

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THEISM: SCORING THE QUINN-PLANTINGA DEBATE

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In the extensive literature that has accumulated around Reformed epistemology, some of the most interesting material is found in the debate on the foundations of theism between Philip Quinn and Alvin Plantinga. The debate began with a 1985 paper by Quinn entitled "In Search of the Foundations of Theism,"¹ in which he raised critical questions about Plantinga's work on that topic. The next year Plantinga responded with "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply."² After a hiatus, Quinn again took up the debate in 1993 with "The Foundations of Theism Again: A Rejoinder to Plantinga."³ So far, there has been no further reply from Plantinga. Nevertheless, the discussion provides a rich source of insight into the issues surrounding Reformed epistemology, and I believe it is possible to push the discussion some distance beyond the point reached so far by Quinn and Plantinga. In this paper, I will organize my comments around the four points singled out for discussion by Quinn in his rejoinder.

I. Criteria for Properly Basic Beliefs

Plantinga, himself a foundationalist in epistemology, rejects the criteria for "properly basic beliefs" established by classical foundationalism. He proposes, following Roderick Chisholm, that the right way to arrive at such epistemic criteria is through an inductive procedure. This procedure is described as follows:

We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously *not* properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples.⁴

One further point is worthy of note: Our initial data set consists of pairs of



beliefs and conditions such that (in our view) the belief in question either obviously is, or obviously is not, properly basic under the stated conditions. But it can happen that, upon further consideration, we decide to eliminate some of the data from the original set, should that set prove inconsistent or in some other way incoherent.⁵ The whole procedure is not dissimilar to the scientific project of framing hypotheses to account for sets of data. (And in science also, some of the data which is initially accepted may eventually be thrown out.)

Quinn acknowledges this as in principle a feasible procedure for arriving at epistemic criteria. He points out, however, that insofar as various enquirers may differ in their initial data sets, they may very well come up with widely differing criteria of proper basicity:

The difficulty is, of course, that this is a game any number can play. Followers of Muhammed, followers of Buddha, and even followers of the Reverend Moon can join in the fun. Even the modern foundationalist can play (*Search*, p. 473).

Plantinga, however, does not see this as a serious objection. In a passage that is cited by Quinn just prior to the previous quotation, Plantinga writes:

The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he doesn't accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare (*sic*) may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.⁶

In his rejoinder, however, Quinn indicates yet another difficulty with the way Plantinga proceeds in this matter. As he rightly points out, in his various writings on Reformed epistemology Plantinga does not, in fact, go about establishing epistemic criteria according to the prescribed method. In fact, one of the striking things about these writings is that Plantinga nowhere sets out necessary and sufficient conditions for a proposition to be properly basic. He does, to be sure, assert concerning specific propositions that in certain circumstances they could properly be accepted in a basic way, and concerning other propositions that in certain other circumstances they could not properly be so accepted. These examples, then, would form part of Plantinga's data set for establishing criteria for proper basicity. But he never proceeds to the actual work of constructing such criteria. Instead, he seems simply to assume that the Christian community, starting with theistic beliefs among its examples of properly basic beliefs, will be able to arrive at epistemic criteria which vindicate that initial judgment. And he appears willing to concede that the scientific naturalist, the Buddhist, and the follower of Rev. Moon may also be able to arrive at epistemic criteria which vindicate *their* distinctive beliefs as properly basic (or

as properly derived), and reject those of the Christian theist.

Quinn points out that this assumption is premature and may well be unjustified. The crucial point to notice is that, under the procedure as specified, *it need not be the case that the propositions eventually recognized as properly basic will coincide with the initial data set*. This may be the case, but again it may not; the data set, as we have already noted, is in principle revisable under the pressure of theoretical considerations. Now, consider an enquirer who is initially undecided as to whether theistic beliefs can ever be properly basic. She will not, then, include such beliefs among either the positive or the negative examples of her original data set. On the basis of her data, she formulates a hypothesis about the sufficient conditions for proper basicity, and then she notices that certain theistic beliefs under certain conditions satisfy those conditions. She may, then, come to accept those theistic beliefs as properly basic, even though no such beliefs occurred in her initial data.

But movement in the contrary direction is also possible. Someone begins with theistic beliefs as part of his data set of properly basic beliefs. Upon reflection, he formulates a set of necessary conditions for proper basicity which appear to account for the majority of his initial data set. It becomes apparent, however, that the theistic beliefs in his data set fail to satisfy those necessary conditions. Upon further reflection, he concludes that the theoretical considerations favoring the necessary conditions in question outweigh the intuitions supporting the inclusion of theistic beliefs in the data set, and as a result he no longer considers such beliefs as properly basic.

The upshot, then, is that it is necessary actually to construct the criteria for proper basicity; it is not sufficient to specify a few examples and just assume that they will be preserved by the criteria that eventually emerge. It seems to me that Quinn is quite correct about this, and that Plantinga has been somewhat too cavalier in his treatment of this issue.⁷ *Score: Quinn 1, Plantinga 0.*

II. The Status of Classical Foundationalism

It is well known that Plantinga regards classical foundationalism as being self-referentially incoherent. Classical foundationalism, as he uses the term, is a disjunction of ancient and medieval foundationalism⁸ with modern foundationalism. For purposes of this discussion, however, both Quinn and Plantinga focus on modern foundationalism, which holds that a belief is properly basic for a person only if the proposition believed is either self-evident or incorrigible for that person. Plantinga points out that this criterion is itself neither self-evident nor incorrigible, and in all likelihood cannot be derived by any acceptable method from propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible. If this is so, then the modern foundationalist who accepts the criterion is, by her own lights, irrational; thus the charge of self-referential incoherence.

Quinn is unmoved by this. In his initial paper, he claims that Plantinga has failed to show that the criterion proposed by the modern classical

foundationalist is in any way defective. He admits, to be sure, that the modern foundationalist's criterion is not itself either self-evident or incorrigible. What needs to be further considered, however, is whether it might be possible to derive that criterion from propositions which are, by its own light, properly basic. Quinn suggests that this might be done using Plantinga's own procedure (discussed in the last section) for establishing epistemic criteria. That is to say: the modern foundationalist will assemble an initial data set consisting of pairs of beliefs and circumstances such that the beliefs in question either obviously are, or obviously are not, properly basic under the respective circumstances. Quinn further suggests that the modern foundationalist can plausibly claim that it is *self-evident* to her that these beliefs are (or are not) properly basic under the given circumstances. If this is so, and if the derivation of the criterion goes smoothly, the modern foundationalist can hold her criterion without any inconsistency or incoherence. As members of the initial data set, he suggests the following:

(8) The belief that I am being appeared to redly is properly basic in conditions optimal for visual experience in which I am being appeared to redly. [Throughout the paper, the numbering of propositions follows that in *Rejoinder*.]

And,

(9) The belief that Jove is expressing disapproval is not properly basic in conditions optimal for auditory experience in which I am being appeared to thunderously.

Both of these propositions, according to Quinn, may plausibly be regarded as self-evident by the modern foundationalist. Now of course, many more examples than this will be needed, and there is in addition the task of testing the criterion against the data set. But all this means is that the modern foundationalist has work to do—the same conclusion we reached in the last section concerning the Reformed epistemologist.

Plantinga finds all this extremely implausible. He does not claim to have *shown conclusively* that the modern foundationalist's project could not succeed, but the chances of this appear very slim. While he doubts that either of the data statements suggested by Quinn could be self-evident, he focuses especially on the negative example. The belief about Jove fails to be properly basic in case *either* (a) one is violating some epistemic duty in accepting it *or* (b) one's acceptance of it would involve some cognitive malfunction. Plantinga points out that someone might be *unable* to refrain from accepting this belief under those conditions, and if so (on the "ought-implies-can" principle) there can be no violation of duty in accepting it. And he insists that it could hardly be *self-evident* that acceptance of such a belief must involve some cognitive malfunction. In his rejoinder Quinn admits this, and suggests a reformulation:

(10) The belief that Jove is expressing disapproval is not properly

basic in conditions optimal for auditory experience in which I am being appeared to thunderously and I can refrain from believing that Jove is expressing disapproval.

This removes Plantinga's reason for saying that, in the original example, it might be impossible for one to violate epistemic duty by accepting the proposition. Quinn admits that Plantinga might be able to come up with some other objection to the claim that the example is self-evident; if that happens, the modern foundationalist will have to attempt yet another revision, and it can't be guaranteed that she will not succeed in this. What is clear is that the modern foundationalist has a great deal of work ahead of her. But then, as we saw in the last section, the same is true of the Reformed epistemologist. Quinn concludes, "Hence I am of the opinion that we thus far have no better reason for adopting criteria according to which some beliefs that self-evidently entail the existence of God can be properly basic than for adopting criteria according to which no such beliefs can be properly basic" (*Rejoinder*, p. 28).

It seems to me that Quinn faces a steep uphill battle with this line of argument. Part of the problem is that Quinn is not a modern foundationalist, and he himself does not believe that his examples (especially the negative examples) really are self-evident. My own suspicion, anyway, is that each new formulation of a negative example can be met with still another objection, and the whole enterprise will have difficulty getting off the ground. Admittedly, the Reformed epistemologist also has a lot of work to do. But there is no reason to suppose that *the same kind* of problems will plague him, because there is no reason to think he will accept a criterion for proper basicity which is anywhere near as restrictive as that of the modern foundationalist. So Quinn's opinion that the two approaches are on a par, in the light of the Chisholm-Plantinga procedure for establishing epistemic criteria, is far from convincing. *Score*: Quinn 1, Plantinga 1.

III. Does Proper Basicity Matter?

Is it important whether theistic beliefs are properly basic? Surprisingly, Quinn's answer to this is No. He writes,

So, oddly enough, if certain propositions which self-evidently entail the existence of God can be properly basic for a person at a time, it is epistemically unimportant whether such propositions actually are properly basic for that person at that time. Without loss of degree of justification, such theistic propositions can just as well be properly based, at least in part, on others which are descriptive of the person's experience at the time and are then properly basic for the person. Although such theistic propositions would not need to be based on the evidence of other propositions, they always could be so based. So the cautious philosopher who did so base them would be every bit as justified in believing in the existence of God as the reckless mystic who did not (*Search*, p. 479).

What point is Quinn making here? What he says explicitly is that any belief which can be justified in a basic way can also be justified by evidence, so that a person who justifies his belief in this way is at no epistemic disadvantage compared with someone who accepts the same belief as properly basic. I suspect, however, that Quinn means to suggest another, and stronger, conclusion. Note the last sentence, with its references to the “cautious philosopher” (i.e., the evidentialist), and the “reckless mystic” (i.e., the Reformed epistemologist). Doubtless the epithet is tongue-in-cheek, but what point is being made? Well, consider the following argument: If evidentialism is correct and Reformed epistemology is wrong, then theistic beliefs are rational only if they can be justified by propositional evidence (since in that case no other source of justification is available). If on the other hand Reformed epistemology is correct, it is still the case that theistic beliefs are rational only if they can be justified by propositional evidence (since whatever justification the beliefs receive directly from the experience, they could also receive from a propositional description of the experience). So, whether or not Reformed epistemology is correct, theistic beliefs are rational only if they can be justified by evidence. So it is epistemically unimportant whether or not Reformed epistemology is correct.

I am not absolutely certain that this line of thought should be attributed to Quinn. But all the required premises are provided in the paragraph quoted above—and on the other hand, the argument is of sufficient interest in its own right to be worth pursuing, whether or not Quinn intended to suggest it.

Let’s examine Quinn’s reasons for his claims. He bases his analysis in part on a parallel—in itself welcome to Reformed epistemologists like Plantinga—between theistic beliefs and ordinary perceptual beliefs. Suppose that, having a certain familiar type of experience, I form the belief that

(13) I see a tree before me.

Suppose, furthermore, that the belief formed in these conditions is properly basic. After reflecting upon my experience, I form an additional belief, namely

(17) I am being appeared to treely.

And now, Quinn says,

Suppose further that I then proceed to change my noetic structure in such a way that (13) comes to be based on (17). And assume, finally, that there are no other changes in the conditions in which (13) was properly basic for me. Now (17) is properly basic for me. . . . But what of (13)? Though it is no longer basic for me, my claim is that it is now properly based on (17) and is no less justified for me than it was when it was properly basic for me. . . . Since, by hypothesis, my visual experience in those conditions suffices to confer a certain degree of justification on the proposition expressed by (13), the amount of justification

that reaches the proposition expressed by (13) will not be less in those conditions if it passes by way of the proposition expressed by (17) than if it is transmitted directly without intermediary (*Rejoinder*, pp. 29-30; the final sentence is quoted from *Search*, p. 478).

By analogy, if the belief that God is speaking to me is properly basic in virtue of an experience I have while reading the Bible, then that belief will be no less justified if I formulate a propositional description of the experience and infer the belief that God is speaking to me from that description.

A couple of points not made by Plantinga seem relevant here. First, it is not at all clear whether or how the kind of change envisioned by Quinn can actually come about. I frankly find it very difficult to envision how any normal human being could cause herself to suspend the practice of forming basic perceptual beliefs on the occasion of sensory experiences, and replace it with the practice of basing beliefs about her surroundings on descriptions of those experiences. (I can easily imagine someone *claiming* to have done this, on the basis of some epistemological theory she espouses—but that is a different matter altogether.)⁹ Second, it is evident that our experiences often have epistemically significant characteristics that we would find difficult or impossible to express in a description. Any actual experience of observing a tree, for example, is a great deal richer in content than the bare description afforded by (17). Now it may be that in the case of familiar kinds of experiences like seeing a tree, where we can assume that almost everyone has had relevantly similar experiences, the relative poverty of the description doesn't matter much epistemically. If on the other hand the experience is very unusual, or is for some reason controversial, it can matter a great deal. Even if I believe implicitly everything St. Teresa says about her experience of the presence of Christ, it would be absurd to suppose that her description of that experience places me in an epistemic position comparable to hers as she first enjoys and then recollects her own experience. And this disparity between rich experiences and impoverished descriptions has an obvious bearing on the extent to which the justificatory force of an experience can be transmitted through a description of it.¹⁰

Probably Plantinga would agree with these points, but the point he actually makes is a different one. (17), he says, does *not* constitute good evidence for (13). His principal reason for saying this is that a whole host of philosophers, from Descartes, Hume, and Reid down to the present, have demonstrated the failure of attempts to produce good arguments from propositions like (17) to propositions like (13); this is the (still unsolved) "problem of the external world."

Quinn demurs from this; he insists that (17) *is* good evidence for (13), even if no one has been able to construct an argument to show that this is the case. Plantinga's reasoning here, he surmises, relies on the principle:

(19) For all p and q , p is good evidence for q only if someone has constructed a cogent argument from p to q .¹¹

But, says Quinn, this principle is false. For a counterexample, consider the

following:

Suppose that, as I look out over my class, I observe a fidgety student.

Upon noticing this, I form the following belief:

(20) That student is moving restlessly about.

I also form this belief:

(21) That student feels uncomfortable.

Now it is exceedingly hard to see how to construct a cogent argument from (20) to (21), as anyone who has studied Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* must admit. If the problem of other minds is as yet unsolved, as I think it is, no one has constructed such an argument. But (20) is good evidence for (21), and so (19) is false (*Rejoinder*, p. 32).

And by the same token,

(22) It seems to me that God is speaking to me
can be good evidence for

(14) God is speaking to me,

even if no one has constructed a good argument from (22) to (14).

Now, Quinn and Plantinga agree that no one has constructed a good argument from (17) to (13), or from (20) to (21). What they have in mind, of course, is an argument *that would be convincing to an epistemological sceptic*. The problem of the external world and the problem of other minds, they agree, remain unsolved. On the other hand, someone who is not a sceptic about other minds would quite readily accept (20) as evidence for (21). But (20) would *not* be accepted as evidence for (21) by one who is a sceptic about other minds, or by someone seriously tempted to such scepticism. So it is really misleading to say, as Quinn does, that (20) is *evidence* for (21) even though there is no *argument* from (20) to (21). "Evidence" and "argument" are both context-relative, and the sceptic about other minds will not admit that we have *either* evidence or an argument here. For the non-sceptic, on the other hand, (20) *is* evidence for (21), but in that case it will not be difficult to construct an argument: we need only supply as an additional premise

(20*) When a student moves restlessly about in class, that student usually is feeling uncomfortable.

This premise, I suggest, could be confirmed to quite a satisfactory degree—provided we are not sceptics about other minds.

By the same token, if we are not religious sceptics we may accept (22) as evidence for (14), given appropriate further stipulations about the nature and conditions of the experience in question. (Even among the devout, claims that God has spoken to one are not taken to be as unproblematic as claims that one has seen a tree.) But in the context of the present discussion, the entire point of talking about *both* evidence and arguments is the justification of theism *in the face of religious scepticism*. So what is the point, in such a context, of Quinn's appeal to "evidence" which will not be accepted as such by a religious sceptic?

At this point we need to recall some generalities concerning the relation

between basic, non-inferential justification and justification by propositional evidence. Basic justification typically comes about when a belief is formed and/or sustained as a result of an appropriate kind of experience. This applies to beliefs about physical objects, beliefs about other minds, and (Plantinga has argued) to theistic beliefs as well. It is important to realize that *Quinn has not disputed any of this*. That theistic beliefs can be non-inferentially justified by experience is an *assumption* of this part of Quinn's argument, not something he is prepared to challenge.

Now, what happens if, instead of relying on basic justification, we turn to justification by evidence, where the evidence consists of a description of the experience in question? What happens depends on who the evidence is offered to. If the person who assesses the evidence is a non-sceptic—that is, if she accepts that basic beliefs formed under those kinds of conditions are justified—then she will likely regard the evidence as good. Because of the relative poverty of the description in comparison with the actual experience, the justification by evidence will often be somewhat weaker than the basic justification, but in many contexts it may be strong enough to serve. If on the other hand the evidence is assessed by a sceptic, he will undoubtedly refuse, in the absence of a compelling argument, to acknowledge that the alleged evidence has any force.

To be sure, the sceptic will also refuse to accept the basic belief as justified, and experience suggests that it may be quite difficult to get him to change his mind. What is really at issue here, however, is the following question: How should one best proceed, within a foundationalist epistemology, in order to establish experience-based beliefs as justified? In answering this question, all the advantages lie on the side of taking the beliefs in question as properly basic. If we refuse to do this, the prospects for justifying either perceptual beliefs or beliefs about other minds inferentially are distinctly unpromising, and inferential "arguments from religious experience" are conspicuously less impressive than is the case for taking theistic beliefs as properly basic. In the relevant kinds of cases, justification by evidence is parasitic on basic justification, and the parity Quinn claims between justification by evidence and direct, non-inferential justification by experience simply does not obtain. It *does* matter whether beliefs about God are properly basic. *Score: Quinn 1, Plantinga 2.*

IV. *The Case of the Intellectually Sophisticated Theist*

We now come to the area of disagreement between Quinn and Plantinga which, I believe, both of them regard as most important. It concerns, on the one hand, the epistemic status of theistic belief for well-informed contemporary theists, and, on the other hand, the importance or unimportance of natural theology. The discussion revolves around "the intellectually sophisticated adult theist in our culture," a person Quinn supposes to "know a good deal about standard objections to belief in God . . . [including] various versions of the problem of evil as well as the tradition of explaining theistic belief projectively that stems from Feuerbach and comes down to us through Freud and Durkheim" (*Rejoinder*, p. 35). (Later on I shall suggest a modification of this description.)

Granted that theistic beliefs *can* be basic under the appropriate circumstances, are they *in fact* basic for typical, well-informed theists in our culture? Plantinga thinks they are, but Quinn thinks they are not. Quinn is not denying that such theists have experiences which confer non-inferential justification on their beliefs. But he thinks that, in the typical case, this non-inferential justification will be outweighed by the kinds of objections to theism that are so prevalent in contemporary intellectual culture. So if these theists are to be rational in their beliefs, the non-inferential justification of the beliefs through experience needs to be supplemented by a broad case for the rationality of theistic belief—that is, by natural theology. On this point, Plantinga says, “I find myself in solid disagreement” (*Reply*, p. 308).

Pretty clearly, Quinn and Plantinga disagree about the strength of the justification most theists possess in virtue of their religious experience. Quinn thinks that for the typical theist, who has not been spoken to from a burning bush but who (for example) senses God speaking to him as he reads the Bible, these beliefs “have only a modest amount of [non-inferential] warrant” (*Rejoinder*, p. 40). I think Plantinga believes the warrant is stronger than this, though he says little about this directly. Both men devote most of their discussion to the potential defeaters of theistic belief, and we shall follow their example.

Concerning the problem of evil, Quinn writes, “What I know, partly from experience and partly from testimony, about the amount and variety of non-moral evil in the universe confirms highly for me the proposition expressed by . . .

(28) God does not exist” (*Rejoinder*, p. 40).

Quinn adds that this claim of his is consistent with (28) being highly disconfirmed by his total evidence. But clearly, additional evidence is needed, to overcome the strong objection to theism based on natural evil.

Plantinga concedes that the problem of evil initially seems to present a strong reason for rejecting theism, but he thinks this initial impression is misleading. He notes that atheologians have pretty well given up the claim that evil is logically inconsistent with theism, and have retreated to the claim that theism is improbable with respect to the evidence of evil. In response to this, Plantinga observes that “no atheologian has given a successful or cogent way of working out or developing a probabilistic atheological argument from evil, and I believe there are good reasons for thinking it can’t be done” (*Reply*, p. 309). (He refers the reader interested in these reasons to his own article on the subject.¹²) Quinn replies that the failure to construct a successful probabilistic argument from evil shows that evil does not disconfirm theism only if we assume that confirmation must be understood probabilistically, an assumption Quinn rejects. He writes, “I take intuitively clear cases of scientific confirmation and disconfirmation as data against which philosophical accounts of confirmation are to be tested. . . . And I am inclined to think that the claim [that] (28) is highly confirmed by the non-moral evil in the universe is another such datum for confirmation theory” (*Rejoinder*, p. 41).

I suspect that quite a few theists will fail to be satisfied by Plantinga's approach to this problem. There is the initial difficulty that understanding Plantinga's objections to probabilistic arguments from evil requires a level of logical sophistication which is not possessed by all philosophers, let alone non-philosophers. But even for those who understand his arguments (or accept the assurance of experts that the arguments are successful), there remains the larger challenge exemplified by Quinn's response to Plantinga. To Quinn it seems simply evident that the world's evil disconfirms theism, and the failure of a particular philosophical strategy for showing this (e.g., by arguments based on probability theory) leaves that troubling conviction unaffected. If one sees the problem of evil primarily as a group of arguments devised by atheistic philosophers to make life difficult for theists, then showing that, for technical reasons, these arguments are unsuccessful may be a sufficient response. (Showing this is in any case an important thing to do, and Plantinga has done it brilliantly.) But if one is deeply troubled and perplexed by the actual phenomena of evil, a purely negative and defensive strategy may be insufficient. What one needs, in that case, is some positive account of evil, something that offers some actual understanding of why evil exists and how it fits into God's plan for the world. In other words, a theodicy.¹³

The disagreement between Quinn and Plantinga about projective explanations of religious belief is sharp. Plantinga writes, "Freud's jejune speculations as to the psychological origin of religion and Marx's careless claims about its social role can't sensibly be taken as providing argument or reason for (28), i.e., for the nonexistence of God; so taken they present textbook cases . . . of the genetic fallacy" (*Reply*, p. 308). Quinn admits there are flaws in Freud's writings on this topic, but insists that "to construe Freud's contribution to our understanding of religion as nothing but jejune speculation strikes me as uncharitable in the extreme." He goes on to discuss various projection theories, and concludes "I believe that projection theories have so far achieved a real, but limited, success in explaining religious beliefs of some sorts, and I think this success does give the intellectually sophisticated adult theist in our culture substantial reason for thinking that (28) is true" (*Rejoinder*, pp. 41, 42).

Plantinga thinks the projection theories (considered as an argument for God's non-existence) commit the genetic fallacy, because they assume that an account of the origin of religious belief is determinative for its subsequent status, in this case its truth or falsity. This assessment may be correct.¹⁴ But what Plantinga overlooks is that psychological projection theories, if they are successful, constitute a powerful undercutting defeater for the claim that theistic beliefs are non-inferentially justified by religious experience. The view that such experiences do provide significant non-inferential justification for theistic beliefs is plausible only on the supposition that, in the experience, the believer is genuinely in contact with God. I don't mean by this that one must *first* establish that there is contact with God, and only then conclude that the experiences afford justification; that would be falling back into the trap of evidentialism. But evidence that the experience can be completely and correctly explained *without reference* to the presence and activity of God strongly undermines the claim of those

experiences to afford justification for beliefs about God's character and activities.¹⁵ And this kind of explanation is just what the projection theories claim to provide. Furthermore, it's not necessary, in order to have this effect, for the projection theories to show that *all* religious experience is a result of projection. The non-inferential justification of religious beliefs by experience is largely, if not entirely, a "first-person" affair, and if one comes to suspect that one's *own* religious experiences are the result of psychological projection, wish-fulfillment, and the like, then that tends to both to discredit the experiences themselves and to undermine any warrant they might otherwise provide for one's religious beliefs.¹⁶

That is not to say that the projection theories are in fact successful in discrediting religious experience and religious beliefs. This is a large topic, and no doubt there is much to be said against such theories, especially when they are taken as a *general* explanation for religious belief and practice. But there is work here that needs to be done, and once a person has begun to recognize the elements of plausibility, and indeed of partial truth, in these theories, an offhand dismissal like Plantinga's is not apt to be convincing.¹⁷

At this point I wish to suggest a modest addition to Quinn's description of the intellectually sophisticated adult theist in our culture. I believe the addition will be both realistic, in that many contemporary theists in fact conform to the augmented description, and helpful for the present topic. I will ask us to assume that our typical theist has a modicum of knowledge about the plurality of religions in the modern world. In particular, she knows that there are several different "world religions" with mutually incompatible doctrines, each of them boasting elaborate, intellectually developed systems of belief and espoused by intelligent, thoughtful advocates who can testify to experiences confirmatory of their respective beliefs.¹⁸

Now, how does this affect the rationality of our theist's belief in God? It does not necessarily lend support to atheism; indeed one might seek to argue from the prevalence of religious experience that there is "something out there" to which the religious are responding. It seems clear, however, that religious pluralism does to some extent weaken the support, whether inferential or non-inferential, of religious experience for any particular system of beliefs about the nature of God or ultimate reality. This does not, I think, mean that the theist ought to *give up* her beliefs; they are, after all, *her* beliefs, grounded in part in her own experience, and she should give them up only if, after thorough reflection, they seem insufficiently likely to be true, or to be close to the truth in important respects. But the fact that others—Buddhists and Hindu advaitists, for example—experience the divine as having significantly different characteristics has to constitute a problem for her. And it is exceedingly difficult to see how she is going to find a satisfying resolution of the problem apart from a large-scale apologetic enterprise which will argue for the superiority of theism as a worldview and, indeed, for the particular variety of theism she espouses.¹⁹

What shall we conclude from all this? I think we have seen that each of the three problem areas we have considered may well present genuine difficulty for well-informed contemporary theists, and the resolution of these difficulties is likely to demand answers going well beyond the kinds of responses Plantinga has indicated. Are the difficulties so severe as to over-

whelm the non-inferential justification the theist has for her belief in God, and render that belief no longer properly basic for her? That is a difficult question to answer, and in fact no general answer is possible; the answer in each case will depend both on the strength of the theist's non-inferential justification for her belief, and on the strength *for her* of the various objections to it. But even if her non-inferential justification for theism is sufficient to outweigh the combined force of the objections, the latter is great enough that sooner or later it is going to take its toll, creating genuine discomfort and perplexity. It seems, then, that it will be to her advantage, even if it is not absolutely essential for justified belief, to have available to her further answers which defeat the objections and contribute to an overall case for the rationality of theistic belief.

Now in principle, these further answers could be limited to "defeater-defeaters"; they could consist of considerations which lessen or eliminate the force of the objections to theism, but do not attempt to provide any positive support for belief in the existence of God or for a particular system of religious belief. But while the further support *could* be so limited, is there any intelligible reason why it *ought* to be? Should the theist not, on the contrary, avail herself of plausible theistic arguments, if there are any, and permit them to add their force to her "cumulative case" for the reality of God and the truthfulness of her faith? If not, why not? To be sure, if the various objections could be defeated conclusively and without remainder, it may be the theist would find it superfluous to attempt to add anything by way of positive argumentative support; in her reclaimed innocence, she could again assume the stance of the "rational basic believer." In practice, though, that is not how things are likely to go. All of the objections we have mentioned, even when answered as completely as possible, are likely to leave behind a lingering aura of tension not fully resolved. And unless we, like Kierkegaard, revel in intellectual uncertainty as the lifeblood of faith, it is only sensible to marshal all our resources in order to exhibit to the greatest degree possible the rational excellence of the faith we profess.²⁰

So who wins the debate? Obviously the issues in this part of the paper are many and complex, and it would be rash in the extreme to assert that either Quinn or Plantinga (or the author of this paper!) is right about all of them. But on the main points at issue, the seriousness of the challenges to theism and the importance of natural theology, I cannot help but conclude that Quinn is more nearly right than Plantinga. *Final Score: Quinn 2, Plantinga 2.*

In the end of course, it is artificial and perhaps even wrong-headed to think of "scoring" a debate like this one. Insofar as issues are clarified and light is thrown on them, both Quinn and Plantinga are winners—as are all the rest of us who have benefited from their exchange. And if the general conclusions drawn in this final section are correct, there is another sense in which the debate has many winners and no losers. We have envisioned a situation in which there is a large number of philosophical and apologetic tasks waiting to be performed. Much work remains to be done in clarifying the nature, scope and force of the non-inferential justification of religious belief by experience. There is also the task of traditional natural theology, in developing and advancing arguments and analyses supportive of

belief in God and the religious worldview.²¹ Insofar as our faith is crucially rooted in historical narratives, there is philosophical work (as well as historical work) to be done in clarifying the nature, credibility, and evidential force of those narratives. And of course, there is a great deal that needs to be said in response to the many potential defeaters of religious belief. There is occupation here for virtually every philosophical taste and talent—and what more could a philosopher ask for?²² But all this work needs to be done—we intellectually sophisticated contemporary adult theists need all the help we can get.²³

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NOTES

1. *Faith and Philosophy* 2:4 (1985), pp. 469-486 (hereafter cited as *Search*).
2. *Faith and Philosophy* 3:3 (1986), pp. 298-313 (hereafter, *Reply*).
3. Linda Zagzebski, ed., *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 14-47 (hereafter, *Rejoinder*).
4. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16-93; quotation is from p. 76.
5. "The sample set, furthermore, should be revisable in the light of theory and under the pressure of argument. Thus we may come to see that a pair <BC>, originally taken to be an example of belief and a circumstance such that the former is justified in the latter, is really not of that sort" ("Reason and Belief in God," p. 76).
6. "Reason and Belief in God," p.60.
7. William Alston finds it strange that I award a point to Quinn for his objection, since Plantinga has acknowledged that some beliefs initially accepted as properly basic may later be denied that status. Alston quotes Quinn's assertions that "it should not be taken for granted that once the Reformed Epistemologist...puts the particularistic method to work, he is bound to succeed in justifying criteria for proper basicity according to which theistic beliefs are properly basic" (*Rejoinder*, p. 21). He then adds, "presumably Plantinga would not disagree." (Comments delivered at the Society for Philosophy of Religion, March 6, 1997.) It seems to me, however, after re-reading the relevant sections of "Reason and Belief in God," that Plantinga *does* take this for granted: it is something that is essential for his position, but he never defends it or even indicates awareness of the need for a defense. He does seem simply to assume that, once the Christian community has been allowed its own set of epistemic examples, the result will be vindication of belief in God as properly basic. Plantinga does address the task of formulating epistemic criteria in his book, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). But a shift of epistemological paradigms has occurred in the meantime, from deontological justification to warrant conceived externalistically, and it remains somewhat unclear how this new material is to be related to the earlier work on Reformed epistemology. Presumably these matters will be clarified in Plantinga's forthcoming book, *Warranted Christian Belief*.
8. According to ancient and medieval foundationalism, a belief is prop-

erly basic if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses.

9. It may be that there are cases in which one can decide either to accept a belief in a basic way or to accept it on the basis of propositional evidence. But ordinary perceptual beliefs like (13) do not seem to be good candidates.

10. William Wainwright has suggested, in conversation, that the evidential force of description may be high *for the person who had the experience*, even if it is lower for someone else. It does not seem to me, however, that the relation of evidential support between two propositions can vary in this way. (It can vary due to differences in background information, but simply having had the experience will not by itself put the experiencer in possession of additional background information.) My proposal is rather that the additional warrant enjoyed by the experiencer derives, not from the propositional description of the experience, but rather from her recollection of the experience itself, with the proposition serving as a reminder. So interpreted, the case does not constitute a counterexample to my generalization.

11. I believe Quinn is being somewhat unfair to Plantinga here, though no doubt unintentionally so. I suggest we should rather understand Plantinga as holding the more plausible principle

(19*) For all p and q , p is good evidence for q only if it is possible for someone to construct a cogent argument from p to q .

And Plantinga may very well suppose that, given that many acute philosophers have tried strenuously to find a cogent answer to the problem of the external world and have failed to do so, it is likely that the construction of such an argument is impossible.

12. See, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil," *Philosophical Studies* 1980, pp. 1-53.

13. I believe Plantinga is troubled and perplexed by the phenomena of evil, but his sense of the greatness of God and the insufficiency of human reason makes him despair of our ability to provide much in the way of constructive understanding of it. If so, this is a classically Reformed response—and as such, it will be appealing to some contemporary theists, but certainly not to all.

14. It may be, however, that Marx, Freud, and other projection theorists were not actually committing this fallacy. Rather they may have concluded on evidentialist grounds that God does not exist.

15. It will not be sufficient for the theist to claim in the connection that, since God's sustaining activity is required for the existence of all objects, persons, and events, *no* experience can be explained "without reference to the presence and activity of God." In order to claim that the experiences confer justification, the theist must hold that involved in those experiences in a direct and specific way.

16. My own mother, an extremely devout person, once mentioned to me that, when she first learned of the psychological explanations of religion, she was unable to pray for several months. I suspect that, for many contemporary theists, the thought that one's own religious affections may be the projections of psychological needs is a sort of lingering undercurrent of the religious life.

17. I have learned from Alvin Plantinga that his forthcoming book, *Warranted Christian Belief*, will contain an extensive discussion of projection theories.

18. In correspondence, Quinn states, "I agree completely that the intellectually sophisticated theist will need to deal with the problem of religious diversity or pluralism. My thoughts on this topic are contained in my 'Towards Thinner Theologies: Hick and Alston on Religious Diversity'."

(*International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 38 [1995], pp. 145-64)."

19. This point has been made by a number of authors. Consider, e.g., William Hasker, "On Justifying the Christian Practice," *The New Scholasticism* 60 (1986), pp. 129-44; David Basinger, "Hick's Religious Pluralism and 'Reformed Epistemology': A Middle Ground," *Faith and Philosophy* 5:5 (1988), pp. 421-432; and William Wainwright, "Religious Language, Religious Experience, and Religious Pluralism," in Thomas D. Senor, ed., *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 170-88. Alston now agrees that it is advisable to use all available means, including metaphysical and historical arguments, to resolve the ambiguity created by the plurality of mystical practices; see his *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), chapter 7. Plantinga, so far as I am aware, has not yet addressed the issue.

20. It would be premature to claim that there is a consensus on this point, but I believe it is possible to discern a movement in the direction of such a consensus. In addition to the sources cited in the previous note, several of the essays in *Rational Faith* call for such a broad-based apologetic strategy, one which includes the non-inferential justification of belief by experience as well as metaphysical and historical argument and responses to the various potential defeaters of religious belief. Even Plantinga has softened in his attitude towards natural theology; he has delivered (but not so far published) a paper entitled "Two Dozen (Or So) Arguments for the Existence of God."

21. It will, of course, be important to refrain from the excessive claims to demonstrative certainty characteristic of much traditional natural theology—claims which provide all too easy a target for critics of theism.

22. Even the atheists gain by this; they will have more and better grist for their mills than ever before!

23. I wish to acknowledge helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay from William Alston, David Basinger, Alvin Plantinga, Philip Quinn, and William Wainwright.