

CHAPTER 3

The Religious Epistemology of Alvin Plantinga

In the last chapter I focused on the epistemology of theistic evidentialism, and especially that epistemology as used as a premise in the evidentialist objection to theistic belief. The critique of evidentialism presented by Alvin Plantinga has prepared the way for a consideration of a position rival to classical evidentialism - so-called Reformed epistemology, or more precisely, *the Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga*. This alternate way of thinking about the rationality of belief in God will involve the systematic negation of the sorts of evidentialist requirements which were developed in chapter 2. Plantinga's religious epistemology is a complex one which has undergone significant development over the last 12 years, and I intend to treat both its explicit and implicit claims at its two main stages of development.¹

I. Properly Basic Theistic Belief

¹At the time of writing Plantinga is engaged in writing *Warranted Christian Belief*, the final volume of his recent trilogy on epistemology. In this chapter I will be considering Plantinga's epistemology up to its most recent stage of development based on both published and unpublished material. The key texts are "Reason and Belief in God" (1983a), "Justification and Theism" (1987), "The Prospects for Natural Theology" (1991), *Warrant and Proper Function*

Over against the tradition of classical evidentialism, Alvin Plantinga claims that theistic belief can be *properly basic* - rational without the satisfaction of evidentialist requirements. Belief in God can rationally belong to the foundations of one's noetic structure. Plantinga's proper basicity thesis is developed within the framework of the sort of modest foundationalism articulated in chapter 1.²

A. Theistic Foundationalism

This new version of foundationalism is often called **Reidian Foundationalism** because of its roots in the 18th century Scottish common-sense philosopher Thomas Reid (although its prominence as the model of justified belief among advocates of properly basic theistic belief has led to such descriptions as "Reformed," "theistic" or "theological" foundationalism).³

Reid's epistemology, usually noted for its emphasis on the principles of common sense, gives an illuminating account of the nature and origin of human belief-

(1993b), "Naturalism Defeated" (1994a, unpublished December draft), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (1994b, unpublished draft, chapters 1-6).

² This claim may not strike one as obviously true. Negatively, Plantinga has argued that classical foundationalism and coherentism are both equally wrongheaded. Positively, he concedes the existence of basic beliefs (among which he includes theistic belief) and nonbasic beliefs in a person's noetic structure. As noted in chapter 1, a commitment to basic beliefs does not entail a commitment to foundationalism (though the converse does hold). Nevertheless, Plantinga does suggest that properly basic theistic beliefs are at least sometimes "foundational" (1983a, p. 73), and - as the account which follows in the text develops - Plantinga has expressed his sympathies with Reidian foundationalism (1993b, pp. 183-185).

dispositions, an account set in the larger context of answering Humean skepticism. Reid was critical of philosophers who too frequently fell prey to an undue epistemic partiality in selecting “this” or “that” source of belief as the criterion by which all other beliefs were to be judged. Reid’s point is that we have no more reason for trusting reason than we do for trusting our other sources of beliefs, and if we must doubt one of our sources of belief, then we will have to doubt them all. Reid’s argument shows that there is no argument for restricting proper basicity to beliefs with epistemic immunities, that doing so is arbitrary epistemic partiality. The reason why such beliefs are given foundational status is that they are generated by well-established practices of belief formation. It is precisely this point that requires the extension of the class of properly basic beliefs to include memory beliefs, beliefs that imply the existence of an external world, beliefs about the mental states of other persons, beliefs about the future, testimonial beliefs, and perceptual beliefs.

According to Reid, the human mind is fitted with a variety of belief-forming mechanisms, so that in appropriate circumstances these belief-forming dispositions are triggered. For instance, some beliefs about the past are formed on the basis of memory experience, and beliefs about the physical world are formed on the basis of sensory experience. These beliefs are *immediate* beliefs since they are formed without inference from or mediation through other beliefs. In contrast to immediate beliefs, there are *mediate* beliefs, beliefs formed by the reasoning-disposition, according to which we are disposed to accept propositions on the basis of *propositional evidence*. Moreover, Reid

³ Reid's epistemology is discussed in Alston 1991c (pp. 151-155, 162-165), Plantinga 1993b (pp.

recognized the importance of an initial principle of credulity with reference to the various sources of beliefs we have discussed. Over against a principle of incredulity (that beliefs, or belief-forming practices, are to be considered “guilty until proven innocent”), Reid emphasized the importance of beliefs (or belief-forming dispositions) being innocent until proven guilty. We are constructed such that we simply *cannot* discard beliefs at will. Although this doesn’t in itself entail that our immediate beliefs are likely to be true, it does follow that we are deontologically justified in holding them (assuming, that is, one cannot be obliged to do what one cannot do). But even if justification is not taken to be necessary for knowledge, it may be that on Reid’s account we *know* many of our immediate beliefs. Reid’s account suggests that these beliefs are produced by belief-forming mechanisms which are triggered by a kind of evidence under the appropriate experiential circumstances. The conjunction of the reliable operation of these mechanisms (or their proper function) and the experiential circumstances in question might be thought of as offering an account of knowledge, or a nondeontological account of what transforms true belief into knowledge.

Reidian foundationalism provides an appropriate framework for laying out an epistemology of religious belief rival to theistic evidentialism, one which takes seriously the Reformed theological commitment to the proper basicity of theistic belief. Plantinga’s move is to utilize a Reidian epistemological framework to argue for the proper basicity of theistic belief.⁴ Plantinga’s main argument is directed at showing that

182-185), and Wolterstorff 1983b.

⁴ Reid himself in all probability did **not** conceive of theistic belief as foundational - though some scholars dispute the point. When it comes to religious belief, Reid is in many ways very close to

“it is perfectly rational to take belief in God as basic - that is, to accept theistic belief without accepting it on the basis of argument or evidence from other propositions one believes” (Plantinga 1985b, pp. 55-56).

Plantinga claims:

[P] There are some people S* such that (a) S* believe in God, (b) S*'s belief in God is rational, and (c) S*'s belief in God is not based upon reasons (adequate or otherwise).^{5,6}

First, an important clarification is needed as to (a) in [P]. Plantinga (1983a, pp. 80-82) makes it clear that the actual theistic belief that is going to be properly basic is not *God exists* or *there is such a person as God*. The kind of beliefs that are taken as basic are actually beliefs like

- (1) God is speaking to me.
- (2) God has created all this.
- (3) God disapproves of what I have done.
- (4) God forgives me.

the Enlightenment philosophers he criticizes at other points. According to Wolterstorff (1983b, pp. 60-64) Reid was a theistic evidentialist since he views the rational justification for belief in God (at least for adults) as requiring grounding in reason(s). Equally, like Locke, one will be justified in accepting the Bible as a divine revelation only if we have good reason for regarding it as having come from God.

⁵ This formulation is to be preferred over what is more typically found in the literature: “theistic belief *is* properly basic” or “theistic belief *can* be immediately justified.” These locutions obscure the point of Reformed epistemology that *some* theistic beliefs are justified for *some* people at *certain* times under the *appropriate circumstances*. Equally, the typical formulations of Reformed epistemology set up the position so as to rule out certain kinds of evidentialist requirements. Wolterstorff and Swinburne were instrumental in my coming to formulate the thesis of proper basicity in these terms.

⁶ I alter the wording here to avoid an ambiguity which would present itself by saying that theistic belief need not be based on adequate reasons, as this might suggest an allowance for its being based on reasons which are not adequate. But the latter is clearly not what Plantinga wants to say.

(5) God is to be thanked and praised.

Although Reformed epistemologists loosely speak of taking belief in God as basic, to be more accurate the clause *belief in God* should be taken to refer, not to the general proposition *God exists*, but to the types of beliefs given above - each of which self-evidently entails that God exists. I shall hereafter speak of various beliefs (or belief) that Pt to refer to the sorts of lower-grade theistic beliefs Plantinga has in mind. In such a case, belief that God exists would turn out to be nonbasic. It would be based on beliefs like (1)-(5). It might be thought that this difference is important for assessing evidentialism; but since the evidentialist requires theologically neutral or unbiased reasons to ground theistic belief proper, he would not regard these beliefs that Pt as adequate grounds for the belief that God exists. He would require that these lower-grade beliefs themselves be supported by reasons, presumably reasons for believing that there is a God.

Secondly, (b) in [P] must be unpacked a bit. The sort of rationality involved here is *prima facie* rationality. It can be overridden by sufficient reasons to the contrary. Moreover, the sense of rationality Plantinga has in mind in [P] may be construed as either *deontological* or *axiological*. He takes it that the evidentialist challenge is frequently couched in terms of intellectual obligations. He is anxious to argue that a theist may be intellectually in the clear, within his epistemic rights, in believing in God, even if his belief is basic. A person who believes that Pt in a basic way does not necessarily violate any epistemic duties. In 1983a (p. 52) Plantinga also notes that rationality can be taken in the sense of “the possession of epistemic excellence” or “the avoidance of an epistemic

defect.” The Reformed position is that “one who takes belief in God as basic is not thereby violating any epistemic duties or *revealing a defect in his noetic structure* (p. 72). I have noted this notion of epistemic non-defectiveness in chapter 2 in relation to evidentialism, where Plantinga labels it “axiological” rationality. I will develop this idea of non- defectiveness more thoroughly in Part III with Plantinga's more recent notion of warrant and proper function.

B. Nonpropositional Rationality Making Properties

The general formulation needs a bit more unpacking with reference to condition (c) in [P]. How can a belief in God be basic and yet *rational*? As Reid maintained, from the fact that a belief is not produced by the reasoning-disposition, it does not follow that it is groundless and irrational. The reasoning disposition is only one type of disposition activated by a certain kind of evidence - reasons (i.e., other beliefs or knowledge). But reasons are only one kind of ground - *propositional* evidence. There is also another type of ground for belief that is nonpropositional, but which is evidence nonetheless. Reid spoke of various kinds of evidence that could be classified as nonpropositional, the evidence of sense, testimony, consciousness, memory, and axioms. These days modest foundationalists usually postulate several plausible *rationality* or *justification-conferring* grounds for immediate beliefs: (i) immediate experience of what the belief is about, (ii) facts about the origin of the belief, or, in certain cases, (iii) the mere truth of the belief. Plantinga (1993b, pp. 192-193) speaks of *impulsional-evidence*; that is, in certain

circumstances or under certain conditions we have the disposition or inclination to form certain beliefs. Such putative grounds of belief do not (at least not directly) involve other beliefs, but rather they involve things like being appeared to a certain way and a felt attractiveness, fittingness, inclination toward or disposition to form the belief in question, or some kind of attractive sensuous phenomenology.

We can say that there are two-levels of evidence: *second-level evidence* (which is propositional) and *first-level evidence* (which is nonpropositional). This can be further explicated by speaking of beliefs as the output of realized functions and relevant input. A belief has second-level evidence when the relevant belief-forming mechanism takes other beliefs as input and yields beliefs as output. A belief has first-level evidence when it is the output of cognitive functions that take nonpropositional circumstances as input. The rationality of immediate beliefs would be, at least in part, a function of the epistemic adequacy of these nonpropositional grounds or conditions. This may turn out two ways depending on the sense of rationality one is assuming. Reid clearly thought that since most of our beliefs were the output of belief-forming processes over which we do not have any direct voluntary control, it is hard to see how we could be guilty of flouting any epistemic *obligations*. The position seems to secure deontologically rational immediate beliefs. I also noted though that it is plausible to take his position as establishing a stronger claim. (i)-(iii) above may actually be sources of immediate *knowledge*.

If theistic belief is an immediately justified belief, then there will be nonpropositional justification-conferring conditions. In 1983a Plantinga lays out three paradigmatic properly basic beliefs: I see a tree, I had breakfast this morning, and that

person is in pain. In each of these cases the belief is typically basic, but not groundless. In the case of sensory perceptual beliefs, I am appeared to in a certain way, and my being appeared to in such and such a way grounds the belief. There are phenomenological conditions accompanied by a sort of felt attractiveness or inclination to form certain beliefs under those conditions. In such condition(s) C (simple or complex), a person S will be rational or justified in believing that p in a basic way (where C will naturally vary with p). Now Plantinga originally held that it was a person's being appeared to in these characteristic ways which sufficiently confers on the person the right to believe the corresponding proposition (1989a, p. 79). He now holds that a person is justified in holding B on some occasion just if: (1) a person has an epistemic right to trust a basic source of belief X except where the person has a defeater for a deliverance of that source (i.e., roughly, a reason to believe that the belief is false or the source untrustworthy), and on this occasion (2) B is a deliverance of source X and (3) S has no reason to think that B is false or produced in some unreliable fashion.⁷

Plantinga thinks that these conditions are sometimes satisfied for theistic belief. According to Plantinga, there is a disposition to form belief in God in certain experiential circumstances.

Plantinga (1983a) writes:

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

⁷ See Plantinga's forthcoming *Warranted Christian Belief* (1994b, chapter 4).

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. (p. 80)

These widely realized conditions and circumstances trigger belief in God. But the grounds are not limited to just these sorts of conditions, but include things like the reading of Scripture, the feeling of guilt, or a sense of God's presence or his speaking to us. As already noted, it is not the belief that God exists that is actually properly basic in these circumstances, but it is a range of beliefs about God's attributes and actions which self-evidently entail God's existence. There are a variety of beliefs that Pt that involve grounding in experiential (broadly speaking) justification-conferring circumstances, in many cases analogous to the way in which we form sensory perceptual beliefs.

William Alston (in 1991c) has carefully developed the type of phenomenological conditions discussed by Plantinga. Alston argues that we can understand religious experience as kind of perception of God, a nonsensory perceptual experience of God analogous to our sensory perceptual experience of the world. Alston targets a certain class of beliefs, M- beliefs ("M" for "manifestation").⁸ These beliefs are "beliefs to the effect that God is doing something currently vis-à-vis the subject - comforting, strengthening, guiding, communicating a message, sustaining the subject in being - or to

⁸ As the following makes clear, Alston's M-beliefs are not identical with Plantinga's properly basic beliefs. What is crucial to Alston's account is God's experientially *appearing* to the individual and the direct perception of God. Some of Plantinga's examples do not square with this. On the difference between Alston and Plantinga here, see Alston 1991c, pp. 196-97. Also, although for Alston religious experience functions as a *ground* for theistic belief, Plantinga (1991, p. 310) sees basic belief in God as resembling not just sensory perception, but memory and *a priori* beliefs. And these latter beliefs - according to Plantinga's warrant theory - do not require

the effect that God has some (allegedly) perceivable property - goodness, power, lovingness" (Alston 1991c, p. 1). M-beliefs involve the direct experiential awareness of God. In much the same way that objects in the environment are presented to a person's consciousness in sensory perception resulting in beliefs about the external world, M-beliefs are the result of God being presented to a person's consciousness. Moreover, as sensory perceptual beliefs can be construed as being the output of a disposition or habit of belief formation related in a certain way to relevant input, Alston develops the notion of the formation of M-beliefs within the larger sphere of a functioning, socially established, practice of M-belief formation. The upshot of this is that the doxastic practice of M-belief formation can form an adequate experiential ground for various beliefs about God. Plantinga, though, is not thinking of the direct experiential presentation of God, even though some of his examples approach the experiential conditions described by Alston.⁹ Rather, we have been designed by God to form a broad range of beliefs about him when we find ourselves in widely realized experiential circumstances. A person will be justified in holding theistic belief in these circumstances on some occasion provided she has no reason to believe that her theistic belief is false or that the source of her belief is unreliable.

The sort of formulation we are left with then turns out to be something like.

[P1] There are some people S* in some circumstance C and at some time T who believe that Pt, where (a) S*'s belief that Pt is justified and (b) S*'s

anything resembling grounds for rationality, even if they have rationality-conferring conditions (e.g., certain phenomenological qualities, other beliefs, etc).

⁹ See chapter 8 Part II for further discussion. For Plantinga's critical commentary on Alston's religious epistemology, see Plantinga's "What is the Question?" (1995a), and his forthcoming *Warranted Christian Belief* (1994b, chapter 4).

belief that Pt is not based on reasons (adequate or otherwise), and (c) C excludes S*'s having defeaters for their belief that Pt.

So when the Reformed epistemologist claims that belief in God can be a justified belief even though it is not based upon propositional evidence, he means the following. First, for some people certain beliefs that self-evidently entail God's existence are the deliverance of an immediate source of belief, given the appropriate sort of conditions or circumstances (which we might loosely call evidence, impulsion evidence). Secondly, S lacks reasons to believe that the deliverance of this source is either false or unreliable. Moreover, Plantinga's claim should be understood as a negation of the propositional evidence-possession requirement.¹⁰ The theist is said to be "within his epistemic rights in believing in God's existence even if he has no argument or evidence at all" (1983a, pp. 30). Equally, I have been concentrating on structuralist evidentialism, but the rejection of that implies a rejection of dialectical formulations of the evidentialist requirement as well. "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" (1983a, p. 17). In fact, Plantinga writes: "It is not that such a person is justified or rational in so believing by virtue of having an implicit argument. . .No, he does not need any argument for justification or rationality. . .he is perfectly rational in accepting belief in God as basic in the utter absence of any argument, deductive or inductive" (p. 67). I take it, then, that Plantinga's basic claim is invariant under evidential-requirement substitution instances

¹⁰ Actually, Plantinga denies an even broader evidence-possession requirement where evidence is inclusive or both propositional and nonpropositional *grounds*, even though - as noted earlier - he

canvassed in the last chapter. In other terms, where (c) in [P] is replaced by any one of the substitution instances we noted in chapter 2, the claim to proper basicity remains in place. So, if (c) is replaced by either (d) a dialectical evidentialist requirement or (e) an evidence possession requirement, theistic belief will still be basic under the appropriate conditions.

Plantinga's proper basicity thesis, though, is actually stronger than I have outlined thus far. One might think that a belief is properly basic only if there is evidence for the proposition, evidence available in a person's epistemic community, though not necessarily evidence possessed by the person in question, let alone the causal basis for their belief. Anthony Kenny (1992) advocates this notion. According to Kenny, there is a sense in which a belief that p is properly basic only if there is evidence for p. Unlike the evidentialist requirements discussed earlier, this position does not require either an evidence-basis requirement or an evidence- possession requirement for the person in question. Kenny says "a belief may be basic in the sense of not being held on the basis of reason, but yet defensible to others by the giving of reasons" (p. 26). This actually forms a premise in Kenny's own argument: "Roughly speaking, a belief can be properly held as basic, without evidence, only if it is rationally defensible. If the existence of God is to be something justifiably held as basic, it must be defensible by argument" (p. 69). Call this an *evidence-availability* evidentialist requirement. It leads to an alternative account of proper basicity.

admits a qualified sense of evidence, what he calls impulsional evidence (in the case of memory and *a priori* beliefs).

But Plantinga's position rules this out. He explains that "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 in fact no such argument exists" (Plantinga 1983a, pp. 71-72).¹¹ In 1985b Plantinga asks: "But why suppose that the theist needs evidence to be rational? Suppose he doesn't have any evidence; suppose in fact there isn't any. How does it follow that his belief is not perfectly rational?" (p. 59). This theme, which runs throughout Plantinga's work, is also emphasized by Stephen Wykstra in his essay "Toward a Sensible Evidentialism" (1989). Wykstra takes the crux of Reformed epistemology to be, not merely that one's belief in God can be rational without an evidential basis, but that theistic belief can be rational even without there being any evidence available for it.

Calvinians will insist that there does not need to be an evidential case available for theistic belief in order for it to be epistemically adequate. . . . What Calvinians really want to say is that belief in God. . . is evidence non-essential: even if no evidential case is available for it, theistic belief suffers no epistemic defectiveness and should not be seen as being in big (or little) doxastic trouble. (Pp. 433-434)¹²

What Wykstra says here with respect to epistemic defectiveness is held by Plantinga regarding the sort of conditions required for a person to be within their

¹¹ I think that Plantinga understands the clause "even if in fact no such argument exists" to be conditioned on the evidence available at any time. It certainly should be taken in that sense. For there might *be* an argument for the belief that Pt even if, given the evidence available at some time t_n , no such argument can be formulated since there is no deductive or inductive (or probabilistic) path from the available evidence to the proposition Pt.

¹² Kenneth Konyndyk 1986 (pp. 106-107) concurs with Plantinga and Wykstra. For a critique of Anthony Kenny's concept of evidentialist proper basicity, see Konyndyk 1991 (pp. 319-332).

intellectual rights. No arguments need to be available for that (cf. Plantinga 1991, p.303).

Hence, Plantinga's notion of proper basicity is quite strong indeed.

[P2] There are some people S^* in some circumstance C and at some time T who believe that P_t and S^* 's belief that P_t is justified, even if there exists no available propositional evidence in support of the belief that P_t .

C. Proper Basicity Criteria and Particularism

There is a final point that relates to the approach taken by Plantinga to establish the proper basicity of theistic belief. Plantinga adopts a non-classical form of foundationalism that broadens the scope of properly basic beliefs and thereby allows Plantinga to place various beliefs that P_t in the foundations of some people's noetic structure. It should be noted that, although modest foundationalism permits such a move, it doesn't necessitate it. As stated in the last chapter, modest foundationalism might not accept the proper basicity of theistic belief. Rejecting CF only suggests that there is no CF ground for denying the placement of theistic beliefs in the foundations, but this is not equivalent to a reason for doing so. In short, even if the evidentialist objection based on classical foundationalism is untenable, why suppose that theistic evidentialism could not be based on modest foundationalism? Plantinga himself (in 1983a) has suggested that one could modify CF, such that it did not have at least some of the adverse philosophical consequences already noted. One of those consequences was that most ordinary, everyday beliefs would not be rational if CF were true. So we can widen the base of

properly basic beliefs to include beliefs which entail the existence of other minds and the external world.

In short, we could include common sense beliefs by replacing

[CF] A proposition *p* is properly basic for a person *S* if and only if *p* is either self-evident to *S* or about *S*'s immediate experience or evident to the senses,

with

[X1] A proposition *p* is properly basic for *S* if and only if *p* is self-evident or about *S*'s immediate experience or evident to the senses for *S*, or *is accepted as basic by nearly everyone*.

If we add to [X1] the premise

[X2] Beliefs that *Pt* are not accepted by nearly everyone as basic,

we get the same result, leaving theistic belief in need of propositional support or grounding. Plantinga notes that [X1] would still, at least as worded, leave most people unjustified in a host of beliefs. First, the formulation seems to overlook the situational nature of rational belief. The belief that I had breakfast this morning at Oriel College is hardly accepted as basic by just anyone. It is my basic belief, but not others. Presumably we could chisholm [X1] more so as to allow for this. . . “is the reliable output of belief-forming mechanisms recognized by nearly all” (memory, perception, etc.). However, it seems that [X1] or any such modification would be subject to the objection that not nearly everyone would accept it as basic, and so we would still need an argument for the

claim that these are the criteria for proper basicity. The question then becomes one of establishing criteria for the set of properly basic beliefs.

The objection can be raised from another perspective. Suppose that alternate forms of modest foundationalism are guilty of epistemic partiality in their selection of properly basic beliefs, or that the form of foundationalism is for other reasons still unacceptable. Might it not be that Plantinga's version includes or allows *too much* in the way of properly basic beliefs? If we so widen the set of properly basic beliefs to include theistic belief, what precludes taking just any belief as properly basic? Suppose a person believes that the Great Pumpkin returns each Halloween. What is to stop someone from claiming that this belief is rational because it is properly basic? Plantinga (1983a, pp. 74-78) addresses this: "If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?" (p. 74). Plantinga denies that the Reformed position has such a consequence. The proper basicity claim stipulates that certain people will, at certain times and under certain justification-conferring circumstances, have a rational belief in God without propositional grounding. From this it does not follow that theistic belief (or any belief) will be properly basic in just *any* circumstance and at *any* time, that just any circumstance confers justification on a belief. Nor is it that for any belief *b*, there is *some* circumstance *C* such that *b* is properly basic in *C*. Plantinga likens this situation to a denial of the verification principle in Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* not committing one to holding that just any sentence (e.g., 'T was brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymble in the wabe') is meaningful. Can one

not deny Ayer's verification principle of meaning without thereby suggesting that just anything goes? If the criteria of modern foundationalism are rejected one is not thereby committed to allowing just anything in the set of foundational beliefs. Or, to turn this about a bit, is it necessary for the theist who advocates the proper basicity of theistic belief to have a substitute criterion already in place, a criterion which allows him to include theistic belief and exclude the Great Pumpkin? Plantinga wants to claim that in order to make a judgment - positive or negative - about the proper basicity of some belief, it is not necessary to have a criterion for proper basicity.

The question comes down to the procedure of rightly arriving at a criterion of properly basic beliefs. Plantinga's argument is that such a procedure must, as Reid emphasized, be inductive. More precisely, he is thinking of the correct criteria for proper basicity being necessary truths (like general ethical principles) which are arrived at by Aristotelian intuitive induction, whereby what *is* a necessary truth is *known* by considering particular cases (actual or possible). In other terms, the procedure must be particularist.¹³ We are to proceed inductively by assembling belief-condition pairs $\langle B, C \rangle$, which range over the follow sorts of relations: Given $\langle B, C \rangle$,

B is obviously properly basic in C,
 It is fairly clear that B is basic in C,
 It is not clear that B is basic in C,

¹³ The particularist is contrasted with the methodist. The two may be distinguished (as Chisholm does in 1982, pp. 61-75) between two sorts of epistemological questions: (A) What do we know? What is the extent of our knowledge? (B) How are we to decide whether we know? What are the criteria of knowledge? The particularist seeks to answer (A) in order to answer (B), whereas the methodist begins by answering (B) in order to answer (A). The skeptic argues that until one answers (A), one cannot answer (B), and until an answer is provided for (B), an answer cannot be given to (A).

It is not clear that B is not basic in C,
 It is fairly clear that B is not basic in C,
 B is obviously *not* properly basic in C.

The next step is to form hypotheses containing the necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity. The hypotheses must then be tested in the light of the examples contained in the belief-condition pairs. So if it is obvious that under certain conditions, the belief that <there is a person standing before me> is justified, then a hypothesis whose conditions of proper basicity do not permit the belief to be properly basic (such is the case with modern classical foundationalism) must be mistaken. The *degree* to which it is clear that the belief is or is not properly basic in the appropriate condition must obviously be weighed, but the mere fact that a belief doesn't fit the criteria proposed by some hypothesis may count against hypothesis (to a greater or lesser extent). Plantinga admits a number of important qualifications to this general outline. The sample set must be revisable in the light of theory and argument. We may thereby come to see that some particular belief-condition pair, originally taken to give us conditions in which a belief is properly basic, does not in fact give us such conditions. Or perhaps the pair, hitherto thought to give us necessary and sufficient conditions for the proper basicity of the belief, gives only either sufficient or necessary conditions. So John's seeming to remember that p may be necessary for John's belief that p being basic and justified, but it may not be sufficient (if, for instance, John also knows that his memory is faulty when it comes to matters related to p). Perhaps the best we will be able to do for many belief-condition pairs is establish a sufficient condition for *prima facie* justification. Hence, being appeared to in a particular way will be sufficient for being *prima facie* justified in

believing that there is a large puddle of water on the road, but it is a justification which is defeasible and so can be overridden by sufficient reasons to the contrary. A man who is appeared to water-on-the-roadly and believes that there is a large puddle in the road may be *prima facie* justified in his belief. But a man who is appeared to in this fashion and has good reason for believing that (due to the hot weather conditions) the large puddle is really an optical illusion will be an a different epistemic situation. Being appeared to in a certain manner is, in some cases, not sufficient for an *ultima facie* justification. So Plantinga, in denying criteria for proper basicity proposed by modern classical foundationalists (as well as non-classical modest foundationalists) and in affirming that theistic belief is properly basic, need not hold this on the basis of some precarious criterion under which “everything is permitted.”

It is here, though, that there is an important break between the position Plantinga articulated in 1983a and his more recent epistemology. Plantinga has recently admitted that the above inductive procedure will in fact yield a very broad range of “justified” beliefs which may well include what many take to be bizarre and absurd beliefs (e.g., “the Great Pumpkin comes and visits us each Halloween”). As conceded in 1983a (p. 77-78), (i) different people or groups of people will draw different conclusions about which beliefs are properly basic because they work from different sets of examples and so (ii) the particularist route may not be very polemically useful. Although each person or group of people will be responsible for their own set of examples and what they take to be properly basic given these examples, there will still *be* a truth of the matter regarding what are in fact and necessarily the correct criteria for proper basicity. But if

“justification” is a matter of “being within one’s intellectual rights” in believing B, then what is ultimately relevant to one’s being justified in believing B is the perspectival nature of the particularist method in its employment. Given this, Plantinga now admits (1994b, chapter 4) that nearly *anything* can be justifiably believed, including visitations from the Great Pumpkin on Halloween. What follows from this is the need to radically re-assess the nature of the *de jure* objection to theistic belief. According to classical evidentialism (with its deontological roots) the rightness, propriety, or rationality of theistic belief is a matter of epistemic dutifulness. But perhaps the irrationality of belief in God (without evidence) is not a matter of violating intellectual duties. Perhaps it means something like theistic belief is not a deliverance of *rational* faculties. In that case the problem with theistic belief is that it is produced by cognitive processes aimed at something other than truth or maybe even is the result of some kind of cognitive malfunction. Plantinga’s more recent epistemological interest lies in relocating the *de jure* question regarding the rightness of theistic belief. It is found elsewhere than the deontological concerns of the classical evidentialist tradition.

II. Warranted Theistic Belief

Plantinga’s early religious epistemology is dominated by deontological and internalistic elements, but it contains dimensions (e.g., epistemic excellence and non-defectiveness) which have since been developed into a nondeontological, externalist

epistemology.¹⁴ Plantinga now concedes that rationality is, as he says, “Janus-faced.” Although there are many senses of rationality (including rationality as justification, deontologically construed), Plantinga sees that it is actually the closely allied ideas of *ratio* (man as a rational animal), proper function (freedom from cognitive malfunction), and warrant that supply us with the best way of thinking about the nature of rationality. Warrant is that quantity or quality enough of which is sufficient, or nearly so, to transform true belief into knowledge. Among other things, what is necessary for warrant is the proper functioning of the *ratio* of the human animal.

A. Rationality and Warrant

In *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993b) and *Warrant: the Current Debate* (1993c), Plantinga attempts to show that the received epistemological tradition in Western philosophy from Descartes on is mistaken and incoherent. That tradition, as Plantinga explains it, has taken “justification” as necessary and, together with true belief, nearly (perhaps with an addendum to appease Gettier) sufficient for knowledge. However, it has also taken justification as consisting of the fulfillment of epistemic duty. According to Plantinga, though, (deontological) justification is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge. What is essential to transforming true belief into knowledge (and what is lacking in the traditional view) is the *proper functioning of a person’s cognitive faculties*. Hence, knowledge does possess a normative element, but it is not the

¹⁴ “Justification and Theism” (1987), *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993b), The Prospects for

normativity of deontological justification. “A belief has warrant for you,” Plantinga says, “only if your cognitive apparatus is functioning properly, working the way it ought to work, in producing and sustaining it” (1993b, p. 4).

The idea of “proper function” is one that nearly everyone has, employs, and grasps in some minimal sense. A bird’s wing will not function properly if it is broken. People under the influence of drugs or alcohol do not function properly; that is, their mental and motor functions are to a lesser or greater degree affected in such a way that they cannot carry out certain mental and physical tasks, or at least cannot do them well. Plantinga finds the notion of proper function to be deeply embedded in science, where there is talk about various bodily organs having functions, things which they are supposed to do. Plantinga writes: “Biological and social scientists, furthermore - psychologists. Medical researchers, neuroscientists, economists, sociologists, and many others - continually give accounts of how human beings or other organisms or their parts and organs function: how they work, what their purposes are, and how they react under various circumstances” (p. 6). These functional generalizations seem to presuppose the notion of proper function, organisms and organs functioning free from malfunction or dysfunction. The notion of proper function then may be applied to one’s cognitive life, specifically to those parts of one’s noetic equipment which are related to the formation and sustenance of beliefs. So what transforms true belief into knowledge is warrant, and one’s beliefs are warranted only if one’s epistemic equipment is functioning as it ought in producing or sustaining the belief.

A few qualifications are necessary. First, Plantinga emphasizes that *proper* function should be distinguished from *normal* function. A thing's functioning normally, here, is understood in a broadly, statistical sense. Carl Lewis' ability to jump further than the average person is not an indication that he is defective in some way. Suppose that a nuclear disaster caused global blindness, leaving only a very small portion of the human race with sight. Those who could see would not have improperly functioning eyes on account of being outside the norm. Secondly, we need not suppose that for a particular belief to have warrant all of one's cognitive equipment must be in tip-top shape. A person may suffer from cognitive defects in the faculty responsible for memory beliefs, but this does not entail that her belief "I see a bus" will lack warrant. What must be functioning properly is the faculty or subfaculty that is involved in the production of a particular belief, and it need not be functioning properly over its entire scope of operation. Lastly, proper function comes in *degrees*. So warrant may be conferred on a belief even if the relevant cognitive machinery isn't functioning perfectly. One need not have 20/20 vision for sensory perceptual beliefs to have warrant.

But there are other conditions required for warrant. Proper function alone will not do. It is also necessary that one's cognitive faculties are operational in the appropriate environment. Faculties and environment must be in tune. Suppose a rational, mature adult is transported to a planet revolving around Alpha Centauri, and on this planet conditions are very different from earth. Let us suppose that there are elephants that are invisible to human beings, and the elephants emit a radiation unknown to earthlings which causes human beings to form the belief that a trumpet is sounding. An elephant walks by and the

human being forms the belief that a trumpet is sounding. Plantinga says that the problem here is not that one's cognitive faculties are functioning improperly (for they clearly are not) nor that the belief is false (that happens in fact to be the case), but the problem is that the human being's cognitive environment has been altered. He is no longer in the environment for which his epistemic equipment was designed. So, adds Plantinga, "your faculties must be in good working order, and the environment must be appropriate for your particular repertoire of epistemic powers. It must be the sort of environment for which your faculties are designed - by God or evolution (or both)" (1993b, p. 7).

Three other conditions, though, are also necessary for a belief to have warrant. A person's noetic structure has, at any time, a range of beliefs that are held with differing degrees of strength. A belief that $2 + 2 = 4$ or "I am in pain," is typically held with a degree of strength greater than beliefs based on memories of what happened years ago in such and such a place. Our cognitive apparatus may indeed be functioning properly and in the appropriate environment; but nonetheless beliefs may possess different degrees of warrant by virtue of how firmly we believe a given proposition. Plantinga takes it that a proposition will have a degree of warrant proportional to the degree to which a person believes the proposition. When our cognitive equipment is in good working order, a belief will have warrant to the degree a person is inclined to accept it, and this degree will be the degree to which the person actually accepts the belief. Secondly, given that different parts of a person's cognitive faculties are designed to serve a broad range of goals, warranted belief must be distinguished from the production of belief for reasons other than an epistemic goal. The human cognitive apparatus is designed, for instance, to

form (under the appropriate circumstances) beliefs which will be conducive for survival, relieve us from suffering, incline us toward procreation, and so on. So Plantinga adds the alethic condition: “What confers warrant is one’s cognitive faculties working properly, or working according to the design plan insofar as that segment of the design plan is aimed at producing true beliefs” (p. 16). And finally, Plantinga finds it necessary to impose a reliability constraint for warrant (the important truth in reliabilism). In addition to a belief’s formation being connected with an alethic goal, it is crucial that, given the proper function of one’s epistemic equipment in the appropriate environment, the statistical or objective probability of the belief’s being true be very high. “[I]f one of my beliefs has warrant,” writes Plantinga, “then the module of the design plan governing the production of that belief must be such that the statistical or objective probability of a belief’s being true, given that it has been produced in accord with that module in a congenial cognitive environment, is high” (p. 18).¹⁵

B. Theistic Knowledge

Plantinga’s claim, then, is that theistic belief can be properly basic, and as such it is not only justified but has warrant (at least for some people). The warrant claim is obviously a stronger statement about the epistemic status of belief in God than the concession to deontological rationality. One reason being that warrant (like Alston’s concept of epistemic justification) entails a reliability constraint. It puts one in a good

¹⁵ There are a number of other subtle aspects to proper function and design plan that I have will

position vis-à-vis the epistemic goal, both the short term goal of acquiring a true belief and the long term goal of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a body of beliefs. Indeed, on Plantinga's own position a justified true belief does not constitute knowledge, but warrant allows one to have knowledge that p. Plantinga's position here was first approximated in "On Reformed Epistemology" (1982a): "When our epistemic powers are employed in the way God meant them to be, and when, furthermore, they work in the way God intended them to work, the result is knowledge. . . .A belief constitutes knowledge, if it is true and it arises as a result of the right use and proper function of our epistemic capacities" (p. 17).

Plantinga's earlier discussion of axiological evidentialism can now be translated into warrant:

[P3] There are some people S* at certain times T, and under certain conditions C, such that at T and in C (a) S* believe that Pt, (b) S*'s belief that Pt satisfies warrant conditions, and (c) S*'s belief that Pt is not based on reasons (adequate or otherwise).

[P3] entails the further epistemic claim that:

[P4] There are some people S* at certain times T and under certain conditions C, such that (a) S" firmly belief that Pt, (b) S* **know** that Pt, and (c) S*'s belief that Pt is not based on reasons (adequate or otherwise).

Plantinga surely wants to claim this, and does in 1982a, 1983a, and 1991, and it will form the central thesis of *Warranted Christian Belief* (forthcoming). Moreover, **[P3]**

have cause to develop in later chapters.

and [P4] will equally hold where (c) is substituted by either (d) S has no reasons (adequate or otherwise) which provide evidential support for the belief that Pt (evidence possession requirement), and *a fortiori* (e) S is not able to give any reasons (adequate or otherwise) for the belief that Pt (dialectical evidentialism). So warranted properly basic theistic belief is, like justified properly basic theistic belief, invariant under various evidential-requirement substitution instances (and so the same will be true for knowing that Pt in a basic way). Plantinga's warrant theory reveals that for him the evidentialist position with respect to belief in God is mistaken not merely in its deontological form, but even with respect to theistic knowledge.

The question of whether basic belief in God has warrant comes down to whether when a person (at some time and under the appropriate circumstance(s)) believes in God in a basic way any of the conditions of warrant are violated. In 1991 Plantinga reaffirms the widely realized experiential conditions which he developed in earlier articles. But these conditions are now construed as *warrant* conferring circumstances. There are circumstances, involving neither testimony nor argument, in which people find themselves with new or strengthened belief in God. "Upon beholding the majesty of the mountains, or the glories of the starry heavens above, or the power of the ocean, or the marvelous, highly articulate beauty of a tiny flower, I may form the belief that it was good for God to have created all this" (1991, p. 304). The circumstances would also include reading the Bible, listening to Mozart, viewing a painting by Michael Angelo, and a host of other circumstances in which people find themselves believing theistic propositions (specifically beliefs that Pt, as defined earlier) in a basic way.

Plantinga raises two questions crucial for the determination of whether there can be a warranted basic belief in God.

- (a) Do experiences of these kinds [as noted above] sometimes contribute to someone's feeling impelled to believe in God, so that she is more strongly inclined to believe than she would simply on the basis of propositional evidence or testimony?
- (b) If so, does this ever happen in the case of those whose faculties are functioning properly?

One might be inclined to answer “yes” to the first and “no” to the second question. Plantinga points out that Karl Marx would hold that indeed people might find themselves very inclined to believe in God given such experiences, but that such a belief is perverted or unhealthy. A person who believes in God (in a basic way or not) suffers from some kind of cognitive malfunction and has a defective noetic structure. If a person’s cognitive apparatus is properly functioning, then they will not believe in God. Similarly, Sigmund Freud would answer “yes” to the first question. People certainly find themselves believing in God in such situations, but all such theistic beliefs arise as a result of “wish fulfillment,” and as such they are “illusions.” Theistic belief is the way many people are able to cope with the harsh realities of life, and as such it is something like beliefs formed for survival, to cope with fear, social stability, and so on. It is not “reality oriented.” Plantinga notes that it is not clear whether Freud would consider religious belief a cognitive malfunction. I am inclined to agree with Plantinga's suggestion here that Freud doesn’t view religious belief as the consequence of some

cognitive malfunction, but as a belief formed on a module of the design plan *not* aimed at truth, and on *that* account lacks warrant.¹⁶

It is at this point that Plantinga drops the philosophical bomb. The issue up for debate, whether basic theistic belief can be warranted, cannot be settled *within* the field of epistemology. The answer to such a question depends on what a person believes about the nature of human beings, and so depends on issues anthropological, ontological, and yes - theological. Suppose we assume that man was created in the image of God, and so created as to see God's hand in the created order and through the sorts of experiences mentioned above. In this case, a person will not hold a position like that of Marx or Freud. They will regard belief in God (or the disposition to form belief in God) as part and parcel of a person's cognitive equipment functioning properly and as produced by modules of the design plan aimed at truth, not merely psychological comfort. Calvin, for instance, would view Marx and Freud as the ones who have cognitive malfunction. For a theist, belief in God is entailed by proper function; the failure to believe in God is an indication of a defective noetic structure.

Plantinga writes:

What you properly take to be rational. . .depends upon what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt; it depends upon what kind of beings you think humans are, and what sorts of beliefs their noetic faculties will produce when they are functioning properly. Your view as to what sort of creature a human being is will determine or at any rate heavily influence your views as to what it is rational for human beings to believe. And so the dispute as to whether theistic belief is rational can't be settled just by attending to epistemological considerations; it is at bottom

¹⁶ See chapter 6 of *Warranted Christian Belief* (1994b) for a thorough account of the Marxist and Freudian objections to theistic belief and their connection with rationality as proper function.

not merely an epistemological dispute, but a metaphysical or theological dispute (1993d; cf. 1991, pp. 309-310; 1993b, p. 183).

But the matter is more specific. What sort of person one takes a human being to be will determine what sorts of beliefs one takes as *properly basic*. Plantinga states (1991, p. 310) that a nontheist will think of basic belief in God as possessing little if any warrant. It will then be natural from a nontheistic perspective to require reasons for theistic belief. Theistic belief will lack warrant unless backed by evidence or arguments, and so the evidentialist requirement arises - at least in this case - from a distinct perspective on human nature. Change this view of human nature and the prospects for a warranted basic belief in God look rather different. Plantinga's religious epistemology leads ultimately to metaphysics and the *de jure* question about the rightness or rationality of theistic belief cannot in the final analysis be settled without attending to the *de facto* question of the truth of theism.

III. The Hard Proper Basicity Thesis

A. The Impropriety of Nonbasic Theistic Belief

Although it has been common to take either [P1] or [P2], and more recently [P3] and [P4], as the sum of Plantinga's religious epistemology, I think his religious epistemology includes an additional thesis that is stronger than any of the these.

Stating the position of John Calvin, Plantinga (1983a) writes:

The Christian does not need natural theology, either as a 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.” . . . [Calvin] thinks that **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.** (pp. 67, 73) [bold mine; italics Plantinga’s]

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. . . .

. . . 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.** (p. 72) [emphasis mine]

These passages make it quite evident that Plantinga construes the Reformed objection to natural theology to be twofold: (a) reasons and arguments are *unnecessary* for the believer to have a justified or warranted belief in God and (b) reasons and arguments are *inappropriate* (in some sense) as a basis for theistic belief. (a) is what I will call the *soft thesis*. It is entailed by the rejection of the evidentialist requirement for theistic belief and has been the main focus of discussion in the literature. (b) is a substantially stronger claim than (a), and it isn’t immediately obvious how it is connected to (much less generated by) a denial of the evidentialist requirement for theistic belief. (b) certainly entails a negation of the evidentialist requirement, but it would seem also to entail a denial of the claim that reasons are, in some instances, a sufficient basis for

theistic belief, for on (b) nonbasic theistic belief is simply inappropriate. (b) casts a broader epistemological net. It expresses what I will be calling the *hard proper basicity thesis*. But how exactly should we understand this hard thesis? What meaning should be given to the “*ought not* believe in God on the basis of reasons”? What is the nature of the incorrectness or inappropriateness of nonbasic belief in God?

Plantinga correctly highlights Calvin’s emphasis on “certainty” as an essential element of religious faith. As the following makes clear the kind of certainty intended by Calvin is psychological.¹⁷ According to Plantinga, the reason why Calvin (and Reformed theologians generally) holds that a Christian should not believe in God on the basis of reasons or argument is because in a crucial way the nature and integrity of faith is jeopardized. Reason-based faith is likely to be “unstable and wavering” and “subject to perpetual doubt.” In Calvin this matter arises with reference to belief that Scripture is the Word of God, but it is applicable to belief in God since faith plays a role here as well. Faith in Scripture as God’s Word requires certainty, but no argument or rational proof can establish with certainty that the Scriptures are the very Word of God. “The certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Holy Spirit” (*Institutes*, I.vii.5). And again Calvin writes: “Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit. . .But those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known” (I.viii.13). Although this appears to be an outright epistemological statement by Calvin, it would be a mistake I think to read it as

¹⁷ See Hoitenga 1991 (pp. 147-150) and Vos 1985 (pp. 4-9).

such. Calvin's use of the word "knowledge," though involving a cognitive or propositional component, is radically existential and intimately associated with our being affected and moved to the worship of God.¹⁸ This makes any straightforward epistemological analysis rather difficult. It is important to bear in mind that Calvin's concern in contrasting belief based on rational evidences and the certainty of faith is practical, moral, and religious, not essentially epistemic. This would suggest that the kind of impropriety associated with nonbasic belief in God is not primarily, if at all, epistemic. The putative negative consequences of reason- or argument-based religious belief seems to fall on their relation to the character of a religious or pious life. Calvin's apparent anxiety about nonbasic religious belief is the result of a religious (and probably pastoral) concern, not an epistemological one.

Suppose, though, that we focus on the nonepistemic reasons against nonbasic theistic belief. It doesn't strike me that nonbasic theistic belief is incompatible with either certainty or something less than certainty but consistent with a firm belief, nor that basic belief will always be certain or firm. This dichotomy between basic belief/certainty (or firm belief) and nonbasic belief/uncertainty (or doubt) may originate in the Humean "inferential drag" assumption: the more links in an inferential chain the higher the degree of doubt we have.¹⁹ I don't find this very convincing. First, many nonbasic beliefs are not arrived at through an explicit process of inference, but merely take as their input other

¹⁸ On Calvin's "existential" view of knowledge, see Dowey 1952 (pp. 24-27) and Houtenga 1991 (pp. 143-145).

¹⁹ See Hume 1975 (p. 144). For considerations to the contrary, see Schum 1994 (pp. 33-34; 292-306).

beliefs of the subject. It is a common error to assume that “nonbasic” entails “arrived at through a process of inference.” The psychology of nonbasic belief is more complex and sophisticated than that. Moreover, even in cases of explicit inference how firmly one holds a nonbasic belief will depend on the intuitive plausibility and force of one’s standards of evidence, the kinds of argumental structures involved, and the sorts of propositions involved. More importantly, Calvin puts the goal of certainty in an infelicitous manner, as he allows a significant degree of doubt in fact to coexist with faith (III.ii.17). Focusing on firmness and high degree of belief seems to be more reasonable, but if that is the way we cut the cake, the case against nonbasic theistic beliefs is reduced considerably. Thirdly, there is no need to think that the vitality and spontaneity of basic belief does not also characterize nonbasic belief. Even if psychological mediacy is involved in nonbasic beliefs, this is compatible with a temporal immediacy in belief formation.

There are two other considerations though. Calvin emphasizes the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit with respect to generating the certainty which faith requires. Perhaps the Holy Spirit works through propositional evidence. Specifically, suppose that part of the internal work of the Spirit involves enabling one to see the force of certain kinds of propositional evidence and argument forms. This is a matter worthy of detailed consideration which space constraints make impractical here.²⁰ I raise it only to show that

²⁰ As C. Stephen Evans has recently claimed: “The process of forming a belief on the basis of evidence is one reliable way of arriving at a belief, and I see no reason why the Spirit could not employ such a natural process as part of the divine work. So the task of the evidential apologist need not be incompatible with the Reformed account. Here the work of the Spirit lies in part in calling the attention of a person to evidence, and enabling that person properly to appreciate and

the case against nonbasic theistic belief on the grounds that the source of a believer's certainty regarding some religious beliefs is something like the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit is not a very well formed argument. Secondly, there is the widely accepted distinction, developed at length by L. Jonathan Cohen (1992) between *belief* and *acceptance* - as two distinct cognitive states. Belief is understood to be a disposition normally to feel that p (where this is an involuntary cognitive response to the evidence one has and is aware of at any given time), while acceptance is a policy for action adopted at will. It might then be argued that what is required for the aims of a religious life is firm acceptance, and there may be a disparity between the degree of belief and acceptance (indeed perhaps one without the other altogether).

For the reasons just canvassed, I simply do not see a plausible case for thinking that nonbasic theistic belief necessarily has any adverse consequences for the goals of religious life and practice. There does not appear to be a case against nonbasic theistic belief based on nonepistemic considerations.

B. The Epistemic Significance of the Basic/Nonbasic Distinction

Neither Calvin, Kuyper, nor Bavinck specify anything in the way of what relevant epistemic categories are involved in the distinction between basic and nonbasic belief in

assess that evidence" (1995, unpublished paper). See Evan's comments also in 1990 (pp. 67, 71-75). See also William Wainwright 1994 for a consideration of how passional factors affect the force of evidence. Wainwright's discussion focuses on Jonathan Edwards' stance on natural theology, according to which certain evidence for the existence of God is only appreciated by virtue of the inner work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.

God. As just explained, despite Calvin's use of the word knowledge, it is difficult to extrapolate from his account anything of obvious epistemic import. It is here that I think Plantinga makes a contribution to the discussion, for Plantinga's interest *is* epistemological.

Plantinga's earlier articles unpack the evidentialist challenge to theistic belief primarily in terms of a deontological concept of rationality. There does seem to be a case for reading the "ought not" clauses in the key passages (such as in 1983a) as indicating a normativity of epistemic duty, obligation, and permission.²¹ However, I suggest that the more promising and philosophically interesting interpretation of the hard proper basicity thesis derives from taking the normativity implied by Plantinga's "ought not" clauses as the normativity of *proper function*. In fact, I think that both the normativity of duty and the normativity of proper function are present in Plantinga's early articles. In 1983a (pp. 48, 52, 72) Plantinga mentions epistemic defect, even though it is not developed in any great detail.²² In "On Reformed Epistemology" (1982a) knowledge is explicitly associated with properly functioning cognitive faculties. More importantly, the proper function reading fits Plantinga's more recent warrant epistemology, and it is warrant (not deontological justification) which transforms true belief into knowledge. The proper function interpretation of the hard proper basicity thesis thereby allows a treatment of the basicity/nonbasicity distinction in terms of theistic knowledge. On

²¹ I am indebted to David Reiter for pointing out the more obviously deontological reading of the hard thesis prevalent in Plantinga's earlier articles.

²² In 1983a deontologism is not carefully distinguished from proper function (p. 79) and knowledge (pp. 85-87).

this reading, nonbasic theistic belief represents cognitive malfunction or some kind of epistemic defectiveness. Plantinga's position here is that we have been designed to form belief in God in a basic way in a variety of widely realized experiential circumstances. So the view that the Christian *ought not* believe in God on the basis of argument or other rational beliefs is taken as a particular view about *where theistic belief should fit* in a proper and well-formed noetic structure, where it should be according to a theistic design plan and so where it should be when our cognitive system is functioning properly, free from epistemic defect, malfunction, etc. It should be basic. Only then will it possess warrant and constitute knowledge.

Dewey Houtenga, summarizing Plantinga's position, suggests the above interpretation:

Plantinga's central position is that belief in God, that is, belief that God exists, does not require argument or evidence because it can be a properly basic belief. Indeed, for a fully rational human being, belief that God exists is in the foundations of the human noetic structure, just like beliefs that are self-evident to reason or evident to the senses, memory beliefs, and beliefs in other minds. (1991, p. 202) ²³

²³ Houtenga is the only other writer I know of who deals explicitly with something like the hard thesis. He sees the inappropriateness of nonbasic theistic belief as a consequence (drawn by Reformed thinkers) from the Platonic and Augustinian claim to the immediacy of knowledge of God so central in the tradition of Reformed theology. Such a premise, though, might lead one to think that belief in God mediated through other beliefs is an offense to God, perhaps inconsistent with God's omnipresence and immanence. "To infer God's existence from something else - the idea of him in the mind, the contingency of the universe or its order and design, and so forth - is to imply that these other things are known more immediately than God himself. For that is the procedure of inference, to begin with what is better known and move from that to what is less well known or not known at all" (1991, p. 220).

I take the rationality here to be the rationality of proper function that is associated with warrant and knowledge. So the hard thesis turns out to be something like:

[N1] Given any person S, if S believes that Pt, then [if S's cognitive system is functioning properly with respect to the module(s) responsible for the formation of theistic belief(s), then the belief that Pt is properly basic in S's noetic structure N].

[N1] (by the contraposition of the conditional in the consequent) entails:

[N2] Given any person S, if S believes that Pt, then [if the belief that Pt is nonbasic in N, then S's cognitive system is not functioning properly with respect to the module(s) responsible for the formation of theistic belief(s)].²⁴

If [N2] is true, then it seems that theistic belief based on reasons is going to be the result or manifestation of an epistemic defect of some sort. In which case theistic belief will have little (if anything) by way of warrant, for one of the conditions of warranted belief according to Plantinga is that one's cognitive equipment be functioning the way it should, functioning according to its design plan. Calvin discusses the *sensus divinitatis* naturally implanted in humans whereby we have an instinctive awareness of God. Plantinga takes the *sensus divinitatis* to be a cognitive module that produces belief in God when triggered by widely realized experiential conditions. Belief in God should be as natural and spontaneous as belief in an external world, other minds, and what one ate for breakfast yesterday. Consequently, a noetic structure which *lacks* belief in God is

²⁴ Technically speaking, the contrapositive of the conditional consequent of [N1] is "if the belief that Pt is not properly basic. . . ." A belief may fail to be properly basic either because it is nonbasic or basic but not *properly* basic. I am obviously interested in the former.

epistemically defective, much like the noetic structure of a person who doesn't believe that there is an external world (and so does not believe what is obviously true) or who holds that his head is made of blown glass or cardboard (and so believes what is obviously false). For Calvin, when individuals do not believe in God this is an indication that their theistic belief forming mechanism(s) is damaged in some way, and so their cognitive system is - at least in this respect - defective. They fail to believe what is, or at any rate should be, obviously true. Atheism is clearly an indication of epistemic defect of a rather severe sort, as would be agnosticism.²⁵

Plantinga's gloss on Calvin and the Reformed tradition seems to imply an additional claim. The design plan stipulates that humans are not only to form belief in God, but also that the module (or modules) responsible for the formation of theistic belief produce immediate or basic theistic beliefs. Consequently, some forms of theistic belief are epistemically defective, cases in which theistic belief is formed on the basis of reasons or arguments. In this case, nonbasic theistic belief will be, like atheism and agnosticism, another type of cognitive defect, even if not as severe.

Construed this way, the hard proper basicity thesis requires a theological belief about how God has intended us to acquire beliefs about Him. [N2] is true only if this

²⁵ In "Calvin's Sense of Divinity and Externalist Knowledge of God" (unpublished) David Reiter distinguishes between doxastic atheism and acceptance atheism. If the distinction between belief and acceptance is correct, my account would have to be extended. Perhaps there are many people who actually believe that God exists (i.e., they are disposed such that whenever they consider <God exists> they normally feel it true that <God exists>), but who do not accept the existence of God (i.e., do not take <God exists> as true as a policy in their reasoning and decision making). Even if a person cannot occurrently believe both p and not-p, if we distinguish between belief and acceptance, a person might believe that p while simultaneously accepting not-p. This would be a form of self-deception. This self-deception would be a cognitive defect compatible with belief in

theological proposition is true, along with Plantinga's theory of warrant. I for one am dubious about the former; others will have their doubts about the latter. The rather obvious response to the former is this. What grounds do we have for believing that God has intended that humans only acquire theistic belief(s) in a basic way? I am not aware of this claim having any Scriptural basis. And it is not in or entailed by any of the statements found in the major creeds or confessions of Christendom through the centuries, and nor for that matter do I find any unambiguous support for it in the Reformed theological tradition. The only plausible case is one that could locate some religious defect as an entailment of nonbasic theistic belief. We would then have to assess this defect in the light of epistemic goals. In other terms, there might be some conflict between epistemic goals permitting or requiring nonbasic theistic belief and nonepistemic goals excluding nonbasic theistic belief. The design plan would then have to be spelled out in such a way as to adjudicate this conflict. As Plantinga notes (1993c, p. 16): "Not all aspects of the design of our cognitive faculties need be aimed at the production of true beliefs; some might be such as to conduce to survival, or relief from suffering, or the possibility of loyalty, or inclination to have more children, and so on." It is likely that belief in God is found on more segments of the design plan than simply the segment aimed at the production of true beliefs. Here I am thinking of matters like the comfort and hope which belief in God provides for human beings in the face of many adverse human experiences. It might further be thought that these or other nonepistemic goals or functions for theistic belief are better satisfied when belief in God is properly basic, but that they are

God. Acceptance atheists might even know that God exists, even if they do not believe that they

compromised or not achieved with nonbasic theistic belief. We have already seen a clear case of this type of reasoning in Calvin's insistence that the certainty of faith is not capable of being generated by argument or premises from natural reason. Put less boldly, I think that Calvin is interested in the vitality of faith and the psychological assurance found in the Christian life whereby we have a firm confidence and trust in God and his promises. So maybe nonbasic theistic belief, even if it fares well if we pay attention only to epistemic goals, does not receive high marks relative to nonepistemic aims. The design plan, having to take both these goals into consideration, specifies an immediate mode of theistic belief formation. But as I argued earlier, I do not see any good argument that nonbasic theistic belief is incompatible with the satisfaction of any relevant nonepistemic goals. Therefore, I do not find [N1] or [N2] very plausible. Moreover, as I will henceforth argue, I do not think that Plantinga's hard thesis should be construed in terms of either [N1] or [N2].

C. The Epistemic Superiority of Basic Belief in God

I think that there is an alternative way of spelling out the sense in which a proper and well-formed noetic structure will have theistic belief as a basic belief which does not involve a straight out claim to cognitive malfunction for nonbasic theistic beliefs. Although there are indications that Plantinga is claiming for the Reformed position (and by suggestion his own) that nonbelief in God and nonbasic belief in God are both the

believe that they believe (or know) this. My account is concerned solely with doxastic atheism.

result of cognitive malfunction, I think that there is an interesting ambiguity in the account that leaves room for an alternate construal. On the one hand, there are numerous places where Plantinga speaks of basic belief in God as *the* correct or proper way to believe in God. Elsewhere, though, he makes another statement, a little less extravagant, when he talks about an (instrumental) use of natural theology as “a means of moving toward what Calvin sees as the best way to believe in God: as basic” (1983a, p. 73). Similarly, in an earlier article 1982a, Plantinga says that according to the Reformed tradition “the most appropriate way to believe in God is not to believe on the basis of evidence or argument from other propositions, but to take this belief - that there is such a person as God - as basic” (p. 14). Notice that in these two references, the proper basicity of belief in God is the “best” and “most appropriate” way to believe in God. This is different from saying that taking belief in God as basic is *the* correct and proper way to believe in God, which suggests that to do otherwise is inappropriate. There is a sense in which the best or most appropriate way to get to Boots in Oxford from Oriel College is to go down High Street and take a right on Cornmarket. But there would be nothing wrong with taking Turl Street from High Street, or dash through the Covered Market. The fact that one way is the most appropriate (perhaps because it is the shortest route, or the safest) does not make another way necessarily inappropriate.²⁶ Similarly, basic theistic belief may be the most appropriate mode of theistic belief, but this doesn't

²⁶ In fact, it is not clear whether there is a “best” or “most appropriate” way without qualification to get to Boots. One way may be one best for the sake of safety, and another for brevity of time of travel. In the case under consideration, basic belief in God is the best way to believe in God for epistemic reasons (as contrasted with nonepistemic reasons).

imply that nonbasic theistic belief is inappropriate. And for this reason, even if atheism and agnosticism are the result of cognitive malfunction, nonbasic theistic belief need not be thought of as epistemically defective.

But why should basic belief in God be thought of as the most appropriate mode of believing in God? It could, of course, be most appropriate for nonepistemic reasons. We have already considered the prospects for that and found them to be implausible. Plantinga is thinking of basic belief in God as the most *epistemically* appropriate way of believing in God. And why is this so? Recall that Plantinga's warrant thesis maintains that the degree of warrant is proportional to the strength of belief: "the more firmly S believes B the more warrant B has for S" (1993b, p. 19). So a "weak" or "wavering" belief might possess a very low degree of warrant (or maybe even no warrant at all). It might even possess some degree of warrant, but not enough to transform true belief into knowledge. Above we noted that Plantinga sees the Reformed objection to natural theology to be based partly on the notion that nonbasic belief in God will be "unstable and wavering" and "the subject of perpetual doubt." I have already argued that even if varying degrees of psychological doubt are compatible with nonbasic belief, the same is true for basic belief. In the following chapter I will present further argument for the kinds of circumstances in which basic belief can be weak or wavering. Any attempt to view basic belief as epistemically superior on the grounds that nonbasic belief is held with a less degree of firmness will have to be formulated in a rather careful manner. Moreover, on a Christian view it may be that the effects of sin on the human personality have consequences for how we spell out the design plan (a matter to be fully developed in

chapter 5). For the moment, let's think of the hard proper basicity thesis as articulating a position on a kind of epistemically superior noetic structure, or at least one that is - barring certain circumstances - *typically* epistemically superior to noetic structures in which theistic belief is nonbasic. This doesn't require the obviously absurd claim, postulated earlier, that there is a wide gap between the degree of firmness with which we always hold basic and nonbasic theistic beliefs (or that basic beliefs are immune from doubt altogether). It only requires that that *typically* basic theistic beliefs have a degree of firmness and perhaps psychological resilience which marks them off as standing in a better position to generate beliefs about God with a greater degree of warrant (than nonbasic theistic beliefs). *If* warrant is proportional to the degree of belief, and there is a significant (even if not radical) difference between basic and nonbasic beliefs at this juncture, then we have reason for saying why basic belief in God is typically epistemically superior to nonbasic theistic belief. A greater degree of warrant may often make a difference between knowledge and insufficiently warranted true belief.²⁷

It is plausible, then, to be taking Plantinga to mean something like:

[N3] Typically, a noetic structure N_1 in which theistic belief is properly basic is epistemically superior to a noetic structure N_2 in which theistic belief is nonbasic, where epistemic superiority = the degree of warrant for (basic) theistic belief in N_1 is greater than the degree of warrant for (nonbasic) theistic belief in N_2 , and the degree of warrant possessed by theistic belief

²⁷ On Plantinga's view, one's cognitive faculties are designed to produce a variety of beliefs with a variety of degrees of strength. The design plan will of course state the strength with which we should hold particular beliefs given the circumstances in which they are formed. As I will explain in the chapters 4 and 5, it seems likely that the design plan dictates that the *sensus divinitatis* produce theistic belief with a fairly high degree of strength. There is a sense then in which a low degree of belief in God is an indication of a cognitive malfunction (to some degree) with respect to the functioning of the *sensus divinitatis*. How this particular sort of malfunction relates to nonbasic belief in God is fully developed in chapter 5.

in N_1 is sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge (but not so in N_2).

On [N3] it may be that the design plan stipulates that we acquire theistic beliefs in either a basic or nonbasic way, but that basic beliefs will typically have more by way of warrant since they are held with a greater degree of firmness than nonbasic theistic beliefs. Clearly [N3] is compatible with:

[N4] There are noetic structures N_1 and N_2 such that (1) theistic belief is basic in N_1 and nonbasic in N_2 and (2) the cognitive system represented by N_1 and N_2 is each functioning properly with respect to the module(s) responsible for the formation of theistic belief in N_1 and N_2 .

From which it follows that theistic belief in N_1 and N_2 is equally rational. S_1 (who has a basic theistic belief) and S_2 (who has a nonbasic theistic belief) are both functioning properly in their noetic establishment (at least so far as belief in God is concerned). The epistemic superiority of S_1 's noetic structure is located in the actual degree of warrant possessed by S_1 's theistic belief, specifically that the degree of warrant possessed by his belief in God is sufficient to transform true belief into knowledge. Not so for S_2 (at least not typically). I shall have cause for further chisholming of [N3], so it should only be regarded as a first *approximation* to an accurate and adequate exposition of Plantinga's hard thesis. Nevertheless, I think at this point we have a suitable and adequate enough account of Plantinga's religious epistemology to begin to look at the ways in which reasons (such as those found in natural theology) might be factored into Plantinga's epistemological equation. A better understanding of Plantinga's epistemology will unfold in the context of this investigation.