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PLANTINGA ON PROPERLY BASIC BELIEF IN GOD: LESSONS FROM THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF PERCEPTION

By Jeremy Randel Koons

Plantinga famously argues against evidentialism that belief in God can be properly basic. But the epistemology of cognitive faculties such as perception and memory which produce psychologically non-inferential beliefs shows that various inferentially justified theoretical beliefs are epistemically prior to our memory and perceptual beliefs, preventing the latter from being epistemically basic. Plantinga's analogy between the sensus divinitatis and these cognitive faculties suggests that the deliverances of the sensus divinitatis cannot be properly basic either. Objections by and on behalf of Plantinga to this argument are considered.

A recent commentator on Plantinga's reformed epistemology writes 'I take it as ... evidence of Plantinga's success ... the fact that there are very few responses to Plantinga's model that take on his model directly. The vast majority of the responses ... fall into what one could call the "Yes, but ... " category.'[1] That is, most critics concede that Plantinga has proved that *if* Christianity is true, *then* belief in the Christian God is properly basic; but these critics go on to argue that in proving this, Plantinga has not proved enough. As Swinburne puts the point,

> There is, however, a monumental issue which Plantinga does not discuss, and which a lot of people will consider needs discussing. This is whether Christian beliefs do have warrant (in Plantinga's sense). He has shown that they do, if they are true; so we might hope for discussion of whether they are true.[2]

Swinburne's criticism is indeed trenchant, but I wish to examine the viability of Plantinga's account at an earlier stage. Unlike the critics mentioned above, I shall examine whether any belief can be properly basic in his sense (and hence *a fortiori* whether belief in God can be properly basic). Approaching Plantinga's theory more from the perspective of epistemology than theology, I shall argue that the foundationalist model adopted by Plantinga is not an accurate model of the epistemology of psychologically non-inferential judgements. This point marks a further divergence between the present account and that of many of Plantinga's critics: many of these

[1] D.-P. Baker, 'Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology: What's the Question?', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 57 (2005), pp. 77–103, at p. 99.

[2] R. Swinburne, 'Plantinga on Warrant', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), pp. 203–14, at p. 206, quoted in Baker, p. 84.

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critics have challenged the analogy between the *sensus divinitatis* and other similar cognitive faculties like perception and memory, which analogy Plantinga employs to make his account of the proper basicality of theistic belief more plausible.[3] I, on the other hand, propose to take the analogy seriously, and to argue that the analogy undermines Plantinga's case that belief in God can be properly basic.

I begin with a sketch of Plantinga's view. Then, using analogies from other cognitive processes like perception and memory, I argue that Plantinga's foundationalism is fundamentally mistaken: it misconceives the relation between non-inferential judgements (not only perceptual and memory judgements, but also those delivered by Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis*) and the non-foundational beliefs supported by these non-inferential judgements. The result of this is that Plantinga's view overstates the epistemic autonomy of these supposedly basic beliefs. I shall show that the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* cannot be properly basic, but only because no non-inferential judgement can be properly basic: an examination of perception and memory (the cognitive faculties with which Plantinga most frequently analogizes the *sensus divinitatis*) shows that a 'cognitively spontaneous judgement' (to use Bonjour's phrase) may be psychologically non-inferential, but it can only be warranted if it is epistemically non-basic. I shall conclude by responding to various objections raised by or on behalf of Plantinga.

I. BASIC BELIEFS AND EPISTEMIC PRIORITY

How can belief in God be justified? For Plantinga's foe, the evidentialist, 'belief in God is rationally justifiable only if there are good arguments for it, and only if the arguments in favour of it are stronger than the arguments against it'.[4] But of course most theists are not capable of trotting out the latest iteration of the ontological or cosmological argument; is their belief in God somehow improper or unjustified? Plantinga denies this, arguing instead that belief in God can be properly basic – not based on inference or argument, but non-inferential (on the model of perceptual or memory belief).

What is the best way of understanding properly basic beliefs? One way is along the lines of classical foundationalism, according to which a belief is properly basic if and only if it is 'self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses' (*WCB*, p. 84). Of course, Plantinga forcefully argues that classical foundationalism is self-referentially self-refuting, as the requirement that a belief must be *either* properly basic in the sense just described *or* inferable from properly basic beliefs is itself neither properly basic nor inferable from properly basic beliefs.[5] He adopts a different model of basic

[3] See, e.g., R. Grigg, 'Theism and Proper Basicality: a Response to Plantinga', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 14 (1983), pp. 123–7, and 'The Crucial Disanalogies Between Properly Basic Belief and Belief in God', *Religious Studies*, 26 (1990), pp. 389–401; M. Martin, *Atheism: a Philosophical Justification* (Temple UP, 1992).

[4] A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, hereafter *WCB* (Oxford UP, 2000), p. 81.

[5] See Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Rational?', in C.F. Delaney (ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame UP, 1979), pp. 7–27, and *WCB*, ch. 3.

belief, one which is still foundationalist, but which (unlike classical foundationalism) is fallibilist, admitting that basic beliefs are subject to defeat.[6]

For Plantinga, a basic belief is essentially a foundational belief, a non-inferential belief. Paradigm examples of basic beliefs are perceptual beliefs (as when one sees an orange sphere and forms the belief 'There is a basketball') and memory beliefs (as when one remembers 'I had a banana for breakfast'). In neither case is the belief inferred from any other belief: it is immediate, non-inferential, basic. A belief is properly basic if in addition to being basic, it is warranted for the individual. Warrant, for Plantinga, is, of course, that which is added to true belief to produce knowledge; it functions like justification and the Gettier condition in traditional theories of knowledge. More precisely, a belief's warrant depends on the circumstances of the belief's production. For Plantinga, 'a belief has warrant for a person *S* only if that belief is produced in *S* by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for *S*'s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth' (*WCB*, p. 156). (Because Plantinga uses 'justification' as a technical term distinct from 'warrant', I shall throughout the paper avoid the term 'justification' as a term for the positive epistemic status of a belief; instead, I use 'warrant' to denote whatever is added to a true belief to turn that belief into knowledge.)

Plantinga argues that belief in God can, like perceptual or memory belief, be properly basic. He thinks it likely that if there is a God, He wants us to know Him, and has given us a way of knowing Him. Following Calvin, Plantinga postulates 'a kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism, what Calvin calls a *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God' (*WCB*, p. 172). As this cognitive mechanism is designed to produce true beliefs about God (and other conditions are or can be satisfied[7]), such beliefs about God (if God exists) can be warranted, and we can indeed have knowledge of God, produced by this *sensus divinitatis*.

Plantinga explicitly models the *sensus divinitatis* on other cognitive mechanisms that produce non-inferential, properly basic beliefs – in particular, perception and memory. A particular parallel with the case of perception noted by Plantinga is that beliefs produced by the *sensus divinitatis* may be without evidence, but they are not groundless. In the case of the *sensus divinitatis*, one has an experience – seeing the glory of nature, or the beauty of some aspect of creation, or feeling danger (*WCB*, pp. 173–4); while this experience does not serve as the premise for an argument to belief in God, it does ground belief in God, through the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*. When one has an experience and then (on the basis of this experience) forms a basic belief about God, one's theistic beliefs 'are not accepted as the conclusion of an argument from religious experience.... It is rather that (as in the case of perception)

[6] 'Theistic belief would certainly *not* be immune to argument and defeat just by virtue of being basic. In this, theistic belief only resembles other kinds of beliefs accepted in the basic way' (*WCB*, p. 343).

[7] These conditions need not detain us here; Plantinga discusses the conditions for warranted belief in more detail in *WCB*, ch. 6, and in *Warrant: the Current Debate* (Oxford UP, 1993) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford UP, 1993).

the experience is the *occasion* for the formation of the beliefs in question, and plays a causal role (a role governed by the design plan) in their genesis' (*WCB*, p. 258).

II. PROPERLY BASIC BELIEFS AND EPISTEMIC PRIORITY

The question is whether *any* beliefs are basic in the sense in which Plantinga claims theistic beliefs can be properly basic. For Plantinga, properly basic theistic beliefs (those produced by the *sensus divinitatis*) are non-inferential in every sense. Not only are they psychologically non-inferential (that is, they are not arrived at via a process of inference); but they are also epistemically non-inferential: their warrant does not depend on any evidence or argument which can be brought to bear. They depend for their warrant purely on the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*, on the circumstances in which the *sensus divinitatis* operates being appropriate, and perhaps on the experience which grounds or occasions the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*.[8]

Ordinary perception is an obvious source of basic belief, and one which Plantinga uses repeatedly as an analogy for the *sensus divinitatis*. But does perception produce belief which is properly basic in the sense he requires? There is good reason to doubt that it does, as an example shows. The phenomenon of St Elmo's fire is a glowing region of atmospheric electricity which appears on pointed objects (church steeples, aircraft wings or propellers, etc.) during thunderstorms. Suppose Smith and Jones observe the same phenomenon during a thunderstorm. Smith is well read in science, is familiar with this type of atmospheric disturbance, and without hesitation judges the observed phenomenon to be St Elmo's fire. A familiar form of theory-ladenness is at work here: because of Smith's background theories, the stimuli he is presented with cause him to form a belief that is consonant with those theories. Jones' world view, on the other hand, is a poorly supported pastiche of superstition and the paranormal, which he has acquired from poorly sourced websites and unreliable supermarket tabloids (tabloids of the sort which specialize in absurd stories about Elvis sightings, people giving birth to alien babies, and bizarre tales of the supernatural). With this background, Jones without hesitation judges the observed phenomenon to be a ghost. Again the causal role of the background theories in determining what belief issues from a particular sensory stimulus is clear.

But this is not the end of the story: this innocuous-seeming form of theory-ladenness has serious consequences for foundationalism. It is clear in this case that Smith's observation is warranted, and I think it is equally clear that it is warranted because Smith's theory of the world which generates this particular belief in response to this visual stimulus is itself warranted. Jones' perceptual belief, on the other hand, is clearly not warranted, and it is not warranted because it is generated

[8] Plantinga is not entirely clear on this. He denies, as a general principle, that a belief is only warranted if it is grounded (citing memory beliefs as beliefs that can be warranted without being grounded in some kind of experience): see *WCB*, pp. 104–5. Perceptual beliefs seem to be grounded, though, and Plantinga talks as though the *sensus divinitatis* is analogous to a perceptual mechanism in that it operates in response to experience which grounds the belief in question.

by a theory which is itself not warranted. Thus the observational predicates we employ stand or fall with the theories which stand behind them; and their employment in observation is only warranted if the corresponding theories are warranted. What theory of the world we hold plays a large role in determining what beliefs we form in response to particular visual stimuli. But this is not without normative consequences: if the background theory determining this causal chain is itself poorly supported, then the perceptual beliefs which it determines in response to visual stimuli are also poorly supported.

What are the consequences of this for the notion of basic beliefs, foundationalism and anti-evidentialism about our supposed basic beliefs? The consequences are complex, but it is worth teasing them out. First, our observation reports display epistemic dependence upon our background theories, in that their warrant depends in part on the warrant of the theories standing behind the observational terms embedded in our observational reports. Thus these observation reports are not really basic at all, but are *epistemically dependent* upon an entire body of theory.

Secondly, whether the warrant of these basic beliefs depends on evidence now depends upon what we say about the warrant of the theories on which these observation reports epistemically depend. If evidence is relevant to the warrant of these theories, then it is *a fortiori* relevant to the warrant of the observation reports which are epistemically dependent on these theories.

Like perception, Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* is a cognitive mechanism that operates in response to a stimulus, which serves as the ground for the resulting belief. So suppose one experiences the ground in question, observing (to use Plantinga's examples) the 'impressive beauty of the night sky', or the 'articulate beauty of a tiny flower' (*WCB*, p. 174), and this experience 'calls forth theistic belief', in his phrase. Again the experience is not part of an argument for theistic belief, but (as with perception) is the ground for the belief. The belief is, for Plantinga, non-inferential, both psychological and epistemically.

But as in the case of perception, our epistemic situation is never as simple as that. When we deploy our observation terms, they march with theory at their backs. If I am in Virginia and believe that I see a deer, I may well be right; if I believe that I see a unicorn or a ghost, I am certainly wrong, for the theories which embed these observation terms are without evidential support (and face much counter-evidence). If I think I experience the presence of God, or see His handiwork, then whether such a belief is warranted depends on the prior question of whether I am warranted in deploying such a theoretical entity in my non-inferential judgements in the first place.

So the real issue here is general: theistic belief cannot be properly basic, but only because no kind of belief can be properly basic. No belief can be properly basic because of the relation of epistemic dependence on theory which I have outlined above. Whether a (psychologically) non-inferential belief is warranted cannot depend solely on whether the cognitive mechanism in question has operated properly in the appropriate cognitive environment; it must also depend on the warrant of the relevant background theory, which may well (and probably does) depend on all kinds of evidential relations.

III. OTHER ACCOUNTS

Others have argued that Plantinga's basic beliefs are not properly basic because there is something epistemically prior to them; but these critics have not gone far enough in exploring this relation of epistemic priority. For example, Philip L. Quinn argues that a belief can only be properly basic for me if there are no defeaters, or there are defeaters, but they are in turn defeated (and in either case I must not be guilty of epistemic negligence).[9] Quinn, of course, thinks that most 'intellectually sophisticated adults in our culture' are aware of enough defeaters (such as the problem of evil) to be guilty of epistemic negligence if they persist in believing in God without trying to find rebutting or undercutting evidence for these defeaters ('In Search', p. 481). Ergo, for Quinn, unless his contemporaries find such 'defeater-defeaters', belief in God cannot be properly basic.

Plantinga, naturally, begs to differ. He argues for the existence of 'intrinsic defeater-defeaters'. For example, B can be a proposed defeater for A, but A's warrant can be so great that A itself defeats B. A is the defeater-defeater. Plantinga proposes that belief in God is just such an intrinsic defeater-defeater:

> It isn't necessary that [intellectually sophisticated adults in our culture] have reason *independent* of their belief in God for the falsehood of the alleged defeaters. Perhaps the non-propositional warrant enjoyed by your belief in God is itself sufficient to turn back the challenge offered by the alleged defeaters, so that your theistic belief is an intrinsic defeater-defeater.[10]

Quinn, in turn, denies in 'The Foundations of Theism Again' that belief in God can be an intrinsic defeater-defeater; but this debate need not detain us. What matters is the structure of the debate, not its outcome. Both Quinn and Plantinga seem to share the assumption that belief in God can still be properly basic provided the defeaters for theistic belief can themselves be defeated (whether intrinsically or extrinsically). But both sides in this debate miss a crucial aspect of the epistemology of observation. Whether one is warranted in deploying a particular term non-inferentially has to do not merely with the presence or absence (or defeat or non-defeat) of defeaters. It is also a question of how independently well supported are the theories embedding the observational terms. It is not merely a question of defeat or non-defeat; it is the question of the positive epistemic status of the theory which stands behind the terms that are being deployed in a (psychologically) non-inferential judgement. But to show that this question of positive epistemic status is prior to the warrant of the psychologically non-inferential judgement is to show that

[9] See P.L. Quinn, 'In Search of the Foundations of Theism', *Faith and Philosophy*, 2 (1985), pp. 469–85, at p. 480. Quinn formally states these conditions in the form of a principle in his 'The Foundations of Theism Again: a Rejoinder to Plantinga', in L. Zagzebski (ed.), *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame UP, 1993), pp. 14–47: see principle 23 on p. 35.

[10] Plantinga, 'The Foundations of Theism: a Reply', *Faith and Philosophy*, 3 (1986), pp. 298–313, at p. 312.

this judgement is not *epistemically* basic at all. (Also, if your being warranted in holding a particular psychologically non-inferential judgement is contingent upon your *first* having inferentially ruled out defeaters, or upon your being warranted in believing that there are no defeaters, then it is hard to see how the judgement in question is supposed to be *epistemically* basic; for the judgement's warrant is made epistemically dependent on whatever warrants you in believing that the defeaters are defeated, or that there are no defeaters in the first place. But this is a separate point, and I shall not dwell on it.[11])

The point about epistemic priority can be sharpened by discussing another well known objection against Plantinga's account. The objection is that if one is entitled to belief in God without evidence or argument, then this seems to open the floodgates. Is not this a terribly permissive theory? Does this not mean that all sorts of absurd beliefs are now permitted, if there are no sorts of evidential checks required any more on belief? Here is Plantinga:

> If belief in God is properly basic, why can't just any belief be properly basic? Couldn't we say that 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? ... If we say that belief in God is properly basic, won't we be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?[12]

Plantinga quickly dismisses this objection on the ground that 'to recognize that *some* kinds of belief are properly basic with respect to warrant doesn't for a moment commit one to thinking all *other* kinds are' (*WCB*, p. 344). The Great Pumpkin objection is indeed weak as stated; not only does Plantinga reject it, but he asserts (p. 345) that atheists like Michael Martin also recognize the objection as unsound. But the objection is getting at something; if it is recast so as to incorporate the above insights about epistemic priority, then what was so initially compelling about the objection is more obvious. What prompted the Great Pumpkin objection was the idea that there should be some kind of epistemic controls on the sorts of psychologically non-inferential judgements we make. If we are allowed to make such judgements without evidential constraint, is not anything allowed? What is clear is that the epistemic controls that operate on our psychologically non-inferential beliefs (the candidates for properly basic beliefs) come from above, from the level of theory. A cultural peer of ours cannot form a warranted non-inferential belief about unicorns or dragons, because the theory of unicorns and the theory of dragons are unsupported (and thus,

[11] Quinn and Plantinga are not the only ones to overlook this point. Deane-Peter Baker (p. 94) attributes to Marcus Hester the following principle: 'The supporter of the Reformed epistemology thesis cannot reasonably expect rational people who do not believe in God to accept that belief in God is properly basic, unless some compelling reason is given as to why the unbeliever should consider belief in God to be not just possible, but also *plausible*'. But again, if a cognitively spontaneously theistic judgement can only be *properly* basic (i.e., warranted) if one has *prior reasons* for thinking that belief in God is rational (or even just plausible), then the warrant for this judgement depends, at least indirectly, on these prior reasons, meaning that the judgement is not epistemically basic in the first place.

[12] Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Properly Basic?', *Noûs*, 15 (1981), pp. 41–51, at p. 48.

as I have remarked, psychologically non-inferential reports employing these terms are also unwarranted).

Here is the lesson to take away from the Great Pumpkin objection: when Plantinga deploys the term 'God' non-inferentially (where this term purports to denote the Christian God), then Plantinga's non-inferential report may well be warranted. It is not the goal of this paper to render a judgement on that issue. But if it is warranted, it inherits part of its warrant from the warrant of Plantinga's theory of the Christian God – from his inferentially articulated background theory. The foundationalist envisages warrant as a bottom-up procedure, flowing from non-inferential foundation to theoretical superstructure. But though warrant surely flows in this direction, it just as surely flows in the other direction, too: warrant is in part a top-down phenomenon. This is what the Great Pumpkin objection should draw the attention to. I have, I hope, assembled the theoretical tools in this paper to make plausible the claim that this is the lesson we should draw from this somewhat hoary (and now neglected) objection against Plantinga.

Several other objections against Plantinga's view can be reinterpreted to teach the same lesson. The 'Son of the Great Pumpkin Objection' (as Plantinga calls it) objects that Plantinga's theory creates a relativized epistemic world, where different communities can each legitimately claim a different, incompatible (and in many cases bizarre) set of basic beliefs as proper within that community.[13] Pushing a related objection, certain critics who approach Plantinga from the perspective of religious diversity worry that any other religion can just as easily claim that the tenets of this religion are properly basic; and then each religion can legitimately claim warrant for its own basic teachings. Thus Plantinga's theory is not a defence of Christian theism, *per se*, since it can be adopted by any suitable religion.

What these objections have in common is the idea that Plantinga makes proper basicality too easy, that he does not set the bar high enough. His theory allows bizarre beliefs, or (assuming the truth of Christianity) false religions to take on his model and *legitimately* proclaim certain of their beliefs to be properly basic. I hold that these familiar objections are getting at the same fundamental problem, and that my argument here allows for a diagnosis of this problem. The fundamental problem is that Plantinga sees warrant as a one-way process: it flows from psychologically non-inferential judgements to the superstructure of theory. That is, Plantinga's theory has the structure of traditional foundationalism (though of course he rejects the specific tenets of classical foundationalism, namely, that a belief can only be properly basic if it is self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses). But of course, as I have said, warrant flows in both directions – not only from cognitively spontaneous judgement up to theory, but from theory down to cognitively spontaneous judgement; each bears epistemically on the other. Crucially for my current point, background theory serves as an important check on our cognitively spontaneous judgements, so that the latter are not wholly epistemically prior to the former, but the latter depend on the former to some extent for their warrant. This model of cognitively spontaneous judgement is out of step with

[13] The objection is raised in Martin, *Atheism*, p. 272, and discussed by Plantinga, *WCB*, pp. 345–9.

foundationalism, and incompatible with the notion of an epistemically basic belief (and hence with the notion of a properly basic belief), but it permits a unifying account of these objections.

These objections are all getting at the same worry: Plantinga's model, in which epistemic warrant flows in one direction, does not allow theory to provide a sufficient check on cognitively spontaneous judgement. Without this downwards check (from theory down to cognitively spontaneous judgement), anything goes. This is the heart of the Son of Great Pumpkin objection, and all the related objections which charge that Plantinga makes properly basic belief too easy. The solution is to abandon foundationalism, with its model of warrant as flowing in one direction from downwards up (from cognitively spontaneous belief to theory), and to embrace a richer understanding of how background theory constrains psychologically non-inferential judgement. This means abandoning the notion of properly basic beliefs, but it offers a satisfying and coherent explanation for these objections, and explains the fundamental problem at which they are all getting.

Before turning to objections from Plantinga, I shall address one concern which the above account might raise. I wrote that the warrant of a psychologically non-inferential judgement depends at least in part on the positive epistemic status of the theory which stands behind the terms that are being deployed in this judgement. One might worry, however, that this view has the consequence that no unsophisticated people (i.e., people who do not reflectively consider their background theory) could ever have warranted basic beliefs, as the background theory in question will also lack positive epistemic status.[14]

What it takes for *A*'s background theories (*A*'s theories about whether the world contains deer, or unicorns, or God, or ghosts) to be warranted for *A* is certainly a vexed issue, a larger one than can be addressed here. Whether *A* must have evidence for these theories, or must be able to defend them discursively, is a matter for debate, involving issues of internalism, externalism, and other issues in epistemology. It may well be that *A* can have epistemic entitlement (warrant) for *A*'s background theories without any sort of ability to reflectively defend or justify them, or perhaps not. But resolution of this dispute does not affect the thesis under discussion in this paper. For what is clear is that whatever the source of the warrant of this background theory, its warrant is to some extent epistemically prior to the warrant of the relevant psychologically non-inferential beliefs embedding the relevant theoretical terms; and such beliefs are therefore not epistemically basic. If the warrant for the background theory depends on evidence and arguments, then the warrant for the relevant psychologically non-inferential beliefs does too (at least indirectly). Thus this model of the structure of warrant is fundamentally out of step with the foundationalist picture, which cannot admit the epistemic priority of theory to foundations.

Of course, perceptual beliefs can and do serve as evidence for (and against) background theories; to deny this would be absurd. But the credibility of any particular perceptual belief is always (and unavoidably) to be assessed in the light of

[14] An anonymous referee raised this concern.

background theory.[15] For this reason, we can say with Sellars 'If there is a logical dimension in which other empirical propositions rest on observation reports, there is another logical dimension in which the latter rest on the former'.[16]

IV. OBJECTIONS FROM PLANTINGA

I have been arguing that our psychologically non-inferential judgements are not basic; they are only as strong as the theories that stand behind the concepts deployed in these judgements. Background theories are, of course, inherently contestable, inferentially articulated, and a proper subject for challenge and defence. To the extent that we form psychologically non-inferential theistic beliefs, they are only as warranted as the theistic theories that stand behind them. Plantinga will, of course, object to this talk of the 'theory' of theism. Such talk (he will argue) treats the existence of God as a scientific hypothesis, which is exactly the mistake which Plantinga's flight from evidentialism was supposed to rectify. As he writes (*WCB*, p. 92),

> Why think that theism is rationally acceptable only if there are good arguments for it? Why think that it is, or is significantly like, a scientific hypothesis? Of course these assumptions form part of the classical package: well, why should we accept that package? Clearly there are sensible alternatives. Consider our memory beliefs, for example: obviously, one could take a Mackie-like view here as well. I believe that I had a banana for breakfast; one could hold that a belief like this (and indeed even the belief that there has been such a thing as the past) is best thought of as like a scientific hypothesis, designed to explain such present phenomena as (among other things) apparent memories; if there were a more 'economical' explanation of these phenomena that did not postulate, say, the existence of the past or of past facts, then our usual belief in the past 'could not be rationally defended'. But here this seems clearly mistaken; the availability of such an 'explanation' wouldn't in any way tell against our ordinary belief that there has really been a past. Why couldn't the same hold for theism, or more broadly, for Christian belief?

The reply to this objection must distinguish *forming a non-inferential belief as a theoretical explanation of an experience* from *forming a non-inferential belief using concepts which are embedded in theories*. Of course we do not do the former; but we cannot help but do the latter, since every predicate we employ non-inferentially inherits its credence from a body of background theory. To use Plantinga's own example, when I remember eating a banana for breakfast, I am not forming a theory about what I had for breakfast. But the plausibility of my memory stands or falls with the theoretical

[15] This evaluation of observation in the light of currently accepted theory undoubtedly contributes a certain conservative element to our epistemological practice, but this does not preclude the revision or rejection of theory in the face of recalcitrant perceptual evidence. These issues have been addressed before, most famously by Kuhn: see T.S. Kuhn, 'The Essential Tension' [1959], repr. in his *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago UP, 1977), pp. 225–39, and *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edn (Chicago UP, 1970).

[16] W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Harvard UP, 1997), §38, p. 78.

plausibility of the concepts employed. There is no problem with remembering having a banana for breakfast; bananas are certainly well established entities! But what if I remembered having Stymphalian birds' eggs and a side of bacon from the Crommyonian sow? Then surely the inferior theoretical standing of the concepts I am deploying has a bearing on the warrant of my psychologically non-inferential memory belief.

The point of Plantinga's anti-evidentialism was that you could have theism supported non-evidentially: you could have a foundationalist picture of theism, where a foundation of properly basic theistic beliefs, themselves not supported by evidence or argument (and hence epistemically non-inferential, epistemically basic) support a superstructure of theistic belief. But what I am arguing is that this foundationalist picture is untenable, as it oversimplifies the relation between observation and theory. On the foundationalist theory, observation supports theory in an epistemically one-way relation. But I have argued here that the relation is in fact much more complicated: psychologically non-inferential judgements and the theory behind the concepts embedded in these judgements enjoy a complex two-way justificatory relation which is not captured by the foundationalist, and which prevents these judgements from qualifying as epistemically basic (much less properly basic). To the extent that the house of reformed epistemology is built on a foundation of properly basic beliefs, it is ill founded indeed.

Indeed, this shows how to rebut another objection Plantinga might raise to my account. The objection runs as follows:

> The whole point of reformed epistemology is that it is anti-evidentialist. But your objection begs the question. You argue that basic beliefs are not basic, because they depend for their warrant on the prior warrant of background theory, which is itself inferentially (i.e., evidentially) supported. But since on reformed epistemology, belief in God is not evidentially justified, you are assuming what you are supposed to be proving, namely, that belief in God is a theory that needs inferential/evidential support.

But my response to the previous objection shows that this objection is misguided. When Plantinga argues against evidentialism, he is not arguing that Christian belief should be wholly without rational grounds. He is not arguing for fideism, merely against the idea that evidence is the only possible source of warrant for theistic belief. There is another (perhaps better) source for this warrant, and that source is the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*. Thus Plantinga seems to acknowledge the need for some rational grounding for one's theistic belief; he merely argues that the *sensus divinitatis* (perhaps in conjunction with certain types of experiences) does the grounding instead of rational argumentation. What I am arguing here is that Plantinga's model cannot work, because his foundationalism is untenable. The flow of warrant cannot be only one-way, from psychologically non-inferential judgement to theory. As I showed when discussing other forms of psychologically immediate judgement (such as perception and memory), the flow of warrant is two-way. Plantinga wants warrant for Christian belief to rest solely on the operation of a cognitive apparatus that produces a certain sort of cognitively spontaneous beliefs; but as I have argued,

these cognitively spontaneous beliefs are constantly evaluated in the light of the very background theories they purport to support. So the epistemic strength of these background theories is very much in question: they must have independent support if these cognitively spontaneous judgements are themselves to be warranted. So I do not beg the question against Plantinga. He admits that his beliefs in the Christian God stand in need of warrant. I am arguing that his foundationalism cannot provide that warrant, as it presents an over-simplified view of the flow of justification between psychologically non-inferential judgement and background theory.

To put this another way, Plantinga thinks that the body of beliefs in God does not need support by evidence because it is wholly supported by the one-way flow of warrant from the *sensus divinitatis*. But I have argued that this model of how epistemic support flows from foundations to theory is untenable. So the operation of the *sensus divinitatis* cannot be the only source of warrant for belief in God. Other considerations (evidential ones?) must be relevant too. Moreover, as I have argued, the *sensus divinitatis* of course cannot be taken to provide epistemic support in an epistemic vacuum, either: when we make a cognitively spontaneous judgement, with any cognitive faculty – be it memory, perception or the *sensus divinitatis* – the warrant of that judgement depends to some extent on the independent warrant of the theories which stand behind the concepts deployed in that cognitively spontaneous judgement. So the beliefs produced by the *sensus divinitatis* cannot be properly basic, and cannot be the sole source of epistemic support for theistic belief; and Plantinga's theory cannot by itself provide an alternative to evidentialism, since the judgements delivered by the *sensus divinitatis* cannot be warranted unless the theory standing behind the theistic concepts deployed in these judgements (the theory of the Christian God) is already to some extent independently warranted.

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