And this feature is connected with another: upon understanding a proposition of this sort one feels a strong inclination to accept it; this luminous obviousness seems to compel or at least impel assent. Aquinas and Locke, indeed, held that a person, or at any rate a normal, well-formed human being, finds it impossible to withhold assent when considering a self-evident proposition. The phenomenological component of the idea of self-evidence, then, seems to have a double aspect: there is the luminous aura that $2 + 1 = 3$ displays, and there is also an experienced tendency to accept or believe it. Perhaps, indeed, the luminous aura *just is* the experienced impulsion toward acceptance; perhaps these are the very same thing. In that case the phenomenological component would not have the double aspect I suggested it did have; in either case, however, we must recognize this phenomenological aspect of self-evidence.

Aquinas therefore holds that self-evident propositions are properly basic. I think he means to add that propositions “evident to the senses” are also properly basic. By this latter term I think he means to refer to *perceptual* propositions—propositions whose truth or falsehood we can determine by looking or employing some other sense. He has in mind, I think, such propositions as

(25) There is a tree before me,

(26) I am wearing shoes,

and

(27) That tree's leaves are yellow.

So Aquinas holds that a proposition is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses. Other foundationalists have insisted that propositions basic in a rational noetic structure must be *certain* in some important sense. Thus it is plausible to see Descartes as holding that the foundations of a rational noetic structure include, not such propositions as (25)–(27), but more cautious claims—claims about one's own mental life; for example,

(28) It seems to me that I see a tree,

(29) I seem to see something green,

or, as Professor Chisholm puts it,

(30) I am appeared greenly to.

Propositions of this latter sort seem to enjoy a kind of immunity from error not enjoyed by those of the former. I could be mistaken in thinking I see a pink rat; perhaps I am hallucinating or the victim of an illusion. But it is at the least very much harder to see that I could be mistaken in believing that I *seem* to see a pink rat, in believing that I am appeared pinkly (or pink ratly) to. Suppose we say that a proposition with respect to which I enjoy this sort of immunity from error is incorrigible for me; then perhaps Descartes means to hold that a proposition is properly basic for *S* only if it is either self-evident or incorrigible for *S*.

By way of explicit definition:

(31) *p* is incorrigible for *S* if and only if (a) it is not possible that *S* believe *p* and *p* be false, and (b) it is not possible that *S* believe $\sim p$ and *p* be true.

The second clause serves to exclude necessary truths; given just the first clause, either Goldbach's conjecture or its denial would be incorrigible, even though no one knows whether it is true.

Here we have a further characteristic of foundationalism: the claim that not just any proposition is properly basic. Ancient and medieval foundationalists tended to hold that a proposition is properly basic for a person only if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses: modern foundationalists—Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, and the like—tended to hold

that a proposition is properly basic for *S* only if either self-evident or incorrigible for *S*. Of course this is a historical generalization and is thus perilous; but perhaps it is worth the risk. And now let us say that a *classical foundationalist* is any one who is either an ancient and medieval or a modern foundationalist.

D. The Collapse of Foundationalism

Now suppose we return to the main question: Why should not belief in God be among the foundations of my noetic structure? The answer, on the part of the classical foundationalist, was that even if this belief is *true*, it does not have the characteristics a proposition must have to deserve a place in the foundations. There is no room in the foundations for a proposition that can be rationally accepted only on the basis of other propositions. The only properly basic propositions are those that are self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses. Since the proposition that God exists is none of the above, it is not properly basic for anyone; that is, no well-formed, rational noetic structure contains this proposition in its foundations. But now we must take a closer look at this fundamental principle of classical foundationalism:

- (32) A proposition *p* is properly basic for a person *S* if and only if *p* is either self-evident to *S* or incorrigible for *S* or evident to the senses for *S*.

(32) contains two claims: first, a proposition is properly basic *if* it is self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, and, second, a proposition is properly basic *only if* it meets this condition. The first seems true enough; suppose we concede it. But what is to be said for the second? Is there any reason to accept it? Why does the foundationalist accept it? Why does he think the theist ought to?

We should note first that if this thesis, and the correlative foundationalist thesis that a proposition is rationally acceptable only if it follows from or is probable with respect to what is properly basic – if these claims are true, then enormous quantities of what we all in fact believe are irrational. One crucial lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy—Descartes through Hume, roughly—is just this: relative to propositions that are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable—at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable. Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more

probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me; at any rate no one has given good reason to think any of them is. And now suppose we add to the foundations propositions that are evident to the senses, thereby moving from modern to ancient and medieval foundationalism. Then propositions entailing the existence of material objects will of course be probable with respect to the foundations, because included therein. But the same cannot be said either for propositions about the past or for propositions entailing the existence of persons distinct from myself; as before, these will not be probable with respect to what is properly basic.

And does not this show that the thesis in question is false? The contention is that

- (33) *A* is properly basic for me only if *A* is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for me.

But many propositions that do not meet these conditions *are* properly basic for me. I believe, for example, that I had lunch this noon. I do not believe this proposition on the basis of other propositions; I take it as basic; it is in the foundations of my noetic structure. Furthermore, I am entirely rational in so taking it, even though this proposition is neither self-evident nor evident to the senses nor incorrigible for me. Of course this may not convince the foundationalist; he may think that in fact I do *not* take that proposition as basic, or perhaps he will bite the bullet and maintain that if I really *do* take it as basic, then the fact is I *am*, so far forth, irrational.

Perhaps the following will be more convincing. According to the classical foundationalist (call him *F*) a person *S* is rational in accepting (33) only if either (33) is properly basic (self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses) for him, or he believes (33) on the basis of propositions that are properly basic for him and support (33). Now presumably if *F* knows of some support for (33) from propositions that are self-evident or evident to the senses or incorrigible, he will be able to provide a good argument — deductive, inductive, probabilistic or whatever — whose premises are self-evident or evident to the senses or incorrigible and whose conclusion is (33). So far as I know, no foundationalist has provided such an argument. It therefore appears that the foundationalist does not know of any support for (33) from propositions that are (on his account) properly basic. So if he is to be rational in accepting (33), he must (on his own account) accept it as basic. But according to (33) itself, (33) is properly basic for *F* only if (33) is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for him. Clearly (33) meets none of these conditions. Hence it is not properly basic for *F*. But then *F* is self-referentially inconsistent

in accepting (33); he accepts (33) as basic, despite the fact that (33) does not meet the condition for proper basicity that (33) itself lays down.

Furthermore, (33) is either false or such that in accepting it the foundationalist is violating his epistemic responsibilities. For F does not know of any argument or evidence for (33). Hence if it is true, he will be violating his epistemic responsibilities in accepting it. So (33) is either false or such that F cannot rationally accept it. Still further, if the theist were to accept (33) at the foundationalist's urging but without argument, he would be adding to his noetic structure a proposition that is either false or such that in accepting it he violates his noetic responsibilities. But if there is such a thing as the ethics of belief, surely it will proscribe believing a proposition one knows to be either false or such that one ought not to believe it. Accordingly, I ought not to accept (33) in the absence of argument from premises that meet the condition it lays down. The same goes for the foundationalist: if he cannot find such an argument for (33), he ought to give it up. Furthermore, he ought not to urge and I ought not to accept any objection to theistic belief that crucially depends upon a proposition that is true only if I ought not believe it.

This argument can be made more rigorous. The classical foundationalist accepts

- (34) p is rationally acceptable for S only if either (1) p is self-evident or evident to the senses or incorrigible for S , or (2) there are paths in S 's noetic structure from p to propositions $q_1 \dots q_n$ that (a) are basic for S , (b) are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible for S , and (c) support p .

Now (34) itself is obviously not evident to the senses. Furthermore it is not incorrigible for F . If (34) is contingent, then it will be possible that F believe it even though it is false, in which case it is not incorrigible. If it is noncontingent, then it is either necessarily true or necessarily false. If the former, it will be possible that F believe it false when it is true; if the latter, then it will be possible that F believe it true when it is false; so in neither case is it incorrigible. Still further, (34) is not plausibly thought self-evident; surely it is not such that one cannot understand it without believing it. So (34) is not self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible for F . If (34) is true, therefore, then if F is to be rational in accepting (34), he must believe it on the basis of propositions that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses, and support it. But no foundationalist has ever produced a successful argument for (34) from propositions that meet that condition. It is therefore unlikely that F 's acceptance of (34) conforms to the necessary condition of rationality (34) lays down.

Of course it *could* be that there are propositions $P_1 \dots P_n$ such that (1) there is a path in S 's noetic structure from (34) to the P_i , (2) the P_i do in fact support (34), and (3) the P_i meet the condition for proper basicity laid down in (33)

even if *F* cannot say what they are and even if the rest of us cannot think of any viable candidates. (Just as it could be that every theist accepts belief in God on the basis of propositions that both support that belief and are properly basic according to [33].) This seems unlikely, however, and in the absence of some reason to think there *are* propositions of that sort, the better part of valor is to reject (34).

We might try amending (34) in various ways. Nearly everyone accepts as basic some propositions entailing the existence of other persons and some propositions about the past; not nearly everyone accepts the existence of God as basic. Struck by this fact, we might propose:

- (35) *p* is properly basic for *S* if and only if *p* is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for *S*, or is accepted as basic by nearly everyone.

There are problems with (35). It is meant to legitimize my taking as basic such deliverances of memory as that I had lunch this noon; but not nearly everyone takes that proposition as basic. Most of you, I daresay, have not so much as given it a thought; you are much too busy thinking about your own lunch to think about mine. So (35) will not do the job as it stands. That is of no real consequence, however; for even if we had an appropriate statement of (35), it would suffer from the same sort of malady as does (34). Not nearly everyone takes (35) as basic; I do not, for example. Nor is it self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. So unless we can find an argument for it from propositions that meet the conditions it lays down, we shall, if we believe it, be believing a proposition that is probably either false or such that we ought not believe it. Therefore we ought not believe it, at least until someone produces such an argument for it.

Now we could continue to canvass other revisions of (33), and in Part III I shall look into the proper procedure for discovering and justifying such criteria for proper basicity. It is evident, however, that classical foundationalism is bankrupt, and insofar as the evidentialist objection is rooted in classical foundationalism, it is poorly rooted indeed.

Of course the evidentialist objection *need* not presuppose classical foundationalism; someone who accepted quite a different version of foundationalism could no doubt urge this objection. But in order to evaluate it, we should have to see what criterion of proper basicity was being invoked. In the absence of such specification the objection remains at best a promissory note. So far as the present discussion goes, then, the next move is up to the evidentialist objector. He must specify a criterion for proper basicity that is free from self-referential difficulties, rules out

belief in God as properly basic, and is such that there is some reason to think it is true.

An evidentialist objector need not be a classical foundationalist; indeed, he need not be a foundationalist *at all*. He could accept a coherence theory of rationality. This is a large and complicated topic; I cannot enter it here. The central issues, however, are two. In the first place, what is coherence? And is there any reason to think the theist's noetic structure does not display it? Second, suppose it does not; how do we determine in what direction it should be modified? Suppose, for example, that a given theist's noetic structure exhibits lack of coherence because it contains both belief in God and also, say, rejection of the idea that there is such a thing as agent causation. Perhaps his noetic structure is irrational, or at any rate defective, by virtue of this incoherence. But how can this be construed as an objection to theistic belief? Some change is called for, but why suppose that what he must do is give up theistic belief? Obviously there is another alternative; perhaps what he should do instead is accept agent causation.

PART III: THE REFORMED OBJECTION TO NATURAL THEOLOGY

Suppose we think of natural theology as the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God. This enterprise has a long and impressive history—a history stretching back to the dawn of Christendom and boasting among its adherents many of the truly great thinkers of the Western world. One thinks, for example, of Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham, of Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Recently—since the time of Kant, perhaps—the tradition of natural theology has not been as overwhelming as it once was; yet it continues to have able defenders both within and without officially Catholic philosophy.

Many Christians, however, have been less than totally impressed. In particular Reformed or Calvinist theologians have for the most part taken a dim view of this enterprise. A few Reformed thinkers—B. B. Warfield, for example—endorse the theistic proofs, but for the most part the Reformed attitude has ranged from tepid endorsement, through indifference, to suspicion, hostility, and outright accusations of blasphemy. And this stance is initially puzzling. It looks a little like the attitude some Christians adopt toward faith healing: it can't be done, but even if it could it shouldn't be. What exactly, or even approximately, do these sons and daughters of the Reformation have against proving the existence of God? What *could* they have against it? What could be less objectionable to any but the most obdurate atheist?

A. The Objection Initially Stated

By way of answering this question, I want to consider three representative Reformed thinkers. Let us begin with the nineteenth-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck:

A distinct natural theology, obtained apart from any revelation, merely through observation and study of the universe in which man lives, does not exist. . . .

Scripture urges us to behold heaven and earth, birds and ants, flowers and lilies, in order that we may see and recognize God in them. "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who hath created these." Is. 40:26. Scripture does not reason in the abstract. It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. But it speaks with authority. Both theologically and religiously it proceeds from God as the starting point.

We receive the impression that belief in the existence of God is based entirely upon these proofs. But indeed that would be "a wretched faith, which, before it invokes God, must first prove his existence." The contrary, however, is the truth. There is not a single object the existence of which we hesitate to accept until definite proofs are furnished. Of the existence of self, of the world round about us, of logical and moral laws, etc., we are so deeply convinced because of the indelible impressions which all these things make upon our consciousness that we need no arguments or demonstration. Spontaneously, altogether involuntarily: without any constraint or coercion, we accept that existence. Now the same is true in regard to the existence of God. The so-called proofs are by no means the final grounds of our most certain conviction that God exists. This certainty is established only by faith; that is, by the spontaneous testimony which forces itself upon us from every side.³⁶

According to Bavinck, then, belief in the existence of God is not based upon proofs or arguments. By "argument" here I think he means arguments in the style of natural theology—the sort given by Aquinas and Scotus and later by Descartes, Leibniz, Clarke, and others. And what he means to say, I think, is that Christians do not *need* such arguments. Do not need them for what?

Here I think Bavinck means to hold two things. First, arguments or proofs are not, in general, the source of the believer's confidence in God. Typically the believer does not believe in God on the basis of arguments; nor does he believe such truths as that God has created the world

on the basis of arguments. Second, argument is not needed for *rational justification*; the believer is entirely within his epistemic right in believing, for example, that God has created the world, even if he has no argument at all for that conclusion. The believer does not need natural theology in order to achieve rationality or epistemic propriety in believing; his belief in God can be perfectly rational even if he knows of no cogent argument, deductive or inductive, for the existence of God—indeed, even if there is no such argument.

Bavinck has three further points. First he means to add, I think, that we cannot come to knowledge of God on the basis of argument; the arguments of natural theology just do not work. (And he follows this passage with a more or less traditional attempt to refute the theistic proofs, including an endorsement of some of Kant's fashionable confusions about the ontological argument.) Second, Scripture "proceeds from God as the starting point," and so should the believer. There is nothing by way of proofs or arguments for God's existence in the Bible; that is simply presupposed. The same should be true of the Christian believer then; he should *start* from belief in God rather than from the premises of some argument whose conclusion is that God exists. What is it that makes those premises a better starting point anyway? And third, Bavinck points out that belief in God relevantly resembles belief in the existence of the self and of the external world—and, we might add, belief in other minds and the past. In none of these areas do we typically *have* proof or arguments, or *need* proofs or arguments.

Suppose we turn next to John Calvin, who is as good a Calvinist as any. According to Calvin God has implanted in us all an innate tendency, or *nisus*, or disposition to believe in him:

'There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.' This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. Ever-renewing its memory, he repeatedly sheds fresh drops. Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their lives to his will. If ignorance of God is to be looked for anywhere, surely one is most likely to find an example of it among the more backward folk and those more remote from civilization. Yet there is, as the eminent pagan says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. So deeply does the common conception occupy the

minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.

Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that *there is some God*, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow. . . . From this we conclude *that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school*, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget.³⁷

Calvin's claim, then, is that God has created us in such a way that we have a strong tendency or inclination toward belief in him. This tendency has been in part overlaid or suppressed by sin. Were it not for the existence of sin in the world, human beings would believe in God to the same degree and with the same natural spontaneity that we believe in the existence of other persons, an external world, or the past. This is the natural human condition; it is because of our presently unnatural sinful condition that many of us find belief in God difficult or absurd. The fact is, Calvin thinks, one who does not believe in God is in an epistemically substandard position—rather like a man who does not believe that his wife exists, or thinks she is like a cleverly constructed robot and has no thoughts, feelings, or consciousness.

Although this disposition to believe in God is partially suppressed, it is nonetheless universally present. And it is triggered or actuated by a widely realized condition:

Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. (51)

Like Kant, Calvin is especially impressed in this connection, by the marvelous compages of the starry heavens above:

Even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host. (50)

And Calvin's claim is that one who accedes to this tendency and in these circumstances accepts the belief that God has created the world — perhaps upon beholding the starry heavens, or the splendid majesty of the mountains, or the intricate, articulate beauty of a tiny flower — is entirely within his epistemic rights in so doing. It is not that such a person is justified or rational in so believing by virtue of having an implicit argument — some version of the teleological argument, say. No; he does not need any argument for justification or rationality. His belief need not be based on any other propositions at all; under these conditions he is perfectly rational in accepting belief in God in the utter absence of any argument, deductive or inductive. Indeed, a person in these conditions, says Calvin, *knows* that God exists.

Elsewhere Calvin speaks of “arguments from reason” or rational arguments:

The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God's holy name, that by it the whole world may be brought into obedience to him. Now we ought to see how apparent it is not only by plausible opinion but by clear truth that they do not call upon God's name heedlessly or falsely. If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences — that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles — we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit. (book 1, chapter 7, p. 78)

Here the subject for discussion is not belief in the existence of God, but belief that God is the author of the Scriptures; I think it is clear, however, that Calvin would say the same thing about belief in God's existence. The Christian does not *need* natural theology, either as the source of his confidence or to justify his belief. Furthermore, the Christian *ought* not to believe on the basis of argument; if he does, his faith is likely to be “unstable and wavering,” the “subject of perpetual doubt.” If my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favorite argument. This could be bothersome and time-consuming; and what do I do if someone does find a flaw in my argument? Stop going to church? From Calvin's point of view believing in the existence of God on the basis of rational argument is like believing in the existence of your spouse on the basis of the analogical argument

for other minds—whimsical at best and unlikely to delight the person concerned.

B. The Barthian Dilemma

The twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth is particularly scathing in his disapproval of natural theology. *That* he disapproves is overwhelmingly clear. His *reasons* for thus disapproving, however, are much less clear; his utterances on this topic, as on others, are fascinating but Delphic in everything but length. Sometimes, indeed, he is outrageous, as when he suggests that the mere act of believing or accepting the Christian message is a manifestation of human pride, self-will, contumacy, and sin. Elsewhere, however, he is both more moderate and thoroughly intriguing:

Now suppose the partner in the conversation [that is, natural theology] discovers that faith is trying to use the well-known artifice of dialectic in relation to him. We are not taking him seriously because we withhold from him what we really want to say and represent. It is only in appearance that we devote ourselves to him, and therefore what we say to him is only an apparent and unreal statement. What will happen then? Well, not without justice—although misconstruing the friendly intention which perhaps motivates us—he will see himself despised and deceived. He will shut himself up and harden himself against the faith which does not speak out frankly, which deserts its own standpoint for the standpoint of unbelief. What use to unbelief is a faith which obviously knows different? And how shocking for unbelief is a faith which only pretends to take up with unbelief a common position. . . . This dilemma betrays the inner contradiction in every form of a “Christian” natural theology. It must really represent and affirm the standpoint of faith. Its true objective to which it really wants to lead unbelief is the knowability of the real God through Himself in his revelation. But as a “natural” theology, its initial aim is to disguise this and therefore to pretend to share in the life-endeavour of natural man. It therefore thinks that it should appear to engage in the dialectic of unbelief in the expectation that here at least a preliminary decision in regard to faith can and must be reached. Therefore, as a natural theology it speaks and acts improperly. . . . We cannot experiment with unbelief, even if we think we know and possess all sorts of interesting and very promising possibilities and recipes for it. We must treat unbelief seriously. Only one thing can be treated more seriously than unbelief; and that is faith itself—or rather, the real God in whom faith believes. But faith itself—or rather, the real God in whom faith believes—must be taken

so seriously that there is no place at all for even an apparent transposition to the standpoint of unbelief, for the pedagogic and playful self-lowering into the sphere of its possibilities.³⁸

We must try to penetrate a bit deeper into these objections to natural theology, and suppose we start with Barth. Precisely what is the objection to which he is pointing? That somehow it is improper or un-Christian or dishonest or impious to try to prove God's existence; but *how* exactly? Barth speaks here of a *dilemma* that confronts the natural theologian. Dilemmas have horns; what are the horns of this one? The following, I think. In presenting a piece of natural theology, either the believer must adopt what Barth calls "the standpoint of unbelief" or he must pretend to his unbelieving interlocutor to do so. If he does the former, he deserts his Christian standpoint; but if he does the latter, he is dishonest, in bad faith, professing to believe what in fact he does not believe. But what *is* the standpoint of unbelief and what is it to adopt it? And how could one fall into this standpoint just by working at natural theology, just by making a serious attempt to prove the existence of God?

Perhaps Barth is thinking along the following lines. In *arguing* about the existence of God, in attempting to prove it, one implicitly adopts a certain stance. In adopting this stance one presupposes that it is not yet known whether there is a God; that remains to be seen; that is what is up for discussion. In adopting this stance, furthermore, the natural theologian implicitly concedes that what one ought to believe here depends on the result of the inquiry; if there are good arguments *for* the existence of God, then we—that is, we believers and unbelievers who together are engaged in this inquiry—ought to accept God's existence; if there are good arguments *against* the existence of God, we ought to accept its denial; and if the arguments on both sides are equally strong (and equally weak) then perhaps the right thing to do is to remain agnostic.

In adopting this stance one concedes that the rightness or propriety of belief and unbelief depends upon the outcome of a certain inquiry. Belief in God is right and proper only if there is on balance better reason to believe than not to believe—only if, that is, the arguments for the existence of God are stronger than those against it. But of course an inquiry has a starting point, and arguments have premises. In supposing the issue thus dependent upon the outcome of argument, one supposes the appropriate premises are available. What about these premises? In adopting this stance the natural theologian implicitly commits himself to the view that there is a certain set of propositions from which the premises of theistic and antitheistic arguments are to be drawn—a set of propositions such that belief in God is rational or proper only if it stands in the right relation to that set. He concurs with his unbelieving interlocutor that there is a

set of propositions both can appeal to, a set of propositions accepted by all or nearly all rational persons; and the propriety or rightness of belief in God depends on its relation to these propositions.

What are these propositions and where do they come from? We shall have to enter that question more deeply later; for the moment let us call them "the deliverances of reason." Then to *prove* or *demonstrate* that God exists is to exhibit a deductive argument whose conclusion is that God exists, whose premises are drawn from the deliverances of reason, and each of whose steps is by way of an argument whose corresponding conditional is among the deliverances of reason. Aquinas' first three ways would be attempts to demonstrate the existence of God in just this sense. A demonstration that God does not exist, of course, would be structurally isomorphic; it would meet the second and third condition just mentioned but have as conclusion the proposition that there is no such person as God. An alleged example would be the deductive argument from evil—the claim that the existence of evil is among the deliverances of reason and is inconsistent with the existence of God.

Of course it might be that the existence of God does not thus follow from the deliverances of reason but is nonetheless *probable* or *likely* with respect to them. One could then give a probabilistic or inductive argument for the existence of God, thus showing that theistic belief is rational, or epistemically proper, in that it is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of reason. Perhaps Aquinas' Fifth Way and Paley's argument from design can be seen as falling into this category, and perhaps the probabilistic argument from evil—the claim that it is unlikely that God exists, given all the evil there is—can then be seen as a structurally similar argument for the conclusion that unbelief is the proper attitude.

According to Barth, then, the natural theologian implicitly concedes that the propriety of belief in God is to be tested by its relationship to the deliverances of reason. Belief is right, or rational, or rationally acceptable only if it stands in the proper relationship to the deliverances of reason—only if, for example, it is more likely than not or at any rate not unlikely with respect to them.

Now to adopt the standpoint of unbelief is not, as Barth sees it, to reject belief in God. One who enthusiastically accepts and believes in the existence of God can nonetheless be in the standpoint of unbelief. To be in that standpoint it is sufficient to hold that belief in God is rationally permissible for a person *only if he or she has a good argument for it*. To be in the standpoint of unbelief is to hold that belief in God is rationally acceptable *only if it is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of reason*. One who holds this belief, says Barth, is in the standpoint of unbelief; his ultimate commitment is to the deliverances

of reason rather than to God. Such a person “makes reason a judge over Christ,” or at any rate over the Christian faith. And to do so, says Barth, is utterly improper for a Christian.

The horns of the Barthian dilemma, then, are bad faith or dishonesty on the one hand and the standpoint of unbelief on the other. Either the natural theologian accepts the standpoint of unbelief or he does not. In the latter case he misleads and deceives his unbelieving interlocutor and thus falls into bad faith. In the former case he makes his ultimate commitment to the deliverances of reason, a posture that is for a Christian totally inappropriate, a manifestation of sinful human pride.

And this attempt to prove the existence of God certainly cannot end in any other way than with the affirmation that even apart from God's grace, already preceding God's grace, already anticipating it, he is ready for God, so that God is knowable to him otherwise than from and through himself. Not only does it end with this. In principle, it begins with it. For in what does it consist but in the arrogation, preservation and affirmation of the self-sufficiency of man and therefore his likeness with God? (135)

C. Rejecting Classical Foundationalism

Now I think the natural theologian has a sound response to Barth's dilemma: she can execute the maneuver known to dialectician and matorador alike as “escaping between the horns.” As a natural theologian she offers or endorses theistic arguments, but why suppose that her own belief in God must be based upon such argument? And if it is not, why suppose she must pretend that it is? Perhaps her aim is to point out to the unbeliever that belief in God follows from other things he already believes, so that he can continue in unbelief (and continue to accept these other beliefs) only on pain of inconsistency. We may hope this knowledge will lead him to give up his unbelief, but in any event she can tell him quite frankly that her belief in God is not based on its relation to the deliverances of reason. Indeed, she can follow Calvin in claiming that belief in God *ought* not to be based on arguments from the deliverances of reason or anywhere else. So even if “the standpoint of unbelief” is as reprehensible as Barth says it is, his dilemma seems to evaporate.

What is most interesting here is not Barth's claim that the natural theologian faces this dilemma; here he is probably wrong, or at any rate not clearly right. More interesting is his view that belief in God need not be based on argument. Barth joins Calvin and Bavinck in holding that the believer in God is entirely within his rights in believing as he does even if he does not know of any good theistic argument (deductive or

inductive), even if he does not believe there is any such argument, and even if in fact no such argument exists. Like Calvin, Kuyper, and Bavinck, Barth holds that belief in God is *properly basic*—that is, such that it is rational to accept it without accepting it on the basis of any other propositions or beliefs at all. In fact, they think the Christian ought not to accept belief in God on the basis of argument; to do so is to run the risk of a faith that is unstable and wavering, subject to all the wayward whim and fancy of the latest academic fashion. What the Reformers held was that a believer is entirely rational, entirely within his epistemic rights, in *starting with* belief in God, in accepting it as basic, and in taking it as premise for argument to other conclusions.

In rejecting natural theology, therefore, these Reformed thinkers mean to say first of all that the propriety or rightness of belief in God in no way depends upon the success or availability of the sort of theistic arguments that form the natural theologian's stock in trade. I think this is their central claim here, and their central insight. As these Reformed thinkers see things, one who takes belief in God as basic is not thereby violating any epistemic duties or revealing a defect in his noetic structure; quite the reverse. The correct or proper way to believe in God, they thought, was not on the basis of arguments from natural theology or anywhere else; the correct way is to take belief in God as basic.

I spoke earlier of classical foundationalism, a view that incorporates the following three theses:

- (1) In every rational noetic structure there is a set of beliefs taken as basic—that is, not accepted on the basis of any other beliefs,
- (2) In a rational noetic structure nonbasic belief is proportional to support from the foundations,

and

- (3) In a rational noetic structure basic beliefs will be self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses.

Now I think these three Reformed thinkers should be understood as rejecting classical foundationalism. They may have been inclined to accept (1); they show no objection to (2); but they were utterly at odds with the idea that the foundations of a rational noetic structure can at most include propositions that are self-evident or evident to the senses or incorrigible. In particular, they were prepared to insist that a rational noetic structure can include belief in God as basic. As Bavinck put it, "Scripture . . . does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. But it speaks with authority. Both theologically and religiously it proceeds from God as the starting point" (above,

p. 64). And of course Bavinck means to say that we must emulate Scripture here.

In the passages I quoted earlier, Calvin claims the believer does not need argument — does not need it, among other things, for epistemic respectability. We may understand him as holding, I think, that a rational noetic structure may very well contain belief in God among its foundations. Indeed, he means to go further, and in two separate directions. In the first place he thinks a Christian *ought* not believe in God on the basis of other propositions; a proper and well-formed Christian noetic structure will *in fact* have belief in God among its foundations. And in the second place Calvin claims that one who takes belief in God as basic can *know* that God exists. Calvin holds that one can *rationally accept* belief in God as basic; he also claims that one can *know* that God exists even if he has no argument, even if he does not believe on the basis of other propositions. A foundationalist is likely to hold that some properly basic beliefs are such that anyone who accepts them *knows* them. More exactly, he is likely to hold that among the beliefs properly basic for a person *S*, some are such that if *S* accepts them, *S* knows them. He could go on to say that *other* properly basic beliefs cannot be known if taken as basic, but only rationally believed; and he might think of the existence of God as a case in point. Calvin will have none of this; as he sees it, one needs no arguments to know that God exists.

One who holds this view need not suppose that natural theology is of no use. In the first place, if there *were* good arguments for the existence of God, that would be a fact worth knowing in itself — just as it would be worth knowing (if true) that the analogical argument for other minds is successful, or that there are good arguments from self-evident and incorrigible propositions to the existence of other minds. Second, natural theology could be useful in helping someone move from unbelief to belief. The arguments are not successful from the point of view of classical foundationalism; probably, that is, they do not start from premises that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses and then proceed by argument forms that are self-evidently valid to the conclusion that God exists. Nonetheless there may be (in fact there are) people who accept propositions and argument forms out of which a theistic argument can be constructed; for these people theistic arguments can be useful as a means of moving toward what Calvin sees as the best way to believe in God: as basic.

PART IV: IS BELIEF IN GOD PROPERLY BASIC?

According to the Reformed thinkers discussed in the last section the answer is “Yes indeed.” I enthusiastically concur in this contention, and

in this section I shall try to clarify and develop this view and defend it against some objections. I shall argue first that one who holds that belief in God is properly basic is not thereby committed to the view that just about *anything* is; I shall argue secondly that even if belief in God is accepted as basic, it is not *groundless*; I shall argue thirdly that one who accepts belief in God as basic may nonetheless be open to arguments *against* that belief; and finally I shall argue that the view I am defending is not plausibly thought of as a species of *fideism*.

A. The Great Pumpkin Objection

It is tempting to raise the following sort of question. If belief in God is properly basic, why cannot *just any* belief be properly basic? Could we not say the same for 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? Suppose I believe that if I flap my arms with sufficient vigor, I can take off and fly about the room; could I defend myself against the charge of irrationality by claiming this belief is basic? If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not 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?

Certainly not. According to the Reformed epistemologist certain beliefs are properly basic in certain circumstances; those same beliefs may *not* be properly basic in other circumstances. Consider the belief that I see a tree: this belief is properly basic in circumstances that are hard to describe in detail, but include my being appeared to in a certain characteristic way; that same belief is not properly basic in circumstances including, say, my knowledge that I am sitting in the living room listening to music with my eyes closed. What the Reformed epistemologist holds is that there are widely realized circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic; but why should that be thought to commit him to the idea that just about *any* belief is properly basic in any circumstances, or even to the vastly weaker claim that for any belief there are circumstances in which it is properly basic? Is it just that he rejects the criteria for proper basicity purveyed by classical foundationalism? But why should *that* be thought to commit him to such tolerance of irrationality? Consider an analogy. In the palmy days of positivism the positivists went about confidently wielding their verifiability criterion and declaring meaningless much that was clearly meaningful. Now suppose someone rejected a formulation of that criterion—the one to be found in the second edition of A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, for example. Would that mean she was committed to holding that

- (1) T' was brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymbles in the wabe,

contrary to appearances, makes good sense? Of course not. But then the same goes for the Reformed epistemologist: the fact that he rejects the criterion of proper basicity purveyed by classical foundationalism does not mean that he is committed to supposing just anything is properly basic.

But what then is the problem? Is it that the Reformed epistemologist not only rejects those criteria for proper basicity but seems in no hurry to produce what he takes to be a better substitute? If he has no such criterion, how can he fairly reject belief in the Great Pumpkin as properly basic?

This objection betrays an important misconception. How *do* we rightly arrive at or develop criteria for meaningfulness, or justified belief, or proper basicity? Where do they come from? Must one have such a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgments — positive or negative — about proper basicity? Surely not. Suppose I do not know of a satisfactory substitute for the criteria proposed by classical foundationalism; I am nevertheless entirely within my epistemic rights in holding that certain propositions in certain conditions are not properly basic.

Some propositions seem self-evident when in fact they are not; that is the lesson of some of the Russell paradoxes. Nevertheless it would be irrational to take as basic the denial of a proposition that seems self-evident to you. Similarly, suppose it seems to you that you see a tree; you would then be irrational in taking as basic the proposition that you do not see a tree or that there are no trees. In the same way, even if I do not know of some illuminating criterion of meaning, I can quite properly declare (1) (above) meaningless.

And this raises an important question — one Roderick Chisholm has taught us to ask.³⁹ What is the status of criteria for knowledge, or proper basicity, or justified belief? Typically these are universal statements. The modern foundationalist's criterion for proper basicity, for example, is doubly universal:

- (2) For any proposition *A* and person *S*, *A* is properly basic for *S* if and only if *A* is incorrigible for *S* or self-evident to *S*.

But how could one know a thing like that? What are its credentials? Clearly enough, (2) is not self-evident or just obviously true. But if it is not, how does one arrive at it? What sorts of arguments would be appropriate? Of course a foundationalist might find (2) so appealing he simply takes it to be true, neither offering argument for it nor accepting it on the basis of other things he believes. If he does so, however, his noetic structure

will be self-referentially incoherent. (2) itself is neither self-evident nor incorrigible; hence if he accepts (2) as basic, the modern foundationalist violates in accepting it the condition of proper basicity he himself lays down. On the other hand, perhaps the foundationalist will try to produce some argument for it from premises that are self-evident or incorrigible: it is exceeding hard to see, however, what such an argument might be like. And until he has produced such arguments, what shall the rest of us do — we who do not find (2) at all obvious or compelling? How could he use (2) to show us that belief in God, for example, is not properly basic? Why should we believe (2) or pay it any attention?

The fact is, I think, that neither (2) nor any other revealing necessary and sufficient condition for proper basicity follows from clearly self-evident premises by clearly acceptable arguments. And hence the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, *inductive*. We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously *not* properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples. Under the right conditions, for example, it is clearly rational to believe that you see a human person before you: a being who has thoughts and feelings, who knows and believes things, who makes decisions and acts. It is clear, furthermore, that you are under no obligation to reason to this belief from others you hold; under those conditions that belief is properly basic for you. But then (2) must be mistaken; the belief in question, under those circumstances, is properly basic, though neither self-evident nor incorrigible for you. Similarly, you may seem to remember that you had breakfast this morning, and perhaps you know of no reason to suppose your memory is playing you tricks. If so, you are entirely justified in taking that belief as basic. Of course it is not properly basic on the criteria offered by classical foundationalists, but that fact counts not against you but against those criteria.

I say we must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are *obviously* properly basic in the latter, but that is not exactly right. The sample set, by reference to which hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity must be tested, should contain belief-condition pairs $\langle B, C \rangle$ of that sort but also pairs where it is not clear whether B is justified in C, and pairs where it seems fairly clear but not obvious that B is justified in C. (Of course our sample set should display the same variety with respect to pairs $\langle BC \rangle$ where B is *not* justified in C.)

The sample set, furthermore, should be revisable in the light of theory and under the pressure of argument. Thus we may come to see that a pair $\langle BC \rangle$,

originally taken to be an example of a belief and circumstances such that the former is justified in the latter, is really not of that sort. Further, it may be that we cannot find any revealing criterion; we may have to be content with some necessary conditions and some sufficient conditions. Perhaps my being appeared to redly, for example, is both necessary and sufficient for my being justified in taking it as basic that I am appeared to redly. For other sorts of beliefs, however, it may be extremely difficult to find a condition that is both necessary and sufficient. Consider memory beliefs for example; my seeming to remember that p may be necessary for my justifiably taking it as basic that I do remember that p , but it clearly is not sufficient. If, for example, I know that my memory is faulty on the subject matter of p , then presumably I am not justified in taking it as basic that I remember that p when it seems to me that I do; and it may be very hard to find a condition that when conjoined with *it seems to me that I remember that p* yields a condition that is both necessary and sufficient for my being justified in taking it as basic that I remember that p .

Furthermore, it may be that the best we can do here is to give some sufficient conditions of *prima facie* justification. When I am being appeared to in a certain way, I am *prima facie* justified in believing that I perceive a tree. But this justification is defeasible; if I am told by an authority that there are a lot of fake trees around, visually indistinguishable at medium range from real trees, then I am no longer justified in taking it as basic that I see a tree. So the circumstance of being appeared to in a certain way confers *prima facie*, not *ultima facie*, justification upon my belief that I see a tree.

Accordingly, criteria for proper basicity must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented *ex cathedra* but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples. But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.

And hence criteria for proper basicity arrived at in this particularistic way may not be polemically useful. If you and I start from different examples—if my set of examples includes a pair $\langle B, C \rangle$ (where B is, say, belief in God and C is some condition) and your set of examples does not include $\langle BC \rangle$ —then we may very well arrive at different criteria for proper basicity. Furthermore I cannot sensibly use my criterion to try to convince you that B is in fact properly basic in C, for you will point out, quite properly, that my criterion is based upon a set of examples that, as you see it, *erroneously* includes $\langle BC \rangle$ as an example of a belief and condition such that the former is properly basic in the latter. You

will thus be quite within your rights in claiming that my criterion is mistaken, although of course you may concede that, given my set of examples, I followed correct procedure in arriving at it. But of course by the same token you cannot sensibly use your criterion to try to convince me that B is *not*, in fact, properly basic in C. If criteria for proper basicity are arrived at in this particularistic way, they will not be or at any rate need not be polemically useful. Following this sort of procedure, we may not be able to resolve our disagreement as to the status of $\langle B, C \rangle$; you will continue to hold that B is *not* properly basic in C, and I will continue to hold that it *is*.

Of course it does not follow that there is no truth of the matter; if our criteria conflict, then at least one of them is mistaken, even if we cannot by further discussion agree as to which it is. Similarly, either I am mistaken in holding that B is properly basic in C, or you are mistaken in holding that it is not. Still further, if I *am* mistaken in this matter, then if I take B as basic in C—that is, if I am in C and believe B without the evidential support of other beliefs—then I am irrational in so doing. Particularism does not imply *subjectivism*.

So, the Reformed epistemologist can properly hold that belief in the Great Pumpkin is not properly basic, even though he holds that belief in God is properly basic and even if he has no full-fledged criterion of proper basicity. Of course he is committed to supposing that there is a relevant *difference* between belief in God and belief in the Great Pumpkin if he holds that the former but not the latter is properly basic. But this should prove no great embarrassment; there are plenty of candidates. These candidates are to be found in the neighborhood of the conditions that justify and ground belief in God—conditions I shall discuss in the next section. Thus, for example, the Reformed epistemologist may concur with Calvin in holding that God has implanted in us a natural tendency to see his hand in the world around us; the same cannot be said for the Great Pumpkin, there being no Great Pumpkin and no natural tendency to accept beliefs about the Great Pumpkin.⁴⁰

B. The Ground of Belief in God

My claim is that belief in God is properly basic; it does not follow, however, that it is *groundless*. Let me explain. Suppose we consider perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs ascribing mental states to other persons, such beliefs as:

- (3) I see a tree,
- (4) I had breakfast this morning,

and

- (5) That person is in pain.

Although beliefs of this sort are typically taken as basic, it would be a mistake to describe them as *groundless*. Upon having experience of a certain sort, I believe that I am perceiving a tree. In the typical case I do not hold this belief on the basis of other beliefs; it is nonetheless not groundless. My having that characteristic sort of experience—to use Professor Chisholm's language, my being appeared *treely* to—plays a crucial role in the formation of that belief. It also plays a crucial role in its *justification*. Let us say that a belief is *justified* for a person at a time if (a) he is violating no epistemic duties and is within his epistemic rights in accepting it then and (b) his noetic structure is not defective by virtue of his then accepting it.⁴¹ Then my being appeared to in this characteristic way (together with other circumstances) is what confers on me the right to hold the belief in question; this is what justifies me in accepting it. We could say, if we wish, that this experience is what justifies me in holding it; this is the *ground* of my justification, and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself.

If I see someone displaying typical pain behavior, I take it that he or she is in pain. Again, I do not take the displayed behavior as *evidence* for that belief; I do not infer that belief from others I hold; I do not accept it on the basis of other beliefs. Still, my perceiving the pain behavior plays a unique role in the formation and justification of that belief; as in the previous case it forms the ground of my justification for the belief in question. The same holds for memory beliefs. I seem to remember having breakfast this morning; that is, I have an inclination to believe the proposition that I had breakfast, along with a certain past-tinged experience that is familiar to all but hard to describe. Perhaps we should say that I am appeared to *pastly*; but perhaps that insufficiently distinguishes the experience in question from that accompanying beliefs about the past not grounded in my own memory. The phenomenology of memory is a rich and unexplored realm; here I have no time to explore it. In this case as in the others, however, there is a justifying circumstance present, a condition that forms the ground of my justification for accepting the memory belief in question.

In each of these cases a belief is taken as basic, and in each case *properly* taken as basic. In each case there is some circumstance or condition that confers justification; there is a circumstance that serves as the *ground* of justification. So in each case there will be some true proposition of the sort

(6) In condition *C*, *S* is justified in taking *p* as basic.

Of course *C* will vary with *p*. For a perceptual judgment such as

(7) I see a rose-colored wall before me

C will include my being appeared to in a certain fashion. No doubt C will include more. If I am appeared to in the familiar fashion but know that I am wearing rose-colored glasses, or that I am suffering from a disease that causes me to be thus appeared to, no matter what the color of the nearby objects, then I am not justified in taking (7) as basic. Similarly for memory. Suppose I know that my memory is unreliable; it often plays me tricks. In particular, when I seem to remember having breakfast, then, more often than not, I have not had breakfast. Under these conditions I am not justified in taking it as basic that I had breakfast, even though I seem to remember that I did.

So being appropriately appeared to, in the perceptual case, is not sufficient for justification; some further condition—a condition hard to state in detail—is clearly necessary. The central point here, however, is that a belief is properly basic only in certain conditions; these conditions are, we might say, the ground of its justification and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself. In this sense basic beliefs are not, or are not necessarily, *groundless* beliefs.

Now similar things may be said about belief in God. When the Reformers claim that this belief is properly basic, they do not mean to say, of course, that there are no justifying circumstances for it, or that it is in that sense groundless or gratuitous. Quite the contrary. Calvin holds that God “reveals and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe,” and the divine art “reveals itself in the innumerable and yet distinct and well ordered variety of the heavenly host.” God has so created us that we have a tendency or disposition to see his hand in the world about us. More precisely, there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe.

Calvin recognizes, at least implicitly, that other sorts of conditions may trigger this disposition. Upon reading the Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God’s sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I have done*. Upon confession and repentance I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgives me for what I have done*. A person in grave danger may turn to God, asking for his protection and help; and of course he or she then has the belief that God is indeed able to hear and help if he sees fit. When life is sweet and satisfying, a spontaneous sense of gratitude may well up within the soul; someone in this condition may thank and praise the Lord for his goodness, and will of course have the accompanying belief that indeed the Lord is to be thanked and praised.

There are therefore many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God: guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, a sense that he speaks, perception of various parts of the universe. A complete job would explore the phenomenology of all these conditions and of more besides. This is a large and important topic, but here I can only point to the existence of these conditions.

Of course none of the beliefs I mentioned a moment ago is the simple belief that God exists. What we have instead are such beliefs as:

- (8) God is speaking to me,
- (9) God has created all this,
- (10) God disapproves of what I have done,
- (11) God forgives me,

and

- (12) God is to be thanked and praised.

These propositions are properly basic in the right circumstances. But it is quite consistent with this to suppose that the proposition *there is such a person as God* is neither properly basic nor taken as basic by those who believe in God. Perhaps what they take as basic are such propositions as (8)–(12), believing in the existence of God on the basis of propositions such as those. From this point of view it is not wholly accurate to say that it is belief in God that is properly basic; more exactly, what are properly basic are such propositions as (8)–(12), each of which self-evidently entails that God exists. It is not the relatively high-level and general proposition *God exists* that is properly basic, but instead propositions detailing some of his attributes or actions.

Suppose we return to the analogy between belief in God and belief in the existence of perceptual objects, other persons, and the past. Here too it is relatively specific and concrete propositions rather than their more general and abstract colleagues that are properly basic. Perhaps such items as:

- (13) There are trees,
- (14) There are other persons,

and

- (15) The world has existed for more than five minutes

are not in fact properly basic; it is instead such propositions as:

- (16) I see a tree,

(17) That person is pleased,

and

(18) I had breakfast more than an hour ago

that deserve that accolade. Of course propositions of the latter sort immediately and self-evidently entail propositions of the former sort, and perhaps there is thus no harm in speaking of the former as properly basic, even though so to speak is to speak a bit loosely.

The same must be said about belief in God. We may say, speaking loosely, that belief in God is properly basic; strictly speaking, however, it is probably not that proposition but such propositions as (8)–(12) that enjoy that status. But the main point, here, is this: belief in God, or (8)–(12), are properly basic; to say so, however, is not to deny that there are justifying conditions for these beliefs, or conditions that confer justification on one who accepts them as basic. They are therefore not groundless or gratuitous.

C. Is Argument Irrelevant to Basic Belief in God?

Suppose someone accepts belief in God as basic. Does it not follow that he will hold this belief in such a way that no argument could move him or cause him to give it up? Will he not hold it come what may, in the teeth of any evidence or argument with which he could be presented? Does he not thereby adopt a posture in which argument and other rational methods of settling disagreement are implicitly declared irrelevant? Surely not. Suppose someone accepts

(19) There is such a person as God

as basic. It does not for a moment follow that he will regard argument irrelevant to this belief of his; nor is he committed in advance to rejecting every argument against it. It could be, for example, that he accepts (19) as basic but also accepts as basic some propositions from which, by arguments whose corresponding conditionals he accepts as basic, it follows that (19) is false. What happens if he is apprised of this fact, perhaps by being presented with an argument from those propositions to the denial of (19)? Presumably some change is called for. If he accepts these propositions more strongly than (19), presumably he will give the latter up.

Similarly, suppose someone believes there is no God but also believes some propositions from which belief in God follows by argument forms he accepts. Presented with an argument from these propositions to the

proposition that God exists, such a person may give up his atheism and accept belief in God. On the other hand, his atheistic belief may be stronger than his belief in some of the propositions in question, or his belief in their conjunction. It is possible, indeed, that he *knows* these propositions, but believes some of them less firmly than he believes that there is no God; in that case, if you present him with a valid argument from these propositions to the proposition that God exists, you may cause him to give up a proposition he knows to be true. It is thus possible to reduce the extent of someone's knowledge by giving him a sound argument from premises he knows to be true.

So even if I accept (19) as basic, it may still be the case that I will give up that belief if you offer me an argument from propositions I accept, by argument forms I accept, to the denial of (19). But I do have other options. All your argument really shows is that there is trouble somewhere in my noetic structure. A change must be made somewhere, but the argument does not show *where*. Perhaps I will give up one of the premises instead, or perhaps I will give up their conjunction. Perhaps I will give up one of the argument forms involved in the inference of the denial of (19) from those premises; this would be in the spirit of Hilary Putnam's suggestion that we give up the logical law of distribution because it is incompatible with quantum mechanics. Still another possibility: I may find all of (19), these premises, and the above-mentioned argument forms more worthy of belief than the contention that those argument forms lead from those premises to the denial of (19); if so, then perhaps I should give up *that* belief.

So a person can accept belief in God as basic without accepting it dogmatically—that is, in such a way that he will ignore any contrary evidence or argument. And now a second question: Suppose the fact is belief in God *is* properly basic. Does it follow that one who accepts it dogmatically is within his epistemic rights? Does it follow that someone who is within his rights in accepting it as basic *remains* justified in this belief, no matter what counterargument or counterevidence arises?

Again, surely not. The justification-conferring conditions mentioned above must be seen as conferring *prima facie* rather than *ultima facie*, or all-things-considered, justification. This justification can be overridden. My being appeared to treely gives me a *prima facie* right to take as basic the proposition *I see a tree*. But of course this right can be overridden; I might know, for example, that I suffer from the dreaded dendrological disorder, whose victims are appeared to treely only when there are no trees present. If I do know that, then I am not within my rights in taking as basic the proposition *I see a tree* when I am appeared to treely. The same goes for the conditions that confer justification on belief in

God. Like the fourteen-year-old theist (above, p. 33), perhaps I have been brought up to believe in God and am initially within my rights in so doing. But conditions can arise in which perhaps I am no longer justified in this belief. Perhaps you propose to me an argument for conclusion that it is impossible that there be such a person as God. If this argument is convincing for me—if it starts from premises that seem self-evident to me and proceeds by argument forms that seem self-evidently valid—then perhaps I am no longer justified in accepting theistic belief. Following John Pollock, we may say that a condition that overrides my *prima facie* justification for *p* is *defeating condition* or *defeater* for *p* (for me). Defeaters, of course, are themselves *prima facie* defeaters, for the defeater can be defeated. Perhaps I spot a fallacy in the initially convincing argument; perhaps I discover a convincing argument for the denial of one of its premises; perhaps I learn on reliable authority that someone else has done one of those things. Then the defeater is defeated, and I am once again within my rights in accepting *p*. Of course a similar remark must be made about defeater-defeaters: they are subject to defeat by defeater-defeater-defeaters and so on.

Many believers in God have been brought up to believe, but then encountered potential defeaters. They have read books by skeptics, been apprised of the atheological argument from evil, heard it said that theistic belief is just a matter of wish fulfillment or only a means whereby one socioeconomic class keeps another in bondage. These circumstances constitute potential defeaters for justification in theistic belief. If the believer is to remain justified, something further is called for—something that *prima facie* defeats the defeaters. Various forms of theistic apologetics serve this function (among others). Thus the *free-will defense* is a defeater for the atheological argument from evil, which is a potential defeater for theistic belief. Suppose I am within my epistemic rights in accepting belief in God as basic; and suppose I am presented with a plausible argument—by Democritus, let us say—for the conclusion that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil. (Let us add that I am strongly convinced that there *is* evil.) This is a potential defeater for my being rational in accepting theistic belief. What is required, if I am to continue to believe rationally, is a defeater for that defeater. Perhaps I discover a flaw in Democritus' argument, or perhaps I have it on reliable authority that Augustine, say, has discovered a flaw in the argument; then I am once more justified in my original belief.

Of course if this happens, my original belief may still be basic; I do not now accept it *on the basis of* my belief that Democritus' argument is unsuccessful.

That fact does not, of course, constitute any evidence at all for the existence of God; but when I believe *A* on the basis of *B* and do so rationally, then *B* is part of my evidence for *A*. In this case, therefore, I would be irrational or at least in some way mistaken if I *did* believe in God on the basis of my belief that Democritus' argument is unsound. It could be the case, therefore, that in certain circumstances my rationally believing *A* requires that I believe *B*, even though rationality does not require and may even preclude my believing *A* on the basis of *B*. If I accept a belief *A* as basic and then encounter a defeater for *A*, rationality may require that if I continue to believe *A*, then I rationally believe there is a defeater for that defeater; but it does not require that I believe *A* on the basis of that belief. It may be that the conditions under which a belief *A* is properly basic for me include my rationally holding some other belief *B*. But it does not follow that if I am *in* those conditions, then *A* is not properly basic for me.

What I have said in this section requires a great deal by way of supplement, qualification, and amplification. I do not have space here for that, but I shall at least suggest some hints for further study.

First, one *prima facie* justification-conferring condition that does not get enough attention is *training*, or *teaching*, or (more broadly) *testimony*. If I ask you your name and you tell me, I have a *prima facie* right to believe what you say. A child is within his epistemic rights in believing what he is taught by his elders. An enormous proportion of beliefs are accepted at least partly by way of testimony: a much higher proportion than one might initially think. You may believe that the Kröller-Müller museum is in Gelderland, The Netherlands. Even if you have been there, you are dependent upon testimony for such information as that *that* museum was indeed the Kröller-Müller and that the area around the museum is indeed part of Gelderland. You are also dependent upon testimony for your knowledge that Gelderland is part of The Netherlands; perhaps you learned this by consulting a map. Indeed, even if you live in a nearby village and are the museum's chief caretaker, you are still dependent upon testimony for these items of information. And testimony, of course, is a *prima facie* justification-conferring circumstance.

Second, what we have been discussing all along is what we might call *weak* justification: a condition satisfied by a person *S* and a belief *p* when *S* is within his epistemic rights in accepting *p*. But there are other interesting and relevant epistemic conditions lurking in the neighborhood. *Being appeared to truly* may confer on me, not merely the *prima facie* right to believe that there is a tree present, but the more impressive epistemic condition of being such that if the belief in question is true, then I *know* it. Call that condition *strong justification*. Being thus appeared to may perhaps also lay obligations on me; perhaps in those conditions I am not merely within my rights in believing that there is a tree present; perhaps I have a *prima facie* obligation to do so.

As I have said, testimony confers a *prima facie* right to believe; but in the typical case the epistemic condition one is in vis-à-vis *p* by virtue of having been *told* that *p* is not as favorable as the condition one enjoys vis-à-vis a proposition — $2 + 1 = 3$, say — that is apparently self-evident. There is a whole range of interesting and relevant epistemic conditions here.⁴²

Third, the conditions that confer *prima facie* justification do not inevitably include *belief*. What justifies me in believing that there is a tree present is just the fact that I am appeared to in a certain way; it is not necessary that I know or believe or consider the fact that I am being thus appeared to. What justifies me in believing, on a given occasion, that $2 + 1 = 3$ is the fact that it then seems self-evident to me; there is the "clarity and brightness" (Locke) or luminous aura I referred to above. But to be justified it is not necessary that I believe, on that occasion, that my experience is of that character; I need not so much as raise the question. The condition's being satisfied is sufficient for *prima facie* justification; my *knowing or believing* that it is satisfied is not necessary.

On the other hand, what sometimes confers *prima facie* justification upon me in accepting a proposition *p* as basic is a condition that includes my believing some other proposition *q*—where I do *not* believe *p* on the basis of *q*. I learned as a child that there is such a country as China. When I now hear or read something like *leading spokesmen for China today declared the Russian response totally unacceptable*, I am *prima facie* within my rights in believing it; and part of the justifying condition is that I already know or believe that there are such countries as China and Russia. If I did not know or believe that, I would be justified in believing, not the proposition those words do in fact express, but only something weaker—perhaps *there are a pair of things respectively named "China" and "Russia," and leading spokesmen of the first declared the response of the second totally unacceptable*.

Finally, the relation between various justifying conditions and various epistemic conditions can be much more subtle and complex than the above suggests. There may be a pair of conditions C1 and C2, each of which confers *prima facie* weak justification on *p* (for *S*), such that if *S* is in both conditions, then he has *prima facie* strong justification for *p*. On the other hand, these may be a pair of such *prima facie* weak-justification-conferring conditions (for *p*), such that if *S* is in both, then he is *prima facie* obliged *not* to believe *p*. Order may also be important; it may be the C1 and C2 are *prima facie* weak-justification-conferring conditions, such that if *S* is first in C1 and then in both C1 and C2, then *p* is *prima facie* strongly justified for him; but if he is first in C2 and then in both C1 and C2, *p* is only *prima facie* weakly justified for him.

In this connection, consider again the conditions I mentioned above as *prima facie* conferring weak justification on belief in God. Some who believe in God have come to this belief by way of conversion—a deep and relatively sudden restructuring on one's entire noetic structure. Others have been brought up or trained to believe; they originally acquired theistic belief by way of teaching or testimony on the part of their elders and by imitation of their elders. (Like moods and diseases, beliefs can be contagious.) This belief may then be sustained and reinforced by the conditions I mentioned above as weakly justifying belief in God. These conditions, furthermore, may confer a higher epistemic status upon belief in God. One who has been brought up to believe in God has a *prima facie* right to do so; but perhaps one who is brought up to believe and then finds himself in one of the circumstances mentioned above has (*prima facie*) strong justification for

believing in God. Perhaps his condition is such that (given that his belief is true and given the absence of contravening conditions) he *knows* that God exists.

D. Fideism

I take up one final question. In *Reflections on Christian Philosophy* Ralph McInerny suggests that what I have been calling Reformed epistemology is *fideism*. Is he right? Is the Reformed epistemologist perforce a fideist? That depends: it depends, obviously enough, on how we propose to use the term "fideism." According to my dictionary fideism is "exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth." A fideist therefore urges reliance on faith rather than reason, in matters philosophical and religious; and he may go on to disparage and denigrate reason. We may thus distinguish at least two grades of fideism: moderate fideism, according to which we must rely upon faith rather than reason in religious matters, and extreme fideism, which disparages and denigrates reason.

Now let us ask first whether the Reformed epistemologist is obliged to be an extreme fideist. Of course there is more than one way of disparaging reason. One way to do it is to claim that to take a proposition on faith is higher and better than accepting it on the basis of reason. Another way to disparage reason is to follow Kant in holding that reason left to itself inevitably falls into paradox and antimony on ultimate matters. According to Kant pure reason offers us conclusive argument for supposing that the universe had no beginning, but also, unfortunately, conclusive arguments for the denial of that proposition. I do not think any of the alleged arguments are anywhere nearly conclusive, but if Kant were right, then presumably reason would not deserve to be paid attention to, at least on this topic. According to the most common brand of extreme fideism, however, reason and faith conflict or clash on matters of religious importance; and when they do, faith is to be preferred and reason suppressed. Thus according to Kierkegaard faith teaches "the absurdity that the eternal is the historical." He means to say, I think, that this proposition is among the deliverances of faith but absurd from the point of view of reason; and it should be accepted despite this absurdity. The turn-of-the-century Russian theologian Shestov carried extreme fideism even further; he held that one can attain religious truth only by rejecting the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ and accepting instead $2 + 2 = 5$.

Now it is clear, I suppose, that the Reformed epistemologist need not be an extreme fideist. His views on the proper basicity of belief in

God surely do not commit him to thinking that faith and reason conflict. So suppose we ask instead whether the Reformed epistemologist is committed to *moderate* fideism. And again that depends; it depends upon how we propose to use the terms "reason" and "faith." One possibility would be to follow Abraham Kuyper, who proposes to use these terms in such a way that one takes on faith whatever one accepts but does not accept on the basis of argument or inference or demonstration:

There is thus no objection to the use of the term 'faith' for that function of the soul by which it attains certainty immediately or directly, without the aid of discursive demonstration. This places faith over against demonstration, but *not* over against knowing.⁴³

On this use of these terms, anything taken as basic is taken on faith; anything believed on the basis of other beliefs is taken on reason. I take $2 + 1 = 3$ as basic; accordingly, I take it on faith. When I am appropriately appeared to, I take as basic such propositions as *I see a tree before me* or *there is a house over there*; on the present construal I take these things on faith. I remember that I had lunch this noon, but do not accept this belief on the basis of other propositions; this too, then, I take on faith. On the other hand, what I take on the basis of reason is what I believe on the basis of argument or inference from other propositions. Thus I take $2 + 1 = 3$ on faith, but $21 \times 45 = 945$ by reason; for I accept the latter on the basis of calculation, which is a form of argument. Further, suppose I accept supralapsarianism or premillennialism or the doctrine of the virgin birth on the grounds that God proposes these doctrines for our belief and God proposes only truths; then on Kuyper's use of these terms I accept these doctrines not by faith but by reason. Indeed, if with Kierkegaard and Shestov I hold that the eternal is the historical and that $2 + 2 = 5$ because I believe God proposes *these* things for my belief, then on the present construal I take them not on faith but on the basis of reason.

And here we can see, I think, that Kuyper's use of these terms is not the relevant one for the discussion of fideism. For consider Shestov. Shestov is an extreme fideist because he thinks faith and reason conflict; and when they do, he says, it is reason that must be suppressed. To paraphrase the poem, "When faith and reason clash, let reason go to smash!" But he is not holding that faith teaches something — $2 + 2 = 5$, for example — that conflicts with a belief — $2 + 2 = 4$ — that one arrives at by reasoning from other propositions. On the contrary, the poignancy of the clash is just that what faith teaches conflicts with an *immediate* teaching of reason — a proposition that is apparently self-evident. On the Kuyperian use of these terms Shestov would be surprised to learn that he is not a fideist after all. For what he takes faith to conflict with here is not something

one accepts by reason—that is, on the basis of other propositions. Indeed, on the Kuyperian account Shestov not only does not qualify as a fideist; he probably qualifies as an antifideist. Shestov probably did not recommend taking $2 + 2 = 5$ as basic; he probably held that God proposes this proposition for our belief and that we should therefore accept it. On the other hand, he also believed, no doubt, that $2 + 2 = 4$ is apparently self-evident. So given the Kuyperian use, Shestov would be holding that faith and reason conflict here, but it is $2 + 2 = 4$ that is the deliverance of faith and $2 + 2 = 5$ the deliverance of reason! Since he recommends accepting $2 + 2 = 5$, the deliverance of reason, he thus turns out to be a rationalist or antifideist, at least on this point.

And this shows that Kuyper's use of these terms is not the relevant use. What we take on faith is not simply what we take as basic, and what we accept by reason is not simply what we take on the basis of other propositions. The deliverances of reason include propositions taken as basic, and the deliverances of faith include propositions accepted on the basis of others.

The Reformed epistemologist, therefore, is a fideist only if he holds that some central truths of Christianity are not among the deliverances of reason and must instead be taken on faith. But just what are the deliverances of reason? What do they include? First, clearly enough, self-evident propositions and propositions that follow from them by self-evidently valid arguments are among the deliverances of reason. But we cannot stop there. Consider someone who holds that according to correct scientific reasoning from accurate observation the earth is at least a couple of billion years old; nonetheless, he adds, the fact is it is no more than some 6000 years old, since that is what faith teaches. Such a person is a fideist, even though the proposition *the earth is more than 6000 years old* is neither self-evident nor a consequence of what is self-evident. So the deliverances of reason include more than the self-evident and its consequences. They also include basic perceptual truths (propositions "evident to the senses"), incorrigible propositions, certain memory propositions, certain propositions about other minds, and certain moral or ethical propositions.

But what about the belief that there is such a person as God and that we are responsible to him? Is that among the deliverances of reason or an item of faith? For Calvin it is clearly the former. "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. . . . God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. . . . men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker." (*Institutes* I, 3, 1) According to Calvin everyone, whether in the faith or not, has a tendency or n^{isus}, in certain situations, to ap-

prehend God's existence and to grasp something of his nature and actions. This natural knowledge can be and is suppressed by sin, but the fact remains that a capacity to apprehend God's existence is as much part of our natural noetic equipment as is the capacity to apprehend perceptual truths, truths about the past, and truths about other minds. Belief in the existence of God is in the same boat as belief in other minds, the past, and perceptual objects; in each case God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we form the belief in question. But then the belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of reason as those other beliefs.

From this vantage point we can see, therefore, that the Reformed epistemologist is not a fideist at all with respect to belief in God. He does not hold that there is any conflict between faith and reason here, and he does not even hold that we cannot attain this fundamental truth by reason; he holds, instead, that it is among the deliverances of reason.

Of course the nontheist may disagree; he may deny that the existence of God is part of the deliverances of reason. A former professor of mine for whom I had and have enormous respect once said that theists and nontheists have different conceptions of reason. At the time I did not know what he meant, but now I think I do. On the Reformed view I have been urging, the deliverances of reason include the existence of God just as much as perceptual truths, self-evident truths, memory truths, and the like. It is not that theist and nontheist agree as to what reason delivers, the theist then going on to accept the existence of God by faith; there is, instead, disagreement in the first place as to what are the deliverances of reason. But then the Reformed epistemologist is no more a fideist with respect to belief in God than is, for example, Thomas Aquinas. Like the latter, he will no doubt hold that there are other truths of Christianity that are not to be found among the deliverances of reason—such truths, for example, as that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. But he is not a fideist by virtue of his views on our knowledge of God.

By way of summary: I have argued that the evidentialist objection to theistic belief is rooted in classical foundationalism; the same can be said for the Thomistic conception of faith and reason. Classical foundationalism is attractive and seductive; in the final analysis, however, it turns out to be both false and self-referentially incoherent. Furthermore, the Reformed objection to natural theology, unformed and inchoate as it is, may best be seen as a rejection of classical foundationalism. As the Reformed thinker sees things, being self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses is not a necessary condition of proper basicity. He goes on to add that belief in God is properly basic. He is not thereby committed to the idea that just any or nearly any belief is properly basic, even if

he lacks a criterion for proper basicity. Nor is he committed to the view that argument is irrelevant to belief in God if such belief is properly basic. Furthermore, belief in God, like other properly basic beliefs, is not groundless or arbitrary; it is grounded in justification-conferring conditions. Finally, the Reformed view that belief in God is properly basic is not felicitously thought of as a version of fideism.

NOTES

1. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. 345 f.
2. Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 400 f.
3. Bertrand Russell, "Why I am not a Christian" in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957) p. 3 ff.
4. Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 87 ff.
5. Anthony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (London: Pemberton, 1976), pp. 22 ff.
6. Wesley Salmon, "Religion & Science: A New Look at Hume's Dialogues," *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978): 176.
7. Richard Braithwaite, *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), p. 32.
8. Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 8.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
11. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (London: Gollantz, Ltd., 1946), pp. 114-20.
12. For further discussion of positivism and its dreaded verifiability criterion of meaning, see Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968), pp. 156-68.
13. This claim has been made by Epicurus, perhaps by David Hume, by some of the French Encyclopedists, by F. H. Bradley, J. McFaggart, and many others. For an influential contemporary statement of the claim, see J. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200 ff.
14. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1943); and see Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, 115-55; *idem*, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), chapter 9. A more accessible form of the argument can be found in Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (1974; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 1-50.
15. Alvin Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* (1979): 1-53.
16. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 183.

17. Ibid., p. 14.
18. Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy*, pp. 102–3.
19. See Plantinga, “The Probabilistic Argument from Evil,” pp. 27ff.
20. See, for example, Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, chapter 10.
21. Blanshard, *Reason and Belief*, p. 401.
22. Scriven, *Primary Philosophy*, p. 103.
23. Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 14.
24. Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 134.
25. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (hereafter “ST”), IIa, IIae, I, 5.
26. In fact, these argument forms are self-evidently valid in two senses: (a) it is self-evident that for any instance of the form in question, if the premises are true, then so is the conclusion, and (b) the corresponding conditional of the argument form is itself self-evident.
27. Although the quantification rule presents a bit of a problem in some formulations, in that it does not have the sheer see-through-ability demanded by self-evidence. The fact, incidentally, that propositional and first order logic are not *uniquely* axiomatizable is no obstacle to seeing them as sciences in this Aristotelian sense; nor does the incompleteness of arithmetic show that arithmetic is not a science in this sense.
28. Verum autem est dupliciter considerabile: uno modo, sicut per se notum; alio modo, sicut per aliud notum. Quod autem est per se notum se habet ut principium, et percipitur statim ab intellectu. Et ideo habitus perficiens intellectum ad hujusmodi veri considerationem vocatur *intellectus*, qui est habitus principiorum.
Verum autem quod est per aliud notum, non statim percipitur ab intellectu, sed per inquisitionem rationis, et se habet in ratione termini. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 84, a.2; my italics)
29. See Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, chapter 1.
30. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (hereafter “SCG”), I, 13,3.
31. That is, by arguments whose corresponding conditionals are self-evident to us.
32. Aquinas, *De Veritate*, question 14, article 10.
33. Plantinga, “The Probabilistic Argument from Evil,” pp. 15ff.
34. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 17ff.
35. This was suggested by Philip Quinn in his contribution to the APA (Western Division, 1981) symposium on Alvin Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?” *Nous* 15 (March 1981):41–51.
36. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, tr. William Hendricksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), pp. 78–79. *The Doctrine of God* is the translation of the second volume of Bavinck’s *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, published 1895–99.
37. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), book 1, chapter 3, pp. 43–44.
38. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, tr. G. T. Thompson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), volume 1, part 1, pp. 93–95.

39. Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973), pp. 14ff.
40. For further comment on the Great Pumpkin objection see Alvin Plantinga, "On Reformed Epistemology," *Reformed Journal*, April 1982.
41. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that if a person believes a true proposition and is justified (in this sense) in believing it, then it follows that he *knows* it; that is a different (and stronger) sense of the term.
42. See Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, pp. 7-15.
43. Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*, tr. J. DeVries (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), pp. 128-29.