

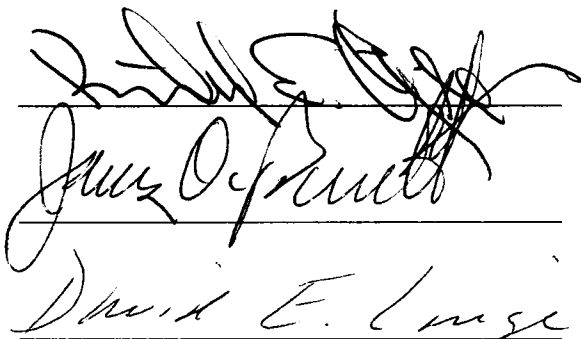
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Michael Douglas Krogman entitled "The Role of Evidence in Reformed Epistemology." I have examined the final copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Philosophy.



Sheldon Cohen, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:



Accepted for the Council:



Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

THE ROLE OF EVIDENCE IN REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michael Douglas Krogman
December 1998

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DEDICATION

To Janice, who has made me the richest of men.

Proverbs 31:10

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

"To steal ideas from one person is plagiarism; to steal from many is research."¹

Though I am, in places, critical of their work, Reformed epistemologists, like Plantinga, Wolterstorff, Alston, and Mavrodes have done more to shape and mold my noetic structure than any other group of thinkers. I consider them giants in the field of the philosophy of religion and I am grateful for their work.

Many have had a hand in the development of this dissertation. I am indebted, first and foremost, to the members of my dissertation committee, Drs. Sheldon Cohen, Richard Aquila, Jim Bennett, and David Linge, for their critiques and suggestions. Though difficulties with the final product remain my own, this dissertation would not be what it is without their guidance.

Fellow graduate students Kippy Myers and Matt Massey have also assisted in asking thought-provoking questions that have shaped this writing. One of the primary tasks of the philosopher is to get others to think. For this reason I deem Kippy and Matt first-rate philosophers.

I would also like to thank the Theist Club, particularly Frank Mashburn and Ron Pickell, for suffering through seemingly endless tirades concerning Plantinga, proper basicity, and evidence. Their encouragement and thoughts have been timely and insightful.

Lastly, a special thanks is offered to my wife Janice and son Stephen for giving me the time and space necessary to finish this dissertation.

¹ *Smokies Signal*, a publication of Smoky Mountain Mensa, ed. Tom Pritchard. 21:1 (January 1998): 7.

ABSTRACT

Philosophers associating themselves with a Calvinist interpretation of Christianity, like Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, and George Mavrodes, have recently argued that belief in God is properly basic. Since the existence of God is foundational, evidence is not required and should not be sought. I believe that Reformed thinkers are mistaken in the role they assign to evidence. Pointing to their own philosophical and theological grounding in Thomas Reid and John Calvin, I argue that, even though belief in God is foundational, evidence can and *should* play a role with respect to theistic belief. Evidence confirms and modifies even basic beliefs and is necessary to adjudicate between rival religious beliefs. It should therefore be afforded a greater role in Reformed epistemology.

PREFACE

The first time I read *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (the defining text of Reformed epistemology) I was confused. Very little of what was written made any sense to me. Furthermore, those parts that I thought I *did* understand were unpalatable. My first impression, confirmed in conversation with others, was that the view was wholly irrational and fideistic.

Upon closer examination, however, I found that previously unclear portions were persuasive and that my previous thoughts about the position constituted a misrepresentation. I began to rethink all that I had previously held with respect to belief in God. My quandary was compounded when a fellow graduate student asked, "If no cogent or sound argument for the existence of God could be found and if all of the arguments you currently find persuasive were conclusively deemed faulty, would you continue to believe in God?" After some serious thought I had to admit that I would. No small admission for one who had previously been the poster-child for Clifford's maxim "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."² I realized that, though I *thought* I believed in God because of arguments for His existence, I did not genuinely believe that arguments were necessary. Perhaps belief in God was foundational.

Yet I was troubled by some of the claims made by Plantinga and others. It seemed as though the Reformed epistemologist had gone too far in completely rejecting any role for evidence. Without appeal to argument and evidence, opposing religious systems are all equally grounded. This work stems from a desire to meet this difficulty and

² William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular*

others like it. Though I take belief in God to be foundational, I also believe that evidence can serve a critical role with respect to this belief.

Chapter One is an exposition of the Reformed epistemologist's rejection of evidentialism. According to thinkers like Plantinga and Wolterstorff, evidentialism is rooted in a type of classical foundationalism espoused in Scholasticism and the Enlightenment. Reformed thinkers reject classical foundationalism, and its associated evidentialism, because it faces insurmountable difficulties. Externally, there are problems regarding what constitutes justification and regarding a sufficient number of foundational propositions. Internally, the traditional approach is deemed counterintuitive and self-referentially incoherent: intuitively rational claims are designated irrational and it fails its own criteria. As a result, though an analysis of natural atheology is considered relevant for Plantinga, the majority of Reformed thinkers assert that arguments of natural theology are unnecessary for grounding belief in God.

The alternative to evidentialism provided by Reformed thinkers is described in Chapter Two. Relying on the works of John Calvin and Thomas Reid, Calvinists defend the view that belief in God is appropriately foundational or properly basic. As a foundational belief, evidence should be neither expected nor sought. In this respect Reformed epistemology is similar to the approaches of the pragmatist William James and the presuppositionalist Cornelius Van Til.

Chapter Three addresses the various objections against the view that belief in God is properly basic. Though many objections are

easily countered, requiring either a clearer understanding or minor revision of Reformed epistemology, others are more serious. Reformed epistemology justifies contradictory alternatives, draws a distinction between "positive" and "negative" apologetics and argument where none exists, misconstrues the status of specific claims of religious experience, fails to realize evidence can play a role even with respect to foundational beliefs, and attempts to ground belief in God by means of argument by analogy when a preferable alternative exists.

A proposed revision of Reformed epistemology that grants a larger role for evidence is discussed in Chapter Four. I recommend that Reformed thinkers follow Reid's approach more closely in identifying first principles and sketch a way in which the existence of God and the reliability of religious experience can both be judged first principles.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE REJECTION OF EVIDENTIALISM	1
Preliminaries	1
Source of Evidentialism: Classical Foundationalism	3
Exposition	3
Proponents	6
History of Evidentialism: Scholasticism and the Enlightenment.....	8
Scholasticism	8
Enlightenment	11
Evaluation of Evidentialism: Rejected	35
External Difficulties	37
Internal Difficulties	44
Natural Theology and Atheology	49
Natural Theology	50
Natural Atheology	61
II. THE ALTERNATIVE TO EVIDENTIALISM	80
Theological Background: Calvin	80
Philosophical Background: Reid	93
Theory of Rationality	95
The Existence and Role of God	116
Reformed Epistemology	120
Compared to Reid	120
Belief in God as Properly Basic	129
Similar Approaches	136
William James	136
Cornelius Van Til	149
III. OBJECTIONS	172
Less Serious Objections	174
Indirect Objections	174
Direct Objections	194
More Serious Objections	220
Justifies Contradictory Alternatives	220
Faulty Use of Evidence	227
Conclusion	243
IV. EPILOGUE: CONCLUDING SPECULATION REGARDING A LARGER ROLE FOR EVIDENCE	245
Mitigating Factors	248
Nature of the Object	249
Nature of the Subject	252
Relationship Between Subject and Object	253
First Principles	257
Case Study: Law of Non-Contradiction	259
The Existence of God as a Metaphysical Necessary First Principle	264
The Reliability of Religious Experience as a Contingent First Principle	279
Conclusion	294
BIBLIOGRAPHY	297
VITA	307

CHAPTER I

THE REJECTION OF EVIDENTIALISM

A. PRELIMINARIES

One of the most recent approaches regarding the relationship between faith and reason in the philosophy of religion is "Reformed Epistemology" or "Calvinist Epistemology".¹ The most well-known book associated with the approach is *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*—edited by Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. In it one finds perhaps the clearest and most detailed work by the leading spokespersons of the position. Ronald Nash, David Clark, Robert Pargetter, and others all find affinities with Reformed epistemology. It unnecessary to examine the views of all those who look favorably on the approach. For the leading exponents who have done most of the work and have advanced the position farthest number three: Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and to a lesser extent William Alston. All have made significant contributions to the approach and have assisted in making it what it is today.

This is, of course, not to say that there is complete agreement regarding what Reformed epistemology is; in many ways it is easier to categorize the approach by what it is *not*. As stated previously, Reformed epistemologists align themselves with Calvinian thinking (both theologically and philosophically). As such, they reject an evidential approach to substantiating the claims of theism in general

¹ So named because of its link with philosophers and theologians who align themselves with a Continental Reformed (or Calvinist) tradition (Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Introduction," *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p.7.).

and Christianity in particular. They hold that it is either unnecessary, impossible, or inadvisable to seek such proofs or arguments and therefore all such attempts should be abandoned.

Most Calvinian epistemologists locate the most thoroughgoing explication of evidentialism in the enlightenment: particularly the classical foundationalism of Descartes and Locke. Although they agree that classical foundationalism should be rejected, there appears to be less consensus as to what should replace it. At times Plantinga appears to offer an alternate form of foundationalism, while Wolterstorff eschews any form of foundationalism and claims his view is a coherence theory.² Alston appears to offer a theory of reliabilism³, a type of externalism which Plantinga rejects because "... it omits a crucial component of warrant ... that of *proper function* or absence of dysfunction."⁴ Wolterstorff also claims his theory is *not* a form of reliabilism.⁵

Calvinist thinkers also tend to be unclear as to the exact nature of natural theology and natural atheology. Some claim it is a form of evidential apologetics and therefore reject it out of hand, while others make a distinction between evidentialism and natural theology. It also appears that there is unclarity regarding exactly what natural theology is and how, if a legitimate enterprise, it should be undertaken. Many of the ambiguities are simply due to the

² Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?" in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 172. It is interesting that Mavrodes points out that Wolterstorff's approach is foundational (George Mavrodes, "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited", in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 202).

³ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 184-192.

⁴ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. vii.

⁵ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" pp. 159-162.

program still being in its infancy. The field is ripe for new ideas and development, and much of the work remains unfinished.⁶

For this reason it is best to refrain from dogmatic assertions regarding what Reformed epistemology is or what all Calvinist epistemologists believe. Perhaps it is enough to say that as a whole they tend to 1) reject evidentialism, which arises out of classical foundationalism; 2) frown on the appropriateness or usefulness of natural theology; and 3) therefore claim evidence is unnecessary or illegitimate when substantiating the claims of the theist or Christian.

B. SOURCE OF EVIDENTIALISM: CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONALISM

1. EXPOSITION

If there is one notion that unifies Calvinist epistemologists more than any other it is the rejection of evidentialism in regards to matters of religious belief. According to Reformed thinkers, it is unnecessary and inappropriate to seek confirmation of one's religious convictions by appealing to evidence. One is warranted in believing such propositions without evidence. Certainly this is an approach that differs from that normally found among philosophers of religion. Many, both theist and atheist alike, claim that one must have evidence for *any* claim (let alone the religious) to be grounded or warranted. In other words, evidentialists demand that one provide evidence: propositions which entail or imply a specific conclusion that is held mediately.

The Reformed epistemologist rejects such notions by rejecting classical foundationalism, from which they think the notion of

⁶ A good example would be the fact that many are anxiously awaiting the appearance of Plantinga's third volume in his trilogy on warrant (to be titled: *Warranted Christian Belief* [Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current*

evidentialism springs. Reformed thinkers point out that the evidentialist challenge has two prongs:

... let me formulate more amply the objection to theistic conviction which I see as a characteristic of the modern Western intellectual. The objection can be seen as presupposing a challenge, call it the *evidentialist challenge* to theism. And this challenge can be thought of as consisting of two claims: first, if it is not rational to accept some proposition about God then one ought not accept it; and second, it is not rational to accept propositions about God unless one does so on the basis of others of one's beliefs which provide adequate evidence for them, and with a firmness not exceeding that warranted by the strength of the evidence.⁷

According to classical foundationalism, therefore, one is warranted in accepting a belief that is either foundational (meaning immediately and noninferentially known with certitude) or a belief that is derivable from, or justified by, a foundational belief (known mediately).⁸ In other words, one's epistemic structuring is analogous to the situation in which one finds oneself when engaging in geometry. One begins with indubitable certitudes (or axioms) that serve as the foundation for all other beliefs. If a belief is not foundational (if it is held mediately), one is obligated to provide evidence (meaning providing the foundational beliefs that are either individually or together said to entail such a belief).⁹

In the words of Wolterstorff, a foundationalist "will begin by making a distinction between those of our beliefs which we hold on the basis of others of our beliefs and those which we do not hold on the basis of other beliefs of ours—those which we hold *immediately* ..." ¹⁰

Debate, p. viii.)).

⁷ Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 136.

⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 28-29.

⁹ Obviously the geometry analogy breaks down for one does not always, or usually, derive one's mediately held beliefs deductively (in some kind of Cartesian sense).

¹⁰ "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 2. Obviously, when one is making the immediately-held/mediately-held distinction one is making an epistemic and not a temporal distinction. It is that the propositions are not held on the basis of others (mediated)—not that

Examples of immediately held propositions would therefore include claims like " $1+1=2$ " and "I feel dizzy" when one in fact feels so.¹¹ All foundationalists believe that any mediate belief is grounded or supported ultimately by immediately held beliefs. In other words, any belief that is not foundational can be "traced back," by way of reference, to foundational beliefs. Foundational beliefs, combined with other immediately held beliefs, result in beliefs which are held mediate (on the basis of immediate beliefs) which may themselves in turn be used to arrive at additional mediate beliefs *ad infinitum*.

Where foundationalists tend to differ is with respect to how various propositions are linked with one another (how one belief provides an evidential grounding for another). Foundationalists also differ as to what sorts of beliefs are foundational (or are held immediately—that require no support or evidence from other propositions). Foundationalists, therefore, "... all agree that every person's structure of rationally held beliefs will have this foundation/superstructure character. But they disagree on just what is to be found in the foundation—and on how the superstructure is supported by the foundation."¹²

What sorts of beliefs, then, does a *classical* foundationalist accept as immediately-held propositions? Here, Plantinga provides the clearest picture. Plantinga's terminology for concepts affirmed within classical foundationalism differs slightly from those of Wolterstorff, but he acknowledges the same basic structure and examples. For "immediately held beliefs" Plantinga uses the phrase

the proposition is held instantaneously (though there often is a link). Wolterstorff and others are stressing the original definition of "immediate" and "mediate"—not their contemporary usage.

¹¹ Wolterstorff, "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 2.

¹² Wolterstorff, "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 3.

"basic beliefs," for "mediately," Plantinga uses the term "nonbasic."

According to foundationalism, then,

... some of my beliefs may be based upon others; it may be that there are a pair of propositions *A* and *B* such that I believe *B*, and believe *A* on the basis of *B*. An account of a person's noetic structure, then, would specify which of his beliefs are basic and which nonbasic. Of course it is abstractly possible that none of his beliefs is basic; or perhaps he holds just three beliefs, *A*, *B*, and *C*, and believes each of them on the basis of the other two. ... And it is also possible that *all* of his beliefs are basic ... In the typical case, however, a noetic structure will include both basic and nonbasic beliefs.¹³

Hence, the classical foundationalist claims that a typical noetic structure is a combination of basic (immediately held) and nonbasic (mediately held) beliefs. Plantinga also points out that, according to classical foundationalism, beliefs differ in degree: one may hold one belief more firmly than others. Finally, some beliefs are more important than others—what Plantinga refers to as "depth of ingression." "Some of my beliefs are, we might say, on the periphery of my noetic structure. I accept them, and may even accept them firmly, but I could give them up without much change elsewhere in my noetic structure."¹⁴

2. PROPONENTS

As was stated previously, classical foundationalism is not a view that is held exclusively either by theists or atheists. Foundationalism cuts blindly across widely divergent groups of thinkers. Applied to religious belief, it is not solely the atheist who demands that one support or give evidence for a religious proposition. The theistic evidentialist too, acknowledges that evidence should be given and reciprocates by demanding that the atheist also provide justification for her own claims. Hence

¹³ "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 48-49.

¹⁴ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 49, 50.

individuals like William Clifford, Bertrand Russell, and Anthony Flew all claim that belief in God is irrational or unreasonable because there is insufficient evidence for it.

Russell claimed that if after dying he found out God existed and was brought before Him his excuse for unbelief would be "'Not enough evidence God! Not enough evidence!'"¹⁵ According to Russell one should believe a claim to the degree the evidence warrants, a statement that is echoed in Clifford's famous assertion that it is always wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence. Contemporary atheists sing a similar refrain. Flew is famous for his "presumption of atheism" which demands theists give evidence for their belief.¹⁶

But the atheists are not alone in their demand for evidence. Numerous theistic contemporary philosophers and theologians acknowledge that for their theism to be rational they must provide evidence for it. Examples are many—Richard Swinburne, Peter Kreeft, A.E. Taylor, and the like all attempt to provide evidence as justification for theistic belief. Even more ironically, historically speaking, it appears to have been the theist, and not the atheist, who first claimed that one must provide evidence for the claim that God exists. For evidentialism appears to have been strongest and most clearly explicated during the enlightenment when two theists, Descartes and Locke, helped shape the course of classical foundationalism to come. As Plantinga has pointed out: "Classical

¹⁵ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 17, 18. Here Plantinga is citing Wesley Salmon, "Religion & Science: A New Look at Hume's Dialogues," *Philosophical Studies* 33 [1978]: 176.

¹⁶ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 25. Obviously, many have pointed out, such an approach is blatantly *ad hoc*—for the opposite presumption is just as warranted (Flew is also required to provide evidence for his nonbelief).

foundationalism has been dominant in Western epistemology ever since the Enlightenment ..."¹⁷

C. HISTORY OF EVIDENTIALISM: SCHOLASTICISM AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

1. SCHOLASTICISM (AQUINAS)

Certainly when it is claimed that classical foundationalism has been dominant since the time of the Enlightenment this does not rule out its history's going back much farther. In reality classical foundationalism is an ancient approach in the field of epistemology. Wolterstorff traces its beginnings all the way back to Aristotle,¹⁸ and most acknowledge that it was also a major theme during the scholastic period. For example, Aquinas (who, as is well known, was heavily influenced by "the Philosopher", Aristotle) is said to have held to a form of classical foundationalism. The link between Aristotle and Aquinas is fairly straightforward. "Aristotle suggests that the principles of a science must be self-evident; and Aquinas sometimes seems to follow him in holding that *scientia*, properly speaking, consists in a body of propositions deduced syllogistically from self-evident first principles ..."¹⁹ In other words, according to Aquinas, some propositions (like $1+2=3$) are known immediately whereas other propositions (like $2792+698=4$) are known mediately.²⁰

In Aquinas there are two sorts of propositions that are known immediately "... whose truth we simply see ..."²¹: there are self-evident propositions, and there are propositions that are evident to the senses. An example of a self-evident proposition would be a

¹⁷ "Preface," in *Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. v.

¹⁸ *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 30.

¹⁹ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 40 (cf. also Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, pp. 30-31 for more on Aquinas).

²⁰ Cf. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 41.

²¹ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 43.

proposition like $1+2=3$. By contrast, a proposition is evident to the senses "... if we human beings have the power to determine its truth by looking at, listening to, tasting, touching, or smelling some physical object."²² Hence "I smell bacon" and "this coat is blue" would be examples of immediately held propositions which are evident to the senses. Applied to religious belief, Aquinas is said to have believed that one can have *scientific* knowledge of God's existence (cf. his Five Ways in the *Summa Theologiae*). Yet few have the ability, desire, or time to engage in such demonstrations; therefore the majority of those who believe in God do so on faith.²³ Plantinga sums up the matter in the following way:

Let us say that a proposition is *basic* for me if I believe it and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions. ... I believe that $2+1=3$, for example, and do not believe it on the basis of other propositions. I also believe that I am seated at my desk, and that there is a mild pain in my right knee. These too are basic for me; I do not believe them on the basis of others. Now the propositions we are rationally justified in accepting as basic, thinks Aquinas, are the ones we see to be true: those that are self-evident or evident to the senses. As for the rest of the propositions we believe, we are rational in accepting them only if they stand in a certain relationship to those that are properly basic.²⁴

A proposition held mediately (or in a nonbasic way) is therefore rational if it is probable with respect to beliefs that are properly (or appropriately) basic-beliefs that are either self-evident or evident to the senses.²⁵

²² Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 43.

²³ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 44.

²⁴ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 46-47.

²⁵ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 47. At this point Plantinga is careful to point out that Aquinas also appears to present another way of grounding a belief in God. Whereas his Five Ways constitute a mediate or nonbasic approach to belief in God, Aquinas also appears to present the possibility of grasping God's existence immediately or intuitively. Plantinga cites the following from *Summa Contra Gentiles* III 38:

... there is a common and confused knowledge of God which is found in practically all men; this is due either to the fact that it is self-evident that God exists, just as other principles of demonstration are ... or, what seems indeed to be

At this point it should be noted that even though Plantinga associates medieval thinkers (particularly Thomas Aquinas) with classical foundationalism, this does not entail or imply that Reformed epistemologists believe such thinkers were necessarily engaged in evidential apologetics.²⁶ Wolterstorff distinguishes natural theology and evidential apologetics.²⁷ The former appears to have a possible legitimate application whereas the latter does not.²⁸

I have said that the evidentialist challenge and objection to theistic conviction, along with the attempt to cope with the challenge by practicing evidential apologists, are peculiar to modernity. Some will question this claim by pointing to the practice of natural theology among the medievals. The reply is that natural theology was a different project from evidentialist apologetics—even though the same arguments may occur in both.²⁹

According to Wolterstorff both Aquinas and Anselm were not offering arguments to substantiate or justify a particular claim. Rather, their goal was "... to transmute what already one believed into something known. Demonstration was seen as indispensable to this transmutation project."³⁰

true, that man can immediately reach some sort of knowledge of God by natural reason. (Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 47.)

Indeed, such an approach comes very close to mirroring Plantinga's own Reformed view.

²⁶ Evidential apologetics is the attempt to defend Christianity's truth claims by appeal to evidence.

²⁷ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" pp. 140-141. It is unclear as to whether all Calvinian epistemologists would agree with such a distinction.

²⁸ This may help explain why Plantinga in his *God and Other Minds* and *God, Freedom, and Evil* analyzes the various arguments in natural theology and natural atheology. An exposition and evaluation of those classical arguments will be given later in this work.

²⁹ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" pp. 140-141.

³⁰ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 141. Whether in fact the foregoing is an accurate assessment is somewhat trivial. The important thing to note is that Wolterstorff (and presumably other Reformed thinkers) recognizes such a distinction—a recognition that, as will be seen later, might allow room for a greater role for evidence (in the form of natural theology) in forming and confirming religious belief.

2. ENLIGHTENMENT

a. Exposition: Descartes and Locke

While the scholastic period witnessed the rise of classical foundationalism, it was during the enlightenment that the view reached its pinnacle. To do justice to classical foundationalism, therefore, it is necessary to "... go back to the fountainheads of Western theory of knowledge, those twin towers of Western epistemology, Descartes and Locke."³¹ The importance of these two thinkers to current approaches in epistemology cannot be overestimated. It is therefore necessary to discuss both, and Locke in particular, in detail. This is because, according to Wolterstorff, the basis for Locke's evidential challenge "... was his adherence to classical foundationalism with respect to rationality. Though Descartes was certainly a classical foundationalist, it is doubtful that he was that for anything other than scientia."³² This challenge would obviously apply to a belief in God in general, and Christian theism in particular. Since the central claim was neither self-evident nor incorrigible evidence was therefore necessary.³³

According to Plantinga, Descartes and Locke are both classical internalists.³⁴ What this means is "... that what determines whether a belief is warranted for a person are factors or states in some sense internal to that person; warrant conferring properties are in some way internal to the subject or cognizer."³⁵ Both thinkers also claim that obligation or duty is central to the doxastic enterprise. Descartes claims one should not affirm a claim unless it is perceived with

³¹ Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. 11.

³² Wolterstorff, "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 6.

³³ Wolterstorff, "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 16.

³⁴ *Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. 5.

clarity and distinctness and Locke claims one is only warranted to believe that which one has good reasons to believe.

The classical internalists think we need give no hostages to fortune when it comes to justification; here our destiny is entirely in our own hands. The fates may conspire to deceive me; or I could be wrong about whether there is an external world, or a past, or other persons; for all I can be really sure of, I may be a brain in a vat or the victim of a malevolent Cartesian demon who delights in deception; I may be wholly and hopelessly deceived. Even so, I can still do my epistemic duty; I can still do my best; I can be above reproach. Justification (unlike, say, a strong constitution) is not something that *happens* to a person; it is instead a result of her own efforts.³⁶

Plantinga identifies three motifs of the internalist.³⁷ First, epistemic justification is entirely up to the individual. Descartes and Locke both affirm that one is blameworthy or blameless depending upon the way in which one utilizes one's freedom of cognition. Regardless of whether one may be influenced by a malevolent demon or be a brain in a jar, justification (in the subjective sense) is still up to the individual. The second internalist motif states that objective and subjective duty often coincide. In other words, "*... what you objectively ought to do matches that which is such that if you don't do it, you are guilty and blameworthy.*"³⁸ "According to Locke and Descartes, I have a sort of guaranteed access to whether a belief is justified for me and also to what makes it justified for me: I cannot (if I suffer from no cognitive deficiency) nonculpably but mistakenly believe that a belief is justified or has the justification-making property."³⁹ This entails the final motif of internalism, for one only has the preceding type of access to a limited number of personal states and properties.⁴⁰

³⁶ Warrant: *The Current Debate*, p. 15.

³⁷ Found in Warrant: *The Current Debate*, pp. 19-25.

³⁸ Warrant: *The Current Debate*, p. 20.

³⁹ Warrant: *The Current Debate*, p. 22.

⁴⁰ This obviously would not apply, for example, to one's knowing the precise amount of blood in one's body or whether a particular group of

Perhaps the simplest way to see how the dominant epistemology of the Enlightenment worked itself out would be to view the ramifications of the evidentialist challenge in regards to religious belief. Here one need look no further than the epistemological status of faith in Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

b. Application: Faith in Locke⁴¹

Religion and the role of faith were at the core for Locke. As Wolterstorff correctly points out:

... a striking feature of Locke's thought is that religious considerations enter into all parts of his thought ... Our common practice of treating the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European philosophers as if they were secular philosophers does most of them a very ill turn.⁴²

Such a statement is confirmed if one researches the history surrounding the writing of the *Essay*. Locke writes the following in his Epistle to the Reader:

*Were it fit to trouble thee with the History of this Essay, I should tell thee that five or six Friends meeting at my Chamber, and discoursing on a Subject very remote from this, found themselves quickly at a stand, by the Difficulties that rose on every side. After we had a while puzzled our selves, without coming any nearer a Resolution of those Doubts which perplexed us, it came into my Thoughts, that we took a wrong course; and that, before we set our selves upon Enquiries of that Nature, it was necessary to examine our own Abilities, and see, what Objects our Understandings were, or were not fitted to deal with.*⁴³

It should strike one as curious that Locke does not inform the reader as to the nature of the topic that was being discussed which

cells is functioning properly. "So the justification-making property will have to attach to such states as my believing thus and so, my being appeared to in such and such a fashion, my aiming at a given state of affairs, my trying to do something or other, and the like." (*Warrant: The Current Debate*, pp. 22-23.)

⁴¹ Wolterstorff addresses the role of Locke in classical foundationalism at length in "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" pp. 137-140, 142-145.

⁴² "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 174.

⁴³ John Locke, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975),

led to his writing of the *Essay*. Ramsey sheds some light in this area. It seems that James Tyrrell, one of the friends Locke mentions in his *Epistle*, wrote in his own personal copy of the *Essay* that they were discussing "the principles of morality and revealed religion."⁴⁴ If this is the case, one sees immediately how important it is to discuss Locke's own conclusions regarding faith—for it was a discussion of faith (or assent given to revelation) which partly served as a catalyst for the writing of the book. It is therefore necessary to address Locke's general epistemology (a discussion of belief and knowledge), followed by a more specific and detailed account of the relationship between reason and revelation. I hope it will then become clear why Locke responded the way he did to that group which he referred to as the "enthusiasts."

1.) Locke's General Epistemology: Knowledge and Belief

Before one is able to understand why Locke makes any of the particular statements about faith that he does, one must first understand Locke's general epistemology. Locke was clear as to his purpose in the *Essay*: "This, therefore, being my *Purpose* to enquire into the Original, Certainty, and extent of humane Knowledge; together, with the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent ..."⁴⁵. Thus, "fundamental in Locke's epistemology was his distinction between *knowledge* and *assent* (*belief*)."⁴⁶ But how did Locke define knowledge and belief? Locke defines knowledge in Book IV, chapter 1, section 2 as follows: "*Knowledge* then seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and

p. 7.

⁴⁴ I. T. Ramsey, "Editor's Introduction," to John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 9.

⁴⁵ I.1.2: p. 43.

⁴⁶ Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 175.

repugnancy of any of our Ideas".⁴⁷ Knowledge was also seen as certain.⁴⁸ Given the foregoing, it is easy to see how Locke is able to assert that that which has the certainty of true knowledge is indeed "very short and scanty."⁴⁹ But this only substantiates the claim that it was Locke's goal to explicate the limits of true knowledge—obviously that which counted as certain knowledge for Locke was very circumscribed indeed. But what of belief? Locke gives a definition of belief in IV.15.3:

Probability is likeliness to be true, the very notation of the Word signifying such a Proposition, for which there be Arguments or Proofs, to make it pass or be received for true. The entertainment of the Mind gives this sort of Propositions, is called *Belief*, *Assent*, or *Opinion*, which is the admitting or receiving any Proposition for true, upon Arguments or Proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain Knowledge that it is so. And herein lies the difference between *Probability* and *Certainty*, *Faith* and *Knowledge*, that in all the parts of Knowledge, there is intuition; each immediate *Idea*, each step has its visible and certain connexion; in belief not so.⁵⁰

Hence, according to Wolterstorff, the difference between assent or belief and knowledge is that belief or assent is *taking* some proposition to be true whereas knowledge is *seeing* some proposition to be true.⁵¹ Elsewhere Wolterstorff explains the difference as follows: "Knowledge is awareness of some fact; belief or assent, by contrast, is taking something to be a fact".⁵²

All of this is what Wolterstorff refers to as Locke's *official* doctrine. Certainly it does seem to be Locke's formal presentation of the distinction between belief and knowledge. Locke has clearly drawn the lines between that which can be called knowledge (that which is

⁴⁷ p. 525.

⁴⁸ Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 177.

⁴⁹ IV.14.1: p. 652.

⁵⁰ p. 655.

⁵¹ Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 176.

⁵² "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 177.

certain) and that which is belief or faith or assent (that which can only be probable). But although his official position may be that knowledge is *not* a species of assent, it appears that his unofficial position is that knowledge is a species of assent. As Wolterstorff points out, "... since Locke identifies one's knowing P with P's being certain for one, it follows that knowledge is a species of assent".⁵³ However, this statement is hedged with the following:

But whether knowledge be identified with insight, or with assent that is certain, it was clear to Locke that for life it is indispensable that we take certain things to be true without seeing, or even being certain, that they are true. The workings of our assent- and belief-forming faculties must, however, be governed.⁵⁴

Wolterstorff believes that it is possible to identify four essential principles in Locke's epistemology. The first is the Principle of Immediate Belief. One is to believe something immediately only if one knows it or if it is certain for one.

Often Locke will say that we are to believe something immediately only if we perceive it. But ... he finds himself forced to move away from that preferred position.

The remaining principles for *trying one's best* pertain to *mediate* assent to propositions. Locke himself singled out for special attention those cases of mediate assent to some proposition which are such that one knows the proposition demonstratively. The principle is that if one knows that some proposition is entailed by something that one knows immediately, then one is entitled to believe that proposition with near maximal firmness. In fact, however, this principle is entailed by Locke's principles for mediate belief generally ...⁵⁵

As for mediate believing, "... it is with evidence that one must begin. ... And the evidence must consist of things one knows. Belief is to be based on knowledge, on certitude: ideally, on insight."⁵⁶ This leads directly to a second principle.

⁵³ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 177.

⁵⁴ Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 178.

⁵⁵ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 182.

⁵⁶ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 183.

Wolterstorff calls Locke's second principle the Principle of Evidence. "One is not to believe something mediately until one has acquired evidence for it such that each item of evidence is something that one knows and such that the totality of one's evidence is satisfactory".⁵⁷

The third principle is the Principle of Appraisal. Here one is to withhold mediate belief in some proposition until one has examined the evidence and determined its logical force. Only then will one be able to determine the probability of any proposition.⁵⁸ Here Wolterstorff appears to have in mind Locke's discussion of Probability in Book IV, chapter 15, section 4:

Probability then, being to supply the defect of our Knowledge, and to guide us where that fails, is always conversant about Propositions, whereof we have no certainty, but only some inducements to receive them for true. The grounds of it are, in short, these two following:

First, The conformity of any thing with our own Knowledge, Observation, and Experience.

Secondly, The Testimony of others, vouching their Observation and Experience.⁵⁹

After the probability of certain propositions has been determined one then applies the fourth principle: the Principle of Proportionality. "Having determined the probability, on one's satisfactory evidence, of the proposition in question, one ought to adopt a level of confidence in it which is proportioned to its probability, on that evidence".⁶⁰

2.) Locke's Epistemology: Faith and Reason

It now becomes necessary to identify and determine the probability of that species of assent which Locke calls faith. Obviously, Locke (officially at least) is of the opinion that it does

⁵⁷ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 183.

⁵⁸ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 183.

⁵⁹ pp. 655-656.

⁶⁰ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 184.

not belong in the same category as knowledge. However, Locke *does* use the term "know" in conjunction with his discussion of faith more than once. Furthermore, Locke appears adamant that there is an aspect of faith which is certain. Such claims seem, at the very least, at odds with his categorization of faith as solely a species of assent or belief. The question is therefore, "what is the epistemological status of faith?" If it is merely a species of assent then what is one to do with those passages that seem to place faith under the heading of knowledge? In other words, how should one interpret those passages that seem, at the very least, to use the language that is usually reserved solely for intuitive or demonstrative knowledge? In order to answer these questions adequately one must turn to the eighteenth chapter of Book IV of Locke's *Essay*. Here (and in the surrounding chapters) Locke defines, categorizes, and describes the roles of reason and faith. As Locke states:

... I think we may come to lay down the Measures and Boundaries between Faith and Reason: the want whereof, may possibly have been the cause, if not of great Disorders, yet at least of great Disputes, and perhaps Mistakes in the World. For till it be resolved, how far we are to be guided by Reason, and how far by Faith, we shall in vain dispute,⁶¹ and endeavour to convince one another in Matters of Religion.

It is therefore necessary to define and describe both reason and faith. Locke defines them as follows:

[Reason is] ... the discovery of the Certainty or Probability of such propositions or Truths which the Mind arrives at by Deductions made from such Ideas ... [attained by sensation or reflection]
Faith, on the other side, is the Assent to any Proposition, not thus made out by the Deductions of Reason; but upon the Credit of the Proposer, as coming from GOD, in some extraordinary way of Communication. This way of discovering Truths to Men we call Revelation.⁶²

⁶¹ IV.18.1: pp. 688-689.

⁶² IV.18.2: p. 689. Elsewhere (IV.17.24: p. 687), Locke describes faith as "nothing but a firm Assent of the Mind."

Earlier, Locke had made the distinction between things which are "according to reason", "above reason", and "contrary to reason":

1. *According to Reason* are such Propositions, whose Truth we can discover, by examining and tracing those *Ideas* we have from *Sensation* and *Reflexion*; and by natural deduction, find to be true, or probable. 2. *Above Reason* are such Propositions, whose Truth or Probability we cannot by Reason derive from those Principles. 3. *Contrary to Reason* are such Propositions, as are inconsistent with, or irreconcilable to our clear and distinct *Ideas*.⁶³

Where does Locke categorize faith? It should be obvious by now that the assent to "above reason" is what Locke calls faith.⁶⁴ According to Copleston, "Revealed truths are those which are above, though not contrary to, reason, and the truth of which we know on the testimony of God".⁶⁵ It appears, then, that for Locke, faith is *not* knowledge:

... faith lacks the certitude requisite to knowledge. In his letter to Stillingfleet, the bishop of Worcester, he says that "the certainty of faith, if your lordship thinks fit to call it so, has nothing to do with the certainty of knowledge. ..." ⁶⁶

Further, in a letter to Stillingfleet Locke states:

"Faith stands ... upon grounds of its own," different from those of knowledge. "Their grounds are so far from being the same, or having anything common, that when it is brought to certainty, faith is destroyed; it is knowledge then, and faith no longer."⁶⁷

At first glance, such statements appear at odds with Locke's earlier affirmations regarding the nature of faith. Earlier in Book IV, Locke says regarding the certainty of faith:

Besides those we have hitherto mentioned, there is one sort of Propositions that challenge the highest Degree of our Assent, upon bare Testimony, whether the thing proposed, agree or disagree with common Experience, and the ordinary course of Things, or no. The Reason whereof is, because the Testimony is of such an one, as cannot deceive, nor be deceived, and that is

⁶³ IV.17.23.

⁶⁴ Ramsey, p. 10.

⁶⁵ Frederick Copleston, "Hobbes to Hume," vol. 5 in *A History of Philosophy* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1959), p. 120.

⁶⁶ Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 189.

⁶⁷ Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 190. Cf. *The Works of John Locke*, Rev. ed., 10 vols., vol. 4 (London: Thomas Davison, Whitefriars, 1823), p. 146.

of God himself. This carries with it Assurance beyond Doubt, Evidence beyond Exception. This is called by a peculiar Name, *Revelation*, and our Assent to it, *Faith*: which as absolutely determines our Minds, and as perfectly excludes all wavering as our Knowledge it self [sic]; and we may as well doubt of our own Being, as we can, whether any Revelation from GOD be true. So that Faith is a settled [sic] and sure Principle of Assent and Assurance, and leaves no manner of room for Doubt or Hesitation.⁶⁸

How is one to regard what looks to be a clear contradiction in the writings of Locke? On the one hand, it appears that faith (as simply a type of assent) carries with it only probability. On the other hand, Locke speaks of faith leaving no room for doubt. It is assurance beyond doubt; (a) there is no hesitation, (b) one has evidence beyond exception.⁶⁹ The answer to the problem is given in a continuation of Locke in chapter 16, section 14 of Book IV:

Only we must be sure, that it be a divine Revelation, and that we understand it right: else we shall expose our selves to all the Extravagancy of Enthusiasm, and all the Error of wrong Principles, if we have Faith and Assurance in what is not divine Revelation. And therefore in those Cases, our Assent can be rationally no higher than the Evidence of its being a Revelation, and that this is the meaning of the Expressions it is delivered in. If the Evidence of its being a Revelation, or that this its true Sense be only on probable Proofs, our Assent can reach no higher than an Assurance or Diffidence, arising from the more, or less apparent Probability of the Proofs.⁷⁰

In a sense, one may speak of there being complete certainty in the objects of faith. In such cases one is no longer dealing in probabilities, there need be no hesitation, there is no room for doubt: as Locke put it, "we may as well doubt of our own Being." But what is key is the latter part of the sentence: "as we can, whether any Revelation from GOD be true." Due to our intuitive knowledge about God and His nature, there is no doubt or hesitation in affirming that what He has revealed is true. The doubt, hesitation, or

⁶⁸ IV.16.14: p. 667.

⁶⁹ Michael Ayers, *Locke, Volume 1: Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 122.

⁷⁰ pp. 667-668.

probability arises when one is confronted with whether or not God has indeed revealed it. It is reason (which deals solely in the realm of probability) which decides whether or not a revelation is genuine. But if this is the case, it looks as though Locke has found himself with the proverbial weakest link in the chain argument. Perhaps an illustration would help.

Suppose that an individual (Mr. X) were to get a job as a philosophy instructor. Knowing that teachers of philosophy receive wages in the six digits⁷¹ Mr. X decides to buy a lavish and elegant home with open rooms and tall ceilings. One day he notices that a bulb has burned out in the den. Knowing that he is not tall enough to reach the full 16 feet up to the light and that he has already sent the butler home, Mr. X begins to construct a makeshift ladder from articles of furniture close at hand. He drags in a table from the kitchen but is unsure whether it will support his weight (he purchased it second-hand while still on the income of a graduate teaching associate). Mr. X therefore tentatively concludes that it will probably support him. He then grabs a newly purchased sturdy oak chair which (for the sake of argument) he is *certain* will support him; he *knows* it will support him. He places it on top of the table and now proceeds to climb up the furniture ladder. As he begins to climb atop the table his wife (always concerned about his health) enters the room and asks, "Are you sure that you are going to be supported in that chair?" Now there are two ways of looking at and responding to the question, and it appears that Locke reasons similarly in discussing the certainty of faith. On the one hand Mr. X is certain that the chair *qua* chair will support him (much in the same way that Locke can affirm that faith is certain in regards to true revelation).

⁷¹ Unfortunately this includes both sides of the decimal point.

However, if Mr. X were to look at the *foundation* upon which the chair rests (a foundation whose sturdiness and trustworthiness is only *probable*) he might respond prudently to his wife's query by stating, "No, I'm not--will you change it?"

This is similar to Locke's foundation for faith. For although faith in divine revelation is certain, the foundation upon which it rests is only probable. It is only by means of reason (which would only be able to yield probable conclusions) that one could say that a particular revelation really *is* a *genuine* divine revelation. Faith in divine revelation is certain, but it is only probable that a revelation is genuinely divine. As Ayers states: "Yet what is given so effusively to the 'evidence' of revelation is at once taken away."⁷² Why?

Because 'we must be sure, that it be divine Revelation and that we understand it right', all this security is rapidly reduced to probability. The term 'evidence' is here in effect being abused, since it stands for a merely conditional certainty. Locke is really arguing that nothing is, in this usual sense, 'evident' about revelation, apart from the platitude that what God has revealed is true.⁷³

This is why Locke stresses that revelation is to be subordinated to reason. In the end, it is Locke's goal to demonstrate that when revelation conflicts with natural certainty, the "revelation" cannot legitimately be *called* revelation.

Locke insisted, therefore, that even though God can certainly reveal truths which transcend reason, in the sense that reason alone cannot establish them as true, it must be shown by reason that they are in fact revealed before we can be expected to accept them by faith.⁷⁴

⁷² p. 122.

⁷³ p. 122.

⁷⁴ Copleston, pp. 120-121.

Locke states that it belongs to reason to judge if something is a revelation⁷⁵: there can be no revelation contrary to reason. He states in IV.18.4 that traditional revelation and reason can reveal the same truths yet the *knowledge* conveyed by traditional revelation can never be as sure as the knowledge conveyed by reason. For example, Locke states that if it were revealed that the sum of the three angles of a triangle were equal to the sum of two right angles this would not amount to as much certainty as would be obtained by personally comparing the two ideas and finding them equal (remembering that knowledge conveyed by reason is knowledge gained from the clear and distinct perception of the agreement [in this case] of our own ideas). Hence, Locke is able to conclude the following:

And therefore, *no Proposition can be received for Divine Revelation, or obtain the Assent due to all such, if it be contradictory to our clear intuitive Knowledge.* Because this would be to subvert the Principles, and Foundations of all Knowledge, Evidence, and Assent whatsoever: And there would be left no difference between Truth and Falshood, no measures of Credible and Incredible in the World, if doubtful Propositions shall take place before self-evident; and what we certainly know, give way to what we may possibly be mistaken in.⁷⁶

And again: "Faith can never convince us of any Thing, that contradicts our Knowledge".⁷⁷ Elsewhere, Locke states that "nothing that is contrary to, and inconsistent with the clear and self-evident Dictates of Reason, has a Right to be urged, or assented to, as a Matter of Faith, wherein Reason hath nothing to do".⁷⁸ Locke is asserting that if one were to accept a divine revelation as true when it conflicts with (or is contrary to) reason, one has given up the very basis for the possibility of *any* knowledge. This is a very important point for Locke to make, for, without it, Locke held that it

⁷⁵ IV.18.8.

⁷⁶ Locke, IV.18.5: p. 692.

⁷⁷ IV.18.5.

⁷⁸ IV.18.10.

would be impossible to distinguish that which was revealed by God from that which is a delusion of Satan.⁷⁹ Additionally, Locke makes it clear that if one does not keep the boundaries of faith and reason, and the two are not distinguished, there will be no room for reason. If this is the case, then ANY religion can be affirmed. As Locke affirms:

For, to this crying up of *Faith*, in opposition to *Reason*, we may, I think, in good measure, ascribe those Absurdities, that fill almost all the Religions which possess and divide Mankind. ... So that, in effect Religion which should most distinguish us from Beasts, and ought most peculiarly to elevate us, as rational Creatures, above Brutes, is that wherein Men often appear most irrational, and more senseless than Beasts themselves [Locke then quotes the famous dictum of Tertullian: *Credo, quia impossibile est*].⁸⁰

It should be abundantly apparent by now that faith IS NOT knowledge for Locke. But there does appear to be at least one place where Locke seems to state exactly the opposite. In IV.18.4-5 Locke speaks of us *knowing* that God has revealed something. Locke states that "For the Knowledge, we have, that this *Revelation* came at first from GOD, can never be so sure, as the Knowledge we have from the clear and distinct Perception of the Agreement, or Disagreement of our own *Ideas*".⁸¹ In section 5,⁸² Locke again brings up the notion of some kind of knowledge associated with revelation: "Since the whole strength of the Certainty depends upon our Knowledge, that GOD revealed it, which in this Case, where the Proposition supposed revealed contradicts our Knowledge or Reason, will always have this

⁷⁹ IV.19.13. Locke's answer to the question (how can one tell whether a revelation is from God or Satan) was that it can neither be contradictory to intuitive knowledge (IV.18.5) nor can it be the enunciation of a 'new simple idea.' Rather, it must be understandable (IV.16.4 and IV.18.7) (Ramsey, pp. 11, 12).

⁸⁰ IV.18.11: p. 696.

⁸¹ IV.18.4: p. 691.

⁸² p. 692.

Objection hanging to it, (*viz.*) that we cannot tell how to conceive that to come from GOD ..."

Wolterstorff believes that where Locke makes such claims they are to be regarded as "... slips of the pen on his part. They conflict with his repeated and emphatic insistence that the certainty required for knowledge is lacking in these cases."⁸³ This does appear to be an adequate interpretation of Locke's point in IV.18.5, but Locke's point in section 4 appears stronger. Here Locke espouses his belief in *degrees of knowledge*.⁸⁴ Why Wolterstorff would want to brush aside the passage as a "slip of the pen" seems puzzling, especially since he himself pointed out that Locke's unofficial doctrine was that knowledge is a species of assent.⁸⁵ Given this, and his general view that intuitive, demonstrative, and sensitive knowledge differ with respect to certainty, one would expect Locke to acknowledge degrees in knowledge.⁸⁶ In other words, it might prove beneficial to pursue the statements not as obvious conflicts with prior and clearer assertions or as mere slips of the pen. Perhaps, in chapter 18, one can see a qualification in what Locke means in his use of the term knowledge. It seems that Locke is here attempting to distinguish between different degrees of assent and perhaps inadvertently referred to a stronger degree as knowledge.

Be that as it may, although it may appear that, for Locke, all religious issues are matters of faith, this does not entail that everything that belongs to the realm of the religious is therefore a

⁸³ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 190.

⁸⁴ The notion of degrees in knowledge is central to his general view of knowledge.

⁸⁵ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 177.

⁸⁶ Two points need to be made here. First, it is not at all unreasonable that I am simply misunderstanding Wolterstorff's own position here. Second, credit should be given to Wolterstorff for being the only commentator referenced that even mentioned the fact that Locke wrote of one *knowing* that God revealed something.

matter solely of faith. Locke does believe that there are some religious issues of which one can have knowledge. Locke obviously held that one could have knowledge of God's existence⁸⁷ and it appears that he also held that one could know certain things about this God.⁸⁸

3.) Locke's Epistemology: Reason and Revelation

It now becomes necessary to spell out in greater detail the relationship between reason and revelation. If revelation and faith are to be subjected to reason because they do not authenticate themselves, what sort of evidence is required to substantiate a revelation as being authentic? Locke states that deductive links are not required (indeed they are not possible) for that which is "above reason." Rather, outward signs are given to convince individuals of those revelations.⁸⁹ In IV.19.15 Locke states:

Thus we see the holy Men of old, who had Revelations from GOD, had something else besides that internal Light of assurance in their own Minds, to testify to them, that it was from GOD. They were not left to their own Perswasions [sic] alone, that those Perswasions [sic] were from GOD; But had outward Signs to convince them of the Author of those Revelations.⁹⁰

Locke speaks of these outward signs in his *The Reasonableness of Christianity*. Locke asserts that individuals should believe the revealed truths of Christianity because of the two outward signs which make such a belief reasonable: fulfilled prophecy, and Christ's miracles.⁹¹ All of this is merely Locke's method of setting up the

⁸⁷ IV.10: pp. 619-630. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that Locke himself was successful in such a demonstration. As Wolterstorff states in regards to Locke's proof for the existence of God: "When compared to other variants, and formulations of variants, of the cosmological argument for God's existence, this is surely among the weakest ..." ("Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 189).

⁸⁸ Such as the claim that whatever God has revealed is necessarily true. Although Locke does not appear to spell out his reasoning behind such a claim, it appears obvious that Locke is reasoning based upon God's nature (omnibenevolent, cannot lie, etc.).

⁸⁹ Ramsey, p. 12.

⁹⁰ p. 705.

⁹¹ *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University

groundwork for his attack on the Enthusiasts in chapter 19. Locke had an aversion to enthusiasts (those who gave no objective reasons to support the claim that the ideas they received constituted divine revelation).⁹² Hence, in his response to enthusiasm,

... he recognized both the possibility of an illusion of "evidence" and the need to explain it. What he did and indeed had to do, was to reduce the purported evidence to mere conviction, and to demand grounds for the conviction.⁹³

As Locke himself pointed out, the enthusiasts were merely arguing in a circle:

For if I mistake not, these Men receive it for true, because they presume God revealed it. Does it not then stand them upon, to examine upon what Grounds they presume it to be a Revelation from GOD? or else all their Confidence is mere Presumption: and this light, they are so dazzled [sic] with, is nothing, but an *ignis fatuus* that leads them continually round in this Circle. *It is a Revelation, because they firmly believe it, and they believe it, because it is a Revelation.*⁹⁴

More simply put, the enthusiast *has* no evidence. The enthusiast has no outward sign (like a miracle or a fulfilled prophecy) to which he can point. His supposed evidence is no evidence at all, rather, "their Confidence is mere Presumption."

In the end, then, how should one categorize Locke? Locke was obviously an evidentialist.⁹⁵ As Passmore states, Locke appears to assent to something similar to Clifford's thesis in "The Ethics of Belief": "'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'".⁹⁶ As Wolterstorff points out, "... one must not merely have satisfactory evidence but must know or

Press, 1958); Ramsey, p. 13. Ramsey brings up a good point at this juncture: "May not intuition play the same part for propositions which are above reason as demonstration does in the case of propositions which are according to reason?" (p. 13).

⁹² Copleston, p. 120.

⁹³ Ayers, p. 124.

⁹⁴ Locke IV.19.10: p. 702.

⁹⁵ Wolterstorff, "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 185.

⁹⁶ J. A. Passmore, "Locke and the Ethics of Belief," in *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Idealism: British Academy Lectures on the History of*

believe the proposition *on the basis of satisfactory evidence*".⁹⁷ Many find such a position troublesome.

Locke's evidentialist epistemology of religious belief seems questionable to many. Locke was right on this: religious belief does not, with rare exceptions, satisfy his evidentialist demands. ... a significant number of philosophers have begun to suggest that it is rather Locke's evidentialist demands that ought to be given up for religion as well as for science and other matters.⁹⁸

In many ways Wolterstorff appears correct in his assessment concerning the inadequacy in Locke's epistemology. Generally speaking, evidential epistemology appears *prima facie* self-refuting. One need only ask Clifford what evidence he gives to support the claim that one ought to *always* believe "x" on the basis of sufficient evidence. More specifically, Locke seems to find himself in similar straits in several places in the *Essay*. Ayers provides one example:

Despite this vigorous endorsement of the natural faculties, however, there might seem to be something circular in Locke's epistemology with respect to the role of God. For he often seems willing to imply that the faculties owe their authority precisely to their bestowal by our creator. Even the fundamental epistemological doctrine that all simple ideas are 'true' and 'real' is presented in terms of a wise God's purposes for us, 'having set them as Marks of Distinction in Things, whereby we may be able to discern one thing from another'. Again, we are told that 'God has given me assurance enough of the Existence of Things without me.' Even the plea for the natural faculties in 'Of Faith and Reason' is made in God's name: to accept that revelation may contradict reason 'must overturn all the Principles and Foundations of Knowledge he has given us; render all our Faculties useless; wholly destroy the most excellent Part of his Workmanship, our Understandings'. The question arises whether Locke is not in the end guilty of something like the famous Cartesian circle, employing reason to justify reason: by means of my faculties, I can prove the existence of God; since God is not a deceiver, I can trust my faculties.⁹⁹

Ayers makes a good point, and it is difficult to imagine how

Philosophy, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 24.

⁹⁷ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 186.

⁹⁸ "Locke's Philosophy of Religion," p. 197. It is here where Wolterstorff believes one ought to adopt a "Reformed epistemology."

⁹⁹ pp. 122-123.

Locke might have answered. Obviously Locke has problems with his epistemology, and this is seen more acutely as the issue pertains to the relationship between faith and reason. However, one must keep in mind why Locke felt it necessary to affirm such a position. According to Locke, it was necessary to define the boundaries between faith and reason so that one would be able to distinguish between truth and falsity as it pertains to contrasting religious systems (e.g. Christianity versus Buddhism) and contrasting religious views within one particular system (e.g., "Orthodox" Christians versus "Enthusiasts"). It is easy to dismiss Locke's views of the epistemology of religion as having failed; it is an altogether different matter to attempt to explain a criterion by which one can accomplish his goals.¹⁰⁰ It may be due to the inadequacy of any other alternative that many contemporary thinkers have also embraced classical foundationalism and its corollary: evidentialism.

c. Influence: Contemporary Thinkers

As Plantinga views it, the dominant themes of twentieth century epistemology are three:

(1) justification is necessary and (along with truth) nearly sufficient for knowledge, (2) there is a strong connection between justification and evidence, and (3) justification involves internalism of two kinds (epistemic and personal internalism). Further, justification itself is taken as a matter of epistemic responsibility or aptness for epistemic duty fulfillment ..., as an "evaluation" of how well you have fulfilled your epistemic goals ..., as being believed or accepted on the basis of an adequate truth conducive ground ..., as being produced by a reliable belief-producing mechanism ..., as being supported by or fitting the evidence ..., and as a matter of things going right with respect to the knowing subject *qua* subject.¹⁰¹

According to Plantinga, each of the dominant themes (expressed by contemporary philosophers) obviously has its basis and starting point

¹⁰⁰ For, as will be seen in Chapter III, the alternative epistemology proposed by Reformed thinkers may once again open the Pandora's box of the Enthusiasts (a box Locke tried, but failed, to shut).

¹⁰¹ Warrant: *The Current Debate*, p. 25.

in a Lockean-Cartesian epistemology.¹⁰² Justification, internalism, and epistemic duties are all closely related: Justification is a deontological concept and internalism also stems from deontology.¹⁰³

Some theists might try to claim that belief in God requires no evidence and that argument is not necessary for belief.

Evidentialists (both atheists and theists) claim that one has a *prima facie* duty to try not to believe in God if one does not have evidence.¹⁰⁴

To be sure, Plantinga points out,

Presumably the objector does not mean to suggest that *no* propositions can be believed or accepted without evidence, for if you have evidence for every proposition you believe, then (granted certain plausible assumptions about the formal properties of the evidence relation) you will believe infinitely many propositions; and no one has time, these busy days, for that. So presumably *some* propositions can properly be believed and accepted without evidence. Well, why not belief in God? Why is it not entirely acceptable, desirable, right, proper, and rational to accept belief in God without any argument or evidence whatever?¹⁰⁵

The evidentialist quickly replies, "Belief in God does not meet the criteria established for a properly basic belief as established by classical foundationalism." So one must (to be rational) provide evidence or basic beliefs that serve as support for such a belief. What exactly are these criteria of classical foundationalism? Again, it is helpful to recognize the two chief time-periods when classical foundationalism was most clearly articulated: the scholastic and modern periods. This is important first, so that one does not confuse the teachings of the various thinkers and, second, because they differ on what counts as properly basic.

¹⁰² Warrant: *The Current Debate*, pp. 25-27.

¹⁰³ Warrant: *The Current Debate*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁴ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 39.

¹⁰⁵ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 39.

As previously stated, a properly (or appropriately) basic belief during the medieval period was a belief that was either self-evident (example: $1+2=3$) or "evident to the senses" (perceptual propositions like "the chair is on the floor"). The modern period (again, spearheaded by Descartes and Locke) accepted and propounded the foundational epistemology which was handed to them. They thereby made the same sorts of distinctions among various beliefs: some were held immediately (those that were basic) while other were held mediately (nonbasic propositions arrived at evidentially on the basis of basic propositions). But while the foundational structure was accepted (meaning the immediate/mediate or basic/nonbasic distinction) what qualified as a basic or immediately held belief was different from that established by Aquinas and others of the Middle Ages. Whereas Aquinas viewed immediate propositions as either self-evident or evident to the senses, modern epistemologists (again, beginning with Locke and Descartes) preferred self-evident and incorrigible.¹⁰⁶

The main reason, as Plantinga sees it, that modern thinkers generally rejected the notion that propositions that are evident to the senses are basic was that they were seeking certainty in constructing a rational noetic structure. Obviously Descartes' influence regarding clearly and distinctly known or perceived ideas (or propositions which are so certain that they cannot be doubted) is what Plantinga has in mind here. Propositions that are evident to the senses obviously do not meet such a strict criterion. One can *think* one is perceiving a bear when one is only seeing a stump (*a la* Laura Ingalls Wilder). One can *think* one smells bacon when no bacon exists. Similarly, one can seemingly hear, touch, or taste an object and be mistaken. The truth of the matter is that senses often deceive and,

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 55-59.

as Descartes demonstrated, it is even possible that they *always* deceive. For this reason, the medieval's "evident to the senses" criterion should be qualified—if not completely abandoned. Most propositions which are evident to the senses are nonbasic beliefs. Since they are not certain, they must be grounded (if possible) in propositions which are certain (namely, basic or immediately held propositions).

As previously intimated, it may not be necessary to reject the criterion completely. Considered broadly, there is more than one kind of perception. The five basic senses can best be described, for lack of a better phrase, as "external perception"¹⁰⁷—here, according to Reformed thinkers, modern philosophers claim that propositions do not have the requisite certainty to qualify as basic or immediately held. However, if perceptual beliefs are limited to those which are "internal" (claims about one's own mental life) one appears to have a legitimate criterion for proper basicity. Surely the number of such propositions would be much less than the total of all perceptual beliefs, both external and internal. That being said, however, this *does* increase basic beliefs beyond the self-evident. Additionally, one can be said to have claims with a higher degree of certainty among one's basic beliefs.

One could certainly, at this point, raise objections with respect to the Reformed thinkers' appraisal of modern epistemology. For it is by no means clear that modern philosophy rejected the criterion of evident to the senses. For example, though Locke claims that "These two, (*viz.*) Intuition and Demonstration, are the degrees of our Knowledge; whatever comes short of one of these, with what

¹⁰⁷ Although Plantinga himself does not make such a distinction.

assurance soever embraced, is but Faith, or Opinion, but not

Knowledge, at least in all general Truths"¹⁰⁸ he goes on to state that

There is, indeed, another *Perception* of the Mind, employ'd about the particular existence of finite Beings without us; which going beyond bare probability, and yet not reaching perfectly to either of the foregoing degrees of certainty, passes under the name Knowledge. There can be nothing more certain, than that the *Idea* we receive from an external Object is in our Minds; this is intuitive Knowledge. But whether there be any thing more than barely that *Idea* in our Minds, whether we can thence certainly infer [sic] the existence of any thing without us, which corresponds to that *Idea*, is that, whereof some Men think there may be a question made, because Men may have such *Ideas* in their Minds, when no such Thing exists, no such Object affects their Senses. But yet here, I think, we are provided with an Evidence, that puts us past doubting ...¹⁰⁹

Though Plantinga and others have failed to note that Locke does not conform to their characterization of modern epistemology, their assertion need merely be qualified to state that many modern philosophers did not include "evident to the senses" as a criterion for proper basicity.

The modern classical foundationalist thereby supplemented the criteria for basicity of the medievals. While the scholastic philosopher stressed self-evident and evident to the senses, the modern foundationalist stressed self-evident and incorrigible. By transforming the criterion of evident to the senses to incorrigible beliefs they limited the scope of beliefs. Whereas before, the proposition "I see an owl" was properly basic in an "evident to the senses" sort of way, the moderns have "I seem to see an owl." As opposed to "I see red" they have "I am appeared to redly."

Propositions of this latter sort seem to enjoy a kind of immunity from error not enjoyed by those of the former. I could be mistaken in thinking I see a pink rat; perhaps I am hallucinating or the victim of an illusion. But it is at the least very much harder to see that I could be mistaken in believing that I *seem* to see a pink rat, in believing that I am

¹⁰⁸ IV.2.14: pp. 536-537; my emphasis.

¹⁰⁹ IV.2.14: p. 537. I am indebted to Richard Aquila for bringing this point to my attention.

appeared pinkly (or pink ratly) to. Suppose we say that a proposition with respect to which I enjoy this sort of immunity from error is incorrigible for me; then perhaps Descartes means to hold that a proposition is properly basic for *S* only if it is either self-evident or incorrigible for *S*.¹¹⁰

It should now be clear why classical foundationalists, whether theist or atheist, claim that one must provide evidence for belief in God: belief in God does not meet the criteria for a properly basic belief. A belief in God is neither incorrigible, self-evident, nor (even if one wanted to broaden the criteria by adding a scholastic alternative) evident to the senses. Belief in God is not a claim about one's internal mental life: it is not like claiming "I am appeared to redly." Belief in God is not self-evident simply by the nature of the concepts involved (akin to Hume's relations of ideas or Kant's analytic statements): it is not like the claim "a bachelor is an unmarried male." According to classical foundationalists, belief in God is certainly not evident to the senses: it is not like the claim "I hold a pen in my hand."¹¹¹ Therefore, belief in God does not fall into any of the three main categories (keeping in mind that for most contemporary foundationalists only the first two criteria are legitimate) of properly or appropriately basic beliefs.

As such, if the proposition is going to be justified it must be *grounded* in basic propositions. If the proposition is not basic it is either irrational or nonbasic. If it is not irrational it is nonbasic. If it is nonbasic it must be supported by evidence for it to be classified as rational for belief. According to the contemporary classical foundationalist, one must "trace" belief in God (since a nonbasic belief) back to a set of propositions which are either incorrigible or self-evident (basic beliefs). This is accomplished by

¹¹⁰ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 58.

¹¹¹ And even if it were, this would count for naught since most modern and contemporary epistemologists would reject 'evident to the senses'

providing evidence. Unless one can do this, belief in God remains at best a groundless and unjustified belief, and, at worst, an irrational belief. As in geometry, if a proposition is not an axiom it must be grounded in propositions that are, if it is to be a proposition or claim that is to be believed.

This is the position of *any* foundationalist. It is not solely the atheist who stands atop the soapbox and cries out that for a belief in God to be rational one must provide evidence. The theistic evidentialist is also on the soapbox claiming that evidence must (and can) be given. The difference does not lie in the claim that evidence should be provided—the difference lies in the analysis of the existence of such evidence. The atheist claims the evidence is absent, lacking, or overridden by evidence against the claim (appealing to internal or external inconsistency, alternative explanations, and the like) whereas the theist claims there is adequate evidence to justify or warrant the claim that God exists. They agree evidence is needed—they disagree as to whether or not sufficient evidence exists.

D. EVALUATION OF EVIDENTIALISM: REJECTED

The Reformed thinker's response to the foregoing debate is not to join in the fray and attempt to argue that belief in God is rational by providing evidence for the proposition. According to Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and other Reformed epistemologists, *both* atheistic *and* theistic evidentialists are engaging in impossible or useless exchanges. Their response is not to join hands with theistic evidentialists atop the soapbox of classical foundationalism. Rather, such Calvinists go about dismantling the soapbox upon which all

as a proper criterion for an immediately held, basic belief.

evidentialists stand. For, according to Reformed thinkers, the whole enterprise of looking for evidence, on either side, is misguided and inappropriate. Belief in God, along with a myriad of other beliefs, does not require evidence. Even if belief in God is not incorrigible or self-evident, it still may be classified as properly basic. This is precisely Plantinga's claim: Belief in God is properly (or appropriately) basic, therefore one need not provide evidence for it to be rational.

As support for this claim, let us first explicate what is wrong-headed about the whole foundational approach which gave birth to evidentialism in the first place. Reformed thinkers are not alone in rejecting foundationalism. As Wolterstorff points out "... most philosophers who have seen clearly the structure of this particular option have rejected it. On close scrutiny they have found classical foundationalism untenable. And it makes no difference now whether it is construed as a theory of rational acceptance, or of knowledge, or of scientia."¹¹² Elsewhere Wolterstorff discounts the possibility of revamping foundationalism into a coherent system: "Of course, it is always possible that by a feat of prodigious imagination foundationalism can be revitalized. I consider that highly improbable ..."¹¹³

According to Wolterstorff, we are not "... justified in requiring of a foundationalist a *general criterion* for determining when one is and when one is not warranted in believing so-and-so ..."¹¹⁴

¹¹² "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 4.

¹¹³ *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 33. Ironically, then, one can view the Reformed epistemologist as reacting to Descartes' epistemology in much the same way he did to his predecessors. Desiring a more adequate and convincing theory of knowledge, Descartes preferred dismantling and starting from scratch to remodeling and bolstering the previous approach; this Wolterstorff, in turn, does with Descartes and his fellow classical foundationalists.

¹¹⁴ *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 35. What follows is

Furthermore, he points out that one can be warranted in believing something without having an adequate criterion for warranted belief. "I am surely warranted in my belief that I cannot jump to the moon. Yet I have no general criterion for warranted belief."¹¹⁵ However, there are certain other concepts that pose inextricable difficulties for the foundationalist;

In short, we would not be justified in demanding of the foundationalist either a satisfactory explication of the *concept* of being warranted in behaving so-and-so, or a satisfactory *criterion* as to when one is warranted in believing so-and-so. But the same cannot be said for the concept of a *theory's* belonging to *genuine science*. This concept does need explication, and the foundationalist offers it. ...

The foundationalist's explication of a theory's belonging to genuine science uses two main concepts: that of a theory's being *justified* by some foundational propositions, and that of *knowing something with noninferential certitude*.¹¹⁶

1. EXTERNAL DIFFICULTIES

a. Problems Regarding What Constitutes Justification

Wolterstorff describes justification as the relation of a theory to its foundation. According to Wolterstorff all attempts to explain the relation fail.

1.) Deductivism Inadequate

The traditional claim is that the relation between a proposition and its foundations is deductive. Beginning with certain axiomatic foundations, we derive additional propositions from those certain starting points. "One can see how this view is attractive. Deduction always and necessarily transmits truth from premisses to conclusions."¹¹⁷

explicated on pages 35-55 of this book.

¹¹⁵ Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, p. 36. Mavrodes makes similar kinds of claims in his "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited" essay in *Faith and Rationality*.

¹¹⁶ Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, p. 36.

¹¹⁷ Reason With the Bounds of Religion, p. 37.

Although this sounds like an appealing approach to the issue, deductivism is lacking as an adequate account of justification, for many, if not most, propositions that are intuitively considered rational and "... warranted of acceptance are not deducible from any foundation."¹¹⁸ The classic example of a deductive argument is the categorical syllogism

1. All humans are mortal
2. Socrates is human
3. Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The problem with this argument is the initial premise, for how has one arrived at the claim that "All humans are mortal"? A certain conclusion requires certain premises, but the initial premise is not certain. An adequate foundation for the conclusion solely on the basis of this argument requires an additional premise:

- 1a. All humans have been evaluated in terms of their mortality.

The problem is that there seems to be no way to confirm such a proposition along necessary or certain lines (without arbitrarily re-defining what is meant by "human" along *ad hoc* lines). "The conclusion seems inescapable: even so elementary a 'theory' as 'All swans have wings' cannot be deductively derived from foundational propositions. Yet are we not warranted in accepting it—or, if not this one, at least some other such universal propositions?"¹¹⁹

2.) Probabilism (Inductivism) Inadequate

If deduction does not give an adequate account of justification neither does its counterpart: probabilism. Although it obviously gives up entailment between propositions and their foundation, probabilism (or inductivism¹²⁰) presumably saves foundationalism as a theory. But does it? Does probabilism save the theory or merely

¹¹⁸ Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 37.

¹¹⁹ Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 38.

¹²⁰ 'Inductivism' is not a term utilized by Wolterstorff.

prolong its gradual death? For one still needs to address the relationship between a theory and its presumed foundations in a coherent and consistent fashion. It is worth quoting Wolterstorff at length:

A fundamental question about all such [inductive] arguments is, What justifies us in drawing a conclusion of that sort from a premiss of that sort? One might reply that such arguments need no justification, that we can apprehend them noninferentially and with certitude as satisfactory. The problem with that response is that it does not seem to be true. Already in the 18th century David Hume noticed that if nature is not uniform between what we have observed (the evidence) and what we have not, then this is surely not a satisfactory mode of argument; whereas if it is thus uniform, it is satisfactory.

So the question becomes, Are we warranted in believing that nature is thus uniform? Here there are two options open to the foundationalist. He can say that we know with certitude, whether inferentially or noninferentially, that nature is uniform. But surely we do not. None of us knows, let alone knows with certitude, that those segments of the world which have been observed are uniform with those which have not been. The other option is to say that on the basis of evidence it is *probably* true that nature is thus uniform. But that would be to offer an inductive argument—an inductive argument to justify the very principle we need to justify an inductive argument. In short, we are still in the situation that David Hume was in. We lack a justification for induction.

It is important to see that, as far as foundationalism is concerned, all probabilistic inductive arguments are equally untenable, for they all use a rule of inference that is neither known with certitude to be satisfactory nor known to be probably satisfactory. But this leaves us without any acceptable explanation of the relation theories bear to the foundation ... First it was demanded that a theory be provable with respect to the foundation. It turned out that the most acceptable theories were not. Then it was required that a theory be probable with respect to the foundation. It turned out that none were.

Now there is nowhere in these developments a *refutation* of foundationalism. We have not proved that a foundationalist justification of induction will *never* be discovered and developed, or that no satisfactory alternative to deductivism or probabilism will ever be proposed. But the developments we have sketched have made foundationalism look like an extremely unpromising theory.¹²¹

Wolterstorff goes on to point out that, as a matter of fact, an alternate criterion for justification exists. While many foundationalists have recognized the inadequacy of appealing to

¹²¹ Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, pp. 39-41.

deductivism or probabilism, this has not entailed a complete abandonment of the approach. Although the collapse of the two traditional approaches to justification implies that one is deprived of necessary and sufficient conditions for foundationalism, perhaps the bar merely needs to be lowered. Perhaps it is enough to identify a necessary condition. This has been the approach of those who espouse falsificationism.

3.) Falsificationism Inadequate

According to the falsificationist "... we can still give a necessary condition of a foundationalist sort for a theory's belonging to genuine science. Or, to put it the other way around, we can give a sufficient condition for a theory's *not* belonging to genuine science."¹²² Even though there are no necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory's acceptance, there are sufficient conditions for a theory's rejection. Hence, even though the foundationalist appears to give ground by moving from deductivism to probabilism and then to falsificationism, foundationalism need not be abandoned. But the question then becomes, Is falsification workable? Wolterstorff claims it is not; falsificationism only rarely demands that one reject a theory or proposition.

Every theorist confronts the world with a whole web of theoretical and non-theoretical beliefs. And seldom will there be a direct contradiction between his theory and what he takes as indisputably known. Rather, there will at best be a contradiction between *the whole web* of his beliefs and what he takes as indisputably known. It is then up to him to decide which of his beliefs to surrender. The wisest course may be to surrender the theory under consideration. Or it may be to surrender some other theory. But for answering that question the falsification rule gives us no guidance whatsoever.¹²³

¹²² Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 41.

¹²³ *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 43.

It is often the radical empiricist or the scientist who demands that a theory, at a minimum, be falsifiable to be rational.¹²⁴ But Imre Lakatos, cited by Wolterstorff¹²⁵, illustrates how even the scientist is caught in her own falsificationist web:¹²⁶

The story is about an imaginary case of planetary misbehavior. A physicist of the pre-Einsteinian era takes Newton's mechanics and his law of gravitation (N), the accepted initial conditions, I , and calculates, with their help, the path of a newly discovered planet, p . But the planet deviates from the calculated path. Does our Newtonian physicist consider that the deviation was forbidden by Newton's theory and therefore that, once established, it refutes the theory N ? No. He suggests that there must be a hitherto unknown planet p' which perturbs the path of p . He calculates the mass, orbit, etc., of this hypothetical planet and then asks an experimental astronomer to test his hypothesis. The planet p' is so small that even the biggest available telescopes cannot possibly observe it: the experimental astronomer applies for a research grant to build yet a bigger one. In three years' time the new telescope is ready. Were the unknown planet p' to be discovered, it would be hailed as a new victory of Newtonian science. But it is not. Does our scientist abandon Newton's theory and his idea of the perturbing planet? No. He suggests that a cloud of cosmic dust hides the planet from us. He calculates the location and properties of this cloud and asks for a research grant to send up a satellite to test his calculations. Were the satellite's instruments (possibly new ones, based on a little-tested theory) to record the existence of the conjectural cloud, the result would be hailed as an outstanding victory for Newtonian science. But the cloud is not found. Does our scientist abandon Newton's theory, together with the idea of the perturbing planet and the idea of the cloud which hides it? No. He suggests that there is some magnetic field in that region of the universe which disturbed the instruments of the satellite. A new satellite is sent up. Were the magnetic field to be found, Newtonians would celebrate a sensational victory. But it is not. Is this regarded as a refutation of Newtonian science? No. Either yet another ingenious auxiliary hypothesis is proposed or ... the whole story is buried in the dusty volumes of periodicals and the story never mentioned again.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Cf. Flew's story of the "Invisible Gardener" and its application to religious belief.

¹²⁵ Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, p. 45.

¹²⁶ Certainly one need look no further than Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to bear out this point.

¹²⁷ Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programs," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 100-101.

Hence, according to Wolterstorff, falsificationism is insufficient to explain what constitutes the justification of a theory or proposition. Neither deductivism, probabilism, or falsificationism are adequate accounts of justification. But he does not stop there. Wolterstorff also claims that there are problems associated with finding a sufficient number of propositions that belong to the foundation in the first place.

b. Problems Regarding a Sufficient Number of Foundational Propositions

According to Wolterstorff, there are difficulties associated with the notion that one can have such foundational propositions in the first place. He is questioning whether one can know a proposition "... noninferentially and with certitude to be true."¹²⁸ By certitude, Wolterstorff has in mind indubitability¹²⁹ so the issue is whether one can know something noninferentially and indubitably. He then asks if we can know whether an object is a specific color and claims that not all individuals will be able to acquire this kind of indubitable knowledge. One may think that an object, like someone's shirt, is gray when in fact it is red. If someone is color-blind or under the influence of some external force (like drugs or alcohol) or if the lighting is poor it is not at all unreasonable to conclude that one's assessment can be faulty.¹³⁰

But certainly the foundationalist has a way of dealing with such perceptual mistakes. Individuals can come to learn "... laws to the effect that if one is a perceiver of such-and-such a situation, then in using one's perceptual capacities probably such-and-such objects will appear different from the way they are with respect to such-and-such properties. Further, we even learn certain laws specifying how

¹²⁸ Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 46.

¹²⁹ *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 48.

¹³⁰ Cf. Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 49.

such an object in such a condition will appear instead."¹³¹ For example, if one is color-blind one knows that the street signal one sees as blue is really green; the shirt one sees as green under yellow light is blue, and so forth. But according to Wolterstorff such a response does not resolve the difficulty, it only *postpones* it. For, "... how could we possibly acquire an indubitable knowledge of all such laws and of the fact that we know all such laws? ... For may it not be that some noxious chemical of which I know nothing has entered my city's water supply, making this object look brown when it is not brown?"¹³² He goes on to point out that

the screws can be turned yet tighter. Even if I knew indubitably that I knew all the discrepancy-making conditions, how could I acquire the indubitable knowledge that none of them obtains in a given case? ... In short, if I am to come to the indubitable knowledge that my perceptual capacities are in their normal state by the use of my perceptual capacities, I must already have indubitable knowledge that my perceptual capacities are in their normal state."¹³³

A classical foundationalist would find the foregoing troublesome but not lethal. For one can restrict perceptual claims to the internal sort (as was done historically within classical foundationalism, as previously pointed out by Plantinga). Instead of claiming one can have indubitable knowledge of propositions that are evident to the senses (such as "I see a brown dog") one can rephrase the proposition to reflect one's inward mental state (such as "I am appeared to 'brownly' and 'dog-likely'"). According to Wolterstorff, such a retreat does not resolve the issue, for

... notice what it is—a claim about myself and my state of consciousness. Along the way we have discarded singular propositions about physical objects from the body of indubitables, and thus from the foundation.

It may be that though we cannot have *indubitable* knowledge of the truth of singular propositions about physical objects,

¹³¹ Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, p. 50.

¹³² *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, pp. 50, 51.

¹³³ *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, pp. 51, 52.

yet we are warranted in believing some of them on the basis of foundational propositions about our states of consciousness. In fact no thinker has ever displayed any such warrant, nor is it easy to see how it could be done. From a set of propositions specifying how I have been appeared to one can, by straight probabilistic induction, infer how I will probably be appeared to in the future. But what principle will justify me in inferring, from such propositions, that probably some *object* was appearing to me? And then there is the prior difficulty that, on foundationalist grounds, inductive arguments in general are unacceptable.

In summary, it seems distinctly unlikely that the set of indubitables is ample enough to support all theorizing.¹³⁴

2. INTERNAL DIFFICULTIES

Whereas Wolterstorff appears to be raising external difficulties with classical foundationalism (difficulties regarding the workability of the approach), Plantinga attempts to place a dagger in the heart of foundationalism. Plantinga seeks to demonstrate the inherent irrationality of classical foundationalism. In this sense he can be seen as pushing the claims of the classical foundationalist and the insights of Wolterstorff to their logical conclusions.

a. Counterintuitive: Intuitively Rational Claims are Designated

Irrational

By way of review, Plantinga points out that the classical foundationalist asserts that "a proposition *p* is properly basic for a person *S* if and only if *p* is either self-evident to *S* or incorrigible for *S* or evident to the senses for *S*."¹³⁵ If such an approach designates what is foundational, Plantinga claims the number of foundational beliefs will be small indeed. In and of itself that is not a theory-obliterating problem.¹³⁶ In fact, one would not expect most beliefs to be basic or immediately believed. Most would probably acknowledge that the majority of beliefs are held mediately. This is

¹³⁴ Reason Within the Bounds of Religion, p. 54.

¹³⁵ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 59.

¹³⁶ Indeed, this is simply a restatement of the difficulty raised by Wolterstorff earlier.

not what is problematic for Plantinga for, it must be remembered, he is not claiming that all beliefs should be basic or that non-basic, mediately-held beliefs do not exist. According to Plantinga the problem with limiting foundational beliefs to those that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses¹³⁷ is that it implies that many beliefs most consider intuitively rational are designated irrational. As Plantinga points out, "... if these claims are true, then enormous quantities of what we all in fact believe are irrational. One crucial lesson learned from the development of modern philosophy--Descartes through Hume, roughly--is just this: relative to propositions that are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable--at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable."¹³⁸

As examples Plantinga points to claims that other people exist, that the universe has existed for over five minutes, and that enduring physical entities exist. According to Plantinga, none is more or less probable with respect to the modern criteria for proper basicity: self-evidence or incorrigibility.¹³⁹ He goes on to point out that broadening the criteria to include the ancient and medieval criterion for proper basicity ("evident to the senses") improves things little. For one is then only able to label the belief in physical objects as rational; propositions concerning the past or propositions which entail the existence of other persons still do not meet the broadened criteria.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Recall also that in including 'evident to the senses' as a criterion for proper basicity Plantinga is being unduly gracious. Few classical foundationalists accept such a criterion. Rather, most (since the time of Descartes and Locke) limit properly basic beliefs to those that are either incorrigible or self-evident.

¹³⁸ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 59.

¹³⁹ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 59-60.

¹⁴⁰ An additional obvious difficulty with broadening the criteria for proper basicity which Plantinga does not mention would be that few

To Plantinga's way of thinking, any notion of proper basicity that runs counter to one's intuitions regarding what *is* properly basic is a false theory. In other words, at a bare minimum, a theory of what is foundational should be rejected from the start if it rejects what one takes oneself already obviously and immediately to know.¹⁴¹

In Plantinga's words:

... does this [the inability to deal adequately with obviously basic beliefs] not show that the thesis in question is false? The contention is that

... A is properly basic for me if A is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses to me.

But many propositions that do not meet these conditions are properly basic for me. I believe, for example, that I had lunch this noon. I do not believe this proposition on the basis of other propositions; I take it as basic; it is in the foundations of my noetic structure. Furthermore, I am entirely rational in so taking it, even though this proposition is neither self-evident nor evident to the senses nor incorrigible for me.¹⁴²

There are several options available to the classical foundationalist at this point. An initial response might be to admit that while one accepts such claims as basic one *should not*. If, for example, a proposition regarding the past does not meet the criteria for proper basicity it should be rejected. But this would be an instance of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Although an option, the intuitive rationality of claims regarding the past would appear to trump any such response.

A more prudent option would be to argue that though we *claim* to accept such propositions as basic, we in fact *do not*. Two problems

contemporary foundationalists would be willing to accept 'evident to the senses' as a criterion to begin with. Hence the classical foundationalist is left in the unenviable position of disliking the consequences if they reject or accept the criterion.

¹⁴¹ One can think of an analogous situation in a different field in philosophy: ethics. One could say that an ethical theory that entails torturing infants with pitchforks and cattleprods for the fun of it is a theory that should be rejected. At the very least an ethical theory should do justice to one's most basic intuitions.

¹⁴² "Reason and Belief in God," p. 60.

immediately arise if the classical foundationalist takes this approach. First, most individuals would vehemently deny that they do take such propositions as nonbasic (even if evidential grounds could be given).¹⁴³ For example, even though I might be able to confirm my belief that I had grape-nuts this morning (by digging in the garbage and finding the empty box, or locating the used bowl in the sink, or pumping my stomach) most would say that such actions are unnecessary in confirming one's belief. Most hold that such beliefs do not need such support (in terms of evidence) and that it would be irrational to think that one did.

Perhaps a bigger difficulty with the notion would be that many beliefs intuitively taken as basic would be impossible to confirm by appeal to evidence anyway. An example would be beliefs about one's past.¹⁴⁴ In utilizing memory to confirm the reliability of memory one would be arguing in a vicious circle; one cannot engage in such an enterprise without begging the question.¹⁴⁵

b. Self-Referentially Incoherent: Fails Its Own Criteria

In his final objection to classical foundationalism, Plantinga points out that it cannot pass its own test for rationality. It itself is not a basic, foundational, immediately-held belief and it is not derivable from propositions which are; it is self-referentially incoherent. Here Plantinga is raising an objection very similar to that raised against other extreme empirically-based programs. An analysis of logical positivism springs immediately to mind. The verification principle—a claim is cognitively meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or at least in principle empirically

¹⁴³ This, in fact, appears to be Plantinga's approach in the foregoing.

¹⁴⁴ Here the previous example is simply being built upon.

¹⁴⁵ A possible third option would be to classify such propositions (and others like them) as self-evident 'in a broader way' or, as Plantinga

verifiable—is neither analytic nor empirically verifiable. In the same way Plantinga asserts that classical foundationalism does not meet its own criteria for proper basicity and is not derivable from propositions that are. In other words, classical foundationalism is irrational according to classical foundationalism:

The classical foundationalist accepts

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

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

Of course it *could* be that there are propositions $P_1 \dots P_n$ such that (1) there is a path in S 's noetic structure from (34) to the P_i , (2) that P_i do in fact support (34), and (3) the P_i meet the condition for proper basicity laid down in (33)¹⁴⁶ even if F cannot say what they are and even if the rest of us cannot think of any viable candidates. ... This seems unlikely, however, and in the absence of some reason to think there are propositions of that sort, the better part of valor is to reject (34).¹⁴⁷

One could try to amend (34) to allow for many of the preceding

claims, as properly basic in their own way.

¹⁴⁶ "(33) A is properly basic for me only if A is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses for me." (Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 60)

¹⁴⁷ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 61-62.

examples of intuitively basic propositions (that are currently ruled irrational by classical foundationalism). One might, for example, add the criterion "accepted as basic by nearly everyone"¹⁴⁸ to the original three criteria for proper basicity. This would allow propositions entailing the existence of other persons as well as a collection of propositions regarding the past to count as basic.

But there is a difficulty associated with this. Many would *not* take the new statement of proper basicity (which contains the new criterion of "accepted as basic by nearly everyone") as basic. As Plantinga states, "... I do not, for example. Nor is it self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses."¹⁴⁹ In other words, the new and improved condition for proper basicity faces the same difficulties as the original criteria—it thereby receives the same failing grade.

By way of summary Plantinga claims "... that classical foundationalism is bankrupt, and insofar as the evidentialist objection [to religious belief] is rooted in classical foundationalism, it is poorly rooted indeed."¹⁵⁰

E. NATURAL THEOLOGY AND ATHEOLOGY

Since we are concerned with the role of evidence in Reformed epistemology, it is crucial that we examine the view of Reformed thinkers regarding the traditional evidence given in support of religious belief. The rejection of evidentialism by most¹⁵¹ Reformed thinkers has an enormous impact on the legitimacy of natural theology.

¹⁴⁸ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 62.

¹⁴⁹ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 62. One might also point out that such a qualification has a definite air of *ad hoc*ness about it.

¹⁵⁰ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 62.

¹⁵¹ This is not to say that all Reformed philosophers and theologians are opposed to the use of natural theology. B. B. Warfield, for example, was a prominent Reformed thinker and yet he endorsed the

As related earlier, their view of natural theology is overwhelmingly negative. Whereas some merely frown on the endeavor, many reject any role it might play in affirming or even confirming one's religious convictions. That being said, there is no broad consensus among Calvinist philosophers and theologians on the role natural theology and atheology can play in religious belief. It should be remembered that Wolterstorff himself makes a distinction between evidentialism and natural theology. Whether or not such a distinction is warranted and what, if any, practical difference it makes will be addressed later. At this point it is sufficient to point out that most Reformed epistemologists do not look upon natural theology favorably; there is a fair amount of disagreement regarding what role it can play and how it differs from evidentialism. As Plantinga himself admits, "... the Reformed attitude has ranged from tepid endorsement, through indifference, to suspicion, hostility, and outright accusations of blasphemy."¹⁵²

If this is the case, we would be on shaky ground dogmatically asserting that there was one specific Calvinian attitude toward arguments used in natural theology. But since some *do* acknowledge a place for natural theology, or at least address some of the arguments utilized within natural theology, it is necessary to review what the most prominent Reformed epistemologist, Alvin Plantinga, has to say about traditional arguments both for and against the existence of God.

1. NATURAL THEOLOGY

Before engaging in an exposition of the theistic proofs, natural theology must first be defined. Any definition will obviously determine what counts as natural theology and so affect whether it can

theistic arguments (Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 63).
¹⁵² "Reason and Belief in God," p. 63.

be deemed successful. Plantinga's own description of natural theology and the criteria necessary for its success has changed over the years. In "Reason and Belief in God" he claims natural theology is "... the attempt to prove or demonstrate the existence of God."¹⁵³ In an earlier work, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*, Plantinga provided specifics as to what is involved in such an endeavor. According to Plantinga: "What the natural theologian sets out to do is to show that some of the central beliefs of theism follow deductively or inductively from propositions that are obviously true and accepted by nearly every sane man (e.g., *Some things are in motion*) together with propositions that are self-evident or necessarily true."¹⁵⁴

By 1990, in his new preface to *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga recognized that such a stringent account of the goal of natural theology was too demanding. He admitted that

In evaluating the theistic arguments ... I employed a traditional but improperly stringent standard; there may be plenty of good arguments for theism even if there aren't any that start from propositions that compel assent from every honest and intelligent person and proceed majestically to their conclusion by way of forms of argument that can be rejected only on pain of irrationality. After all, no philosophical arguments of any consequence meet *that* standard, and the fact that theistic arguments do not is not as significant as I thought.¹⁵⁵

He goes on to point out that he remains "... unrepentant about the main epistemological conclusions of the book."¹⁵⁶ Though he lessens the

¹⁵³ p. 63.

¹⁵⁴ (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 4. Other Reformed thinkers echo such an assessment of the enterprise of natural theology. As Kelly James Clark admits, "*the attempt to demonstrate the rational acceptability of belief in God through the natural light of reason (without appeal to special revelation)* is called **natural theology**. **Classical natural theology** tries to attain this end with statements that all rational creatures are obliged to accept ..." [Clark's emphasis]. (*Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 4.).

¹⁵⁵ "Preface to the 1990 Paperback Edition," p. x.

¹⁵⁶ "Preface to the 1990 Paperback Edition," p. xi.

demands placed upon natural theology, he claimed the legitimacy of its use was not increased in any significant way. To better understand his view of the enterprise, it is necessary to examine Plantinga's analysis of the classical arguments in natural theology: the cosmological, teleological, and ontological.¹⁵⁷

a. Cosmological Argument

Plantinga takes Aquinas' formulation of the cosmological argument as the classical form and outlines it as follows:

- (1) There are at present contingent beings ("things that are possible to be and not to be").
- (2) Whatever can fail to exist, at some time does not exist ("that which can not-be at some time is not").
- (3) Therefore, if all beings are contingent, then at one time nothing existed. (2)
- (4) Whatever begins to exist is caused to begin to exist by something else already existing.
- (5) Therefore, if at some time *t* nothing existed, then nothing would have existed at any later time. (4)
- (6) So if at one time nothing existed, then nothing exists now. (5)
- (7) So if all beings are contingent nothing exists now. (3) and (6)
- (8) Hence not all beings are contingent; there is at least one necessary being. (7) and (1)
- (9) Every necessary being either has its necessity caused by another or has its necessity in itself.
- (10) There cannot be an infinite series of necessary beings each having its necessity caused by another.
- (11) Therefore, there is a necessary being having of itself its own necessity, and this all men speak of as God. (8), (9), and (10)¹⁵⁸

This is a puzzling argument according to Plantinga: what does Aquinas mean by a necessary being? If Aquinas means a being that exists in every possible world then there is little reason, if any,

¹⁵⁷ This is not to imply that Plantinga does not acknowledge the existence of other arguments in natural theology. For he admits that "... these three are not the only arguments of their kind; there are also, for example, the various sorts of moral arguments for God's existence. But these are not initially very plausible and do not become so under closer scrutiny." (*God and Other Minds*, p. 111)

¹⁵⁸ Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 78.

for making the distinction between a necessary being which is necessary "from another" as opposed to necessary "from itself."¹⁵⁹

Plantinga raises an even more damaging objection to the supposed proof. He points out that (2) is neither evidently true nor obvious but even if it were there is no reason to think that it would entail (3). For,

"What (2) says is really

(2') for every Contingent being B, there is a time t such that B does not exist at t

From this Aquinas appears to infer

(3') There is a time t at which no contingent beings exist.

This is a fallacious inference; it is like arguing from

For every person A there is a person B such that B is the mother of A

to

There is a person B such that for every person A, B is the mother of A.

The first seems reasonable enough, but the second is utterly outrageous; more to the point, it does not follow from the first."¹⁶⁰

Plantinga provides further explication, analogies, and objections to the cosmological argument elsewhere,¹⁶¹ but the foregoing is sufficient to illustrate that he definitely does *not* find the argument successful.

In and of itself that should not be deemed troubling, for there are many *evidentialists* who do not consider the cosmological argument (at least in its Thomistic form) to be sound. One need not give up all hope of constructing a convincing argument at this point—for

¹⁵⁹ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁶⁰ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 80.

¹⁶¹ *God and Other Minds*, Chapter 1.

alternatives are available to the natural theologian. Many turn from the failure of the cosmological argument to the possibility of the teleological.¹⁶²

b. Teleological Argument

The teleological argument has a long history and has been propounded by many. Plantinga points out that even Kant respected the argument¹⁶³ though its classical formulation can be found in Paley's watchmaker argument.¹⁶⁴ Plantinga is quick to acknowledge that in many ways the teleological differs from the other classical arguments, both in form and in content.

In many ways the teleological argument is more difficult to discuss and assess than are the ... [cosmological and ontological]. This difficulty arises mainly, perhaps, from the circumstance that it is an inductive or analogical argument; and the logic of such argumentation is not nearly as well understood as the logic of deductive argument. Furthermore, questions involving degrees of difference between widely disparate claims of things (does the universe resemble a machine more than it does an animal? or is it more like a vegetable?) become essentially relevant; and it is hard indeed to see how to answer them.¹⁶⁵

According to Plantinga, the basic structure of the argument (as found, for example, in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*¹⁶⁶) is as follows:

- (1) The "productions of human contrivance" are the products of intelligent design.
- (2) The universe resembles the productions of human contrivance.
- (3) Therefore probably the universe is a product of intelligent design.

¹⁶² Obviously one would *not* be Kantian since Kant reckoned the two arguments to be inextricably intertwined. On Kant's account it would not be possible to form a successful teleological argument in light of an unsuccessful cosmological—for the former rides "piggy-back" upon the latter.

¹⁶³ He references Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. K. Smith (London, 1953) p. 520 in his *God and Other Minds*, p. 95.

¹⁶⁴ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁶⁵ *God and Other Minds*, p. 96.

¹⁶⁶ Ed. with an introduction by Henry D. Aiken (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1969), p. 17.

- (4) Therefore probably the author of the universe is an intelligent being.¹⁶⁷

In a nutshell the argument claims that design implies a designer, the universe exhibits design, therefore the universe requires a Designer.

Plantinga wends his way through various objections and reformulations of the argument until he arrives at what he perceives to be its strongest formulation.¹⁶⁸ This is of little use, however, according to Plantinga, for even when the argument is buttressed and steadied it still fails to allow one to reach the desired conclusion--that God exists. For in order to do this the theist must confirm several claims, none of which the theist is able to accomplish. Quite apart from problems with the premises, under the auspices of the teleological argument the theist tends to go on to claim that the universe was designed by one person who created it from nothing. Additionally, the being is said, according to the traditional conception, to be omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, spirit (without body) and necessary.¹⁶⁹

Plantinga acknowledges (and here I get the distinct impression that he is being gracious) that there *may be* some evidence for the claim that the universe is designed. But as far as the remaining points are concerned, Plantinga is in agreement with Hume as to the inability of the teleological argument to deliver such knowledge. The evidence is either ambiguous (as there is just as much evidence *against* such propositions as *for* them) or there is actually more evidence *against* the propositions. It appears to Plantinga that there is just as much reason to think there are multiple designers, or a

¹⁶⁷ *God and Other Minds*, p. 97.

¹⁶⁸ In *God and Other Minds*, pp. 97-109.

¹⁶⁹ *God and Other Minds*, p. 109 and *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 83-84.

corporeal designer, a limited designer, and so forth.¹⁷⁰ If this is the case, certainly the teleological argument cannot be deemed a success.

Perhaps an *a priori* approach will fare better. Indeed, according to Plantinga, one does find more success when one turns to the ontological argument.

c. Ontological Argument

Plantinga's original assessment of the ontological argument, in 1967, was not very favorable. At that time the strongest formulation of Anselm's original argument was to be found in the modal form of Malcolm and Hartshorne. After extensive evaluation of Malcolm's revision Plantinga remained unconvinced regarding the argument's soundness. For,

... the assertion that a being so defined exists, that the definition actually applies to something, may well be, for all that Malcolm and Anselm have said, a contingent assertion. It is a necessary truth that if God exists, then there is a being who neither comes into nor goes out of existence and who is in no way dependent upon anything else. But from this it does not follow, contrary to Malcolm's argument, that the proposition *There is a being who neither comes into nor goes out of existence and who depends upon nothing* is necessary; nor does it follow that *God exists* is necessary. Malcolm's reconstruction of the ontological argument therefore fails.¹⁷¹

Here Plantinga appears to be throwing his hat in with the Kantian objection that necessity applies only to judgments.¹⁷² Malcolm's reformulation is a valiant effort at buttressing the classical argument, but it falls prey to the same objection originally raised against Anselm's.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. *God and Other Minds*, pp. 109-111 and *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 84.

¹⁷¹ *God and Other Minds*, p. 94.

¹⁷² Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith, unabridged ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), p. 502.

But an interesting development took place in Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity*.¹⁷³ Plantinga did not withdraw his objection to the formulations of the ontological argument provided by Anselm, Malcolm, and others. But he suggested the possibility of a revision which utilized the notion of "possible worlds."

By the time of the publication of *God, Freedom, and Evil* in 1974 Plantinga had worked out such a revision of the ontological argument. Here again Plantinga traced the development of the argument from Anselm, to objections by Gaunilo and Kant, through the modal reformulations of Hartshorne and Malcolm.¹⁷⁴ But instead of ending with failure, Plantinga goes on to present his own "possible worlds" version of the argument.

Plantinga begins by making a distinction between greatness and excellence. "A being's excellence in a given world *W*, let us say, depends only upon the properties it has in *W*; its greatness in *W* depends upon these properties but also upon what it is like in other worlds."¹⁷⁵ It then becomes feasible to think that maximal greatness would entail maximal excellence in all possible worlds. Plantinga then restates the argument as follows:

- (25) It is possible that there be a being that has maximal greatness.
- (26) So there is a possible being that in some world *W* has maximal greatness.
- (27) A Being has maximal greatness in a given world only if it has maximal excellence in every world.
- (28) A being has maximal excellence in a given world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in that world.¹⁷⁶

This reformulation, according to Plantinga, does not fall prey

¹⁷³ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974).

¹⁷⁴ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 85-106.

¹⁷⁵ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁶ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 108.

to the objections that claim necessary existence is not a perfection. Even without assuming that necessary existence is a perfection, he claims that from (25), (27), and (28) it necessarily follows that God exists (a Being who is omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect).¹⁷⁷ But it is acknowledged that one may question the ontological status or nature of "possible beings"—a notion that is utilized in (26). If such entities are in question, it appears Plantinga may have built himself a house of cards. For one could claim his argument turns on a questionable pivot. But Plantinga is not without retort, for he states that

I am inclined to think the supposition that there are such things—things that are possible but don't in fact exist—is either unintelligible or necessarily false. But this doesn't mean that the present version of the ontological argument must be rejected. For we can restate the argument in a way that does not commit us to this questionable idea. Instead of speaking of *possible beings* that do or do not exist in various possible worlds, we may speak of *properties* and the worlds in which they are or are not *instantiated*. Instead of speaking of the possible fat man in the corner, noticing that he doesn't exist, we may speak of the property *being a fat man in the corner*, noting that it isn't instantiated (although it could have been). Of course, the *property* in question, like the property of *being a unicorn*, exists. It is a perfectly good property which exists with as much equanimity as the property of equininity, the property of being a horse. But it doesn't happen to apply to anything. That is, in *this world* it doesn't apply to anything; in other possible worlds it does.¹⁷⁸

Hence Plantinga believes it possible to restate the argument without appealing to questionable "possible beings"; Plantinga appeals to "... the property of being maximally great or maximal greatness."¹⁷⁹ Proposition (25) therefore becomes "**There is a possible world in which maximal greatness is instantiated ...**" (27) becomes "**Necessarily, a being is maximally great only if it has maximal excellence in every world ...**" and (28) becomes "**Necessarily, a being has maximal excellence**

¹⁷⁷ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 108.

¹⁷⁸ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 110.

¹⁷⁹ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 111.

in every world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in every world."¹⁸⁰ In none of the foregoing does he appeal to possible yet nonexistent entities. Yet he can deduce that an omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect Being (God) necessarily exists.¹⁸¹

According to Plantinga the argument is valid and the premises are true. If this is the case (since it is a deductive argument) its conclusion is true. Plantinga is acknowledging the existence of a deductive argument that is successful. And the conclusion is not merely possible, nor even probable—it is necessary. Beyond that, the claim of the argument is the strongest possible. For it does not merely conclude that some kind of intelligence exists, or that some power is involved, or that nothing can be known regarding this being's moral standing. Plantinga has presumably demonstrated the existence of the traditional Judeo-Christian conception of God. This argument does not fall prey to all of the shortcomings of the traditional arguments.

¹⁸⁰ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 111.

¹⁸¹ As another source puts it, Plantinga's conclusion may be reached in seven simple steps:

1. There is a possible world (W) in which there is a being (X) with maximal greatness.
2. But X is maximally great only if X has maximal excellence in every possible world.
3. Therefore X is maximally great only if X has omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection in every possible world.
4. In W, the proposition "There is no omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being" would be impossible—that is, necessarily false.
5. But what is impossible does not vary from world to world.
6. Therefore, the proposition, "There is no omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being" is necessarily false in this actual world, too.
7. Therefore, there actually exists in this world, and must exist in every possible world, an omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect being. (Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 71-72.)

At first glance the argument appears to provide all that we could hope or ask for: a conclusive proof of the traditional conception of God. But at this juncture Plantinga makes a hard right: "... we must ask whether this argument is a successful piece of natural theology, whether it proves the existence of God. And the answer must be, I think, that it does not. An argument for God's existence may be sound, after all, without in any useful sense proving God's existence."¹⁸²

Certainly the preceding would seem to leave most rubbing their proverbial brows. What exactly is meant by Plantinga's assertion? For what else *does* soundness mean, if not establishing what one set out to prove? Plantinga suggests an answer elsewhere when he claims "It is unlikely that it has played the sort of role in strengthening and confirming religious belief that, for example, the teleological argument has played. To the unsophisticated, Anselm's argument is (at first sight at least) remarkably unconvincing, if not downright irritating; it smacks too much of word magic."¹⁸³ More to the point, Plantinga offers an analogy to help illuminate why the ontological argument is unsuccessful.¹⁸⁴

Since I believe in God, I think the following argument is sound:

Either God exists or $7+5=14$

It is false that $7+5=14$

Therefore God exists.

But obviously this isn't a *proof*; no one who didn't already accept the conclusion, would accept the first premise. The ontological argument we've been examining isn't just like this one, of course, but it must be conceded that not everyone who understands and reflects on its central premise—that the existence of a maximally great being is *possible*—will accept it. Still, it is evident, I think, that there is nothing *contrary to reason or irrational* in accepting this premise. What I claim for this argument, therefore, is that it establishes, not the *truth* of theism, but its rational acceptability. And hence it

¹⁸² *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 112.

¹⁸³ *God and Other Minds*, p. 26.

¹⁸⁴ And here he acknowledges George Mavrodes' *Belief in God* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p 22ff.

accomplishes at least one of the aims of the tradition of natural theology.¹⁸⁵

2. NATURAL ATHEOLOGY

To some it would certainly smack of irony to learn that Plantinga, as a theist, appears to spend more of his energies addressing natural atheology than natural theology. But Plantinga appears to view combatting natural atheology as a much more critical enterprise than constructing arguments within natural theology.¹⁸⁶ In fact, in many ways Plantinga has pioneered some of the most formidable rebuttals to the atheistic arguments against belief in God. His "defense versus theodicy distinction" in regards to the problem of evil appears unique (at least in terms of a clear distinction being made) in the annals of Christian apologetics. And, according to many, his free-will response to the problem of evil is the classic modern form of an ancient approach.

In his two major works dealing with natural theology—*God, Freedom, and Evil* and *God and Other Minds*—Plantinga gives more space to the primary argument against God's existence than to any one single argument for theism. Over half of *God, Freedom, and Evil* is spent addressing what he perceives to be the biggest challenge to religious belief—the problem of evil. This is not to say that Plantinga does not address other challenges to religious belief. But the number of pages given to said objections pales in comparison to that given to the claim that God's existence is incompatible with the existence of evil. In his two works Plantinga reserves almost 100 pages for a discussion of the problem of evil but spends only 37 discussing all other forms of atheologia.

¹⁸⁵ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 112.

¹⁸⁶ Again, it will be left for later to evaluate the validity of treating the two disciplines differently.

a. Assorted Atheologia

The challenges to religious belief can be broken down into three general areas: problems of alternative explanations, religious language, and evil. With the first, one is, in effect, claiming that belief in God is unnecessary since there are other ways to explain religious belief or data. These alternatives can be classified as either psychological (along the lines of Feuerbach, Freud, and others who claim theistic belief is wish-fulfillment or paternal projection), sociological (such as Marx and his view of religion as "the opiate ..." and "form of oppression"), or scientific (for instance, naturalistic arguments against the miraculous, the theory of evolution, and the like).

Plantinga pays little heed to such arguments. He mentions Freud and Marx in passing but dismisses their allegations immediately. For "it may help us understand theists, but it tells us nothing at all about the truth of their belief; to that it is simply irrelevant."¹⁸⁷ Such objections to theism are simply *ad hominem circumstantial* arguments that beg the question as to the validity of the belief,¹⁸⁸ and Plantinga is quick to pierce through the fog to reveal the charade.

Plantinga says little of science and the naturalist as being antagonistic to religious belief.¹⁸⁹ Perhaps this is because he views the problem of evil as the biggest challenge raised by the naturalist, or thinks that the naturalists' challenges are easily countered and therefore not worth his attention, or that all problems they raise are

¹⁸⁷ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 65.

¹⁸⁸ They assume theism is not true and then seek an explanation for the obstinacy of the belief.

¹⁸⁹ Although in his *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) he points out that the scientific method can be carried out rationally only within a *theistic* framework.

merely apparent. Whatever the reason, Plantinga moves on to another challenge to religious belief: the problem of religious language.¹⁹⁰

The challenge is that belief in God is incoherent or meaningless. There are several ways in which this objection works itself out. One can claim religious language or belief is not verifiable (as Ayer and the logical positivists attempted to do) or not falsifiable (as attempted by Flew and his parable of the gardener). Presumably Plantinga evaluates these objections as stronger than those that appeal to alternative explanations, for he spends more time countering them.

To the positivist Plantinga raises first the age old retort that the verification principle fails to pass its own test. He follows this by claiming that "... there seems to be no reason at all why a theist, or anyone else who holds beliefs ruled out by the verifiability criterion, should feel even the slightest obligation to accept that criterion."¹⁹¹ The criterion cannot pass its own test for being meaningful, but even if it could there would be no reason for thinking one would have to embrace it. Plantinga therefore deems the verifiability objection easily met.

He tends to link falsifiability with verifiability and therefore his responses to Flew share a familiar ring with those given to Ayer and the positivists:

... the theist can perhaps meet the challenge head on. My discovering a contradiction in the proposition *God exists* would constitute a disproof of it; and if after death I were to meet Father Abraham, St. Paul, and St. John (I think I could recognize them), who united in declaring they had been duped, perhaps I should have sufficient reason for conceding that God does not love us after all.

¹⁹⁰ Wolterstorff appears more interested in addressing the details of the exact relationship between faith and science. The bulk of his *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* is aimed to this end.

¹⁹¹ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 66. Plantinga discusses the issue in greater detail in the seventh chapter of his *God and Other Minds*.

But clearly enough this is not at all the sort of event or happening Flew has in mind. What he means is that meaningful assertions must be falsifiable by some *empirical* state of affairs, or some proposition with *empirical* content. Duff-Forbes takes Flew to be chiding the religious for trying to make assertions that no *observation statements* count against. It appears, then, that according to Flew a meaningful (contingent) proposition must be falsifiable by observation statements; there must be some finite and consistent set of observation statements that entail its denial. If so, Flew is embracing a version of the famous *verifiability criterion of meaning*.¹⁹²

One could respond to Flew first by claiming that there are ways to falsify one's religious convictions and, if that is not acceptable, we can demonstrate that falsifiability entails the problem-plagued verifiability criterion of meaning. For, in addition to the difficulties raised earlier, "the many attempts to state the verifiability criterion have met a common fate; each has been so restrictive as to exclude statements the verificationists themselves took to be meaningful, or so liberal as to exclude no statements at all."¹⁹³ Furthermore, Flew's falsifiability criterion is just as self-referentially absurd as the positivists' verification principle.

As Hempel remarks in a slightly different connection, one must suppose that if a given statement is meaningful, so is its denial. Flew's criterion does not meet this condition: for (as Hempel remarks) although a universal statement like *All crows are black* passes the test, its existential denial does not. *There is at least one pink unicorn* is consistent with any finite and consistent set of observation statements. (Apparently it is Flew rather than the theologian who is holding that some propositions have no denials.) So we must add—as the second clause of a recursive definition—that if a statement is meaningful, so is its denial. But the result is still far too restrictive; for now, as Hempel points out, statements of mixed quantification (*For every substance there is a solvent, Every tree is about the same size as some other tree*) turn out to be meaningless.¹⁹⁴

Plantinga adds that any further "tweaking" of the criterion meets with additional difficulties and rebuttals; there is simply no

¹⁹² *God and Other Minds*, pp. 162-163.

¹⁹³ *God and Other Minds*, p. 163.

¹⁹⁴ *God and Other Minds*, pp. 163-164.

way to salvage falsifiability as an adequate theory of meaning. Couple this with all of the difficulties raised earlier by Wolterstorff and one is left with a quick and decisive response to falsificationism as an objection to religious belief.

Hence claims which assert that belief in God is either unnecessary (for psychological, sociological, or scientific reasons) or incoherent (not meaningful according to verifiability or falsifiability criteria) are easily met. But the atheist has a final card up her sleeve. For she can claim that belief is inconsistent or self-contradictory: either internally or externally. An internal inconsistency occurs if God's nature cannot be coherently explicated (e.g. if the theist cannot describe the divine attribute of omnipotence in a coherent fashion), as Mackie claims. An external inconsistency occurs if God's nature is incompatible with an entity or activity outside Himself (e.g. God's omniscience with human freedom). Plantinga responds to both objections.

Plantinga provides his reader with a synopsis of Mackie's argument. It begins with "(1) Either God can make things He cannot control or God cannot make things He cannot control."¹⁹⁵ Next Plantinga provides a bolstered and revised version of a second point made by Mackie: "(2') If God can make things He cannot control, then it is possible that there be things He cannot control, in which case God is not omnipotent."¹⁹⁶ Finally, "(3) If He cannot, then there are things He cannot do and hence He is not omnipotent."¹⁹⁷

Plantinga appeals to Bernard Mayo and George Mavrodes for an initial rejection of (3).¹⁹⁸ Utilizing the classic "stone so heavy God

¹⁹⁵ *God and Other Minds*, p. 169.

¹⁹⁶ *God and Other Minds*, p. 169.

¹⁹⁷ *God and Other Minds*, p. 169.

¹⁹⁸ *God and Other Minds*, p. 171. Plantinga references George Mavrodes, "Some Puzzles Concerning Omnipotence," *Philosophical Review* LXXII

cannot lift it" example, Mavrodes points out that the "thing" that cannot lift the rock is absolutely impossible and therefore is not associated with the notion of omnipotence. Plantinga points out that Mayo and Mavrodes are solving the paradox by appealing to an implicit assumption: that the claim "God is not omnipotent" is a proposition which is necessarily false. One could question whether this is true. Plantinga therefore prefers to resolve the quandary by adding "(4) It is possible that (God is omnipotent and it is possible that there is a being God cannot control)."¹⁹⁹ According to Plantinga, (4) is either true or false. If it is false then (3) is obviously false,²⁰⁰ but if it is true then (2') is obviously false, hence "... in either case one of the premises of the paradox is unacceptable; so the paradox fails."²⁰¹

Plantinga also responds to the claim that God's omniscience is incompatible with human freedom: "... if God knows in advance that a person will perform a certain action A, then that person isn't free with respect to that action. But if God is omniscient, then for any person and any action he performs, God knew in advance that he'd perform that action. So if God is omniscient, no one ever performs any free actions."²⁰²

According to Plantinga, even though the argument may appear initially plausible God's omniscience does not imply or entail any loss of freedom. For the claim "If God knows in advance that X will do A, then it must be the case that X will do A"²⁰³ could be taken to

(1963), 221-222 and Bernard Mayo, "Mr. Keene and Omnipotence," *Mind*, LXX (1961), 249.

¹⁹⁹ *God and Other Minds*, p. 172.

²⁰⁰ *God and Other Minds*, p. 172.

²⁰¹ *God and Other Minds*, p. 173.

²⁰² *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 66.

²⁰³ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 67.

mean either one of two things: either "necessarily, if God knows in advance that *X* will do *A*, then indeed *X* will do *A*" OR "if God knows in advance that *X* will do *A*, then it is necessary that *X* will do *A*."²⁰⁴

The proponent of the presumed objection to theism requires the latter interpretation for her argument to work, yet the original argument supports only the former. In the words of Plantinga, the argument is based on a confusion, since

It is indeed necessarily true that if God (or anyone else) knows that a proposition *P* is true, then *P* is true; but it simply doesn't follow that if God knows *P*, then *P* is necessarily true. If I know that Henry is a bachelor, then Henry is a bachelor is a necessary truth; it does not follow that if I know that Henry is a bachelor, then it is necessarily true that he is. I know that Henry is a bachelor: what follows is only that Henry is married is false; it doesn't follow that it is necessarily false.²⁰⁵

Certainly these are not all of the arguments that can be given in opposition to belief in God.²⁰⁶ But a brief tour through the halls of assorted atheologia should be adequate to demonstrate that though Plantinga deems it necessary to address and refute them, he considers them relatively insignificant as serious challenges to belief in God. Each is readily dismissed. Neither extended time nor rigorous effort is wasted in demonstrating their shortcomings. The same cannot be said for the final charge of external inconsistency raised against theistic belief: the problem of evil.

b. The Problem of Evil

Plantinga acknowledges that "the most impressive argument of natural atheology has to do with the problem of evil"²⁰⁷ and elsewhere

²⁰⁴ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 67.

²⁰⁵ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 67. In a similar fashion (on pages 67-72) Plantinga goes on to demonstrate that Pike's qualification that human freedom is incompatible with God's being essentially omniscient is likewise flawed.

²⁰⁶ For example, Plantinga addresses and rejects Findlay's ontological argument for God's nonexistence in *God and Other Minds*, pp. 173-183.

²⁰⁷ *God and Other Minds*, p. 115.

refers to it as "... the most widely accepted and impressive piece of natural atheology ...".²⁰⁸ A cursory reading of Plantinga reveals immediately that this is not a piece of atheologia that can be dismissed easily. For its forms are many and its consequences, if sound, are lethal to the theist's system. As Plantinga sees it, atheists assert that there is some kind of logical inconsistency in affirming both the existence of evil (whether natural or moral) and the existence of God (who, according to the traditional conception, is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good). While the classic formulation can be found in Epicurus and Hume, Plantinga points out that many from that time to the present (such as Mill, Bradley, McCloskey, and Mackie) have echoed the charge.²⁰⁹

Plantinga's first response is to point out that there are several kinds of contradiction. One can speak of something being *explicitly* contradictory if (in a conjunctive proposition) one has one conjunct which is the negation or denial of the other. But certainly the propositions which the theist accepts (that *God is omnipotent, God is omniscient, God is wholly good and evil exists*) are not contradictory in this sense. Furthermore, the propositions are also not *formally* contradictory since there seems to be no way in which one can, by the laws of logic, deduce from the propositions an explicit contradiction.

Since this is the case, the atheist can best be viewed as claiming that the theist's propositions are *implicitly* contradictory.²¹⁰ In other words, one needs to supply an additional

²⁰⁸ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 7.

²⁰⁹ *God and Other Minds*, pp. 115-116; *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 11-12.

²¹⁰ Plantinga describes an implicit contradiction along the following lines: "That is, a set *S* of propositions is implicitly contradictory if there is a necessary proposition *p* such that the result of adding *p*

necessarily true proposition to imply the negative of one or more of

(1)-(4). For example, to:

- (1) God is omnipotent
- (2) God is omniscient
- (3) God is wholly good
- (4) Evil exists

one might add:

(5) "An omnipotent and omniscient good being always eliminates every evil that it can properly eliminate

and ...

[6] ... There are no nonlogical limits to what an omnipotent being can do."²¹¹

But Plantinga points out that supplying (5) and (6) does not entail a contradiction. (1), (2), (3), (5), and (6) do not entail a denial of (4). All that they imply is (4') "There is no evil that God can properly eliminate."²¹² For the atheist to arrive at a formally contradictory set she must supply the following additional proposition: "If God is omniscient and omnipotent, then he can properly eliminate every evil state of affairs."²¹³ But this proposition is simply not necessarily true. For there may be a good state of affairs that outweighs any evil that is found within it. In other words, one could only eliminate the evil state of affairs if one were to eliminate the overriding good state of affairs.

Certain kinds of values, certain familiar kinds of good states of affairs, can't exist apart from evil of some sort. For example, there are people who display a sort of creative moral heroism in the face of suffering and adversity—a heroism that inspires others and creates a good situation out of a bad one. In a situation like this the evil, of course, remains evil; but the total state of affairs—someone's bearing pain magnificently,

to *S* is a formally contradictory set. Another way to put it: *S* is implicitly contradictory if there is some necessarily true proposition *p* such that by using just the laws of ordinary logic, we can deduce an explicit contradiction from *p* together with the members of *S*." (*God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 16; Plantinga discusses how this applies to the problem of evil on pages 12-16)

²¹¹ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 21.

²¹² *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 22.

²¹³ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 22.

for example-may be good. If it is, then the good present must outweigh the evil; otherwise the total situation would not be good. But, of course, it is not possible that such a good state of affairs obtain unless some evil also obtain. It is a necessary truth that if someone bears pain magnificently, then someone is in pain.²¹⁴

The preceding is sufficient, according to Plantinga, to show that the atheist's charge of inconsistency is unfounded. But one can go further, and indeed the atheist might very well demand that one should. One can demonstrate that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God is consistent with the existence of evil by supplying a proposition that would entail evil's existence. A possible proposition would be **"God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so."**²¹⁵

Such an endeavor can be undertaken in one of two ways: one can attempt to specify a *possible* state of affairs which would substantiate the claim, or one can attempt "... to specify what God's reason is for permitting evil and try to show, if it is not obvious, that it is a good reason."²¹⁶ Plantinga refers to the latter as a theodicy ("what God's reason is"), the former as a defense ("what God's reason might possibly be").²¹⁷

... there is a significant difference between a Free Will Theodicy and a Free Will Defense. The latter is sufficient (if successful) to show that set A is consistent; in a way a Free Will Theodicy goes beyond what is required. On the other hand, a theodicy would be much more satisfying if possible to achieve. ... Neither a defense or [sic] a theodicy, of course, gives any hint as to what God's reason for some *specific* evil-the death or suffering of someone close to you, for example-might be. And there is still another function-a sort of pastoral function-in the neighborhood that neither serves. Confronted with evil in his own life or suddenly coming to realize more clearly than before the extent and magnitude of evil, a believer in God may undergo a crisis of faith. ... Neither a Free Will Defense nor a Free Will Theodicy is designed to be of much help or comfort to one suffering from such a storm in the soul (although in a

²¹⁴ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 23.

²¹⁵ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 26.

²¹⁶ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 26.

²¹⁷ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 28.

specific case, of course, one or the other could prove useful).²¹⁸

What Plantinga is saying then is that since the atheologian is declaring that the existence of God as traditionally conceived is logically incompatible with the existence of evil, all a theist need do to meet the charge of inconsistency is respond with a "God may have a good reason for allowing evil to exist." If the atheist demands more, the theist can respond by spelling out what that reason might possibly be (a defense)—it is not necessary to know or explain what God's reasons are (a theodicy).

The deductive problem of evil as presented by the atheist is a logical one. She is claiming God's existence is logically *impossible* if evil exists. Therefore, to prove the atheist incorrect all that is required is that one provide a *possible* way of perceiving the two as compatible. Surely a probable reason (a theodicy) is sufficient to do this but it is not necessary; a defense can also meet the charge of inconsistency. If the atheist is claiming the two concepts are logically contradictory and that God therefore *necessarily* does not exist (since it is obvious evil does) all the theist need do by way of response is provide a *possible* reason why God would allow evil to occur or a *possible* way in which the two are compatible. It does not matter if the response is probable or even plausible—for the atheist is claiming there is no possible way the two can be made compatible (so long as she is claiming the two are necessarily logically contradictory). By way of response to the deductive problem of evil, then, Plantinga appeals to a specific defense: The Free Will Defense.

Plantinga begins by defining freedom: "If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and

²¹⁸ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 28-29.

free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't."²¹⁹ He goes on to claim that a person is *significantly free* "... if he is then free with respect to a morally significant action."²²⁰ With the foregoing Plantinga is then able to formulate his Free Will Defense:

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.²²¹

Plantinga readily admits that objections can be raised against this defense, but it is his opinion that they can be met. He quickly rejects a compatibilist response to the defense as implausible.²²² The objection that he considers more formidable is the one raised by the late J. L. Mackie.²²³ It is Mackie's claim that

- (1) It is logically possible for one to always *freely* choose to do right (good, be moral, etc.)
- (2) God can do that which is logically possible (as omnipotent)
- (3) Therefore, God can make creatures who always freely choose to do that which is right
- (4) The fact that such creatures do not, in fact, exist is therefore logically inconsistent with God being omnipotent and omnibenevolent (and one could add omniscient as well).

²¹⁹ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 29.

²²⁰ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 30.

²²¹ God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 30.

²²² He states, "One might as well claim that being in jail doesn't really limit one's freedom on the grounds that if one were *not* in jail, he'd be free to come and go as he pleased." (God, Freedom, and Evil, p. 32.)

²²³ God, Freedom, and Evil, pp. 32-34.

But, according to Plantinga, this objection is problematic. For it is based on the premise that an omnipotent God could create any world He liked. Here Plantinga claims Mackie is making the same false assumption as the theist Leibniz. Hence he refers to this incorrect contention as "Leibniz's Lapse."²²⁴ Here is Plantinga's response to it:

If we consider a world in which *S'* obtains and in which Maurice freely chooses oatmeal at time *t*, we see that whether or not it is within God's power to actualize it depends upon what Maurice would do if he were free in a certain situation. Accordingly, there are any number of possible worlds such that it is partly up to Maurice whether or not God can actualize them. It is, of course, up to God whether or not to create Maurice and also up to God whether or not to make him free with respect to the action of taking oatmeal at time *t*. (God could, if He chose, cause him to succumb to the dreaded *equine obsession*, a condition shared by some people and most horses, whose victims find it *psychologically impossible* to refuse oats or oat products.) But if He creates Maurice and creates him free with respect to this action, then whether or not he actually performs the action is up to Maurice—not God.²²⁵

Of course Plantinga acknowledges that this does not prove the proposition that *an omnipotent God cannot create a world containing only moral good*—for all that it demonstrates is that Leibniz's Lapse is false. In order to prove the possibility of the proposition that *an omnipotent God cannot create a world containing only moral good* Plantinga appeals to the concept of transworld depravity.

Obviously it is possible that there be persons who suffer from transworld depravity. More generally, it is possible that *everybody* suffers from it. And if this possibility were actual, then God, though omnipotent, could not have created any of the possible worlds containing just the persons who do in fact exist, and containing moral good but no moral evil. For to do so He'd have to create persons who were significantly free (otherwise there would be no moral good) but suffered from transworld depravity. Such persons go wrong with respect to at least one action in any world God could have actualized and in which they are free with respect to morally significant actions;

²²⁴ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 44.

²²⁵ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 44.

so the price for creating a world in which they produce moral good is creating one in which they also produce moral evil.²²⁶

As Plantinga puts it elsewhere,

... since every person is the instantiation of an essence, He can create significantly free persons only by instantiating some essences. But if every essence suffers from transworld depravity, then no matter which essences God instantiates, the resulting persons, if free with respect to morally significant actions, would always perform at least some wrong actions. If every essence suffers from transworld depravity, then it was beyond the power of God Himself to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil. He might have been able to create worlds in which moral evil is very considerably outweighed by moral good; but it was not within His power to create worlds containing moral good but no moral evil—and this despite the fact that He is omnipotent. Under these conditions God could have created a world containing no moral evil only by creating one without significantly free persons. But it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity; so it's possible that God could not have created a world containing moral good but no moral evil.²²⁷

But if it is possible that God could not create a world containing only moral good (again, by appealing to notions of freedom and transworld depravity), then the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God is compatible with the existence of evil. It must be recalled that such an appeal does not need to be probable (or even plausible for that matter) for a defense only posits possibilities. Plantinga's Free-Will Defense merely asserts that there is a possible way in which God could not have brought about a state of affairs in which no evil obtained. This is sufficient to negate any atheistic claim which asserts the two concepts (God and evil) are logically incompatible (that God's existence is therefore impossible). The atheist claims there is no possible way the two can be made compatible; the theist responds with a possible way.

But Plantinga ponders whether "... the atheologian can regroup; perhaps he can argue that at any rate God's existence is not

²²⁶ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 48-49.

²²⁷ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 53.

consistent with the vast amount and variety of moral evil the universe actually contains."²²⁸ One of the initial ways to respond to this newly reformulated objection would be to point out that it in no way proves theism false:

For it *could* be, obviously enough, that (1) [God is the omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good creator of the world] is improbable with respect to (2) [There are 10^{13} turps of evil] but probable with respect to something else we know. I might know, for example, both that

... Feike is a Frisian, and 9 out of 10 Frisians cannot swim,

and

... Feike is a Frisian lifeguard, and 99 out of 100 Frisian lifeguards can swim;

it is plausible to hold that

... Feike can swim

is probable with respect to ... [the second] ... but improbable with respect to ... [the first].²²⁹

But beyond this Plantinga goes on to point out that one can continue to appeal to the Free-Will Defense when addressing the *amount* of evil. For it is possible that God could not have created a world like the actual except containing less evil.

For it is possible that

(37) For every possible world *W* containing as much moral good as Kronos [this world], but less moral evil, there is at least one essence *E*, an action *A*, and a maximal world segment *S'* such that

(1) *E* contains the properties: *is free with respect to A in W* and *goes right with respect to A in W*

(2) *S'* is included in *W* and includes *E's* being instantiated but includes neither *E's* instantiation's performing *A* nor *E's* instantiation's refraining from *A*

and

(3) if *S'* were actual, *E's* instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.

(37) is possible; if it is true, then it wasn't within the power of God to create a world containing as much moral good as this one but less moral evil. So it's possible that this was not within God's power; but if so, then (1) is compatible with the proposition that there is as much moral evil as Kronos does in fact contain. And, of course, what the Free Will Defender claims is not that (37) is true; he claims only that it is

²²⁸ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 55.

²²⁹ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 22-23.

compatible with the existence of a wholly good, omnipotent God.²³⁰

In a like fashion Plantinga demonstrates that the existence of God is not incompatible with *natural* (as opposed to moral) evil. Plantinga responds to the existence of natural evil on two fronts. He points out initially that it is certainly conceivable that less moral good would be produced if the natural evils did not exist. "Some people deal creatively with certain kinds of hardship or suffering, acting in such a way that on balance the whole state of affairs is valuable. And perhaps the response would have been less impressive and the total situation less valuable if the evil had not taken place."²³¹

A second, more traditional approach would be to appeal to the existence of other free agents who are nonhuman spirits, such as Satan and his minions. Granting the possibility of the existence of such malevolent entities, one has yet another way of explaining the existence of natural evil.²³² If this is the case "... then *natural* evil significantly resembles *moral* evil in that, like the latter, it is the result of the activity of significantly free persons. In fact both moral and natural evil would then be special cases of what we might call *broadly moral evil*—evil resulting from the free actions of personal beings, whether human or not."²³³

²³⁰ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 56-57.

²³¹ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 58.

²³² *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 57-58.

²³³ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 58-59. Certainly one could also appeal, though Plantinga does not, to a third possible explanation for the existence of evil. If the Judeo-Christian conception of God and history is correct it may be the case that natural evils are the result of human free choice. For the Genesis account links human freedom with a cursed world. One could also point out the many ways in which natural evils are linked to (can be circumvented by or are indirectly caused by) human action (e.g. many famines [resulting from natural evil] are exacerbated by human choices [such as a malevolent dictator or apathetic neighbors]).

Hence the deductive problem of evil is really no problem at all. As Plantinga points out "... I think the present consensus, even among those who urge some form of the argument from evil, is that the deductive form of the argument from evil is unsuccessful."²³⁴ Surely Plantinga is correct here, for, as Ronald Nash (quoting Mackie) points out: "Shortly before he died, J. L. Mackie conceded that the deductive 'problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another.' ... Another atheologian, William Rowe, concurs ...".²³⁵

But this does not solve the problem of evil completely. In fact, many would say that the problem is compounded. For the atheist can take one step back and draw a new line in the sand. Perhaps there is no deductive problem of evil—maybe the two are not *logically* contradictory (God's existence is compatible with the existence of evil—God's existence is not *impossible*). This, according to the atheist, does not resolve the issue. For although God's existence may not be *impossible* in the face of evil, God's existence may be *improbable* or *unlikely* given the existence, amount, or kind of evil that exists.

Plantinga finds this approach just as unappealing. For if the atheist is claiming

(1) An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God would create the best possible world

and

(2) It is improbable that the present world is the best possible world

the atheologian is faced with several difficulties.

²³⁴ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 21.

²³⁵ Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1988), pp. 193, 194.

First, the atheist (in the initial proposition) is simply appealing to Leibniz's Lapse (and the claim "God could create any world" has already been proven false).²³⁶

Second, the claim that there is such a thing as a best possible world is suspect. "Just as there is no greatest prime number, so perhaps there is no best of all possible worlds. Perhaps for any world you mention, replete with dancing girls and deliriously happy sentient creatures, there is an even better world, containing even more dancing girls and deliriously happy sentient creatures."²³⁷

Finally, Plantinga points out that even if such difficulties could be overcome (and there is little reason to think that they can) it is difficult to conceive how one could formulate an argument from evil which makes God's existence improbable. Plantinga asks how large amounts of evil *specifically* count against the probability of God existing and claims that no atheologian has provided a cogent response. According to Plantinga, there is no evidence against the claim that all the evil in this world is broadly moral evil and of all the possible worlds God could have made, this one contains the best balance of moral good over moral evil. He states,

Of course, it involves the idea that the evil which isn't due to free *human* agency, is due to the free agency of other rational and significantly free creatures. Many people find this idea preposterous; but this is scarcely evidence against it. Some theologians tell us that this idea is repugnant to "man come of age" or to "modern habits of thought." Again, this may be so (although it certainly isn't repugnant to everyone nowadays), but it doesn't come to much as evidence. The mere fact that a belief is unpopular at present (or at some other time) is interesting from a sociological point of view but evidentially irrelevant. "We have every reason to think", say Cornman and Lehrer, "that all natural evils have perfectly natural causes. It is therefore unreasonable to postulate some nonnatural cause

²³⁶ Jim Bennett has pointed out that it could, however, be argued that this is not an adequate response to the atheists' objection. For an atheist could respond by saying that given those worlds that God *could* create, He has not created the best possible.

²³⁷ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 61.

to explain their occurrences." But, of course, here we're not *postulating* the existence of nonhuman agents to *explain* natural evil; we're simply asking if we have evidence against ... [the claim that all the evil in this world is broadly moral evil and of all the possible worlds God could have made, this one contains the best balance of moral good over evil]. Perhaps, given our evidence, it would be irrational to postulate the existence of such beings; it does not follow that we have evidence against their existence.²³⁸

Hence the existence, kind, or quantity of evil does not make the existence of God impossible, as the deductive argument claims, nor does it make the existence of God improbable, as the inductive argument claims.

By way of summary, then, even though natural theology is unnecessary for grounding religious belief as rational, it may serve such a function.²³⁹ In the absence of any rational argument for the existence of God one may still be rational in holding to such a belief. The Reformed thinker neither requires nor needs (indeed some do not even want) evidence for belief in God. On the other hand, Plantinga, as the primary spokesperson for Reformed epistemology, deems it necessary to provide a response to proposed evidence *against* belief in God—whether this be an argument that claims religious belief is unnecessary, incoherent, or inconsistent.

²³⁸ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 62.

²³⁹ As can be seen in Plantinga's assessment of the ontological argument. (It should, of course, be recalled that many Reformed epistemologists make a distinction between natural theology and evidentialism.)

CHAPTER II

THE ALTERNATIVE TO EVIDENTIALISM

An initial question that comes to mind when one is told belief in God is rational apart from evidence is "How can such a belief be grounded?" If belief is not rational due to evidence how is it rational? If evidence or argument is unnecessary, or—even worse—undesired, what is required? To answer this question it is necessary to examine first the underpinnings of Reformed epistemology: the theological writings of John Calvin and the philosophical works of Thomas Reid. This will be followed by an exposition of Reformed epistemology and the claim that belief in God is properly basic. Finally, approaches similar to Reformed epistemology, those of William James and Cornelius Van Til, will be examined.

A. THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND: CALVIN

If one is looking for a paradigmatic Reformed thinker one can do no better than Calvin himself. All Reformed thinkers trace the origination of their views to this influential figure. It is therefore critical to determine his view of rationality and its link with theistic belief. But "with regard to Calvin and rationality, there is no single work or group of works in which Calvin himself addresses the topic. Thus, one is required to abstract from his writings what his view on the topic is understood to be."¹ Other

¹ Charles Partee, "Calvin, Calvinism, and Rationality," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrik Hart et. al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), p. 2.

Calvin scholars make similar claims.² This is not unexpected, as Calvin considered his enterprise to be largely theological as opposed to philosophical. However, one can certainly derive an *implicit* understanding of his views by examining his theological assertions.

By far the most important work for examining Calvin's theory of knowledge and his views concerning human rationality is his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Hoitenga is on the right track when he points out that Calvin's views can best be understood in light of the ideas of creation, fall, and redemption.³ For the possibility of a person's knowledge of God is contingent upon that individual's state. At creation Calvin would claim that one is in a state of innocence and has been endowed with supernatural and natural gifts. At the fall (Adam's sin) human nature was corrupted but not completely lost—supernatural gifts were lost while the natural gifts (including the will and reason) were corrupted. At redemption (following salvation through Christ), said gifts are restored. Because of this three-fold distinction many of Calvin's points must be qualified as applying only to a specific state. According to Calvin it would be a disservice to claim human nature is static. As one's relationship with God changes, so does one's nature, and thereby also one's knowledge of God.

According to Calvin, *all* know (whether in an original, fallen, or restored state) that God exists

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty. ... Since, therefore, men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker, they are condemned by their own testimony because they have failed to honor him and to consecrate their

² Dewey J. Hoitenga Jr., in his "Faith and Reason in Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," asserts "... Calvin has no well-defined epistemology as such ..." (in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, p.

¹⁷.
³ p. 17.

lives to his will. If ignorance of God is to be looked for anywhere, surely one is most likely to find an example of it among the most backward folk and those more remote from civilization. Yet there is, as the eminent pagan [Cicero] says, no nation so barbarous, no people so savage, that they have not a deep-seated conviction that there is a God. And they who in other aspects of life seem least to differ from brutes still continue to retain some seed of religion. So deeply does the common conception occupy the minds of all, so tenaciously does it inhere in the hearts of all! Therefore, since from the beginning of the world there has been no region, no city, in short, no household, that could do without religion, there lies in this a tacit confession of a sense of deity inscribed in the hearts of all.

Indeed, even idolatry is amply proof of this conception. We know how man does not willingly humble himself so as to place other creatures over himself. Since, then, he prefers to worship wood and stone rather than to be thought of as having no God, clearly this is a most vivid impression of a divine being. So impossible is it to blot this from man's mind that natural disposition would be more easily altered, as altered indeed it is when man voluntarily sinks from his natural haughtiness to the very depths in order to honor God!⁴

Religion is not some arbitrary invention; actual godlessness is not possible.⁵ As he states: "Indeed, the perversity of the impious, who though they struggle furiously are unable to extricate themselves from the fear of God, is abundant testimony that this conviction, namely, that there is some God, is naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within, as it were in the very marrow. ... From this we conclude that it is not a doctrine that must first be learned in school, but one of which each of us is master from his mother's womb and which nature itself permits no one to forget, although many strive

⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol XX (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 43, 44 (bk. 1, ch. 3, sec. 1). Ford's footnote to "an awareness of divinity" (p. 43) is particularly illuminating: "*Divinitatis sensum*." This term and "seed of religion," used immediately below (cf. I.iv.1), refer generally to a numinous awareness of God, and are closely related to conscience, which is a moral response to God. Cf. I.i.3 and Comm. John 1:5,9. On verse 5, Calvin writes: 'There are two principal parts of the light which still remains in corrupt nature: first, the seed of religion is planted in all men; next, the distinction between good and evil is engraved on their consciences.'

⁵ I.iii.2-3; pp. 44-47.

with every nerve to this end."⁶ Thus, all know God as the seed of religion has been placed in all.⁷ None are ignorant of this fact—even those who claim God does not exist. Calvin states that "... a sense of divinity is by nature engraven on human hearts. For necessity forces from the reprobate themselves a confession of it. In tranquil times they wittily joke about God, indeed are facetious and garrulous in belittling his power. If any occasion for despair presses upon them, it goads them to seek him and impels their perfunctory prayers. From this it is clear that they have not been utterly ignorant of God, but that what should have come forth sooner was held back by stubbornness."⁸

As fully aware of God's existence, Calvin claims that all are without excuse.⁹ He examines Biblical data to confirm this fact.¹⁰ He cites Romans 1:21,22¹¹ and points out that the revolt against God is a conscious one.¹² The reason it is conscious is because God has manifested Himself in the work of creation. Thus, in addition to implanting the seed of religion in the mind of all peoples, God has revealed Himself in the universe. "Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him."¹³ Calvin asserts that "the reason why the author of The Letter

⁶ I.iii.3; p. 46.

⁷ I.iii.3; p. 46.

⁸ I.iv.4; p. 51. Here Calvin appears to be offering a claim similar to the popular 'there are no atheists in foxholes or C.S. Lewis' "Pain is God's megaphone."

⁹ I.v.13-15; pp. 66-69

¹⁰ I.iv; pp. 47-51.

¹¹ I.iv.1; p. 48.

¹² I.iv.2; p. 48.

¹³ I.v.1; pp. 51-52.

to the Hebrews elegantly calls the universe the appearance of things invisible [Heb. 11:3] is that this skillful ordering of the universe is for us a sort of mirror in which we can contemplate God, who is otherwise invisible."¹⁴ This is expounded in greater detail in Romans 1¹⁵:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.¹⁶

Hence "even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host. It is, accordingly, clear that there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show his wisdom."¹⁷

But the best proof does not lie in the outside universe (macrocosm) but in man (a microcosm). The greatest proof of divine wisdom is humanity (in body and soul)—yet individuals continue to reject God.

... in regard to the structure of the human body one must have the greatest keenness in order to weigh, with Galen's skill, its

¹⁴ I.v.1; pp. 52-53.

¹⁵ Which Calvin also cites in I.v.1; p. 53.

¹⁶ Romans 1:18-25, *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1984). All Biblical quotations in this work will come from the NIV.

¹⁷ I.v.2; p. 53.

articulation, symmetry, beauty, and use. But yet, as all knowledge, the human body shows itself to be a composition so ingenious that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker.

...

Certain philosophers,¹⁸ accordingly, long ago not ineptly called man a microcosm because he is a rare example of God's power, goodness, and wisdom, and contains within himself enough miracles to occupy our minds, if only we are not irked at paying attention to them. ... Indeed, if there is no need to go outside ourselves to comprehend God, what pardon will the indolence of that man deserve who is loath to descend within himself to find God? ...

How detestable, I ask you, is this madness: that man, finding God in his body and soul a hundred times, on this very pretense of excellence denies there is a God? ... They see such exquisite workmanship in their individual members, from mouth and eyes even to their very toenails. Here also they substitute nature for God.¹⁹

Such knowledge is said to be immediate²⁰ (although it is dubious whether the term is used within an epistemic rather than a temporal framework). In sum, God's existence is known to all through the seed of religion He implanted or by His handiwork (whether it be external to the individual or his or her own body and soul). Thus individuals cannot rely on the excuse of not knowing God. For they *do* know of His existence (it could not be more plainly evident according to Calvin). All know of God's existence; they merely suppress such knowledge (due to the ravages of the Fall). Furthermore, it is not the case that individuals know of God's existence without the associated attributes (as if an existential can be known apart from any predicates). It is not merely known *that* God exists without knowing *what* God is. From God's creation Calvin claims one can know that God is eternal, good, powerful, a protector, a vindicator, righteous, merciful, and wise.²¹ All of this is obvious; proof in the form of argument or reason, is therefore unnecessary: "we see that no long or toilsome proof is needed to elicit evidences that serve to illuminate and affirm the

¹⁸ Aristotle.

¹⁹ I.v. 2,3,4; pp. 53-54, 55-56.

²⁰ I.ii.2; pp. 41-42.

²¹ I.v.6-8; pp. 59-61.

divine majesty ... we ought to observe that we are called to a knowledge of God: not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart."²² For this reason Calvin dismisses the reasoning of the philosophers of times past who claim to be able to delve into the mysteries of God by mere force of will and reason. Time and time again he points out the inadequacy of individuals' reasoning of their way toward an independent knowledge of God.²³ He states that "... among the philosophers who have tried with reason and learning to penetrate into heaven, how shameful is the diversity!"²⁴ Scripture is required for accurate knowledge of God for "... the human mind because of its feebleness can in no way attain to God unless it be aided and assisted by his Sacred Word ..."²⁵ Without the Scriptures all fall into error—for Scripture succeeds where general revelation ("revelation in the creation") cannot.²⁶ According to Calvin, knowledge of God derived from general revelation is uncertain and confused; "... hence it appears that if men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god [cf. Acts 17:23]."²⁷

²² I.v.9; pp. 61-62.

²³ Cf. I.ii.2; p. 41. I.iii.3; pp. 46-47. I.v.11; p. 64.

²⁴ I.v.12; p. 65. On the same page Calvin goes on to examine some of the irrational claims of the Stoics, Egyptians, and Epicureans.

²⁵ I.vi.4; p. 74.

²⁶ I.vi.3,4; pp. 72,73.

²⁷ I.v.12; p. 66. It is interesting to note that Battles footnotes the foregoing by pointing out that: "Natural theology (human reasoning about God, under the conditions of sin, unaided by special revelation) has been the subject of this chapter through section 12. All scholars agree that the above words present Calvin's verdict upon it, held consistently in all his writings. There is a sharp divergence of opinion, however, among interpreters as to Calvin's view of the usefulness of such natural theology to the Christian, especially its role in the Christian's observation of nature." (p. 66)

He stresses Scripture in the place of reason because the testimony of the Holy Spirit is greater than all other rational proofs.

... the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God's holy name, that by it the whole world may be brought into obedience to him. Now we ought to see how apparent it is not only by plausible opinion but by clear truth that they do not call upon God's name heedlessly or falsely. If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences—that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles—we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.²⁸

Calvin can be viewed as giving a response to all Lockeans who, as was seen earlier, demand that one give reasons or evidence for affirming that a specific revelation has come from God. According to Calvin, the Spirit Himself testifies as to the veracity of such texts.²⁹ He points out that

... they who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards. ... Since for unbelieving men religion seems to stand by opinion alone, they, in order not to believe anything foolishly or lightly, both wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke divinely. But I reply: the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. ... Some good folk are annoyed that a clear proof is not ready at hand when the impious, unpunished, murmur against God's Word. As if the Spirit were not called both "seal" and "guarantee" [II Cor. 1:22] for confirming the faith of the godly; because until he illumines their minds, they ever waver among many doubts!³⁰

Thus where Locke demands reasons be given for accepting a revelation as true, Calvin responds by asserting that the Scripture is self-authenticating as well as known to be true by the Holy Spirit.

Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that

²⁸ I.vii.4; p. 78. Plantinga himself references this passage on page 67 of his "Reason and Belief in God."

²⁹ Presumably analogously to the way in which the Spirit testifies with the believer's spirit that he or she is a child of God (Romans 8:16).

³⁰ I.vii.4; pp. 79-80.

Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit. ... we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty ... that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as to a thing far beyond any guesswork!

...

God, therefore, very rightly proclaims through Isaiah that the prophets together with the whole people are witnesses to him; for they, instructed by prophecies, unhesitatingly hold that God has spoken without deceit or ambiguity [Isa. 43:10]. Such, then, is a conviction that requires no reasons; such, a knowledge with which the best reason agrees—in which the mind truly reposes more securely and constantly than in any reasons; such, finally a feeling that can be born only of heavenly revelation.³¹

Later in his opus Calvin echoes the same claim. In Book II he sets out to examine the consequences of humanity's fall from grace. He affirms that all know of God and continue to have knowledge of God, even *after* the Fall. For, in his view, man's nature is not lost—it is corrupted.³² Thus all continue to be aware of God (again, either by the seed of religion implanted in all or as manifested in His work whether external [the universe] or internal [the human body or soul]). It is simply that this knowledge is corrupted or consciously smothered either by ignorance or malice.³³

Earlier in his first book, Calvin points out that the soul is composed of the understanding and will.³⁴ In his second book he insists that *both* must remain part of human nature but that both are corrupted. In order to explain how this is accomplished Calvin appeals to the distinction made earlier by Augustine: the distinction between the supernatural and the natural gifts. In agreement with Augustine, he claims that the supernatural gifts endowed to humans by

³¹ I.vii.5; p. 80.

³² II.ii.12f; pp. 270ff.

³³ Cf. I.iv; pp. 47ff.

³⁴ I.xv.7; p. 194.

God—faith, desire for righteousness and holiness, love of God and neighbor, and the like—were stripped from man. The natural gifts—which would include the reason and the will—were corrupted through sin.

Since reason, therefore, by which man distinguishes between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is a natural gift, it could not be completely wiped out; but it was partly weakened and partly corrupted, so that its misshapen ruins appear. John speaks in this sense: "The light still shines in the darkness, but the darkness comprehends it not" [John 1:5]. In these words both facts are clearly expressed. First, in man's perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam. These show him to be a rational being, differing from brute beasts, because he is endowed with understanding. Yet, secondly, they show this light choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively.

Similarly the will, because it is inseparable from man's nature, did not perish, but was so bound to wicked desires that it cannot strive after the right.³⁵

Thus humanity is left with reason and the will but in a fallen and corrupted state. We retain an understanding of earthly things,³⁶ but an understanding of heavenly things—like pure knowledge of God and His kingdom and the nature of righteousness—is lost.³⁷ Calvin is therefore able to break down spiritual insight into three categories and point out which are within the grasp of fallen man's reasoning, and which are not.

We must now analyze what human reason can discern with regard to God's kingdom and to spiritual insight. This spiritual insight consists chiefly in three things: (1) knowing God; (2) knowing his fatherly favor in our behalf, in which our salvation consists; (3) knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law. In the first two points—and especially in the second—the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles! Certainly I do not deny that one can read competent and apt statements about God here and there in the philosophers, but these always show a certain giddy imagination. ... They are like a traveler passing through a field at night who in a momentary lightening flash sees far and wide, but the sight vanishes so swiftly that he is plunged again in to the darkness of the night

³⁵ II.ii.12; pp. 270-271.

³⁶ Which would included mechanical skills, the liberal arts, household management, and government.

³⁷ II.ii.13; p. 272.

before he can take even a step-let alone be directed on his way by its help.³⁸

One gets the impression, therefore, that if a philosopher arrived at any true knowledge of God, it would be attained solely by accident (or perhaps at the prodding of God Himself). Furthermore, any such knowledge would also be inadequate in terms of soteriological implications. Human reason by itself is incapable of arriving at the first two kinds of knowledge, and when it does it may be considered a fortuitous accident which is nevertheless incapable of guiding an individual. As Calvin frames it, "human reason, therefore, neither approaches, nor strives toward, nor even takes a straight aim at, this truth: to understand who the true God is or what sort of God he wishes to be toward us."³⁹ Thus Calvin comes full-circle and once again asserts that only Scripture can reveal such knowledge of God. One must appeal to a Scripture which itself is not substantiated by human reason, to affirm that which human knowledge by itself cannot attain. He points to several New Testament passages to bear out this claim. I Corinthians 12:3 asserts that no one can claim Jesus Christ is Lord apart from the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist (in John 3:27) claims nothing can be received unless given from above. I Corinthians 2:14 asserts fallen individuals cannot receive the things of the Spirit of God since they are viewed as foolishness and cannot be understood.⁴⁰ "This doubtless means man's mind can become spiritually wise only in so far as God illumines it."⁴¹ In summary, then, in two ways persons are left in an impossible position regarding the possibility of knowing God. The first is like trying to jump the Atlantic Ocean, the

³⁸ II.ii.18; p. 277.

³⁹ II.ii.18; p. 278.

⁴⁰ Calvin discusses the foregoing passages, and others, in Book II.ii.20; pp. 278-280.

⁴¹ II.ii.20; p. 279.

second like jumping the Pacific. Perhaps I can come closer to the goal in the first but both alike remain outside the bounds of the human capacity.

But what of the third aspect of insight ("knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of the law")? A correct understanding of this aspect, as well as its possibility, is crucial for understanding Calvin. For

The evidence of God's will that man possesses make his inexcusable but procures for him no right knowledge ... The human mind sometimes seems more acute in this than in higher things. For the apostle testifies: "When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do the works of the law, they are a law to themselves ... and show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their thoughts accuse them among themselves or excuse them before God's judgment" [Rom. 2:14-15p.] ...

There is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law (of which the apostle is here speaking). Let us consider, however, for what purpose men have been endowed with this knowledge of the law. ... Because it might seem absurd that the Gentiles perish without any preceding judgment, Paul immediately adds that for them conscience stands in place of law; this is sufficient reason for their just condemnation. The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable. ... It is falsely said, therefore, that man sins out of ignorance alone.⁴²

Thus the natural gift of reason and will is severely limited in terms of what it can deliver. It is "... an adequate, although never infallible, tool for making 'earthly' decisions based on available (or collectible) evidence and for relating theological items which are revealed in Scripture. ... Reason is denied as an unrestricted power or ability to speculate (cf. I,xiv,4) accurately into the mysteries of God beyond his revelation."⁴³ If this is the case, argument for God's existence is impossible; it is simply beyond the abilities of limited reason. But beyond this, argument is unnecessary (and this is what renders persons without excuse) for the *sensus divinitatis* provides

⁴² II.ii.22; pp. 281-282.

⁴³ Partee, p. 12.

knowledge of God to all. This is because the problem of the knowledge of God is not a problem of natural theology (as it was for Aquinas)—it is a problem of revelation.⁴⁴ As Plantinga points out,

It is not that such a person is justified or rational in so believing by virtue of having an implicit argument—some version of the teleological argument, say. No; he does not need any argument for justification or rationality. His belief need not be based on any other propositions at all; under these conditions he is perfectly rational in accepting belief in God in the utter absence of any argument, deductive or inductive. Indeed, a person in these conditions, says Calvin, *knows* that God exists.⁴⁵

A believer does not need natural theology, then, according to Plantinga; it is not required either as justification for belief or source of confidence. Beyond this, one should not believe on the basis of any argument for, if so, one will be forever subject to doubt and instability.

If my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with a good objection to my favorite argument. ... From Calvin's point of view believing in the existence of God on the basis of rational argument is like believing in the existence of your spouse on the basis of the analogical argument for other minds—whimsical at best and unlikely to delight the person concerned.⁴⁶

Marching boldly in step with Calvin's exegesis of Biblical texts and his account of the human condition, Reformed thinkers therefore similarly reject the necessity, adequacy, or even possibility of argument (in the form of natural theology or evidence) for the existence of God. But the foregoing has only provided a theological background for the position—it has not presented a philosophical basis for such a view. Reformed epistemologists are not unaware of this

⁴⁴ T.H.L. Parker, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1952), 7-9; cf. Dewey J. Houtenga Jr.'s "Faith and Reason in Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God" in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendreik Hart et. al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), p. 20.

⁴⁵ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 67.

⁴⁶ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 67-68.

fact, but neither are they bothered. For Calvin's approach was not directly epistemic (though its ramifications within the discipline are many)—Calvin's approach was theological. One would therefore not expect a detailed explication of a philosophical grounding from him. Given his low view of contemporary and preceding philosophers it is questionable whether he would deem such an enterprise profitable. Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and others have no such reservations. One need not provide reasons (in the form of argument or natural theology) for one's theistic belief. Furthermore, it is possible to demonstrate *philosophically* why such an approach is unnecessary. Collectively they point to the work of Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid as laying the groundwork for how such a justification can be accomplished.

B. PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND: REID

The philosophical writings of Thomas Reid should be viewed largely as a response to the philosophy of his day. Living in the 18th century, Reid grew up in a philosophical environment permeated by the Cartesian theory of ideas. Reid himself tended to lump all modern philosophers into one Cartesian system. He claimed that most prominent philosophers "... after Des Cartes, may, I think, without impropriety, be called Cartesians. For, though they differ from Des Cartes in some things, and contradict him in others, yet they set out from the same principles, and follow the same method, admitting no other first principle with regard to the existence of things but their own existence, and the existence of those operations of mind of which they are conscious, and requiring that the existence of a material world, and the existence of other men and things, should be proved by argument."⁴⁷ Considered in this broad sense, then, Descartes,

⁴⁷ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, [1785] in *The*

Malebranche, Arnauld, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are all Cartesians⁴⁸—Reid's categorization therefore cuts across traditional rationalist/empiricist lines.

Reid's common-sense philosophy can therefore best be viewed as a reaction to (and rejection of) the philosophy that began in Descartes and culminated in Hume. It was a system presented, by Descartes from the rationalist perspective and Locke from the empiricist, to combat the difficulties and inconsistencies of the Scholastic period. It was doomed to failure according to Reid, and, in a twist of irony, he saw it as his duty to dismantle the problem-ridden system that was originally given in response to what it saw as a problem-ridden system. As Wolterstorff points out, "... Reid viewed the basic cause of this threatening crisis as the spreading influence of Descartes' proposed solution to the crisis he had identified. Descartes, said Reid, had introduced the 'Way of Ideas.' Locke, Berkeley and Hume had followed him. In Hume's hands, the Way of Ideas had led to a blatant form of skepticism."⁴⁹ Hence Reid's philosophy is a reaction to the system as well as the conclusions to which it led. In his dedication of *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* Reid appears very Kantian in acknowledging that it was Hume's "Treatise" that "awoke him from his dogmatic slumber."

I acknowledge ... that I never thought of calling in question the principles commonly received with regard to the human understanding, until the "Treatise of Human Nature" was published in the year 1739. The ingenious author of that treatise upon the principles of Locke—who was no sceptic—hath built a system of scepticism, which leaves no ground to believe any one thing rather than its contrary. His reasoning appeared to me to be just; there was, therefore, a necessity to call in

Works of Thomas Reid, vol 1, 6th ed., ed. Sir William Hamilton, Bart. (Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart, 1863), VI.7; p. 468.

⁴⁸ Cf. Reid, *Essays*, VI.7; p. 464.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrik Hart et. al. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), p. 44.

question the principles upon which it was founded, or to admit the conclusion.⁵⁰

But what sort of theory of rationality does Reid put forth to take the place of those established on a "theory of ideas" which he believes leads to skepticism? How could one build a system that would not also entail the denial of core philosophical claims? Reid's response: by appeal to common sense.

1. THEORY OF RATIONALITY

It should be acknowledged at the outset that Reid did not reject foundationalism.⁵¹ In his main discourse on the structure of rationality (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers* VI.4-7) Reid does not deny the basic and nonbasic or foundational and nonfoundational propositions distinction. Quite the contrary, Reid goes to great lengths to demonstrate that such a distinction exists. His goal and purpose is not to reject foundationalism—his aim is to reshape the content of that foundation. To understand exactly how this is accomplished I will now examine Reid's system in detail—his analysis of the descriptions, types, and examples of first principles. We will see why he rejects the views of other contemporary philosophers and why he holds "common sense" in such high regard.

⁵⁰ Thomas Reid, "Dedication," in *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind*, [1764] in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart, 1863), p. 95; cf. Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid," p. 44. A related issue is Reid's initial acceptance of Berkeley's philosophy but subsequent doubt regarding its foundation (as found in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, II.10; p. 283.): "If I may presume to speak my own sentiments, I once believed this doctrine of ideas so firmly as to embrace the whole of Berkeley's system in consequence of it; till, finding other consequences to follow from it, which gave me more uneasiness than the want of a material world, it came into my mind, more than forty years ago, to put the question, What evidence have I for this doctrine, that all the objects of my knowledge are ideas in my own mind? From that time to the present I have been candidly and impartially, as I think, seeking for the evidence of this principle, but can find none, excepting the authority of philosophers."

⁵¹ Cf. Paul Helm's "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," in *Rationality in the Calvinian Tradition*, ed. Hendrik Hart et al.

In chapter four of his sixth essay on the intellectual powers Reid provides his reader with a general exposition of first principles. He points out that there are some propositions from which one's judgment can be withheld until arguments or reasons are provided while "... there are other propositions which are no sooner understood than they are believed." Speaking of such propositions, Reid claims,

There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another; it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another.

Propositions of the last kind, when they are used in matters of science, have commonly been called *axioms*; and on whatever occasion they are used, are called *first principles*, *principles of common sense*, *common notions*, *self-evident truths*.⁵²

In other words, some propositions are foundational whereas others are not, or, as Plantinga puts it—some propositions are basic whereas others are nonbasic (founded ultimately upon propositions that are). Reid claims that the foregoing *descriptions* also serve as sufficient conditions for *determining* what sort of proposition a particular proposition is. The inability to withhold belief is a sufficient criterion for establishing that a belief is in fact a first principle. Furthermore, the fact that there may be debate whether a particular proposition is a first principle neither negates nor impugns the claim that such a distinction (between propositions which are self-evident and those that are not) exists.⁵³ All affirm the existence of first

(Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), p. 72.

⁵² Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 434.

⁵³ Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 434. As an example Reid states (on the same page): "There is a real distinction between persons within the house, and those that are without; yet it may be dubious to which the man belongs that stands upon the threshold." Reid's point is that a gray area does not discount the existence of the black and white. Surely he is right here. One could assert certain simple mathematical propositions are self-evident (e.g. $1+2=3$) whereas complicated ones obviously are not (e.g. the square root of $101=10.049876$). The fact that there may be disagreement about others (such as $12 \times 12=144$) in all likelihood says more about the

principles. The difference among philosophers lies in what those first principles are.

I take it for granted that there are self-evident principles. Nobody, I think denies it. And if any man were so sceptical as to deny that there is any proposition that is self-evident, I see not how it would be possible to convince him by reasoning.

But yet there seems to be great difference of opinions among philosophers about first principles. What one takes to be self-evident, another labours to prove by arguments, and a third denies altogether.⁵⁴

The issue before Reid, then, is how one determines the first principles. He asserts first that all knowledge derived from reasoning must be necessarily based upon first principles. A proposition must be either self-evident or ultimately based upon those that are. But to demand proofs or reasons for all propositions is to be involved in an infinite regress of explanations. "Where then must this analysis stop? It is evident that it must stop only when we come to propositions which support all that are built upon them, but are themselves supported by none--that is, to self-evident propositions."⁵⁵

Some first principles yield certain conclusions whereas others only entail probable inferences. Reid says little about the former (presumably because they are the most familiar) but provides an example of what he means by the latter. "In a matter of testimony," he says "it is self-evident that the testimony of two is better than that of one, supposing them equal in character, and in their means of knowledge; yet the simple testimony may be true, and that which is

makeup of people than the reality/nonreality or appropriateness of the distinction.

⁵⁴ Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 434.

⁵⁵ Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 435. Here Reid's claim mirrors that of Aristotle's regarding proof of the Law of Non-Contradiction. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that "... it is impossible that there should be demonstration of everything, since it would go on to infinity so that not even so would it be demonstration." (IV.4: 1006a, 8-10., *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J.L. Ackrill [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987], p. 267.)

preferred to it may be false."⁵⁶ If that example is problematic he provides another: "In games of chance, it is a first principle that every side of a die has an equal chance to be turned up; and that, in a lottery, every ticket has an equal chance of being drawn out."⁵⁷

A third initial claim⁵⁸ is that it is essential to determine what the first principles are to aid in the possibility and stability of human knowledge. Such an approach had been undertaken in mathematics since antiquity and in science for several hundred years, and had assisted greatly in both the progress and accuracy of knowledge. This is due to structuring one's approach around definitions, axioms, and deductions.

Reid's final claim is that individuals have the ability to ascertain the first principles. In his words, "... Nature hath not left us destitute of means whereby the candid and honest part of mankind may be brought to unanimity when they happen to differ about the first principles."⁵⁹ One can appeal to common sense. Reid is careful here to acknowledge that there are difficulties in determining which propositions are, in fact, first principles. For if they are first principles one cannot argue for them. If one did, one would be implicitly acknowledging that they are *not* first principles. This, coupled with the fact that it is possible to disagree as to whether a specific proposition is self-evident (Reid acknowledges this possibility) seems to place one in a decidedly disadvantageous position.⁶⁰

But Reid believes that it is still possible to arrive at a consensus regarding the identification of the first principles. The

⁵⁶ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 435.

⁵⁷ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 436.

⁵⁸ Addressed in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; pp. 436-437.

⁵⁹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 437.

⁶⁰ Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; pp. 437-438.

first reason is that *all* individuals, philosophers and non-philosophers alike, are competent to judge in this matter. "In matters beyond the reach of common understanding, the many are led by the few, and willingly yield to their authority. But, in matters of common sense, the few must yield to the many, when local and temporary prejudices are removed. No man is now moved by the subtle arguments of Zeno against motion, though perhaps, he knows not how to answer them."⁶¹

Reid asserts that Pyrrhonic skepticism was an ancient challenge to the possibility of knowledge,

Yet, as this system was an insult upon the common sense of mankind, it died away of itself; and it would be in vain to attempt to revive it. The modern skepticism is very different from the ancient, otherwise it would not have been allowed a hearing; and, when it has lost the grace of novelty, it will die away also, though it should never be refuted.

The modern skepticism, I mean that of Mr Hume, is built upon principles which were very generally maintained by philosophers, though they did not see that they led to scepticism. Mr Hume, by tracing, with great acuteness and ingenuity, the consequences of principles common received, has shewn that they overturn all knowledge, and at last overturn themselves, and leave the mind in perfect suspense.⁶²

In other words, it is only due to the skepticism disguised in modern epistemology that the approach was even given a hearing. It, too, having been revealed by Hume to be a skeptical system in disguise, will be abandoned and repudiated in a fashion similar to its sister skepticism of Pyrrho.

A second reason for thinking first principles can be determined is that that which contradicts them can be immediately discerned to be absurd. According to Reid, "we may observe that opinions which contradict first principles, are distinguished, from other errors, by this:--That they are not only false but absurd ..."⁶³ Hence, "... first

⁶¹ Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 438.

⁶² *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 438.

⁶³ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 438.

principles, which are really the dictates of common sense, and directly opposed to absurdities in opinion, will always, from the constitution of human nature, support themselves, and gain rather than lose ground among mankind."⁶⁴ The possibility of proof based upon the existence of absurdities leads to Reid's third and final set of claims regarding advantages in determining the first principles.

In addition to holding that all persons are competent to judge first principles and that contradictions of those principles are absurd, Reid claims that it is actually possible to reason regarding the first principles. In other words, even though it is impossible for reason to provide a direct or *apodictical* proof for them, reason can serve as a guide. This is accomplished by utilizing *ad hominem*, *ad absurdum*, and universal consent arguments. In regards to the first, Reid claims that

It is a good *ad hominem*, if it can be shewn that a first principle which a man rejects, stands upon the same footing with others which he admits ...

Thus the faculties of consciousness, of memory, of external sense, and of reason, are all equally the gifts of nature. No good reason can be assigned for receiving the testimony off one of them, which is not of equal force with regard to the others. The greatest sceptics admit the testimony of consciousness, and allow that what it testifies is to be held as a first principle. If, therefore, they reject the immediate testimony of sense or of memory, they are guilty of an inconsistency.⁶⁵

In regards to the second—*reductio ad absurdum*—no proposition is isolated; this is especially true of first principles. Many are inextricably linked and intertwined with others. Therefore, if anyone proposes to reject a fundamental first principle and remains consistent, she must also reject or give up many of the other linked propositions held dear.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 439.

⁶⁵ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 439.

⁶⁶ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 439.

Finally, one is able to determine the first principles of common sense by a general appeal to the masses (since all are competent to judge).⁶⁷ Reid is not unaware that many would accuse him of an *ad populum* argument here—but he is not swayed by such a charge. He points out that whether individuals like to admit it or not, all appeal, when determining truth, to the testimony of others who are qualified. And since *all* are qualified in matters of common sense a general consensus serves as rational justification. Reid provides an example from mathematics to prove his point. If a mathematician has made what he thinks is a demonstration of a significant discovery in his field, the first thing that he does to confirm it is to present it among his peers. If initial confirmations and accolades are followed by still others the mathematician can rest assured that his original work is correct. If, however, his approach is met with increasingly ardent skepticism, he holds his theory less tenaciously. If this is how principles are determined in mathematics, which has the highest degree of objectivity and the least amount of room for personal interpretation, how much more so for the discernment of the first principles? As opposed to committing an *ad populum* fallacy one is, in direct opposition, appealing to a legitimate authority (or, better, *authorities*—since all are competent to judge).

By way of summary, then, Reid asserts that

... although first principles are not capable of direct proof, yet differences, that may happen with regard to them among men of candour, are not without remedy; that Nature has not left us destitute of means by which we may discover errors of this kind; and that there are ways of reasoning, with regard to first principles, by which those that are truly such ⁶⁸ may be distinguished from vulgar errors or prejudices.

⁶⁷ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 440.

⁶⁸ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 441.

What are these first principles? Reid spends chapters 5 and 6 of Essay VI detailing their content. He breaks up the first principles into two different categories of truth: "the truths that fall within the compass of human knowledge, whether they be self-evident, or deduced from those that are self-evident, may be reduced to two classes. They are either necessary and immutable truths, whose contrary is impossible; or they are contingent and mutable ..." ⁶⁹ The probability of any given argument's conclusion is therefore directly linked with the status of the propositions from which it is inferred: necessary conclusions from necessary first principles, contingent from contingent. ⁷⁰ Reid gives a detailed listing of contingent first principles in chapter 5; necessary first principles are discussed in chapter 6. Although a detailed exposition of all contingent first principles is not necessary, an examination of the salient features of the more critical foundational beliefs will assist in understanding Reformed epistemology.

The initial contingent first principle listed is "the existence of everything of which I am conscious." ⁷¹ When aware of pain, one can be certain that one, in fact, *is* in pain. No proof can be provided for the claim that one cannot be deceived by one's consciousness for "it seems to disdain any such derived authority, and to claim my assent in its own right." Reid asserts that of all of the principles

⁶⁹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 441. I am indebted to Dr. Jim Bennett for pointing out that Reid's distinction between necessary and contingent first principles is at times gray. However, I do not think that this presents an insurmountable difficulty for his theory. His general point is that some first principles (what he terms "contingent") yield probable inferences while others (those he labels "necessary") result in necessary judgments. The basic thrust of his view remains intact regardless of whether such a distinction can be made. Difficulties with respect to *kinds* of first principles do not necessitate that first principles themselves do not exist.

⁷⁰ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 442.

⁷¹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 442.

of common sense, this is the only one not to be called into question. Indeed, after Hume had doubted and rejected all else he yet, "... acknowledges the reality of the thoughts, sensations, and passions of which he is conscious."⁷² It is also critical because so many other propositions rest upon, and are derivable from, it.⁷³

The next first principle is "*That the thoughts of which I am conscious, are the thoughts of a being which I call MYSELF, my MIND, my PERSON.*"⁷⁴ Reid acknowledges that he cannot give a direct proof of this principle⁷⁵ but he asserts his nature dictates the impossibility of thoughts existing apart from a thinker or ideas feeling pain or pleasure.⁷⁶ Obviously Reid is parting company with Hume here. He claims that

This, however, is clear, that this succession of ideas and impressions, not only remembers and is conscious, but that it judges, reasons, affirms, denies—nay, that it eats and drinks, and is sometimes merry and sometimes sad.

If these things can be ascribed to a succession of ideas and impressions, in a consistency with common sense, I should be very glad to know what is nonsense.⁷⁷

Reid then goes on to list a third first principle: the testimony of memory. He claims this is obviously a first principle since "... no man ever pretended to prove it, and yet no man in his wits calls it in question: the testimony of memory, like that of consciousness, is immediate; it claims our assent upon its own authority."⁷⁸

An additional first principle is the affirmation of the

⁷² *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 442.

⁷³ Reid claims that the reason so many opposing systems are presumably derivable from a shared first principle is because individuals like Locke, Hume, and others confuse consciousness with reflection (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 443).

⁷⁴ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 443.

⁷⁵ Of course if this is a first principle it would be misguided to demand that he should.

⁷⁶ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 444.

⁷⁷ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 444.

⁷⁸ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 444.

existence of that which is perceived as perceived. Reid claims this is "... too evident to need proof .." and therefore Berkeley's system entails absurd consequences. For it entails all that one perceives is merely a dream—that things touched, seen, and heard are only in one's mind. One is ultimately isolated, then, for one sees neither the ideas nor the minds of others. Reid is quick to point out, however, that

The fault is not in the reasoning, but in the principles from which it is drawn.

All the arguments urged by Berkeley and Hume, against the existence of a material world, are grounded upon this principle—that we do not perceive external objects themselves, but certain images or ideas in our minds.⁷⁹

Another first principle is that one's reasoning faculties are not fallacious. Again, Reid points out that no proof for this can be given and that to attempt to provide such a proof would be begging the question. He faults Descartes for making such an oversight when he attempted to confirm his reasoning powers by appealing to God. In regard to those who are skeptics Reid provides several *ad hominem* attacks. His first claim is that denying this principle is contrary to one's makeup. "We are born under a necessity of trusting to our reasoning and judging powers; and a real belief of their being fallacious cannot be maintained for any considerable time by the greatest sceptic, because it is doing violence to our constitution."⁸⁰ Later Reid points out that the skeptic is inconsistent both in regards to rationality and to practice: "They use reasoning to overturn all reasoning, and judge that they ought to have no judgment ... Many have in general maintained that the senses are fallacious, yet there never

⁷⁹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 446.

⁸⁰ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 448.

was found a man so sceptical as not to trust his senses in particular instances when his safety required it ..."⁸¹

The existence of other persons is affirmed in Reid's eighth first principle. It is claimed that children, even before they are old enough to reason, affirm this principle by their actions. Once again Reid claims that, were one to deny this principle or doubt a neighbor was a person, one would be claiming something absurd; "... whether a man can give good reasons for it or not, it is not in his power to shake it off."⁸² That being said, Reid believes an *indirect* reason can be given. One can be assured others are alike and rational due to their words and actions which mirror our own (an argument by analogy).

Reid lists the principle of testimony as his tenth. He states that "the wise Author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon this evidence before we can give a reason for doing so. ... this is necessary both to our preservation and to our improvement. If children were so framed as to pay no regard to testimony or to authority, they must, in the literal sense, perish for lack of knowledge."⁸³

By way of qualification, it should be added here that Reid appears to make a distinction as to the origins of belief dispositions. He asserts that some are innate and nonconditioned and endowed by God as part of human nature. Others appear to come into existence as one matures and are therefore not innate. Such first principles appear to be conditioned. "In Reid's own thought this comes out most clearly in what he says about the credulity principle.

⁸¹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 448.

⁸² *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 448.

⁸³ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 450. This principle is, in turn, followed by the eleventh: that there is a consistency and predictability of another's actions (VI.5; p. 451).

It is a moot point whether the credulity disposition is present in us at birth. But very little maturation is required for it to put in its appearance."⁸⁴ The principle of credulity is "... unlimited in children, until they meet with instances of deceit and falsehood; and it retains a very considerable degree of strength through life."⁸⁵ Reasoning and experience neither create nor destroy this belief disposition but what they can, and indeed, should do, is modify it.

In a word, if credulity were the effect of reasoning and experience, it must grow up and gather strength, in the same proportion as reason and experience do. But, if it is the gift of Nature, it will be strongest in childhood, and limited and restrained by experience; and the most superficial view of human life shews, that the last is really the case, and not the first.⁸⁶

The final principle of common sense addressed by Reid is one of the most important: "*That, in the phenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like to what has been in similar circumstances.*"⁸⁷ This is deemed critical since "... all experience is grounded upon a belief that the future will be like the past" and "... the whole fabric of natural philosophy is built upon this principle, and, if it be taken away, must tumble down to the foundation."⁸⁸ Such a belief is obviously a first principle as all assent to it as soon as they understand it and no one demands proof of it.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 151.

⁸⁵ Reid, *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind*, VI.24; p. 196.

⁸⁶ Reid, *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind*, VI.24; p. 197. Cf.

Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 151.

⁸⁷ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 451.

⁸⁸ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 451.

⁸⁹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 451-452. That is, of course, except for Hume, who claimed that it is not a necessary truth (since it is neither held on the basis of intuitive evidence [as in mathematics] or upon reasoning) (VI.5; p. 451). In discussing this inductive principle (which is not itself a belief disposition but is an innate disposition for the acquisition of those that are) Wolterstorff points to the example of a passing coach given in Reid's *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind* ("Can Belief in God Be Rational?" pp. 150-151):

When I hear a certain sound, I conclude immediately, without

In chapter six of his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* Reid claims there are seven broad categories of necessary first principles. He spends less time addressing necessary first principles since there had been much less disagreement concerning them. The first category he classifies as grammatical (e.g. "That a verb must be present for a sentence to be completed"). The second would include logical axioms (such as "circular reasoning is fallacious" or "something cannot both be and not be at the same time and in the same respect"). The third is mathematical (presumably such propositions as " $2+2=4$ " or "the shortest distance between two points is a straight line").⁹⁰

The fourth category of first principles of necessary truths includes axioms of tastes (fundamental rules for the arts such as paintings, poetry, and music). Reid acknowledges, in his fifth category, first principles of morality (such as the fact that one should not be blamed or praised for that for which one is not responsible). To these first five, discussed in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*. VI.6: 452-454, he adds metaphysical necessary first principles. He devotes a considerable amount of effort to discussing three in particular (in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*. VI.6: 454-461). Our concern here is not so much the identity of

reasoning, that a coach passes by. There are no premises from which this conclusion is inferred by any rules of logic. It is the effect of a principle of our nature, common to us with the brutes. {IV.1; p. 117)

⁹⁰ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 452. In regards to mathematical first principles Reid acknowledges objections raised by Hume but dismisses them quickly. He utilizes an approach similar to that undertaken in his chapter dealing with contingent first principles:

When a man is conscious of having these conceptions distinct and determinate, as every mathematician is, it is vain to bring metaphysical arguments to convince him that they are not distinct. You may as well bring arguments to convince a man racked with pain that he feels no pain. (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 452)

In other words, Reid once again appeals to the notion of common

Reid's metaphysical first principles but how he identifies them. In chapter three I will argue that Reformed epistemologists fail to follow Reid's pattern and, in so doing, weaken their case for belief in God being a properly basic belief.

The first metaphysical first principle discussed by Reid is that of substances (mental and physical): "*That the qualities which we perceive by our senses must have a subject, which we call body, and that the thoughts we are conscious of must have a subject, which we call mind.*"⁹¹ Reid cursorily reviews Hume's rejection of such notions. He also examines Locke's affirmation of the rationality of substance on the ground that it is repugnant to think qualities subsist in themselves—not inhering in something. He points out that proof of this repugnancy is not given and claims that a reason for this is because, as a first principle, proof cannot be given. The realization that neither sensation nor consciousness can provide one with the belief in either a mental or material substance is enough, according to Reid, to demonstrate that Locke should have abandoned the belief that consciousness and sensation are the only two sources of knowledge.⁹²

The second metaphysical principle discussed is that of the Principle of Causality: "*That whatever begins to exist, must have a cause which produced it.*"⁹³ According to Reid, Hume was the first to call this principle into question. He adds that there are three alternatives as to its rationality.

... we must hold one of these three things, either that it is an opinion for which we have no evidence, and which men have foolishly taken up without ground; or *secondly*, That it is capable of direct proof by argument; or *thirdly*, That it is

sense accessible by, and present in, all persons.

⁹¹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 454.

⁹² *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; pp. 454-455.

⁹³ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 455.

self-evident, and needs no proof, but ought to be received as an axiom, which cannot, by reasonable men, be called in question.

The first of these suppositions would put an end to all philosophy, to all religion, to all reasoning that would carry us beyond the objects of sense, and to all prudence in the conduct of life.

As to the second suggestion, that this principle may be proved by direct reasoning, I am afraid we shall find the proof extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible.

I know only of three or four arguments that have been urged by philosophers, in the way of abstract reasoning, to prove that things which begin to exist must have a cause.

... Mr Hume, in his "Treatise of Human Nature," has examined them all; and, in my opinion, has shewn that they take for granted the thing to be proved; a kind of false reasoning, which men are very apt to fall into when they attempt to prove what is self-evident.⁹⁴

Thus the first two options are untenable—it is not a principle embraced irrationally but neither is it a principle for which one can provide proof. That being the case, only the third alternative remains: it is a self-evident truth (therefore rational by attesting to itself). Reid believes there are two reasons for thinking it a self-evident truth. First, the universal consent of humanity to the principle. As an example he points out that, in regards to the formation of the universe, individuals have appealed to the world arising from an egg, struggles between love and strife, heat and cold, or moisture and drought—but none, though it has always been a supposed alternative, have claimed it came from nothing.⁹⁵ He claims that "Mr Hume, as far as I know, was the first that ever expressed any doubt of this principle."⁹⁶ Sir William Hamilton, in his note to this passage,⁹⁷ claims Hume was not the first to doubt this principle. But surely this is beside the point. Time and time again in his writings Reid

⁹⁴ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 455.

⁹⁵ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 456. It is interesting to note that just such an appeal has been voiced in contemporary cosmology. Although critics respond by pointing out either 1) no rational reasons are given for this claim, or 2) the 'nothing' to which many point is not really 'nothing' (whether couched in terms of 'potentiality' or 'pure energy', etc.).

⁹⁶ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 456.

⁹⁷ p. 456.

asserts that for all practical purposes there is general agreement regarding the first principles. That one can point to madmen or a few abstractly-reasoning philosophers who deny them does refute them. Some may reject such a principle with their words, but they affirm it with their actions. Such is the old adage, "Your walk talks and your talk talks but your walk talks louder than your talk talks." One's actions often belie one's actual beliefs.

But one can go much further than this. For it appears that in correspondence with John Stewart, Hume is in complete agreement with Reid. Hume asserts that he does not doubt the principle (as Reid thinks he has).

... Hume himself clearly believed in the causal principle. In 1754 he wrote to John Stewart, "But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that anything might arise without a cause*. I only maintain'd, that our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration, but from another source."⁹⁸

The oft-quoted passage at the end of the first book of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* also testifies that Hume did not doubt the theory in practice.

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.⁹⁹

The words of Hume serve as a segue into Reid's second reason for thinking the principle is self-evident: Life itself is grounded upon

⁹⁸ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 93. Here Craig references the following: David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J.Y.T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932), 1:187.

⁹⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 269.

it. Reid takes his reader through a thought experiment regarding an individual found dead in the road—his body pierced and fractured, his valuables gone. Reid thinks it absurd to posit during a jury trial that there might have been no cause for said effects, but if Hume's principles are correct this would be a genuine defense. Obviously no rational person acting with common sense would for even a second entertain such a possibility. Indeed, Reid points out that, in presumed slips of the pen Hume time and time again in his own writings does not entertain the possibility of behaving consistently with the principles he maintains.

... in the "Treatise of Human Nature," and in that part of it where he combats this very principle:—"As to those impressions," says he, "which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason; and it will always be impossible to decide with certainty whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produced by the creative power of the mind, or are derived from the Author of our being."

Among these alternatives, he never thought of their not arising from any cause.¹⁰⁰

Reid therefore asserts that the main arguments Hume presents against the principle being self-evident can be met.¹⁰¹ With that Reid moves on to his final metaphysical first principle: that intelligence can be inferred from design. As he utilizes this principle in his proof for the existence of God, this necessary first principle will be discussed in detail later.

Reid does two things in the seventh chapter of his sixth essay on the intellectual powers. First, he attempts to review the main approaches of the philosophers before him. Second, he attempts to demonstrate what was problematic in regards to their views concerning principles of common sense.

¹⁰⁰ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 457.

¹⁰¹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 457.

Reid claims that the theory of first principles can be traced all the way back to a central figure in ancient philosophy: Aristotle. Aristotle was the first to examine their content and claim that all other principles are derivable from them (an approach, says Reid, which has continued to the present). All acknowledge the existence of first principles and that they serve as the foundation for all others, but there is a large degree of diversity regarding what makes up the first principles. According to Reid the Ancients were notorious for multiplying the number of first principles—to a fault.

... many things were assumed as first principles, which have no just claim to that character: such as, that the earth is at rest; that nature abhors a vacuum; that there is no change in the heavens above the sphere of the moon; that the heavenly bodies move in circles, that being the most perfect figure; that bodies do not gravitate in their proper place; and many others.

The Peripatetic philosophy, therefore, instead of being deficient in first principles, was redundant; instead of rejecting those that are truly such, it adopted, as first principles, many vulgar prejudices and rash judgments: and this seems in general to have been the spirit of ancient philosophy.¹⁰²

Reid does not discount the fact that skeptics existed who, along with rejecting the foregoing first principles, also rejected all others. But he remains adamant in his assertion that, on the whole, ancient philosophers affirmed the existence of a plethora of first principles. This is an extreme view and, as often happens in philosophy, thinkers are prone to vacillate widely from one extreme to the other. Whereas the ancient thinker held to too many first principles, the modern philosopher holds too few. Reid claims that since Descartes wanted to avoid the pitfalls encountered by Aristotle, he determined to withhold assent from all principles unless forced by the evidence.¹⁰³ Descartes then determined to build his mathematically-modeled system upon his now-famous "*cogito ergo sum*."

¹⁰² *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.7; p. 462.

¹⁰³ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.7; p. 463.

To Reid's way of thinking this laid the groundwork for all other modern philosophers.

The problem with Descartes' starting point, according to Reid, is that it is not possible to build any system of rationality upon it. In fact, only part of the principle ends up being rationally grounded. If all that one has is the *cogito* it is not possible to derive any further propositions; for there is no legitimate basis upon which such an enterprise can take place. For, as was already demonstrated by Reid, "... if it be not admitted as a first principle, that our faculties are not fallacious, nothing else can be admitted ..." ¹⁰⁴ If this were not enough, Hume was correct in pointing out that only the first premise of Descartes' argument is truly warranted. For "... he yields the antecedent of Des Cartes's enthymeme *cogito*, but denies the conclusion *ergo sum*, the mind being, according to him, nothing but that train of impressions and ideas of which we are conscious." ¹⁰⁵

It is arguable that Reid and Hume are offering a straw man argument at this point, for the Descartes they attack is a caricature. It can be argued that Descartes affirmed a much broader foundation than either Reid or Hume admitted. In addition to the *cogito*, Descartes listed numerous other clearly and distinctly evident propositions (that do not derive that evidence from any process of reasoning) such as the idea that "more cannot come from less" in his Third Meditation. ¹⁰⁶ That Descartes acknowledges fewer foundational principles than Reid is admitted, but that he acknowledged only one (the *cogito*) is open to doubt. ¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.7; p. 464.

¹⁰⁵ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.7; p. 464.

¹⁰⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham et. al., vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 24-36.

¹⁰⁷ I am indebted to Richard Aquila for this insight.

According to Reid, far too many propositions are deemed first principles by the Ancients, and muddled reasoning and conflicting conclusions resulted. Descartes, Locke, and others of the modern period¹⁰⁸ (the other extreme), seeking to establish a more adequate foundation, began by rejecting all principles unless they are not doubtable. In so doing, they threw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. They rejected all but one, the *cogito*;¹⁰⁹ they were then unable consistently to derive any other principles from it. They had painted themselves into a corner from which escape was not possible. Of all who came after Descartes, Reid appears to have held Hume in highest regard.¹¹⁰ For it was Hume that reasoned most consistently with regard to the minimal first principle espoused. Hume recognized that the Cartesian approach entailed skepticism. All of this could have been avoided, says Reid, if individuals would have reasoned like

¹⁰⁸ Reid asserts that,

The other writers I have mentioned, after Des Cartes, may, I think, without impropriety, be called Cartesians. For though they differ from Des Cartes in some things, and contradict him in others, yet they set out from the same principles, and follow the same method, admitting no other first principle with regard to the existence of things but their own existence, and the existence of those operations of mind of which they are conscious, and requiring that the existence of a material world, an the existence of other men and things, should be proved by argument.

This method of philosophising is common to Des Cartes, Malebranche, Arnauld, Locke, Norris, Collier, Berkeley, and Hume; and, as it was introduced by Des Cartes, I call it the Cartesian system, and those who follow it Cartesians, not intending any disrespect by this term, but to signify a particular method of philosophising common to them all, and begun by Des Cartes. (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.7; p. 468)

¹⁰⁹ Again, Reid's assessment of the Cartesians is open to question here.

¹¹⁰ Indeed, upon reading a letter he once wrote to Hume (Thomas Reid, "F.-Letter to David Hume," in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 6th ed., vol. 1 [Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart, 1863], pp. 91-92) one gets the distinct impression that Reid was astounded by Hume's intellectual abilities.

Pere Buffier, a French Jesuit, who, as early as 1724, propounded a common sense approach to first principles.¹¹¹

Reid's enterprise can best be seen as a rejection of any "theory of ideas" so prevalent in the modern era. He went to great lengths to demonstrate that the "Cartesians", as he referred to all who affirmed such a system, had allowed too little to count as first principles. Wanting to avoid the problems that arose as a consequence of the extreme position of the Ancients, they ended up embracing a position at the opposite extreme which entailed even more difficulties. Reid claimed that, left only with the *cogito*, they attempted to derive that which was not derivable from it. Hume had the insight to point this out, but he was likewise deficient in thinking that one had to prove or demonstrate certain basic principles before they were grounded. As Reid stressed time and time again, if a particular proposition is a first principle, one will *not* be able to prove it directly—either by reason, or by appeal to experience.

Much of what Reid had to say sounds eerily like Kant. Both credit Hume with shaking their original views, and yet both go on to assert that, in the end, his philosophical skepticism is not required. Both view Locke as correct in affirming the existence of substance, contra Hume, even if it was something "he knew not what." Yet both charge him with inappropriately thinking that the idea of substance is derivable from experience.¹¹²

To stress the similarities between Reid and Kant at the expense of addressing their differences is to do a grave injustice to both thinkers. For while Kant's response entails an existence of phenomena, Reid would believe his theory allows for, and even demands,

¹¹¹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.7; pp. 467-468.

¹¹² Cf. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith, unabridged ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), pp. 127-128.

the noumena. Kant's concluding epistemic theory fares no better than that of the modern philosophers he is reacting against. Both end up firmly entrenched with the skeptic. Kant's theory runs just as counter to common-sense as Descartes', Locke's, Berkeley's, or Hume's. Reid is able to escape the grasp of skepticism by appealing to a divinely created human nature—and this is what separates him from Kant. In the words of Wolterstorff, "... Reid is firmly persuaded that our epistemic nature has an author, namely God. Reid is like Kant in that he sets his entire epistemology within the context of a doctrine of human nature. He is unlike Kant in that he sees this nature as the handiwork of a creating and beneficent God."¹¹³ But clearly the latter does not constitute a difference between Reid and Kant. For Kant would presumably also acknowledge that human nature is the handiwork of God.¹¹⁴

2. THE EXISTENCE AND ROLE OF GOD

God's existence is not a first principle according to Reid. Nowhere does Reid claim that belief in God is a foundational belief. Although Reid does not explain explicitly why this is the case, he does provide implicit reasons.

For a principle to be a common-sense principle it had to be common to virtually all normal adults in all nations and ages. Of course, we do not believe these first principles *because* we find them to be universal; that would be believing them for a reason. We believe them because we are forced to by the constitution of our natures. Nonetheless, universality is a test for identifying common-sense principles. A negative test is that a person devoid of such beliefs would nearly everywhere be considered a lunatic.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 60.

¹¹⁴ I am indebted to Richard Aquila for bringing this point to my attention.

¹¹⁵ George Marsden, "American Evangelical Academia," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 226-227; cf. also Helm, "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," p. 77 and Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 60.

Since belief in God is not an immediately-held belief it must be demonstrated from those that are. Reid asserts that a proof is readily available by appealing to the first principle of design. The third necessary metaphysical first principle mentioned by Reid is "*That design and intelligence in the cause may be inferred, with certainty, from marks or signs of it in the effect.*"¹¹⁶ This principle is part of human nature and the "... inference is made with perfect security by all men. We cannot avoid it; it is necessary in the ordinary conduct of life; it has therefore the strongest marks of being a first principle."¹¹⁷ As with the other first principles, Reid asserts that it is derivable neither from reason nor experience.

It is not attained by reason for two reasons. First, the principle, common to philosophers and the uneducated, is too universal to merely be the result of thought processes. Second, if anyone were capable of reasoning concerning the principle it would be the philosopher. Yet, asserts Reid, when given the opportunity to defend it the philosopher does not appeal to argument—rather, historically anyway, the philosopher appeals to the common sense of all.¹¹⁸

But neither is the design principle derivable from experience—again for two reasons. First, because it is not a contingent truth: it is a *necessary* truth. Second, experience only reveals conjunctions, not necessary connections.¹¹⁹ Having arrived at the conclusion that this principle is therefore a certain first principle Reid deems it a simple matter to demonstrate God's existence.

The argument from final causes, when reduced to a syllogism, has these two premises:--First, that design and

¹¹⁶ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 457.

¹¹⁷ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 458.

¹¹⁸ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; pp. 458-459. Reid points to Cicero and Archbishop Tillotson as proof of this thesis.

¹¹⁹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; pp. 459-460. Here Reid obviously has the work of Hume in mind.

intelligence in the cause, may with certainty, be inferred from marks or signs of it in the effect. This is the principle we have been considering, and we may call it the *major* proposition of the argument. The *second*, which we call the *minor* proposition, is, That there are in fact the clearest marks of design and wisdom in the works of nature; and the *conclusion* is, That the works of nature are the effects of a wise and intelligent Cause. One must either assert to the conclusion, or deny one or other of the premises.¹²⁰

Reid asserts advances in science discount the possibility of doubting the minor premise. To those who deny the major premise, like Descartes or Hume, Reid claims his supposition that it is a first principle serves as a sufficient block, for one can only raise objections to it if one asserts it must be derivable from either reason or experience—which it is not. "It seems, then, that the man who maintains that there is no force in the argument from final causes, must, if he will be consistent, see no evidence of the existence of any intelligent being but himself."¹²¹ The teleological argument, coupled with the fact that elsewhere¹²² Reid seems to hint at the plausibility of a cosmological argument for God's existence, necessitates God's existence. Reid was no atheist, but neither did he believe his theory of common sense gave him the freedom to assert belief in God was a first principle; it must, and can, be demonstrated.¹²³

¹²⁰ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; pp. 460-461.

¹²¹ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.6; p. 461.

¹²² *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.4; p. 442.

¹²³ Here, and elsewhere, Reid resembles Locke more than he resembles Calvin. For example, Reid also states that evidence or argument must be given to support the claim that a text is genuine Scripture. Reid makes the following claim:

"It is no doubt true that Revelation exhibits all the truths of Natural Religion, but it is no less true that reason must be employed to judge that revelation; whether it comes from God. ... We acknowledge then that men are indebted to revelation in the matter of Natural Religion but this is no reason why we should not also use our reason here. Revelation was given us not to hinder the exercise of our reasoning powers but to aid and assist them. 'Tis by reason that we must judge whether that Revelation be really so ..." (Thomas Reid, *Lectures on Natural Theology*, ed. Elmer H. Duncan (Washington D.C.: University Press

Even though theological matters stand in need of grounding in first principles, since they themselves are not first principles—and in this regard Reid's approach appears sympathetic with others of the Enlightenment—the similarities end here. Reid asserts the existence of God must be demonstrated, but once it has been demonstrated, His existence serves a different role than that normally propounded in Enlightenment circles. The existence of God served the function of guaranteeing one's reasoning faculties for the Cartesians. Reid asserted (and the charge has been echoed up until the present day) that such a proposition cannot be proven without appealing to a viciously circular argument. For most thinkers of the Enlightenment, God guaranteed the first principles, or, better, guaranteed the reliability of reasoning *from* the first principles. Reid did not want to be caught in this web of circularity. Although God still had a role to play, it was not as the guarantee. According to Reid, one's natural dispositions and inclinations regarding the common-sense principles were endowed by God; God is the source, although not the direct guarantee, of the first principles. "Reid is careful not to argue from the existence of a wise Creator to the reliability of common-sense first principles (which require no argument); nonetheless, when he speaks of beliefs determined by 'the constitution of human nature,' he certainly has in mind that these belief-mechanisms and the world that they encounter are constituted by the Creator."¹²⁴ In other words, belief in God does confirm the reliability of one's reasoning; but such belief is unnecessary. For, first, if it were, one would have to engage in circular reasoning.

of America, 1981), p. 1; cf. Wolterstorff's "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 63.)

The foregoing quote could just as easily be the words of Locke.
¹²⁴ Marsden, "American Evangelical Academia," pp. 227-228.

Second, individuals can and do have confirmation of their intellectual powers prior to, or in the absence of, any religious belief.

So when all is said and done, the person who believes in a good God does, thereby, have a belief from which he can appropriately infer the reliability of his native noetic faculties. But to accept God's goodness as a reason for trusting in one's noetic faculties is, of course, already to trust one's power of reasoning. And in addition, as Reid often remarks, we all trust our noetic faculties long before, and whether or not, we have this as a reason for doing so.¹²⁵

Reid himself is clear on this point:

Shall we say, then, that this belief [here Reid is speaking about the reliability of sensory experience] is the inspiration of the Almighty? I think this may be said in a good sense; for I take it be the immediate effect of our constitution, which is the work of the Almighty. But, if inspiration be understood to imply a persuasion of its coming from God, our belief of the objects of sense is not inspiration; for a man would believe his senses though he had no notion of a Deity. He who is persuaded that he is the workmanship of God, and that it is a part of his constitution to believe his senses, may think that a good reason to confirm his belief. But he had the belief before he could give this or any other reason for it.¹²⁶

C. REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

1. COMPARED TO REID

The work of Thomas Reid has had a huge impact on the thinking of many Christians. As George Marsden pointed out, most American evangelical theologians, until approximately 100 years ago, discussed the relationship between reason and faith within a "common-sense" rubric.¹²⁷ This is not to say that Reformed thinkers swallow the work of Reid whole. They are some of the first to admit that Reid is not without his difficulties, even with regard to some of his core

¹²⁵ Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," pp. 57-58.

Wolterstorff goes on to cite two confirming passages from Reid: *Essays on the Intellectual Powers* II.20 and *Inquiry Into the Human Mind* VI.24.

¹²⁶ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, II.20; p. 329.

¹²⁷ "American Evangelical Academia," p. 224.

teachings.¹²⁸ But on the whole they view Reid as the first to cut through the jungle of irrationality established by classical foundationalism. This, of course, does not necessitate that a Calvinist must also be a Reidian. This is born out by the fact that Reid himself, though a Presbyterian minister for a short time,¹²⁹ was not a strict Calvinist. According to Helm, "there is no strong reason to think that Thomas Reid was a Calvinist. Nominally, at least, Reid was a Calvinist ... Reid takes up a very mild form of Calvinism, to say the least. His Calvinism is so mild as to be fairly indistinguishable from Arminianism ..." ¹³⁰ On the other hand, Calvinists of the past were not proponents of a "common-sense" philosophy.¹³¹

This does not entail that there is no link between Calvinism and a "common-sense" philosophy: perhaps there is a link but Calvinists inappropriately deny it. If there were a necessary link between Calvin and Reid, one would have to imply the other, but this is obviously not the case. There is no way one could provide a convincing argument for the claim that Reid's work entailed Calvin's: in many ways the two disciplines are simply too disparate. But, likewise, there is no necessary reason why Calvin's works would entail Reid's.

So in answer to whether Calvinism entails Reidism or vice versa, we must offer a tentative "no." ... What we might call

¹²⁸ For example, Helm points out that his 'common-sense/reason' and 'common-sense/philosophy' distinctions are muddled and that it is often unclear as to what Reid means even by 'common sense' ("Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," pp. 75-77). Wolterstorff, similarly, raises at least three difficulties present in Reid. First, regarding his confusion of first principles as *beliefs* and first principles as *belief dispositions*. Second, the lack of a criterion of justified belief. Third, the fact that his sources of belief appear too narrow ("Thomas Reid on Rationality," pp. 53; 58, 65; 66-67 respectively).

¹²⁹ S.A. Grave, "Thomas Reid," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 8 vols., (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 7:118.

¹³⁰ "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," p. 81.

¹³¹ Cf. Riccaltoun, Duncan, and Shedd in Helm's "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," pp. 82-83.

"full Calvinism" neither entails nor is entailed by Reidism ... there is nothing about Calvinism that requires common-sense foundationalism. ... Doubtless Calvinism *rules out* certain ontologies, such as materialism and solipsism, and certain epistemologies, such as total skepticism, but that is a rather different matter. To rule out *p* is not to require *q*. Calvinism, like the Scriptures from which it is drawn, is a theoretically underdetermined affair.¹³²

There is no reason why a Calvinist must be a Reidian or vice versa. There is no necessary link between the two. That being acknowledged, however, there is a link between the two approaches: a collection of overlapping similarities toward which many Reformed thinkers gravitate. As Helm admits, "... common-sense foundationalism may be correct, and certain positive conclusions in natural theology may follow from foundationalism. Then we could say that common-sense foundationalism entailed or rendered probable some certain truths which are, logically speaking, a part of Calvinism and logically more basic than other parts of Calvinism."¹³³ This appears to be the approach taken by contemporary Reformed epistemologists. Their Calvinism does not necessitate a "common-sense" approach to epistemology, yet their theological underpinnings appear most workable within a Reidian theory of rationality.

Numerous similarities can be found between "common-sense" and Reformed thinkers. First, both look negatively upon the foundationalism which precedes them. Both are adamantly opposed to a classical foundationalism which entails skepticism, denies intuitively known basic (or common-sense) beliefs, or is inherently self-defeating. Second, neither seeks to abandon foundationalism. If classical foundationalism is too problematic to be affirmed (which both Reidians and Reformed thinkers claim) one's response is limited to two options: one can either reject foundationalism altogether, or

¹³² Helm, "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," pp. 84, 86, 87-88.

¹³³ "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," p. 86.

one can choose, more moderately, to reject *classical* foundationalism. Both common-sense and Reformed thinkers assent to the latter alternative. It is not foundationalism that is the problem. Rather, *classical* foundationalism presents the difficulty. According to Reid, ancient foundationalism admitted too many first principles while modern foundationalism allowed too few—in neither case do propositions rest on a firm or adequate foundation. Plantinga and others echo the latter claim and tack on the assertion that it cannot pass its own criteria for rationality.¹³⁴

Neither common-sense realists nor Reformed epistemologists are eager to abandon foundationalism altogether. This is born out in Reid's analysis of indirect reasons given for the support and establishment of the first principles as well as his discussion of the link between said principles and those derivable from them. Likewise, Reformed epistemologists do not reject foundationalism.¹³⁵ Plantinga's theory is obviously foundational due to his distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs. Most agree that many contemporary epistemologists, in having similarly surmised the demise of *classical* foundationalism, have gone too far in their response.

From their conviction that the classical foundationalist theory of knowledge is untenable, some philosophers have concluded that the concept of knowledge has no application. That seems to me the basic line of argument in Richard Rorty's recent book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Others, on similar grounds, have drawn conclusions about the non-applicability of the concept of rationality. But obviously this is a mighty leap—from the untenability of a proposed criterion for the

¹³⁴ That Plantinga appears to disagree with Reid regarding an exposition of Ancient foundationalism, though important, does not appear all that relevant to the present discussion. First, because one can come away with different formulations of Ancient epistemology depending upon whose epistemic theory one is examining. Second, of central importance to both Plantinga and Reid was a dismantling of *modern* foundationalism (and here one finds much more agreement in analysis), for even the modern foundationalist found the Ancient formulation troubling. Indeed, this was the very impetus for the construction of a new epistemology in the first place.

¹³⁵ Again, even though in places they appear to.

application of a certain concept, to a conclusion that the concept itself has no application.¹³⁶

The rejection of foundationalism by contemporary thinkers is both dangerous and unnecessary. It is dangerous because of the consequences that follow; it is unnecessary because a more moderate and level-headed response is available. This implies a third commonality between Reformed and common-sense epistemologists: a widening of the foundations.

As opposed to rejecting foundationalism completely due to the irrationality inherent in its classical formulation, one can save it by merely widening what can serve as basic (Plantinga) or first (Reid) principles or propositions.

Reid differed from the classical foundationalists principally in that his close look at those beliefs that people were in practice virtually compelled to hold yielded a considerably expanded set of first principles. Not only did he include states of consciousness, self-evidently necessary truths, and those things evident to our senses, he affirmed also that virtually all normal adults inevitably hold such basic beliefs as the connection between cause and effect, the general regularity in nature, the predictability of some human behavior, the relationship between past and present, the existence of other minds, the continuity of one's self and of others, the reliability of their clear and distinct memories, the trustworthiness of the testimony of others under certain conditions, and the difference between right and wrong. ... People seldom hold any of these beliefs on the basis of reasoning. Rather they are basic beliefs, beliefs not established by arguments, but caused immediately by "common sense," or the belief-producing faculties that underlie all reasoning.¹³⁷

As will be seen in the next section, Reformed thinkers are in general agreement with Reid at this point. The only way to save foundationalism from being self-referentially absurd, entailing skepticism, and serving as an inadequate basis for most beliefs, is to widen the scope of what may be considered foundational. This is not merely for pragmatic or prudential reasons. It is not merely because

¹³⁶ Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 64.

¹³⁷ Marsden, "American Evangelical Academia," p. 226.

one must; one increases the number of foundational beliefs because one should. Thus, Plantinga and others repeat many of Reid's first principles as basic. Here, they believe, Reid was largely on the right track.

A fourth similarity between the two camps is the importance of God in each system. Reid constantly affirms His role. "Anyone who reads the work of Reid cannot fail to be struck by the number of times in which he theologizes about the principles of common sense, that is, attributes the authorship of them to God."¹³⁸ As Wolterstorff points out, "over and over Reid says it is God who has endowed us with our native belief-dispositions."¹³⁹

Although Calvinists agree that human nature, which includes belief-dispositions, is created and given by God, they claim that the existence of God has been placed in the wrong category by Reid. Belief in God is not a first principle of common sense for Reid. Since it is not foundational or basic, it must be grounded in propositions which are. Thankfully, such a proof is readily available in the teleological argument. It is a simple matter, according to Reid, to derive God's existence from the necessary metaphysical first principle that evidence of design implies a designer.

Here Calvinian and Reidian thinkers obviously part company. The Calvinist asserts fallen individuals are not capable of adequate knowledge of God on the basis of reasoning—the proof is *inadequate*. Second, Calvin asserts that God is known immediately by all, apart from any proof (via the *sensus divinitatis*)—the proof is *unnecessary*. Plantinga would then nail the lid on the coffin with his argument that

¹³⁸ Helm, "Thomas Reid, Common Sense and Calvinism," p. 78. Here Helm refers to pages 196, 329, and 341.

¹³⁹ "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 57.

the proof simply does not work¹⁴⁰—it is unconvincing. The key to establishing the existence of God is not appealing to rational argument or multiplying proofs for God's existence. If Calvin's interpretation of Biblical texts is correct, one need not appeal to such proofs—in fact, one should not attempt to prove that God exists. Not because God does not exist but because one is treating the proposition as a mediately-held, non-basic belief when in fact it is an immediately-held, properly basic belief. In the same way that one cannot find, by appeal to reason or argument, any rational ground for any of the first principles precisely because they are first principles (and therefore cannot be proven) one should not find it at all troublesome, or even *unlikely*, that a cogent proof for God's existence cannot be found. If it is a first principle, or properly basic, this is precisely what one should expect. Even if a proof could be found, it would be unnecessary.

Can the Reformed thinker make all of this compatible with Reid? Reid appears adamant regarding the assertion that the existence of God must be proven, since it is not a first principle. Admittedly, Reid thinks one *can* provide such a proof, but in regards to the proposition "God exists" Reid is clearly on the side of those in the Enlightenment, whom he earlier criticized, in asserting it is a nonbasic or nonfoundational belief. Would not Reid look at Plantinga and others as falling into the same error as the Ancients who opened the floodgates of foundational propositions? Perhaps so. But the real issue is whether or not he would be justified in leveling such a charge. What possible justification for viewing belief in God as basic, and properly or appropriately so, can be given?

¹⁴⁰ Cf. the previous chapter's section on "natural theology."

It appears that Reformed thinkers appeal to Reid's own work to substantiate their claim that belief in God, contrary to Reid's own thinking in the matter, is properly basic. The key is his first principle regarding sensory experience, which in turn establishes the existence of a real external world. In the same way that one can know of the existence of an external world from sensory experience, one can infer the existence of God from religious experience.¹⁴¹

An additional element present in Reid adds further confirmation to this belief. The most plausible reason Reid rejected belief in God as a first principle was that it did not have the external confirmation of being universally assented to. But if Calvin is correct, with his belief in the *sensus divinitatis*, then one does have the requisite universal assent.¹⁴² To the counter that individuals do not affirm this proposition universally, several responses can be made. First, if by "universal" one means all then surely there are no first principles. Reid himself admits time and again that philosophers and madmen reject some first principles without impugning the right of those rejected to count as first principles. Second, it is not necessary for a principle to be believed explicitly or consciously for it to be classified as basic. Again, Reid himself appears to acknowledge this. One may believe something implicitly

When a man in the common course of life gives credit to the testimony of his senses, his memory, or his reason, he does not put the question to himself, whether these faculties may deceive him; yet the trust he reposes in them *supposes* an inward

¹⁴¹ Not necessarily in a mystical or overwhelmingly "numinal" way (though this would also be acceptable) but in the course of one's common, everyday experience of God's presence and activity. In addition to claiming one is rational in affirming God's existence on the basis of immediate experiences of God, Reformed epistemologists also claim belief in God can be affirmed on the basis of the testimony of others. Here belief is again not based upon evidence or argument but according to another of Reid's first principles.

¹⁴² Keeping in mind, of course, that such assent does not *ground* the belief (in a fallacious *ad populum* sort of way). It merely assists in identifying it as a first principle.

conviction, that, in that instant at least, they do not deceive him.¹⁴³

One can even outwardly reject a belief while yet affirming it according to Reid. The classic example of this is the skeptic: "Many have in general maintained that the senses are fallacious, yet there never was found a man so sceptical as not to trust his senses in particular instances when his safety required it ..." ¹⁴⁴

Additionally, if Calvin's theology is correct, one would expect to see denials of God's existence. Although Reid does not admit the possibility of such a suppression, it is certainly in keeping with his epistemology that "sin has introduced *malformation* into our existence—one of the results of this malformation being that people resist acknowledging the existence of God."¹⁴⁵ Although Reid does not discuss this possible influence on one's noetic structure explicitly, one can see how even he acknowledges the possibility of an individual being "hardened" to the point of rejecting a convincing argument for God's existence.¹⁴⁶ It could be said that Reid's discussion regarding the sources of belief is too limited.

[Reid] ... attends only to the "noble" sources of belief. No ignobility enters the picture. The fact that we sometimes come to believe something because it helps us to rest content in our position of economic privilege goes unnoticed. Sometimes we come to believe something because it helps to protect us from the embarrassment of acknowledging our true reasons for acting as we did. This is also unnoticed. Of course, Reid's oversight

¹⁴³ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 448 (my emphasis); cf. Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 52.

¹⁴⁴ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 448; cf. Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 52.

¹⁴⁵ Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," pp. 60-61.

¹⁴⁶ Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," p. 66. Here Wolterstorff is commenting on a section in Reid's *Lectures on Natural Theology* (pp. 58, 59). Obviously there is a distinction here that should not be overlooked. Reid is claiming one can withhold assent regarding belief in God as a *non-basic* belief whereas Reformed thinkers are asserting assent may be withheld regarding belief in God as a *basic* belief. Yet the passage appears to at least allow for the possibility of extending belief suppression at the "basic level."

on such matters as these is scarcely culpable. Marx and Freud were still well in the future.

... Reid nowhere recognizes the ways in which sin inserts itself in the workings of our belief dispositions. ... Calvin and Kuyper [a well-known and respected Reformed thinker] were more insightful. ... What we need, then, is a blend between Reid's general framework of belief-dispositions, and Calvin's and Kuyper's vivid awareness of these ignoble belief-dispositions that we now have—we who are not only created but fallen.¹⁴⁷

The Reformed thinker therefore believes Reid's epistemology, understood within and modified by a Calvinian theology, best serves to ground belief in God. How this works itself out is the topic of the next section. For Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston collectively spell out in detail the inner workings of Reformed epistemology.

2. BELIEF IN GOD AS PROPERLY BASIC

According to Plantinga, belief in God is a properly or appropriately basic belief. Reformed thinkers, from Calvin to Barth, have rejected the need for argument or evidences and rightly so.¹⁴⁸ Christians can know that God exists without having to base the claim on other propositions: belief in God is foundational. Like other foundational beliefs affirmed by Reid, belief in God is held immediately.¹⁴⁹ Argument is not required, the *sensus divinitatis* is certain and sufficient.

Of all the Reformed thinkers, none has written more on the topic of religious experience than William P. Alston. His *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*¹⁵⁰ is the *magnum opus* on the topic. His short article entitled "Christian Experience and Christian Belief"¹⁵¹ serves as perhaps the best summary of his work. In this

¹⁴⁷ Wolterstorff, "Thomas Reid on Rationality," pp. 66-67.

¹⁴⁸ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 63-73.

¹⁴⁹ This was Plantinga's point in writing *God and Other Minds*. In the same way that individuals are rational in believing in the existence of other persons in the absence of evidence, so theists are warranted in their belief of God's existence.

¹⁵⁰ (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991).

¹⁵¹ *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre

work Alston limits himself to a discussion of the common religious experience of the average Christian. Mystical experience as well as those that involve sensory hallucinations (such as seeing visions or hearing voices) are tabled. Though important and oft-discussed, focusing solely on the classical forms of religious experiences tends to overlook the experiences of the layperson. The basic thrust of his position is that "the Christian beliefs under consideration say that God will manifest Himself in certain ways in our individual or corporate experience. From time to time we find such manifestations in our experience. This provides empirical confirmation for the beliefs in question."¹⁵²

Alston engages in his experiential confirmation for belief in God by linking it with the existence of external sensory objects by sensory experiential confirmation. In the same way in which "perceptual practice" objectifies sense experience, so "Christian practice" objectifies "... certain ranges of experience in terms of Christian theology."¹⁵³ He acknowledges that epistemic justification admits to degrees in both areas. "A direct realist, in one sense of that term, will hold that I may be justified in believing that there is a tree in front of me just by virtue of the fact that I am currently having a sense experience of a certain sort. But even a direct realist will have to recognize that this will happen only in 'favorable circumstances.'"¹⁵⁴ In other words, one is not *ultima facie* justified—merely *prima facie* justified. One is justified in believing

Dame Press, 1983), pp. 103-134. Alston also outlines his approach to the issue in his "Plantinga's Epistemology of Religious Belief", in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 289-311.

¹⁵² p. 105.

¹⁵³ "Christian Experience," p. 109.

¹⁵⁴ "Christian Experience," p. 111.

unless there is an overriding reason to the contrary—unless a defeater exists.¹⁵⁵

Having laid the groundwork for his discussion of grounding belief in God in religious experience, Alston then moves on to a discussion of justification. There are two forms of epistemic justification: normative and evaluative. In the words of Alston, "I am normatively justified in engaging in a certain epistemic practice provided that it is not the case that I would not be engaging in it if I had been conducting myself as I should in my activities that are designed to influence my habits of belief formation."¹⁵⁶ Later Alston delineates two different forms of normative justification: a stronger and a weaker sense of obligation. In the stronger sense one is obligated to refrain from believing *p* unless one has adequate reasons for it; in the weaker sense one is permitted to believe *p* unless one has adequate reasons not to believe it.¹⁵⁷

Epistemic justification, on the other hand, does not involve approving of one's behavior—it is simply asserting that one is in an "epistemically strong position."¹⁵⁸ Alston illustrates differences between the two forms of epistemic justification with the following:

Consider a naïve member of an isolated primitive tribe who, along with his fellows, unhesitatingly accepts the traditions of the tribe. That is, he believes that *p* wherever the traditions of the tribe, as recited by the elders, include the assertion that *p*. He is ... [normatively justified] ... in doing so, for he has no reason whatsoever to doubt these traditions. Everyone he knows accepts them without question, and they do not conflict

¹⁵⁵ "Christian Experience," p. 112. Certainly Christian practice and perceptual practice are not completely parallel—Alston admits this. There is much more diversity in what "counts" as defeaters of Christian practice. ("Christian Experience," p. 113)

¹⁵⁶ "Christian Experience," p. 114.

¹⁵⁷ "Christian Experience," p. 116. Alston points out that this distinction directly corresponds to the class Clifford-James debate. Clifford propounded normative justification in the stronger sense where "practices are guilty until proven innocent"; James propounded normative justification in the weaker sense where "practices are innocent until proven guilty." (p. 116)

¹⁵⁸ "Christian Experience," p. 115.

with anything else he believes. And yet, let us suppose, this is not a reliable procedure of belief formation; and so he is not ... [epistemically justified] ... in engaging in it.¹⁵⁹

The question becomes: Is one normatively or epistemically justified in perceptual practice and Christian practice? Alston asserts that philosophers (with the exception of those like Bradley and Parmenides) have affirmed that perceptual practice is normatively justified in the weaker sense. If one were a skeptic, one would typically claim that perceptual practice is not normatively justified in the stronger sense. So the real issue is the status of perceptual practice in regards to normative epistemic justification in the stronger sense. For practical purposes normative justification in the stronger sense can be linked with epistemic justification at this point. "Not that they are the same. ... Nevertheless, if I set out to discover whether a practice is ... [epistemically justified] ..., that is, whether it is reliable, then I will also be investigating the question of whether one *could* be ... [normatively justified in the strong sense] ... in engaging in that practice."¹⁶⁰

But here one immediately runs into a difficulty. For how can one verify that perceptual practice is reliable in a noncircular way? It appears one is in a catch-22 situation; one has presumably arrived at an impasse from which no further progress is possible. It is difficult to see how one should proceed if the basic practice itself (and not the beliefs within the practice) are under investigation. One cannot, without begging the question, confirm the reliability of one's perceptions by appealing to those perceptions as confirmation. The bulk of modern and contemporary attempts at grounding fall short. Alston asserts "straightforward attempts at justification" (such as

¹⁵⁹ "Christian Experience," p. 115.

¹⁶⁰ "Christian Experience," p. 117.

Descartes'), "transcendental" attempts (such as Kant's or Strawson's) and "pragmatic" attempts all fall short of providing an adequate noncircular grounding for perceptual practice as reliable.¹⁶¹

If no adequate reason for perceptual practice can be given presumably one cannot claim to be normatively justified in the strong sense in engaging in perceptual practice. "It does not follow, of course, that the practice is not reliable, and hence it does not follow that the practice is not ... [epistemically justified] ...; but it does follow that we cannot have adequate reasons for supposing it to be ... [epistemically justified]."¹⁶² But even though one is not normatively justified in the stronger sense in engaging in perceptual practice, since no sufficient reasons for regarding it as unreliable have been presented, perceptual practice is normatively justified in the weaker sense. Alston claims that this position is basically that of Reid's. Reid claimed there were several ultimate sources of belief which were endowed by God: self-consciousness, sense perceptions, memory, rational intuition, reasoning, and the like. In none is one able to noncircularly reason regarding their reliability.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ "Christian Experience," p. 118. Descartes' attempt is problematic with regard to the premises or the support provided by those premises. Transcendental accounts, even if successful (and numerous objections have been raised) would only confirm that perceptual practice is more deeply embedded in one's cognition than originally thought, or would illustrate the inability to fathom any other alternative (both, therefore, are unable to illustrate how perceptual practice is reliable). Finally, pragmatic accounts are viciously circular. "We have to use ... [perceptual practice] ... to determine that the predictions we make on the basis of perceptual beliefs often turn out to be correct, and to determine that there is a large measure of agreement in perceptual beliefs. We do not discover this by using a crystal ball or being told by an angel." (p. 118)

¹⁶² "Christian Experience," p. 118.

¹⁶³ "Christian Experience," p. 119. "When we consider this question generally, as we did above for sense perception, we see that we are unable to give an adequate noncircular justification for any of the sources. Our only reason for supposing that memory is generally reliable is that its past track record is a good one, and we have no way of ascertaining that without relying on our memory. Again, it is obviously impossible to argue for the reliability of reasoning without

In the above terms we must be content with being ... [normatively justified in the weaker sense]. And if some, why not all? Of course we could, if we chose, accept some sources without any positive basis, such as intuition and reasoning, and then require that other candidates be certified by the former, that is, require ... [normatively justified in the stronger sense] ... for these latter. This is, in effect, what Descartes and many other philosophers have done, when, for example, they held sense perception suspect until its reliability could be shown to follow from self-evident premises. But, as Reid pointed out, this is to be guilty of arbitrary partiality. Why accept intuition and reasoning without any basis, while refusing to do the same for sense perception? Moreover, these attempts have never met with success.¹⁶⁴

Having therefore grounded perceptual practice as foundational (and therefore rational), all that is necessary for Alston to do to illustrate that Christian practice is also foundational (and therefore rational), is to illustrate the parallels between the two practices. He claims that in the same way that no noncircular argument can be given in support for perceptual practice the same can be assumed to be the case for Christian practice. It is not acknowledged, then, that Christian practice is normatively justified in the stronger sense--a sufficient basis for thinking it is epistemically justified is therefore lacking. However, since Christian practice is, like perceptual practice, normatively justified in the weaker sense, it provides a *prima facie* justification for manifestation-beliefs.¹⁶⁵ In other words, Christian practice provides an adequate ground for belief in God. If, while singing a hymn in church one has the experience of being loved by God, or while viewing a sunrise in the Rockies one has the experience of God disclosing Himself in creation, or while reading the Bible one has the experience that God is speaking, one is

relying on reasoning to do so. And so on." (p. 119)

¹⁶⁴ Alston, "Christian Experience," p. 119. What Alston is attempting to do here, through Reid, is illustrate that in engaging in a classical foundationalist enterprise (even were it successful) one is embracing the limited foundations in an *ad hoc* fashion.

¹⁶⁵ "Christian Experience," p. 120.

justified (on experiential grounds) in inferring that God exists (as the object of these varied experiences).¹⁶⁶

A similar approach is adopted by Wolterstorff. Building on the work of Reid, Wolterstorff has attempted "... to formulate and defend a criterion of rational belief alternative to that of classical foundationalism ..."¹⁶⁷ It is his contention that Reid, in his discussion of the credulity disposition, has argued convincingly that one is *prima facie* justified in accepting those beliefs produced by a disposition unless one has adequate reasons for believing them false. Paralleling Alston, he asserts

Our situation is not that to be rationally justified in accepting the deliverances of the credulity disposition we need evidence in favor of its reliability. Rather, we are rationally justified in accepting its deliverances until such time as we have evidence of its unreliability for certain types of cases. The deliverances of our credulity disposition are innocent until proven guilty, not guilty until proved innocent.

So, I suggest, ... in general ... A person is rationally justified in believing a certain proposition which he does believe unless he has adequate reason to cease from believing it. Our beliefs are rational unless we have reason for refraining; they are not nonrational unless we have reason for believing. They are innocent until proved guilty, not guilty until proved innocent.¹⁶⁸

Wolterstorff then produces (following a series of objections, qualifications, and reformulations) the following criterion for rationality:

A person *S* is rational in his eluctable and innocently produced belief *B_p* if and only if *S* does believe *p*, and either:

- (i) *S* neither has nor ought to have adequate reason to cease from believing *p*, and is not rationally obliged to believe that he does have adequate reason to cease; or
- (ii) *S* does have adequate reason to cease from believing *p* but does not realize that he does, and is rationally justified in that.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ For examples cf. Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 80-81.

¹⁶⁷ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 142.

¹⁶⁸ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 163.

¹⁶⁹ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 168.

Obviously, similar approaches have been taken in the history of philosophy and Christian apologetics. One would be hard-pressed to read the preceding from Alston and Wolterstorff and not think of a well-known pragmatist. Similarly, a belief in God presuppositionally also finds its parallel in contemporary popular Christian apologetics. It would be a disservice to complete this chapter without examining both in at least a cursory fashion. For, as they mirror each other in many ways, and therefore face many of the same objections, it will help in understanding Reformed epistemology if one is familiar with such approaches.

D. SIMILAR APPROACHES

As stated previously, parallels to Reformed epistemology can be found in the annals of philosophy and theology. Although seemingly original in their development and expansion of Reid, a rejection of evidentialism coupled with an assertion of the certainty of God's existence is not unique to Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston. Many in history have affirmed a similar approach. Plantinga himself admits this when he refers to individuals like Kuyper, Bavinck, and Barth.¹⁷⁰ Even non-Reformed thinkers have been known to embrace a similar approach. Perhaps the most well-known rejection of evidentialism in regards to religious belief is that of the American pragmatist, William James.

1. WILLIAM JAMES

James was no Calvinist and his epistemology was definitely not Reid's. Beyond that there are also some critical difference between his philosophy of religion and the Reformed epistemologists'. I am not claiming for a second that their approaches are identical. There

¹⁷⁰ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 64-72.

are some points that James makes with which Plantinga and others would not agree and vice versa. However, the parallels between the two approaches are striking. Because these similarities in exposition also entail similarities in evaluation it is beneficial to examine James' approach regarding belief in God in his short, yet powerful, essay entitled "The Will To Believe."¹⁷¹

a. Background: Pascal

It is unfortunate that so many philosophers and theologians treat James' essay in an isolated fashion. Clearly James is working upon the groundwork laid earlier by Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*.¹⁷² According to Pascal, the evidence for God is ambiguous:

Nature has nothing to offer one that does not give rise to doubt and anxiety. If I saw signs of a Creator everywhere I should peacefully settle down in the faith. But seeing too much to deny and not enough to affirm, I am in a pitiful state, where I have wished a hundred times over that, if there is a God supporting nature, she should unequivocally proclaim him, and that, if the signs in nature are deceptive, they should be completely erased; that nature should say all or nothing so that I can see what course I ought to follow.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956); cf. also James' "Faith and the Right to Believe," in the appendix to *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979). It is interesting to note that few Reformed epistemologists stress the similarities between James and their own approach. Only Kelly James Clark, in his *Return to Reason* (pp. 102-113), appears to address the parallels. It is Clark who points out that James, in his *Pragmatism*, claimed it would have been preferable to title his essay "The Right to Believe" (p. 105) (my emphasis).

¹⁷² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, tr. A.J. Krailsheimer (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1966). Although at first examining Pascal's argument skeptically, James concludes Pascal's argument is a "clincher." (p. 11)

¹⁷³ pp. 162-163 [429 (Krailsheimer edition fragment number)/229 (Brunschvicg edition fragment number)]; cf. also pp. 170 [449/556], 322 [934/580]. A similar passage appears in Kierkegaard:

I contemplate the order of nature in the hope of finding God, and I see omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is an objective uncertainty. (*Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, tr. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), Bk. 1, Pt. II, Ch. 2, p. 182.)

Although the ambiguity of the evidence is *troubling* according to Pascal, it is not at all *surprising*. The reason for this is that God is a hidden God (*Deus absconditus*); God has hidden Himself from creation. Pascal references Isaiah 45:15¹⁷⁴: "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel." The reason that God is hidden is because God desires that individuals freely choose Him. "God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will."¹⁷⁵ True freedom requires an epistemic distance (though not metaphysical distance).¹⁷⁶ Were the evidence for God overwhelming, it would compel His creation to acknowledge Him.¹⁷⁷ But God desires that individuals come to Him because they want to, not because they must. If God, therefore, desired to move the will rather than the mind, one would expect the evidence for His existence to be vague.

If the evidence is not clear this would be reflected in the traditional arguments for God's existence. According to Pascal, the traditional proofs only convince the mind (whereas the heart is what God desires)¹⁷⁸ and only while one is attending them: "The metaphysical proofs for the existence of God are so remote from human reasoning and so involved that they make little impact, and, even if they did help some people, it would only be for the moment during which they watched the demonstration, because an hour later they would be afraid they had made a mistake."¹⁷⁹ The problem is that, even if successful, the

¹⁷⁴ pp. 155 [427/194], 101 [228/751 and 236/578], 169-170 [449/556], 263-264 [781/242].

¹⁷⁵ p. 101 [234/581].

¹⁷⁶ John Hick (in his *Evil and the God of Love*, rev. ed. [New York: HarperCollins, 1977], pp. 280-291, 315, 323) has most clearly explicated this notion.

¹⁷⁷ William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), p. 134.

¹⁷⁸ pp. 86 [190/543], 169-170 [449/556], 274 [821/252].

¹⁷⁹ p. 86 [190/543].

proofs are limited in what they prove: they prove a god of abstractions, at best an amorphous blob of powers—they do not prove the Christian God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹⁸⁰ The final difficulty with the proofs is that they are only convincing to those who already believe.¹⁸¹ Hence the proofs are downplayed by Pascal.

All of this is not disheartening for Pascal. Again, it is to be expected. But it is not simply expected—it is *preferred*. For, as previously stated, God desires to move the heart, not the mind.¹⁸² "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."¹⁸³ The heart (with its habits, inclinations, and feelings) is superior to the mind (reason).

Reason works slowly, looking so often at so many principles, which must always be present, that it is constantly nodding or straying because all its principles are not present. Feeling does not work like that, but works instantly, and is

¹⁸⁰ pp. 169-170 [449/556].

¹⁸¹ pp. 263-264 [781/242].

¹⁸² p. 101 [234/581].

¹⁸³ p. 154 [424/278]. Again, we find parallels in Kierkegaard. In response to the objective uncertainty of God's existence he states the following:

But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is, for it embraces this objective uncertainty with the entire passion of the infinite. In the case of a mathematical proposition the objectivity is given, but for this reason the truth of such a proposition is also an indifferent truth.

But the above definition of truth is an equivalent expression for faith. Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith. (*Kierkegaard's Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Bk. I, Pt. II, Ch. 2, p. 182.)

It is subjective, and not objective, thinking that lies at the heart of faith and religious belief. Objective ambiguity is not a curse; it is a blessing. For faith is nourished in the fields of objective uncertainty.

always ready. We must then put our faith in feeling, or it will always be vacillating.¹⁸⁴

All of the preceding serves as the basis for his famous wager. It is his wager which acknowledges the intellectual ambiguity of God's existence. Here the heart makes the decision that reason cannot and *should* not. God either exists or does not, the evidence for His existence is ambiguous—therefore reason cannot decide which option is true.¹⁸⁵ And yet one is forced to choose (as choosing not to choose is equivalent to choosing [that God does not exist]). As Pascal points out, this is a wager or game that one must play: "There is no choice, you are already committed. ... Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other."¹⁸⁶ Realizing that the cost of investment for choosing either theism or atheism is finite but that Christianity entails an infinite gain if true and only a finite loss if not, while atheism entails a finite gain if true and an infinite loss if not, Pascal asserts the prudent individual (moved by the heart) would embrace theism generally and Christianity in particular.

b. The Will to Believe

The approach of James is very similar to that of Pascal. James builds on Pascal's work, thereby providing prudential or pragmatic grounds for belief in God. James begins by discussing the various elements of belief. A hypothesis is anything proposed to one's belief while an option is a decision between any two hypotheses. An option may be dead or living, avoidable or forced, or trivial or momentous.¹⁸⁷ An option is living if both hypotheses that make it up are living—meaning if there is any possibility, to the mind of the individual,

¹⁸⁴ p. 274 [821/252].

¹⁸⁵ p. 150 [418/233].

¹⁸⁶ p. 150 [418/233]; cf. also p. 151 [418/233].

¹⁸⁷ pp. 2-4.

to either option being true.¹⁸⁸ If one or both of the hypotheses is deemed implausible by an individual the option is not living. Obviously whether an option is living or dead is person-relative. What may be a living or dead option for one person may not be for another. For example, the choice between being a Zoroastrian or a Taoist is most likely a dead option for most in the West, as neither option is living. However, to someone in the East this option is more likely viable and living (since both hypotheses are deemed plausible alternatives).

An option is said to be avoidable if the dilemma allows for the possibility of choosing neither hypothesis. If one must choose (if not choosing is equivalent to choosing one of the disjuncts) the option is forced. An avoidable option would be the choice between wearing shirt X or shirt Y (one could wear shirt Z or no shirt at all). James claims an example of a forced option is "'Either accept this truth or go without it,'" ¹⁸⁹ for abstaining from choosing is equivalent to choosing—deciding not to choose implies a choice.

The final distinction made is between trivial and momentous options. Unique, life-changing opportunities are momentous whereas insignificant or reversible opportunities are trivial. Many would classify an opportunity to ride in a space shuttle as momentous whereas the chance to have a hot dog would be trivial. Here again, as with the living or dead option, determining whether an option is trivial or momentous appears to be person, time, and context relative. Many might think riding the space shuttle is no big deal, and possibly 100 years from now it may not be (riding in a car was most likely a momentous option for many people 80 years ago). Similarly, if one

¹⁸⁸ Cf. p. 26.

¹⁸⁹ p. 3.

were starving, eating a hot dog or even drinking a glass of water could be a momentous option insofar as being life-changing.

James is concerned with a specific type of option: living, momentous, and forced. To this kind of option James gives the name "genuine." James discusses the genuine option in light of how one chooses a belief. Whether one acknowledges it or not one has two natures: the intellectual and the passional. Each makes choices. It is James' goal to identify and delineate the scope and limits of each.

The intellectual nature is best described as that which is concerned with pure insight and logic.¹⁹⁰ For purposes of later comparison one can say that it makes up the mind. The scope and application of this nature, according to James, differs depending upon with whom one is speaking. William Clifford, in his famous phrase, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,"¹⁹¹ granted the intellectual nature an unlimited application. If the mind cannot support a specific proposition with sufficient evidence one should withhold assent from said proposition. Clifford presumably assigns no role for the passional nature in the decision-making process.

James cuts to the heart of Clifford's theory when he points out that such an approach was itself determined not by the intellectual nature, but by the passional nature.¹⁹² James asserts that "I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life."¹⁹³ He points out that this seemingly objective scientific view which the empirical Clifford is

¹⁹⁰ p. 11.

¹⁹¹ "The Will to Believe," p. 8.

¹⁹² Cf. Clark, *Return to Reason*, pp. 108-109.

¹⁹³ p. 18.

espousing is inherently driven by the passional. He claims that "... science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept out of the game."¹⁹⁴ And elsewhere: "Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods of man."¹⁹⁵

James therefore believes that a demand for proof of theism, entailed by an unlimited intellectual nature, is therefore unwarranted.

To preach scepticism to us as a duty until 'sufficient evidence' for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof; and I simply refuse obedience to the scientist's command to imitate his kind of option, in a case where my own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk.¹⁹⁶

It is simply implausible to hold that all decisions and choices must be intellectual ones—indeed, such a claim is self-referentially absurd. The claim is itself not made on intellectual grounds but on passional grounds. But this does not mean that there is no role for the intellectual nature. Rather than being unlimited in application, the intellectual nature is limited to questions of science and human affairs in general.¹⁹⁷ Sometimes the intellect cannot decide (if not decidable on intellectual grounds), and sometimes the intellect should not decide. One does not need to decide if the option is not

¹⁹⁴ p. 21.

¹⁹⁵ p. 22; cf. also James' discussion of the very belief in truth itself on pp. 9-10.

¹⁹⁶ pp. 26-27; Cf. *Return to Reason*, p. 113.

¹⁹⁷ p. 20.

genuine,¹⁹⁸ for oftentimes it is wiser to suspend judgment than to risk making a mistake.¹⁹⁹

If there are times when the intellect cannot decide and one must, what is one to do? Here James appeals to the passional nature. The passional nature pertains to volitions (willing, wishing) and passions (preference, desires, fears and hopes, prejudices and passion, invitation and partnership, one's heart, instincts, and courage).²⁰⁰ In other words, where the intellectual nature is the mind, the passional nature is one's will and emotions. According to James,

*Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision,--just like deciding yes or no,--and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.*²⁰¹

James points out that there are numerous important fields that appeal to the passional, and not the intellectual, nature for making decisions and choices between options. Moral issues are not determinable on scientific grounds: "... cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science tells us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart."²⁰² Moral beliefs are determined by the passional nature--the will.²⁰³

Similarly, beliefs pertaining to relations with others are not

¹⁹⁸ p. 20.

¹⁹⁹ p. 21.

²⁰⁰ pp. 9, 24, 29.

²⁰¹ p. 11.

²⁰² p. 22.

²⁰³ pp. 22-23.

determined solely by the intellectual nature. In such cases, a faith in a fact often assists in creating it—a desire for a truth often helps bring it about. James provides three examples. He points out, first, that deciding whether one likes another is often assisted by one party meeting the other half-way.²⁰⁴ Second, an individual viewing a promotion or appointment as a live hypothesis and acting in accordance with that belief, can assist in bringing the advancement to pass.²⁰⁵ Finally, James points out that any social organism behaves as it does on the basis of the passional.

A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before any one else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted.²⁰⁶

By way of summary, "there are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. ... *faith in a fact can help create the fact* ... In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing."²⁰⁷

Religious belief meets the criteria necessary for a belief to be decided by the passional nature. It is not decidable on intellectual grounds and it is a genuine option (living, momentous, and forced).

James says little about religious belief being determinable on intellectual grounds in his "Will to Believe." Aside from merely pointing out that the agnostic or atheist cannot demand evidence without engaging in self-impugnment²⁰⁸ James appears content with merely classifying religious belief as a species of personal action

²⁰⁴ pp. 23-24.

²⁰⁵ p. 24.

²⁰⁶ pp. 24-25.

²⁰⁷ p. 25.

²⁰⁸ Cf. pp. 26-27 cited earlier.

(the passional nature thereby being afforded authority). But elsewhere in the writings of James one finds sentiments which echo Pascal's as to the usefulness of proofs and arguments for God's existence.

The arguments for God's existence have stood for hundreds of years with the waves of unbelieving criticism breaking against them, never totally discrediting them in the ears of the faithful, but on the whole slowly and surely washing out the mortar from between their joints. If you have a God already whom you believe in, these arguments confirm you. If you are atheistic, they fail to set you right. ...

... The bare fact that all idealists since Kant have felt entitled either to scout or to neglect them shows that they are not solid enough to serve as religion's all-sufficient foundation. ... The fact is that these arguments do but follow the combined suggestions of the facts and of our feeling. They prove nothing rigorously. They only corroborate our preëxistent partialities.²⁰⁹

Were the belief in God a dead or trivial or avoidable option one could withhold assent since it would be implausible, insignificant, or decidable at a later time or not at all. But James points out that this is not the case. As with other beliefs that are determined, in whole or in part, by the passional nature, such as a belief in truth itself, moral beliefs, or personal relations beliefs,²¹⁰ so religious belief must be decided by the passional nature. Again, it is not simply that the passional nature can decide—it *must* decide since it is a genuine option and the intellectual nature is not able to make the decision.

According to James, religion is a living option for anyone who admits that the claims of religion are possibly true²¹¹, it is momentous since a vital good is gained or lost by either belief or

²⁰⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), pp. 342-343. According to James, then, at most the proofs (intellect) only corroborate one's feelings (the passional).

²¹⁰ *The Will to Believe*, pp. 9-10, 22-25.

²¹¹ *The Will to Believe*, p. 26.

non-belief, and it is forced since not choosing is equivalent to choosing not to believe.²¹²

c. Compared to Reformed Epistemology

There are several obvious ways in which Reformed epistemology dovetails with the approach of James.²¹³ First, both downplay the role of natural theology. Both reject the necessity or possibility of providing proofs or evidence for the existence of God by appealing to some *a priori* or *a posteriori* argument. Both approaches are non-evidential.

Second, religious experience is central for grounding religious belief in both systems. Although James stresses the mystical experience whereas the Reformed thinkers emphasize the experience of the layperson, both claim religious experience is sufficient for grounding one's belief.

The second similarity is coupled with a third: both argue for the rationality of their approach by means of analogy. James points to moral beliefs and personal relations beliefs to stress the similarities between what is accepted as rational and religious belief; Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston argue Christian practice or religious experience mirrors the perceptual practice or sensory experience—if the latter is rational so is the former. Due to these similarities James and the Reformed epistemologist face common objections and difficulties (to be discussed in chapter three).

²¹² As James points out, "Scepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a certain particular kind of risk." (*The Will to Believe*, p. 26.)

²¹³ Reformed epistemology also shares, by association, similarities with Pascal and Kierkegaard. For example, C. Stephen Evans discusses the similarities between Plantinga and Kierkegaard in his "Kierkegaard and Plantinga on Belief in God: Subjectivity as the Ground of Properly Basic Religious Beliefs" in *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (January 1988): 25-39.

In addition to similarities between the two approaches there are also some glaring differences. First, although both systems downplay the necessity or possibility of natural theology, they do so for different reasons. James and Pascal would presumably utilize evidence for God's existence if it were available; the problem is that such evidence is *not* available. The evidence for God's existence is ambiguous. This is the direct antithesis of Calvin's approach. Echoing Romans 1, Reformed thinkers assert God is clearly evident. The problem is not lack of revelation—it is a sin nature and the suppression of what is known.²¹⁴

Another difference between the two camps involves their epistemologies. The approach of Plantinga and similar thinkers is not, strictly speaking, pragmatic—Reformed epistemology is not a prudential argument for God's existence. As stated previously, they do not reject foundationalism, they are simply rejecting *classical* foundationalism. They are rejecting a narrow form in favor of a wider form. Pragmatists can be, and usually are, interpreted as rejecting foundationalism.

The Reformed thinker is not relegating ultimate choices to the passional nature as is James. The intellectual nature, or mind, is perfectly within its rights in affirming the existence of God and the truth of Christianity as properly basic beliefs. Both claim religious belief is rational but define rationality differently. The two camps differ in regards to what counts as a rational belief. Where James grounds religious belief *outside* the intellectual nature, Plantinga claims religious belief is decidable *by* the intellect (by merely revising and expanding traditional foundationalism). As William J.

²¹⁴ I think that may be possible to make these two disparate perspectives compatible. Unless one interprets "clearly evident" to mean "absolutely compelling" a Calvinist might still be able to make

Wainwright points out, Plantinga "... has a more traditional conception of epistemic rationality than James does."²¹⁵

2. CORNELIUS VAN TIL

James is not the only thinker whose philosophy of religion closely parallels the work of the Reformed epistemologists. If the position of Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston is truly Reformed, one would expect to find similar thinking in the history of Reformed thought. This is precisely what one finds in the Christian apologetics of the Reformed thinker Cornelius Van Til. Van Til's work in this area can best be viewed as a rejection of the traditional apologetics in favor of a "presuppositional" approach. Traditionally (since at least the time of Aquinas), Christians have attempted to defend theism in general and Christianity in particular by presenting arguments that presumably justify core Christian beliefs. According to Van Til such an approach is wrong-headed and, more importantly, unbiblical. The preferred (indeed, the *only*) method is to take the truths of Christianity as one's starting point; the truths of Christianity are to be presupposed. The easiest way to see what Van Til means by this is to examine how he distinguishes the non-Reformed method in apologetics from the Reformed position.²¹⁶ For, according to Van Til, the former is doomed to fail where only the latter succeeds.

a. Traditional Apologetics

By traditional apologetics Van Til is referring primarily to the approach of the Roman Catholic and Arminian Protestants (or Evangelicals). According to Van Til, neither remains true to Biblical

use of the notion of epistemic distance.

²¹⁵ *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1988), p. 159.

²¹⁶ Indeed, this appears to be the way in which Van Til explicates his own system (cf. his outline in "My Credo" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E.R. Green (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed

theology and therefore both engage in a distorted defense of Christianity. Both end up affirming the autonomy of humanity as a starting point for the discussion of religious issues. As such, they have given the non-Christian enough rope to hang the apologist. Referring to the Catholic view, Van Till asserts that, "to be sure, the natural man is said to be fallen, but he has fallen but a little way; even in the state of rectitude he justly insisted on autonomy."²¹⁷ It is Van Til's position that the Arminian view follows in step behind the Roman Catholic and both, therefore, take one "... back at that arch foe of Christianity, namely, the idea of human ultimacy or autonomy."²¹⁸

Since non-Reformed apologists conceive of the nonbeliever as autonomous in his reasoning abilities, they end up utilizing a direct method of apologetics. "Roman Catholics and Arminians, appealing to the 'reason' of the natural man as the natural man himself interprets reason, namely as autonomous, are bound to use the direct method of approach to the natural man, the method that assumes the essential correctness of a non-Christian and non-theistic conception of reality."²¹⁹ As such the conclusions derivable from this method of argumentation are only probable.²²⁰ According to Van Til, all of the foregoing stems from the fact that Catholic and Arminian thinkers presume a neutral starting point with the non-believer. Because they both grant the atheist her autonomy and claim that she can argue correctly on the basis of neutral information (or information upon which the atheist and theist can presumably agree) the theist is

Publishing Co., 1980), pp. 18-21.)

²¹⁷ *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), pp. 138-139.

²¹⁸ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 140.

²¹⁹ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 101; cf. p. 114.

²²⁰ "My Credo," p. 18.

therefore required to follow the atheist wherever her deductions may take her. It is Van Til's opinion that this "presumed" neutral starting point²²¹ will not lead the non-Christian to Christianity. As long as the non-Christian is in the driver's seat and determines the rules of the game the Christian's goal of conversion of the non-Christian will be frustrated. The Christian has granted more to the non-Christian than he should, both from a pragmatic and an epistemic perspective. Since the non-Christian is not redeemed, the noetic effects of sin render all thinking suspect. Indeed, since the natural man, according to Reformed thinking, is vehemently opposed to God and is rebelling against God, it should be expected that once the non-Christian begins her clouded reasoning she will begin to draw conclusions that lead away from God, not to Him. One has, in effect, handed the methodological keys over to the drunk-only trouble lies ahead.

Even if some sort of god could be proved, it would not be the Christian God. "Assigning to reason the task of interpreting nature without dependence upon Scripture, this theology is bound to prove the truth of theism first. The theism that is proved in this way cannot be the only theism that any Christian should want to prove, namely, Christian theism."²²² Following Aristotle, Aquinas by necessity proves Aristotle's god.²²³ The Roman Catholic apologist therefore yields "... a theism in which the God of Christianity and the god of Greek philosophy, particularly the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle, are ground together into a common mixture. ... If with the Romanist we 'prove' the existence of a god, then we have disproved the existence of the God of

²²¹ *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 96-97, 111.

²²² *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 114-115.

²²³ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 134.

Christianity."²²⁴ The proof of an inferior, non-Christian god is no better than no god at all--both fall short of the mark for neither prove the Judeo-Christian conception of God. Having to drink a potion that is 50% water and 50% poison is not substantially different or better than drinking a potion that is all poison. Or, closer to the method, an inferior, weak, and crumbling foundation is little better than no foundation at all if one is attempting to erect a solid edifice. Van Til points out that "... Calvin argues that men *ought* to see God, not a god, not some supernatural power, but only God, in nature."²²⁵ When Christian apologists, like A.E. Taylor, argue for God's existence from the neutral starting point of man's autonomy the most they can hope for is some kind of finite deity.²²⁶ This conclusion is the exact opposite of the Christian's methodological goal. "The traditional view assumes that the natural man has a certain measure of correct thought content when he uses the word God. In reality the natural man's 'God' is always a finite God. It is his most effective tool for suppressing the sense of the true God that he cannot fully efface from the fibres [sic] of his heart."²²⁷

The traditional apologetic approach is not only problematic with regard to general revelation and the existence of God; it also falls short of its goal with regard to the special revelation of the word of God: Scripture. Here Van Til asserts that the Arminian, like the Romanist, in admitting a neutral starting point and an autonomous

²²⁴ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 220.

²²⁵ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 98.

²²⁶ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 142. To claim that the traditional arguments prove even a *finite* god is being unduly gracious according to Van Til's thinking. Elsewhere in *The Defense of the Faith* he analyzes both a *posteriori* and a *priori* arguments for the existence of God and concludes neither will be persuasive to the non-believer (pp. 248-253).

²²⁷ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 203.

unbeliever, also faces difficulties. Either his argumentation is unpersuasive or, even if persuasive, it yields a perverted, limited, or gutted form of Christianity. In regards to revelation, the Arminian argues in four steps for the authority of the Bible.²²⁸ He first addresses the non-believer regarding the possibility of supernatural revelation, then of its probability. This is followed by claims of the fact of revelation and of it being inspired and infallible. Were the non-believer to follow each step with the Christian she would presumably end up affirming what the Christian does. But Van Til claims that so long as the non-believer is granted autonomy she need not follow the four steps. "Possibility" for the non-believer means "chance"—something very different from what the believer means. Probability is also interpreted differently by each. For the non-believer it is related to chance and dismantled by Hume: "... as Hume has effectively shown in his criterion of the empirical probability argument for Christianity, there can be no presumption at all for the eventuation of certain things rather than of others, once one allows the idea of chance in his system at all. ... There can be no probability that God will supernaturally reveal himself to man unless it is certain that without the presupposition of such a revelation man's experience, even of the realm of natural things, is meaningless."²²⁹

Facts are also evaluated differently by the Christian and the non-Christian. One might argue, for example, that the resurrection of Jesus is a fact decidable on evidential grounds.

But this argument about the facts of supernatural revelation again forgets that the natural man's entire attitude with respect to the facts that are presented to him will naturally be controlled by his notions of possibility and probability as already mentioned. He may therefore grant that a

²²⁸ *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 144-145.

²²⁹ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 144.

man named Jesus of Nazareth arose from the dead. He need not hesitate, on his principles, to accept the *fact* of the resurrection at all. But for him that fact is a different sort of fact from which it is for the Christian. It is not the same fact at all. ... To talk about presenting to him the fact of the resurrection without presenting its meaning is to talk about an abstraction. The resurrection either is what the Christian says it is, or it is not. If it *is*, then it is as such that it actually appears in history.

Yet the Arminian position is committed to the necessity of presenting the facts of Christianity as being something other than he himself as a Christian knows they are. He knows that it is the Son of God who died in his human nature and rose again from the dead. But the fact of the resurrection about which he speaks to unbelievers is some nondescript something or other about which²³⁰ believers and non-believers are supposed to be able to agree.

Given the preceding it is obvious that the non-believer will not accept Scripture as absolutely authoritative. The non-Christian may grant that the Bible is inspired and affirm that it is a wonderful book.

Their position allows for sacred books and even for a superior book. But the one thing it does not allow for is an absolutely authoritative book. Such a book presupposes the existence and knowability of the self-contained God of Christianity. But such a God, and the revelation of such a God in the universe and to

²³⁰ *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 144-145. In a hypothetical dialogue between a non-Reformed Christian (Mr. Gray) and a non-believer (Mr. Black) Van Til describes a non-Christian's interpretation of the resurrection:

"Now as for accepting the resurrection of Jesus," continued Mr. Black "as thus properly separated from the traditional system of theology, I do not in the least mind doing that. To tell you the truth, I have accepted the resurrection as a fact now for some time. The evidence for it is overwhelming. This is a strange universe. All kinds of 'miracles' happen in it. The universe is 'open.' So why should there not be some resurrections here and there? The resurrection of Jesus would be a fine item for Ripley's *Believe It or Not*. Why not send it in?"

Mr. Gray wanted to continue at this point. He wanted to speak of the common witness that he had, after all, with the Calvinist for the gospel. But it was too late. He had no "common" witness left of any sort. ... For it was as clear as crystal to Mr. Black, as it should have been to Mr. Gray, that belief in the fact of the resurrection, apart from the system of Christianity, amounts to belief that the Christian system is not true, is belief in the universe as run by Chance, is belief that it was not Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who rose from the dead. (*The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 240-241; cf. p. 204)

man, are notions that, as has already been observed, the natural man must reject.²³¹

None of these consequences should be surprising according to Van Til. From a faulty beginning comes a faulty end. If one makes a mistake in the first part of an involved mathematical proof all further deductions, regardless of how much care is taken, will likewise be faulty. The Reformed thinker should not attempt to bolster the traditional arguments given or invent new ones. If the foundation (or method) is the problem, no amount of work on the house (the arguments stemming from the method) will save it. According to Van Til, "only a defective Protestantism can be built upon the perverted theism of the Romanist type."²³² A theology that begins with Christ of the Scriptures must be mirrored by an *apologetic* that begins with Christ of the Scriptures.²³³ The Reformed thinker must therefore follow the Calvinian work of Kuyper and Bavinck.²³⁴ In so doing the apologist can avoid the difficulties inherent in the Catholic and Arminian methods²³⁵: "... the Roman Catholic and the Arminian tone down the facts of the gospel in order to gain acceptance for them on the part of the natural man. In neither case will the Reformed apologist do so. In both cases he will challenge the natural man at the outset."²³⁶ The difference between the non-Reformed and Reformed positions is therefore a difference of starting points:

The basic difference between the two types of apologetics is to be found, we believe, in the primary assumption that each party makes. The Romanist-evangelical type of apologetics assumes that man can first know much about himself and the universe and *afterward* ask whether God exists and Christianity is true. The Reformed apologist assumes that nothing can be

²³¹ *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 145-146. Cf. pp. 246-248 for a discussion of the inappropriateness of the traditional apologetic for Scripture.

²³² *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 221.

²³³ Cf. "My Credo," p. 21.

²³⁴ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 163.

²³⁵ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 146.

²³⁶ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 149.

known by man about himself or the universe unless God exists and Christianity is true.

It will be observed that it is this very difference that exists between the two types of theology, the Romanist-evangelical and the Reformed. The former type of theology assumes that it first knows what human freedom is from "experience." It then adjusts the doctrines of Scripture concerning God and Christianity to its notion of freedom derived from experience. The Reformed type of theology begins with Scriptures and defines human freedom in terms of its principles alone.

It is natural that this difference which is basic in the two types of theology should also be basic in the two types of apologetics. Thomas Aquinas, the Roman Catholic, and Bishop Butler, the Arminian, both talk a great deal about the nature of man and of reality as a whole before they approach the question of the existence of God or of the truth of Christianity. ... Over against them stands Calvin. He will not say one word about man or about the universe except in the light of the revelation of God as given in Scripture.²³⁷

If this is the case then autonomy and chance (admitted by the Romanist and the Evangelical) are rejected out of hand by the Calvinist.²³⁸ Van Til proposes "that we no longer make an appeal to 'common notions' which Christian and non-Christian agree on, but to the 'common ground' which they actually have because man and his world are what Scripture says they are."²³⁹ The Christian and the non-Christian accept differing starting points in both their epistemology and their metaphysics. As such, there is no neutral starting point. Both affirm opposing presuppositions regarding the nature of reality: the Christian presupposes God, the non-Christian presupposes a dialectic between regularity and chance. Both claim their position conforms with the facts: the Christian interpreting facts in light of his presupposition (the revelation of Christ in Scripture), the non-Christian interpreting facts in light of his presupposition (his own autonomy and the world's brute "givenness"). Both claim their position is rational and conforms to logic: the Christian by appealing

²³⁷ *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 223-224.

²³⁸ Cf. *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 148.

²³⁹ "My Credo," p. 21; cf. *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 112.

to his system's self-consistency and the explanation of the link between fact and logic, the non-Christian by attempting to do the same.²⁴⁰

b. Presuppositionalism

Van Til's method is indirect. He claims that all (not just Christians) must, and unconsciously do, presuppose God's existence. The reason for this is that the existence of God is necessary for any knowledge. According to Van Til, "The only 'proof' of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of 'proving' anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of 'proof' itself."²⁴¹ What Van Til is offering then, is a type of *reductio ad absurdum* argument for Christianity. Without accepting the truth of Christianity as one's presupposition one cannot make sense of reality as we know it. This is why mere appeal to facts is misguided.

The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the "facts" and "laws" intelligible. The question is as to what the "facts" and "laws" really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes that they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?

The answer to this question cannot be finally settled by any direct discussion of "facts." It must, in the last analysis, be settled indirectly. The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake, in order to show him that on such a position the "facts" are not facts and the "laws" are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument's sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ "My Credo," pp. 19-20; *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 216-217.

²⁴¹ "My Credo," p. 21. It is Van Til's opinion that the traditional apologetic has compromised God's grace by not recognizing this point (p. 19).

²⁴² *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 100-101.

Christian theism is the only approach that gives "... reason a field for successful operation and a method of true progress in knowledge,"²⁴³ for "... the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe is the only presupposition which can account for the uniformity of nature which the scientist needs."²⁴⁴ No "fact" is intelligible apart from presupposing the truth of Christianity.²⁴⁵ "Thus the Christian-theistic position must be shown to be not as *defensible as some other position*; it must rather be shown to be *the position which alone does not annihilate intelligent human experience*."²⁴⁶

The Reformed thinker, therefore, should argue for the truth of Christian theism in light of the importance of one's presuppositions. The Reformed apologist

makes no deal with this new man. One shows that on his assumptions all things are meaningless. Science would be impossible; knowledge of anything in any field would be impossible. No fact could be distinguished from any other fact. No law could be said to be law with respect to facts. The whole manipulation of factual experience would be like the idling of a motor that is not in gear. Thus every fact-not *some* facts-every fact *clearly* and not *probably* proves the truth of Christian theism. If Christian theism is not true then nothing is true.²⁴⁷

Since Van Til's approach differs from that of the traditional approach, he ends up grounding belief in the existence of God and the authority of Scripture differently. One does not give proofs for either. "It is the actual existence of God of Christian theism and the infallible authority of the Scripture which speaks to sinners of

²⁴³ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 102.

²⁴⁴ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 103.

²⁴⁵ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 118.

²⁴⁶ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 177; cf. pp. 150, 173, 179, 180, 206.

²⁴⁷ *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 207-208; cf. also p. 214.

Christianity is not simply *probably* true (as the traditional approach attempts, and fails, to demonstrate); Christianity is *necessarily* true.

this God that must be taken as the presupposition of the intelligibility of any fact in the world.²⁴⁸ God's existence and the authority of Scripture are not to be found at the end of any proof—they are the beginning. From these two presuppositions all else follows. The traditional proofs and natural theology are not rejected completely. According to Van Til, the proofs must be formulated on a Christian basis,²⁴⁹ "... they must themselves be interpreted in terms of this self-attesting Scripture."²⁵⁰ "Accordingly I do not reject 'the theistic proofs' but merely insist on formulating them in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of Scripture. 'That is to say, if the theistic proof is constructed as it ought to be constructed, it is objectively valid, whatever the attitude of those to whom it comes may be' ..."²⁵¹ According to Van Til, it is at this point that those who argue along traditional lines (the Roman Catholics and non-Reformed Protestants) have gone astray. They compromise both general and special revelation by granting autonomous thinking and a neutral starting point to the non-Christian.²⁵² It compromises God by claiming his existence is only probable rather than rationally and ontologically necessary.²⁵³ Scripture, too, is compromised in terms of its necessity, authority, sufficiency, and clarity.²⁵⁴

In reasoning regarding God, Van Til harkens back to the work of Calvin. "For Calvin creation itself is directly and clearly revelational of the creative and sustaining activity of God. Man is therefore naturally in contact with the expressed will of God."²⁵⁵ God

²⁴⁸ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 118.

²⁴⁹ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 176.

²⁵⁰ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 178.

²⁵¹ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 197.

²⁵² *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 257.

²⁵³ "My Credo," p. 18.

²⁵⁴ "My Credo," pp. 18-19; *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 258.

²⁵⁵ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 157.

is not known solely by some autonomously produced probabilistic a *priori* or a *posteriori* proof. God's existence is clear. Time and time again Van Til asserts, following Calvin, that all know God innately, God's power and divinity being clearly evident in all an individual perceives. There is no such thing as an atheist—it is simply that this knowledge of God has been suppressed by sin.²⁵⁶ But it is not just knowledge of God's existence that is universal. According to Van Til all know the truth of Christianity. In an obscure passage he asserts that "... the argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity, can as readily be observed to be true by non-Christians as by Christians."²⁵⁷

Van Til argues similarly regarding special revelation. Proofs are not multiplied for the possibility, probability, facticity, or revelation from God in the Bible. Traditional apologetics leads nowhere (or worse, in the direction opposite of Christianity). Proof does not end with Scripture; it begins with Scripture. Van Till therefore states that "... I take what the Bible says about God and his relation to the universe as unquestionably true on its own authority."²⁵⁸ The self-explanatory and self-attesting Christ of Scripture is the starting point in both theology and apologetics.²⁵⁹ As such, the Reformed thinker must argue presuppositionally.²⁶⁰

c. Development of Van Til's Presuppositionalism

The work of Cornelius Van Til had a huge impact on Reformed apologetics. His teachings were embraced by many who have, over the

²⁵⁶ *The Defense of the Faith*, pp. 151-153; 168; 174; 198.

²⁵⁷ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 172.

²⁵⁸ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 195; cf. p. 197.

²⁵⁹ "My Credo," p. 21.

²⁶⁰ Van Til provides examples of his method in his hypothetical dialogue between a Reformed Christian (Mr. White) and a non-believer (Mr. Black). Truths of Christianity are presupposed to demonstrate that Mr. Black is inconsistent with his own non-Christian

years, attempted to articulate, develop, refine, and defend his methodology. Although many claim to be Vantillians or presuppositionalists, perhaps the three foremost thinkers influenced by Van Til would be his former students Francis Schaeffer, Greg Bahnsen, and John Frame. Although they view Van Til's approach as largely correct, in many ways it is only a starting point—further explication and refinement is necessary. A good example of this would be Van Til's transcendental argument. Although it lies at the heart of his system, very little is said regarding its details. That it is necessary is clear, but how it works itself out is not addressed by Van Til in a detailed fashion. It is one thing to say that one must presuppose the truths of Christianity for any proof or knowledge to be possible, for this claim may in fact be true. It is quite another thing to demonstrate why this is the case. Many have felt that Van Til simply posited the transcendental argument without providing the requisite details. Schaeffer, Bahnsen, and Frame can best be viewed as attempting to explicate and defend the missing or deficient points in Van Til's system.

In many ways the thinker who has remained closest to Van Til is Bahnsen. Bahnsen, too, rejects an evidential approach in Christian apologetics; autonomy is rejected. "The testimony of Scripture is clear in teaching that man cannot come to an understanding of God (and thereby of God's world) by means of his independently exercised reason. One does not first satisfy his intellect with certain autonomous proofs that God exists and has a particular nature, and then after gaining this understanding place his faith in the Lord."²⁶¹ Like Van Til, he asserts that "... there can be no neutral ground

presuppositions. (*The Defense of the Faith* 232, 246, 256.)

²⁶¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, ed. Robert R. Booth (Atlanta: American Vision, 1996), p. 87; cf. also

between believer and unbeliever ..." ²⁶² "Since God is the creator of all things, since He sovereignly controls every event, and since He clearly reveals Himself in every fact of the created order, it is utterly *impossible* that there should be any *neutral* ground, any territory or facet of reality where man is not confronted with the claims of God, any area of knowledge where the theological issue is inconsequential." ²⁶³

Bahnsen develops this area in a way in which Van Til did not. Bahnsen points out that appeal to facts and evidence is inadequate for establishing any philosophical system. Merely pointing to evidence and facts will not persuade the non-believer. A neutral, autonomous approach simply will not work because one's presuppositions determine and evaluate the facts or evidence.

Because the unbeliever has such an implicit system of thought directing his attack on the faith the Christian can never be satisfied to defend the hope that is in him by merely stringing together isolated evidences which offer a slight probability of the Bible's veracity. Each particular item of evidence will be evaluated (as to both its truthfulness and degree of probability) by the unbeliever's tacit assumptions; his general world-and-life view will provide the context in which the evidential claim is understood and weighed. What one presupposes as to possibility will even determine how he rates "probability." ...

In principle two complete philosophic systems or perspectives come into conflict when the veracity of the Christian faith is debated. It is for that reason that the apologist cannot be satisfied to argue merely about facts (even those very special facts known as "miracles," like Christ's resurrection). Factual argumentation may become necessary, but it is never sufficient. What one takes to be factual, as well as the *interpretation* of accepted facts, will be governed by his underlying *philosophy of fact*—that is, by more basic, all-pervasive, value-oriented, categorizing, possibility-determining, probability-rating, supra-experiential, religiously-motivated *presuppositions*. It is at this presuppositional level that the crucial work in defending the faith must be done. ²⁶⁴

pp. 83-84, 92, 95, 100, 101.

²⁶² Always Ready, p. 42; cf. p. 43.

²⁶³ Always Ready, p. 45; cf. p. 51.

²⁶⁴ Always Ready, pp. 67, 71. Elsewhere Bahnsen utilizes a well-known joke that illustrates this point:

Remember the story of the psychiatrist who was treating a man who believed that he was dead. Counseling the poor man

One may, of course, at this point be tempted to throw one's hands up in despair. For if there is no neutral starting point from which dialogue can begin and one's presuppositions interpret facts or the evidence differently it would appear that rational individuals from opposing systems of thought cannot discuss ultimate concerns rationally. How can dialogue take place with opposing presuppositions and no neutral starting point? According to Bahnsen a sense of futility and hopelessness at this juncture is premature. For although there may be no *neutral* ground there is *common* ground between the believer and the non-believer. Bahnsen's assertion is that this common ground is God's ground.²⁶⁵ "The believer always has a *point of contact* with the unbeliever: (1) his being the *image of God*, and (2) the *suppressed truth* deep inside him."²⁶⁶ With Van Til, then, Bahnsen espouses an indirect approach for demonstrating the truth of Christian theism:²⁶⁷ the transcendental argument.

... the presuppositionalist maintains that the unbeliever can come to know certain things (*despite* his espoused rejected of God's truth) for the simple reason that he *does* have revealed presuppositions—and *cannot but have them* as a creature made as God's image and living in God's created world. Although he outwardly and vehemently denies the truth of God, no unbeliever is inwardly and sincerely devoid of a knowledge of God. It is not a *saving* knowledge of God to be sure, but even as condemning knowledge natural revelation still provides a knowledge of God. Thus, according to biblical epistemology, while men deny their Creator they nevertheless possess an inescapable knowledge of Him ...²⁶⁸

about his neurosis seemed to go nowhere. Finally one day the psychiatrist decided to use an empirical test to convince the patient of his error. He asked the man whether dead men bleed, to which the man said no. At that point the psychiatrist pricked the man's finger with a pin and told the man to look and see: he was bleeding, so he could not be dead. To this the patient responded that he must, then, have been wrong: dead men *do* bleed after all! (p. 217)

²⁶⁵ Always Ready, pp. 43, 45, 52.

²⁶⁶ Always Ready, p. 52.

²⁶⁷ Always Ready, p. 60.

²⁶⁸ Always Ready, pp. 37-38.

Echoing the work of Van Til, Bahnsen is claiming that though the non-believer is giving lip-service to the claim that God does not exist, she lives her life according to beliefs that only make sense on the presupposition that God does. Insofar as the non-believer verbally affirms one view but lives according to another, he or she is being inconsistent and irrational. According to Frame, "... we are often inclined to ask, e.g., 'What does Susan really believe?' One test is to observe behavior. One's dominant belief will most often or most profoundly govern one's behavior. As Scripture says, 'By their fruit you will recognize them' (Matt. 7:20)."²⁶⁹

According to Bahnsen "faith is the precondition of a proper understanding. Augustine drew the inference with clarity: 'Understanding is the reward of faith; therefore, do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand.' (*Homilies on the Gospel of John* 29.6)."²⁷⁰

The unbeliever should not be left with false pretensions: such as, that this problem is merely a lack of information, or that he simply needs to correct some of his syllogism, or that his experience and thinking are all right as far as they go. In actuality, the unbeliever's espoused principles of thought, reason, and reality would lead to utter intellectual foolishness and destruction (1 Cor. 1:20; Matt. 7:26-27). This is what must be pointed out, thus witnessing that the *contrary* of Christianity is *impossible*, while on the other hand the dogmas of the faith provide the necessary pre-conditions of intelligibility and meaning. Such is the Scriptural perspective and method.

The source of the unbeliever's moral and epistemological problem is that he has the *wrong* (allegedly self-evidencing), authoritative starting point in his thought. It should be obvious, then, that the apologist can help the believer *only* if the apologist is conscientiously aware of the *correct*, genuinely self-evidencing, ultimate authority in the realm of thought, and is faithful in arguing in such a way that his defense is *rooted* in that presupposition ...²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1994), p. 92.

²⁷⁰ *Always Ready*, p. 88.

²⁷¹ *Always Ready*, p. 75.

The Christian apologist's approach is therefore directly related to the situation in which she finds the non-believer. One attempts to demonstrate to the non-Christian that implicit beliefs are inconsistent with explicit affirmations. The Reformed thinker attempts to reveal the non-Christian's epistemic and metaphysical framework for what it is: a house of cards.

Because they know God, they have a rationale for the laws of logic, the uniformity of nature, man's dignity and ethical absolutes. Accordingly they can pursue science and other aspects of life with some measure of success—even though they cannot account for that success (cannot provide the preconditions for the intelligibility of logic, science or ethics). For this reason, every bit of the unbeliever's knowledge is an evidence supporting the truth of God's revelation, and a further indictment against unbelief on the day of judgment.

The task of apologetics is to strip the unbeliever of his mask, to show him that he has really known God all along but suppressed the truth unrighteously, and that knowledge would be impossible otherwise. Apologetics in this way goes to the heart of the matter.²⁷²

Thus both the Christian God²⁷³ and the Christian Scriptures (the Bible)²⁷⁴ are the starting points or presuppositions in all argumentation for the Christian. Presuppositions are not, however, unique to the theist. All have presuppositions regarding the ultimate nature of knowledge and reality, whether the person be a naturalist or a supernaturalist. All, therefore, have a worldview: a system of assumptions regarding logical, metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological claims.²⁷⁵ The issue is whose worldview is correct and how one determines the preferred worldview. Such a determination cannot be achieved by appeal to mere facts: one's worldview determines both the facts and how they are interpreted. In effect, all are going about their daily lives wearing different world-view glasses.

²⁷² *Always Ready*, p. 123.

²⁷³ *Always Ready*, pp. 37-38, 50, 60, 61, 62, 63, 69-70, 72, 75, 79, 95, 123.

²⁷⁴ *Always Ready*, pp. 74, 75, 78, 80, 92.

²⁷⁵ Cf. *Always Ready*, p. 141.

Pointing to an object and claiming it is a square will not convince another that the person's glasses (or worldview) is correct. For the second person's glasses may prohibit that individual from seeing any object at all or may interpret the object not as a square but as a circle. Determining the preferred worldview is not possible by direct appeal to facts (at least those explicitly affirmed); the central issue here is not what is perceived by the glasses (the facts determined by the worldview) but the glasses themselves (or the worldview—the presuppositions through which all facts are filtered).

Whose perspective is intellectually justified, the Christian's or the non-Christian's? Many budding Christian apologists approach the answer to the question in a very simplistic and naive fashion, thinking that all we have to do is go look at the observable evidence and see whose hypothesis is verified. "After all," it is thought, "this is how we resolve disagreements in our ordinary affairs, as well as in science." If a dispute arises over the price of eggs at the store, we can jump in the car, drive down to the market, and go look for ourselves at the price listed on the eggs. ... Of course, disagreements such as these can be readily resolved in this fashion only because the two people who disagree nevertheless agree with each other regarding *more basic* assumptions—such as the reliability of their senses, the uniformity of natural events, the accuracy of data reporting, the honesty of researchers, etc.

However, when the dispute is over more fundamental issues, as it is between believers and unbelievers, simple appeals to observational evidence need not be decisive at all. The reason is that a person's most fundamental beliefs (or presuppositions) determine what he or she will accept as evidence and determine how that evidence will be interpreted. Let me illustrate. Naturalism and supernaturalism are conflicting outlooks regarding the world in which we live and man's knowledge of it. The naturalist claims that what is studied by empirical science is all that there is to reality, and that every event can (in principle) be explained without resorting to forces outside the scope of man's experience or outside the universe. Christian supernaturalism, on the other hand, believes that there is a transcendent and all-powerful God who can intervene in the universe and perform miracles which cannot be explained by the ordinary principles of man's natural experience. Now then, having well-accredited reports of a "miraculous" event is not in itself sufficient to change the mind of the naturalist—and for good reason. The naturalist's presuppositions will *require* him to dispute the claim that such an event really occurred, or alternatively, will lead him to say that the event is subject to a natural explanation once we learn more about it. Simple evidence need not dislodge his naturalistic approach to all things—any more than simple eye-ball evidence could ever in

itself refute the Hindu conviction that everything about man's temporal experience is Maya (illusion). Our presuppositions about the nature of reality and knowledge will control what we accept as evidence and how we view it.²⁷⁶

According to Bahnsen all argue ultimately by means of presuppositions; chains of arguments must end in self-evidencing principles.²⁷⁷ The issue, therefore, is who has the better presuppositions.

Between believer and unbeliever, who *actually* has the most certain starting point for reasoning and experience? What is that presuppositional starting point? Here the Christian apologist, defending his ultimate presuppositions, must be prepared to argue the *impossibility of the contrary*—that is, to argue that the philosophic perspective of the unbeliever destroys meaning, intelligence, and the very possibility of knowledge, while the Christian faith provides the only framework and conditions for intelligible experience and rational certainty. The apologist must contend that the true starting point of thought *cannot be other than* God and His revealed word, for no reasoning, is possible apart from that ultimate authority. Here and only here does one find the genuinely unquestionable starting point.²⁷⁸

The means by which the Reformed apologist demonstrates the superiority of Christianity is by addressing the inconsistencies of the non-Christian.

The life of the unbeliever is riddled with such inconsistency. He will presuppose human dignity and attend a funeral to honor a dead friend or relative, even though he previously argued that man is, in principle, no different from any other product of evolution like a horse or dog. The unbeliever will insist that man is nothing more than a complex of bio-chemical factors controlled by the laws of physics—and then kiss his wife and children when he goes home, as though they share love with each other. He will argue that in sexual relations “anything goes” (there are no moral absolutes)—but then indignantly condemn child molesters or morally repudiate necrophilia. ... The non-Christian does not have a workable worldview, and he exposes its weakness at every turn in his life.²⁷⁹

The non-Christian borrows key concepts from the Christian.

²⁷⁶ *Always Ready*, pp. 118-119.

²⁷⁷ *Always Ready*, pp. 72, 78. Bahnsen claims circularity in debate is therefore unavoidable (p. 78).

²⁷⁸ *Always Ready*, pp. 72-73.

²⁷⁹ *Always Ready*, p. 148.

Outwardly she rejects Christianity while in her daily activities she lives as though it were true. Only Christianity can make sense of life as experienced by all.

It is the Christian's contention that all non-Christian worldviews are beset with internal contradictions, as well as with beliefs which do not render logic, science and ethics intelligible. On the other hand, the Christian worldview (taken from God's self-revelation in Scripture) demands our intellectual commitment because it does provide the preconditions of intelligibility for man's reasoning, experience, and dignity. ...

In various forms, the fundamental argument advanced by the Christian apologist is that the Christian worldview is true because of the impossibility of the contrary. ... To put it another way: the proof that Christianity is true is that if it were not, we would not be able to prove anything.²⁸⁰

The task of the Christian is to point out that the non-Christian has tensions in his ethical, epistemological, logical, and metaphysical perspectives. Non-believers claim a non-Christian view is correct but live as if it was not.²⁸¹ All presumed objections to Christianity are readily dismissed. According to Bahnsen, the problem of evil is a problem for the unbeliever, not the believer (it makes use of notions such as "good" which are only possible within a Christian context).²⁸² "What we find, then, is that the unbeliever must secretly *rely upon* the Christian worldview in order to make sense of his argument from the existence of evil which is *urged against* the Christian worldview! Antitheism presupposes theism to make its case."²⁸³ Other presumed difficulties for Christianity (e.g. religious language and miracles) are dismissed along similar lines.²⁸⁴ The Christian worldview is not simply possible, or probable, or even

²⁸⁰ Always Ready, pp. 121-122.

²⁸¹ Always Ready, pp. 142-144. Elsewhere (pp. 153-160) Bahnsen applies the foregoing to an examination of the internal inconsistencies and tensions present in the work of Bertrand Russell.

²⁸² Always Ready, pp. 168-169.

²⁸³ Always Ready, p. 170.

²⁸⁴ Always Ready, pp. 177-232.

simply superior—it is the *only* tenable alternative. Even the non-Christian acknowledges this by her reasoning and actions; her reasoning and actions cohere only within a Christian framework—only Christianity can make sense of the four standard branches of philosophy: metaphysics, epistemology, axiology, and logic.²⁸⁵

d. Compared to Reformed Epistemology

There are several ways in which the approach and development of Van Til's presuppositionalism mirrors the Reformed epistemology of Plantinga and company. First, there is an obvious heavy reliance upon the work of Calvin—both camps are Calvinist and Reformed in their thinking. Furthermore, it is a particular kind of Calvinism. Reformed epistemologists and presuppositionalists trace their work back to the same branch of Reformed thought: Kuyper and Bavinck. Both reject the Calvinist approach of "Old Princeton" (the Reformed thinkers who taught at Princeton when it was still a conservative, religious institution): Machen, Hodge, and Warfield. Old Princeton looked favorably upon an evidential approach regarding the substantiation of Christianity. Both Plantinga and Van Til reject the need for, or possibility of, such an enterprise. Evidentialism is, at

²⁸⁵ Bahsen, *Always Ready*, pp. 142-144, 153-160; Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* pp. 93-118. Cf. also Francis Schaeffer's *He is There and He Is Not Silent*, bk 3 in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982). It is argued that only Christian theism does justice to each field in philosophy; none are possible without presupposing the truth of Christianity. For example, Schaeffer claims that only Christianity can explain why, metaphysically, man is personal yet finite; ethically, the presence of morality; epistemically, the possibility of knowledge. Only the existence of the Christian God explains the data. Frame, too argues that no other system can account for morality as practiced or the possibility of knowledge. Even the traditional metaphysical arguments for God's existence (like the cosmological or teleological arguments) become convincing once understood as being epistemological in character: they are based upon the idea that the universe can be rationally understood (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, pp. 108, 114).

best, inferior—at worst, it is impossible or counterproductive. Both groups label the work of Warfield and other Calvinist thinkers who take a more traditional approach to natural theology as embracing an aberrant form of Reformed thinking. A truly Reformed approach, which takes God as the starting point, is to be found in those Reformed thinkers who predate Old Princeton.

A second similarity present in both views follows from the first: a rejection or downplaying of the arguments for God's existence. Since they offer an alternative method for grounding Christianity's truth they both reject the traditional method. Either the arguments are weak, unconvincing, or unnecessary (Plantinga) or they are rejected completely since they presuppose man's autonomy and a neutral starting point (Van Til).

Third, both camps emphasize the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit and religious experience as grounding belief in God in general and Christianity in particular. Internal reasons for God's existence are preferred to external arguments. Even were it granted that the traditional arguments are successful, said proofs would pale in comparison to the inner testimony of religious experience.

The most obvious similarity between the work and followers of Plantinga and Van Til is their claim that Christian theism can, and must, serve as the legitimate starting point for rational discussion. According to Plantinga, belief in God is basic—it is an appropriate foundational belief. Argument is not needed to ground it—it may legitimately serve as a ground for other beliefs. Van Til, too, argues that belief in God is a presupposition. One can, and must, presuppose Christian theism to be true in order for any other beliefs to be rational or meaningful. God is either a properly basic belief

or a presupposition—the foundation upon which all other beliefs must be built.²⁸⁶

The fifth and final set of similarities concern the similarities of objections and difficulties both groups face. Charges of groundlessness, fideism, and the like are raised against both approaches. The exact nature of these charges as well as the assessment of the responses given will be discussed in chapter three.

Although Reformed epistemology and presuppositionalism mirror each other in many ways they are not identical. The approach of Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston can be viewed as a philosophical grounding of a theological perspective present in Van Til, Bahnsen, Schaeffer, and Frame. The former attempt to philosophically ground what the latter assume as their starting point.

²⁸⁶ Due to the foregoing similarities presuppositionalists tend to look favorably upon the Reformed epistemology of Plantinga and others. Frame states that he generally approve of their approach (John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987], p. 383).

[The book *Faith and Rationality*] ... certainly seems to be leaning in a presuppositionalist direction, and I am happy for that. Perhaps there will now be, as Van Til has always hoped, a renewal of communication between Westminster and Calvin, between Van Tillian presuppositionalists and the philosophers of the Christian Reformed establishment. I do believe that both groups can learn much from other. (*Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p. 400.)

CHAPTER III

OBJECTIONS

The previous two chapters consisted of an exposition of Reformed epistemology. In chapter one, I outlined the rejection of evidentialism. Presumably evidentialism is grounded in classical foundationalism which was present, in differing forms, in both scholastic and modern philosophy. According to Plantinga and others, evidentialism should be rejected because of its grounding in a problematic classical foundationalism. Due to external as well as internal difficulties both evidentialism as well as the classical foundationalism from which it springs should be rejected. This implies, among other things, that the multiplying of proofs for God's existence is not a requirement. It is not simply that evidence is not necessary, due to their theological underpinnings Reformed thinkers tend to frown upon natural theology as a discipline: it is neither required nor successful.

I presented the Reformed alternative to evidentialism in chapter two. Due to the theological influence of Calvin and the philosophical influence of Reid, Reformed epistemologists have come to the conclusion that belief in God is a properly basic belief. In other words, it is foundational and therefore requires no evidence. In the same way that other beliefs, such as a belief in other minds, are rational without evidence, proof, or argument, so is belief in God. Typically this is demonstrated by identifying parallels between theistic practice and perceptual practice. Since perceptual experience is basic and appropriately so, theistic experience must be

as well. I pointed out that in many ways the works of Plantinga, Wolterstorff, Alston, and others is not new. Similarities can be found in the works of James, Van Til, and others who also argued that seeking evidence was either unnecessary or inappropriate and that theistic belief can and *should* be grounded differently.

In this chapter we turn to an analysis of the foregoing. Until this point Reformed epistemologists and their sympathizers have had the microphone and very few objections have been raised. Whereas the first two chapters were expositional in character, this chapter is evaluational. Reformed epistemology is not without its critics. Many raise objections to both their rejection of evidentialism and the alternative proposed to take its place. It should not be thought for a moment that it is only the atheist who is attempting to point out difficulties with the position. Some of the most strident attacks against Reformed epistemology stem from fellow Christians. Probably the two most systematic critiques of Reformed epistemology were written by Catholic thinkers: *Thomistic Papers IV*¹ and *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology*.²

This chapter will deal primarily with the work of Plantinga. I will demonstrate that many of the objections raised against Reformed epistemology involve misunderstandings while other criticisms, though valid, are not damaging to the system as a whole but merely necessitate minor revisions in the theory. Some objections, however, are more serious and require that a larger role be given to evidence in Reformed epistemology—the ramifications of which I leave for our final chapter. Consider, first, those objections which are less serious.

¹ Ed. Leonard A. Kennedy (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988).

² Ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

A. LESS SERIOUS OBJECTIONS

1. INDIRECT OBJECTIONS

a. Alternative to Foundationalism: Coherentism

One of the first objections that can be raised against Reformed epistemology is its rooting of evidentialism in classical foundationalism. Ironically, it was Alston who raised the issue that perhaps evidentialism is not grounded in traditional foundationalism—there may be some other reason for thinking evidentialism must be held.

Plantinga himself argues that the "Reformed epistemologist" is perfectly within his rights in holding that certain propositions are not properly basic, even if he is without any general conditions for basicity. Why should not the same privilege be accorded the evidentialist? Do we have a double standard at work here?

But even if we hold the evidentialist to propounding some general conditions for basicity, why must they be those embodied in classical foundationalism? It's true that classical foundationalism is widely held *and* that it serves the purpose, in that it is implausible to take the belief in God to be either self-evident or incorrigible (in the appropriate sense) or evident to the senses. However it is by no means the only position that will serve. ... if the claim is that no other epistemological theory could plausibly serve as a reason for the evidentialist denial, that is palpably false. Take, e.g., the liberalization of classical foundationalism that involves accepting memory beliefs and beliefs about the mental states of other human beings (in each case under certain conditions) as basic. Those additions don't accommodate belief in God any better than the classical categories. Or take the various forms of coherence and contextualist epistemology. These serve admirably for the purpose, since on these views there are no properly basic beliefs at all. Plantinga is surely mistaken in supposing that classical foundationalism is the only possible support for the evidentialist denial.³

The problem, then, is not merely that evidentialism is possibly incorrectly linked with classical foundationalism. Alston is claiming that even if evidentialism is an appropriate offshoot of classical foundationalism, other epistemic theories beside a *non*-classical

³ William P. Alston, "Epistemology of Religious Belief," in *Alvin*

foundationalism may be preferable. We may be whipping a dead horse. Why attempt to revise and bolster foundationalism if a more prudent option would be to scrap the approach altogether? Remember, Plantinga is not rejecting foundationalism, merely its classical formulation. He does not reject the existence of foundational or basic beliefs—on the contrary, this serves as the locus for his grounding of belief in God. He merely rejects limiting the number of basic beliefs: the number should be expanded to such an extent as to include belief in God. The point that Alston is raising is that perhaps all of this is wrong-headed. If classical foundationalism is problematic perhaps the more sensible response is to eliminate foundationalism completely. Plantinga has demonstrated that if evidentialism is grounded in classical foundationalism it is poorly grounded. Perhaps this illustrates a difficulty not simply in evidentialism or even in classical foundationalism, but in any foundational theory. This appears to be the very approach taken by some in contemporary epistemology. As Wolterstorff admits,

Some philosophers have concluded from the collapse of the classical foundationalist theory of knowledge that the concept of knowledge itself must be discarded. (Cf. Richard Rorty.) And some have concluded from the collapse of the classical foundationalist theory that the distinction between rational and nonrational beliefs must be discarded. They have affirmed that "anything goes." (Cf. Paul K. Feyerabend.)

Presented with the same data as the Reformed epistemologist (the untenableness of classical foundationalism), postmodernists have drawn a wildly differing conclusion.⁵ The issue is, therefore, whether

Plantinga, pp. 295-296.

⁴ "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 4.

⁵ Thomas A. Russman, in his article "'Reformed' Epistemology," points out that proponents of Reformed epistemology are often lax in addressing this distinction between themselves and postmodernists:

Even though they make it clear that the only sort of foundationalism they mean to attack is "classical" foundationalism, they frequently drop the word "classical" and simply speak as though "foundationalism" taken as a whole were

Plantinga's more moderate response to the demise of classical foundationalism is preferable to the postmodernists' extreme rejection of any form of foundationalism. I believe that it is. The postmodernists' suggestion is both unnecessary and problematic. Consider a coherence theory of truth. Plantinga does not deny that such an alternative exists once one has rejected classical foundationalism. However, rejecting foundationalism is more problematic than revising it.

The central issues ... are two. In the first place, what is coherence? And is there any reason to think the theist's noetic structure does not display it? Second, suppose it does not; how do we determine in what direction it should be modified? Suppose, for example, that a given theist's noetic structure exhibits lack of coherence because it contains both belief in God and also, say, rejection of the idea that there is such a thing as agent causation. Perhaps his noetic structure is irrational, or at any rate defective, by virtue of this coherence. But how can this be construed as an objection to theistic belief? Some change is called for, but why suppose that what we must do is give up theistic belief? Obviously there is another alternative; perhaps what we should do instead is accept agent causation.⁶

In his *Warrant and Proper Function* Plantinga offers his most succinct reason for rejecting coherence theories:

A central reason for the insufficiency of coherence for warrant is that coherence is a *doxastic* relation: a relation that holds just among beliefs. But the warrant of a belief does not depend merely upon its relation to other beliefs: the relation in which it stands to experience is also important. To see this, consider the Case of the Epistemically Inflexible Climber. Ric is climbing Guide's Wall (on Storm Point in the Grand Tetons). He has just led the next to last pitch and is seated on the relatively capacious belay ledge at the end of this pitch. Enjoying the mountain sunshine and idly looking around, he forms the beliefs that Cascade Canyon is down to his left, that the cliffs of Mount Owen are directly in front of him, that there is a hawk gliding in lazy circles 200 feet below him, that it is

to be rejected. Now the latter is exactly what true postfoundationalists say, but it is not what Plantinga or Wolterstorff can or do say. They confuse the issue greatly when they neglect to make the distinction, even offering main headings with such titles as "The Collapse of Foundationalism," when it is clear that the collapse of only "classical" foundationalism is meant.

(*Thomistic Papers IV*, p. 188.)

⁶ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 63.

broad daylight, that the sun is wonderfully warm and pleasant, that he is wearing his new *Fire* rock shoes, and so on. His beliefs, we may stipulate, are coherent. Now add that Ric is struck by an errant burst of high-energy cosmic radiation, causing subtle but pronounced brain damage. As a result, he is subject to cognitive malfunction: his beliefs become *fixed*, no longer responsive to changes in his experience. No matter what his experience, his beliefs remain the same. This makes it difficult to communicate with him, but at the cost of great effort his partner gets him down. That evening, in a desperate last-ditch attempt at therapy, his partner takes him to the opera in nearby Jackson, where the New York Metropolitan Opera on tour is performing *La Traviata*. Ric's experience is the same as everyone else's; he is inundated by wave after wave of golden sound. The effort at therapy unhappily fails; Ric's beliefs remain fixed and wholly unresponsive to his experience; he still believes that he is on the belay ledge at the top of the next to last pitch of Guide's wall, that Cascade Canyon is down to his left, that the sun is shining on him, that there is a hawk sailing in lazy circles 200 feet below him, that he is wearing his new *Fire* rock shoes, and all the rest. Furthermore (since he believes the very same things he believed when seated on the ledge), his beliefs are coherent. But surely they have little or no warrant for him. The reason is cognitive malfunction; his beliefs are not appropriately responsive to his experience. He may be (deontologically) *justified* in accepting those beliefs ... they may display still other epistemic virtues. But they have no warrant for him. Clearly, then, coherence is not sufficient for positive epistemic status.

So coherentism is mistaken: coherence is not the only source of warrant. It does not follow that coherence is not a source of warrant—one source among others. All that follows is that it is not the *sole* source.⁷

Plantinga is therefore presenting a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against the view that coherence is a sufficient condition for warrant while not denying that it may be a necessary condition. If individuals who are mentally disturbed or are in other ways traditionally classified as irrational (e.g. someone claiming he is Napoleon and affirming a set of beliefs coherent with that assertion) can meet the coherence criterion for knowledge and rationality then certainly coherence is not a sufficient condition for warrant.

Elsewhere Plantinga responds directly to Alston's objection:

On a coherentist view, says Alston, there are no properly basic beliefs at all; so *a fortiori* the coherentist would reject the view that belief in God is properly basic. Here there are two

⁷ *Warrant and Proper Function*, pp. 179-180.

things to be said. First, it is exceedingly hard to see how to state an evidentialist objection from a coherentist point of view. Evidentialist objectors typically proceed by pointing out that the traditional theistic proofs, say, don't actually furnish much by way of evidence. Here they may or may not be right. Even if they are, however, that doesn't so much as suggest that theism is in any sort of trouble from a coherentist point of view. To show that, the objector would have to show that theism cannot be or typically is not a member of a coherent system of beliefs; and that is a wholly different enterprise. While it is fairly plausible to suggest that there isn't much by way of non-circular evidence for theism (just as there isn't much by way of non-circular evidence for our belief in the past), it isn't nearly as plausible to claim that theistic belief cannot be an element in a coherent system of beliefs.⁸

Plantinga goes on to address an even more damaging difficulty with embracing coherentism as opposed to foundationalism. Since it is unclear how we should understand coherence, perhaps even the coherentist affirms the existence of properly basic beliefs. For example, if I accept proposition X because it coheres with the rest of my noetic structure, the fact that it coheres is, in effect, my evidence for accepting it. But if the proposition "X coheres with my noetic structure" is my evidence for proposition X, I can then ask what serves as my evidence for "X coheres with my noetic structure." As Plantinga points out, one is trapped in an infinite regress—seeking evidence for evidence. On the other hand, if I think that the evidence for X is simply the set $\{X_1, \dots, X_n\}$, where X_i is simply the other propositions I affirm, I am caught in a vicious circle.

Now the coherentist is sometimes represented as grasping the nettle (or biting the bullet) and holding that circular reasoning is perfectly acceptable (provided "the circle is large enough"). The foundationalist typically holds that the relevant evidence relation is asymmetric, irreflexive and transitive: but then of course it wouldn't be possible that part of my evidence for B is just B itself—as would be the case if my evidence for B were $B_1 \dots B_n$ and my evidence for each of the B_i were B together with the other B_i . On the present representation, the coherentist counters by claiming that the appropriate evidential relation is *not* irreflexive; it could be that part of my evidence for B is just B itself.

⁸ "Replies," in Alvin Plantinga, p. 391.

But this is extremely implausible (and surely the theist won't be in much trouble if he is allowed to cite theism as part of his evidence for theism). A more promising way to state the coherentist view would be to take it not as an implausible comment on the evidence relation, but as instead a statement of a sufficient condition for a belief's being rational. ... A belief is rational, for me, if it coheres with the rest of my noetic structure; and it isn't necessary that it also be *evidentially supported* by the rest of my noetic structure. If we take the coherentist this way, however, then he will not, presumably, deny that some beliefs are properly basic; his disagreement with the classical foundationalist will instead emerge over the question *which* beliefs are properly basic.⁹

Thus Plantinga is asserting two things: First, there is no plausible reason to think coherentism is a preferable, or even workable, epistemic theory. Second, even if it were, coherentism would pose no threat to theistic belief—even theistic belief as properly basic. In his evaluation of coherentism I take Plantinga to be correct. Although it is important to address the possibility of alternatives to foundationalism, the most plausible option (coherentism) is simply not tenable.¹⁰

b. Misinterpretation of Scholastic Philosophy

A second objection often raised against Reformed epistemologists concerns their characterization of Medieval philosophers—particularly that of St. Thomas Aquinas. It is said that Plantinga simply misunderstands the thinker. Not surprisingly, Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers take Plantinga to task on this issue—and

⁹ "Replies," in *Alvin Plantinga*, pp. 391-392.

¹⁰ A detailed exposition of Plantinga's convincing critique of the many faces of coherentism can be found in his *Warrant: The Current Debate* and, to a lesser extent, in his *Warrant and Proper Function*. As has been stated previously, there seems to be no widespread agreement as to the exact nature of the epistemology that should replace classical foundationalism. For example, Plantinga critiques Alston's form of reliabilism in his *Warrant: The Current Debate* and concludes contemporary forms of reliabilism "... omit a crucial component of warrant ... that of *proper function* or *absence of dysfunction*." ("Preface" in *Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. vii.) Wolterstorff, on the other hand, appears critical of any form of reliabilism and raises several scathing attacks against the position ("Can Belief in God Be Rational?" pp. 159-161).

rightly so. The criticisms of Joseph Boyle and Thomas Russman are characteristic of those raised against Plantinga.¹¹

According to Boyle, modern philosophers are open to many of the criticisms to which premodern foundationalists are not. This is because their notion of self-evidence is much broader than Plantinga suggests. As Boyle states, "... a proposition was held to be self-evident if the intelligibility of the predicate term in a proposition was immediately connected with or contained in the subject term. ... Propositions known through themselves are not, as Plantinga's examples tend to suggest, limited to truths of logic or analytic truths. Furthermore, propositions evident to the senses, however the precise boundaries of this category are to be understood, are not limited to Chisholmian reports of experience such as 'I am appeared to redly.'" ¹² Boyle goes on to suggest that if Plantinga acknowledges that Aquinas believed the existence of a material world is evident to the senses then he should also be prepared to admit that it is possible many of the other properly basic propositions (e.g. regarding memory beliefs, beliefs about the past, etc.) might similarly be admissible on the basis of the medieval criterion of "evident to the senses."¹³ Scholastic foundationalism, therefore, has the ability without revision to accommodate many of the beliefs Plantinga thinks classical foundationalism incorrectly eliminates.

Russman's attacks are even more biting. He states that "Plantinga's interpretation of Aquinas is curiously maladroit. Even the texts which he quotes should have led him to a very different

¹¹ Joseph Boyle, "Is 'God Exists' a Properly Basic Belief? A Consideration of Alvin Plantinga's Argument" and Thomas A. Russman, "'Reformed' Epistemology" both in *Thomistic Papers IV*.

¹² "Is 'God Exists' A Basic Belief?" p. 174.

¹³ "Is 'God Exists' A Basic Belief?" p. 174.

interpretation."¹⁴ Plantinga takes Aquinas as asserting that taking something on faith is not knowledge and that knowledge is only possible on the basis of demonstrations for God's existence. But "... this way of distinguishing between faith and knowledge is clearly *not* Aquinas' view, as is manifest from the very texts Plantinga cites in support of it. Aquinas makes it clear that he regards faith as a source of *knowledge* [sic], and he explicitly denies that 'strict demonstration' is 'the only way to reach a knowledge of the things we must know about God.'"¹⁵ According to Russman, a clearer understanding of Aquinas' discussion of the relationship between faith and reason helps explain the passage where Plantinga states that Aquinas comes very close to Calvinism. Aquinas is not affirming a position contrary to his "classical" foundationalism—for he does not embrace the foundationalism Plantinga forces upon him.¹⁶ Consider the case of memory:

Plantinga's failure to understand Aquinas is never greater than on the issue of memory. After calling Aquinas a "classical" foundationalist, he says that matters of memory cannot be basic for the "classical" foundationalist. But it is patently false to say that Aquinas does not accept remembered facts (such as that I had breakfast this morning) as foundational. This is just not a skepticism Aquinas has any tendency toward. Once again, it would appear, Plantinga is projecting back upon Aquinas aberrations that are easily found in later writers.¹⁷

Plantinga misrepresents the position of Aquinas (the primary spokesperson for the scholastic philosophy he classifies as a form of classic foundationalism). This is puzzling for several reasons.

First, it is puzzling because Aquinas clearly does not embrace the classical foundationalism articulated by Plantinga. Most assuredly there are philosophers who are not always clear in their

¹⁴ "'Reformed' Epistemology," p. 189.

¹⁵ Russman, "'Reformed' Epistemology," p. 189.

¹⁶ "'Reformed' Epistemology," p. 191.

¹⁷ Russman, "'Reformed' Epistemology," p. 192.

position or with their terms (such as Locke), or who vacillate between one position and the next (such as Russell), and undoubtedly Aquinas himself is vague or unclear in places. But Aquinas does not appear to be ambiguous with regard to the basic form of his epistemology. Aquinas is plainly not a "classical" foundationalist as Plantinga uses the term, and it is puzzling that Plantinga saddles him with the position.

Second, I interpret Plantinga's assertion that belief in God is properly basic and that many other beliefs are also appropriately foundational as being a call back to epistemic externalism.¹⁸ For it is within this rubric that such foundational beliefs make the most sense. Difficulties with classical foundationalism stem largely from the fact that it is an internalist enterprise. In the first two volumes of *Warrant* Plantinga is not merely laying the groundwork for the claim that belief in God is properly basic, he is also harkening his reader back to the period when philosophers correctly embraced externalism. Plantinga's misunderstanding of Aquinas is odd because he admits that Aquinas was an externalist. In other words, Plantinga can potentially find a genesis for his own system in that of Aquinas. He states, "Of course the fundamental style of Reidian epistemology

¹⁸ According to Plantinga, externalism is the view that "... holds that warrant need not depend upon factors relevantly internal to the cognizer; warrant depends or supervenes upon properties to some of which the cognizer may have no special access, or even no epistemic access at all. ... On externalist views, warrant-making properties are such properties (of a belief) as *being produced by a reliable belief-producing mechanism, or standing in a causal chain appropriately involving the subject of belief, or standing in probabilistic relation R to certain other relevant propositions; and none of these properties is one to which we have the relevant kind of special access*" (*Warrant: The Current Debate*, p. 6). Externalism's polar opposite, internalism, currently fashionable among contemporary epistemologists, asserts that "... what determines whether a belief is warranted for a person are factors or states in some sense internal to that person; warrant conferring properties are in some way internal to the subject or cognizer ... the internalist holds that a person has some kind of special epistemic access to warrant and the properties that ground it"

with its externalist emphasis didn't originate with Reid; it can be traced back to Aquinas and indeed all the way back to Aristotle."¹⁹ If this is the case it appears that the scholastic system as typified by Aquinas is much closer to Reformed epistemology than it is to modern foundationalism. It would therefore be premature, and incorrect, to abandon it completely. Rather than reject it out of hand Plantinga would be better served by doing one of two things. He should either attempt to locate those aspects of Aquinas' theory which would allow for belief in God to be labeled as properly basic, or demonstrate how, although it is an externalist approach like his own and not a modern form of foundationalism, his own externalist foundationalism is superior. At the very least Plantinga should acknowledge that the evidential challenge to belief originates with modern epistemology. This is precisely the position that co-Reformed epistemologists appear to take. Wolterstorff, unlike Plantinga, asserts "... that the evidentialist challenge and objection to theistic conviction, along with the attempt to cope with the challenge by practicing evidentialist apologetics, are peculiar to modernity."²⁰

Plantinga's faulty account of medieval philosophy is, therefore, more than simply an oversight: it is a serious objection. But, fortunately for Reformed epistemology, this does not appear to be a critical objection for the theory. First, as I stated, Reformed epistemology can still be interpreted as a call for revision or supplementation of the evidentialist challenge raised by modern philosophy (which, most have acknowledged, Plantinga correctly explicates). All of the criticisms raised against the modern form of classical foundationalism, indeed, the only form, remain. It faces

(Warrant: The Current Debate, p. 5, 6).

¹⁹ Plantinga, "Preface" in *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. x.

²⁰ "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 140. Emphasis mine.

external difficulties due to what constitutes justification and an insufficient number of foundational propositions; it faces internal difficulties in that it is counterintuitive and self-referentially incoherent.²¹

c. Misinterpretation of Calvin

Although a misunderstanding of Aquinas might be forgivable, a misinterpretation of Calvin would not. Presumably, if anyone can be expected to represent Calvin accurately it would be the Reformed thinker. Yet some have pointed out that Reformed epistemology is not truly a Calvinist position. According to some Reformed thinkers Calvin himself did not argue in such a fashion.

According to Hoitenga, Calvin believed God is known by his creation in more than one way.²² Plantinga and others tend to stress the notion of the *sensus divinitatis* in Calvin. Although this is certainly present and central in the works of Calvin, he does not limit knowledge of God solely to this means. In addition to the

²¹ This is not to say that some thinkers have not attempted to take Reformed thinkers to task for claiming classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent. Boyle, for example, in his "Is 'God Exists' A Properly Basic Belief?," attempts to argue that the 'self-evident' or 'incorrigible' criteria may not be incoherent. Boyle attempts to argue that there is a sort of evidence for these criteria: "immediate" evidence. "This discussion suggest a proposition which seems to be self-evident: that properly basic propositions must be immediately evident." (p. 178.) But I do not see how such a qualification damages Plantinga's position. First, as Reid himself pointed out, immediacy of belief does not ground or substantiate a belief—it is merely a characteristic feature of those beliefs that are foundational. Second, since by definition one cannot give evidence for a foundational belief, if this is evidence then what it demonstrates is not foundational. Third, Boyle himself acknowledges (p. 179) that this is not the way in which Plantinga utilizes the concept "evidence." For Plantinga it is a relation between propositions. Lastly, and most importantly, were one to admit Boyle's qualification it is difficult to see how this would adversely affect Plantinga's position. For, if Calvin is correct with regard to his notion of the *sensus divinitatis*, then belief in God is appropriately foundational.

²² "Faith and Reason in Calvin's Doctrine of the Knowledge of God," pp. 17-39.

sensus divinitatis, knowledge of God is possible from the "workmanship of the universe." This would appear to lend credence and legitimacy to natural theology and the use of argument and evidence. As Hoitenga states:

God, then, is not literally known in his creation, but from it--indirectly, as from a sign to what is signified. Such knowledge, I conclude, must be inferential, requiring reason to take a step from the evidence to what is evident. Admittedly Calvin does not himself interpret his language as suggesting an inferential knowledge of God. He wishes instead to convey a sense of the unavoidability and universality of the knowledge: "Men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him" (I,v,1). But inferences can be as "compelling" as revelation. Again, "we see that no long or toilsome proof is needed to elicit evidences that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty." His point here must not be misunderstood. When he writes this he is not referring to inference from evidence to what is evident, but to arguments for the evidences themselves. These are the arguments that he says are unnecessary, since the evidences "are so very manifest and obvious that they can easily be observed with the eyes and pointed out with the finger" (I,v,9). ... I conclude that there is nothing in Calvin's presentation that precludes an inferential quality to the knowledge of God from the workmanship of nature, and much that suggests or even requires it.

... [Some] ... think that an innate awareness of God's existence renders inference and argument unnecessary. It seems instead that they can be combined, judging from Calvin's own addition of the external "evidences" of God in the cosmos to the *sensus divinitatis* within.²³

It appears, then, that Calvin leaves the door open for the possibility of natural theology. But what is to be done with all of the passages that make claims such as "the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles" (II.ii.18)? Does this not imply that natural theology does not, and cannot, deliver knowledge of God? Not at all.

First and foremost ... it must be insisted that the "blindness" of which Calvin speaks here refers to the proper knowledge of God, the knowledge of piety ... He grants immediately "that one can read competent and apt statements about God here and there in the philosophers," although he quickly adds, "these always show a certain giddy imagination." ... It is an important, frequently recurring theme in Calvin that the natural knowledge of God persisting in man after the fall is sufficient to leave him without excuse ...

... From what I suggested earlier about the function of reason, it is most implausible that Calvin means by its

²³ pp. 22, 23.

corruption that it can no longer formulate some of the propositional content of this knowledge of God, nor make the required inferences from the character of the universe to the existence and power of God. What reason *chiefly* fails to achieve in its fallen state is, it seems not conceptualization or inferences but the act of *faith*. This is consistent with the distinction Calvin draws between the "natural" and the "supernatural" gifts, viz., that the former are "essential" to man, the latter "adventitious."²⁴

If Hoitenga's interpretation of Calvin is correct, and I believe that it is, Reformed epistemologists are guilty of misreading him. Calvin acknowledges a function for evidence, argumentation, and natural theology. Admittedly the role reason plays is an inferior one: it is limited and deficient. The use of reason is therefore fraught with difficulties; the *sensus divinitatis* is obviously superior in the knowledge of God it delivers. Yet Calvin admits reason can, and has, delivered a limited knowledge of God. Calvin appears to be more concerned with the *kind* of knowledge it produces than its actual existence. He admits that knowledge of God can be acquired by speculation but believes that said knowledge is religiously and morally inadequate. Knowledge of God based on speculation is therefore not impossible—Calvin claimed that it is an avenue for knowledge of God. It is simply that such knowledge is deficient and therefore inferior. Calvin compares the two types of knowledge in I.v.9 of his *Institutes*:

We see that no long or toilsome proof is needed to elicit evidences that serve to illuminate and affirm the divine majesty; since from the few we have sampled at random, whithersoever you turn, it is clear that they are so very manifest and obvious that they can easily be observed with the eyes and pointed out with the finger. And here again we ought to observe that we are called to a knowledge of God: not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart. For the Lord manifests himself by his powers, the force of which we feel within ourselves and the benefits of which we enjoy. We must therefore be much more profoundly affected by this knowledge than if we were to imagine a God of whom no perception came

²⁴ Hoitenga, pp. 28, 29.

through to us. Consequently, we know the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order, is not to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.²⁵

Commenting on the preceding passage, Hoitenga points out that Calvin's speaking of the "the most perfect way of seeking God" implies that other, less perfect ways, also exist.

His words here say nothing ... [regarding] ... whether the deficient way can lead to truths of natural theology which appear in the pagan philosophers. Still the belief persists among interpreters of Calvin that his outlook makes no room for natural theology. ... The conclusion would be correct if the knowledge of piety were, indeed, the only knowledge of God which Calvin allows. But if Calvin allows another knowledge of God, a knowledge of God that includes true beliefs but is deficient in piety, the contradiction disappears.²⁶

It is the pious who do not resort to proofs for the existence of God; "... the pious mind is not one that inquires, questions, wonders or seeks to understand, but one that is 'content'—precisely because it already knows."²⁷ Calvin is asserting speculation is not undertaken by the pious individuals precisely because the individual is pious. For him to seek intellectual arguments for God's existence is unnecessary, since he is already not only a believer but pious, and the search is deficient, since a superior source of knowledge, namely revelation, exists. One would therefore expect to see Calvin utilizing proofs in natural theology. Others have pointed out that this is precisely what we see in his *Institutes*. In their book *Classical Apologetics*, R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley identify Calvin's use of both teleological and cosmological arguments for God's existence.²⁸

²⁵ pp. 61-62.

²⁶ p. 33.

²⁷ Hoitenga, p. 34. Here Hoitenga is referring to I.ii.2 of the *Institutes*.

²⁸ *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), pp. 202-203.

Consider the following teleological argument in I.v.2:

There are innumerable evidences both in heaven and earth that declare his wonderful wisdom ... Even the common folk and the most untutored, who have been taught only by the aid of the eyes, cannot be unaware of the excellence of divine art, for it reveals itself in this innumerable and yet distinct and well-ordered variety of the heavenly host. It is, accordingly, clear that there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show his wisdom. Likewise, in regard to the structure of the human body one must have the greatest keenness in order to weigh, with Galen's skill, its articulation, symmetry, beauty, and use. But yet, as all knowledge, the human body shows itself to be a composition so ingenious that its Artificer is rightly judged a wonder-worker.²⁹

Or a cosmological argument in I.v.6:

Now I have only wanted to touch upon the fact that this way of seeking God is common both to strangers and to those of his household, if they trace the outlines that above and below sketch a living likeness of him. This very might leads us to ponder his eternity; for he from whom all things draw their origin must be eternal and have beginning from himself. Furthermore, if the cause is sought by which he was led once to create all these things, and is now moved to preserve them, we shall find that it is his goodness alone.³⁰

One of the foremost authorities on Calvin and Reformed theology, Benjamin Warfield, asserts dogmatically that

We do not read far into the *Institutes* before we find Calvin presenting proofs for the existence of God. It is quite true that this book, being written by a Christian for Christians, rather assumes the divine existence than undertakes to prove it, and concerns itself with the so-called proofs of the divine existence as means through which we rather obtain knowledge of what is, than merely attain to knowledge that God is. But this only renders it the more significant of Calvin's attitude towards these so-called proofs that he repeatedly lapses in his discussion from their use for the former into their use for the latter and logically prior purpose. That he thus actually presents these proofs as evidences specifically of the existence of God can admit of no doubt.³¹

Calvin does not simply provide evidence or arguments for the proposition 'God exists'; he also presents his readers with reasons for accepting the Scripture as God's revelation. Calvin does not

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes*, pp. 53-54.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 59.

³¹ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), p. 143; cf. *Classical Apologetics*, p. 256.

simply appeal to arguments with regard to general revelation—he also makes use of evidence with regard to special revelation. In Book I, Chapter 8 of his *Institutes*, Calvin asserts that human reason, limited though it may be, has access to proofs which establish Scripture's credibility.³² It is interesting to note that Plantinga quotes the following passage in Calvin on page 67 of *Faith and Rationality*:

The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for them as they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs. Rather, they bring forward God's holy name, that by it the whole world may be brought into obedience to him. Now we ought to see how apparent it is not only by plausible opinion but by clear truth that they do not call upon God's name heedlessly or falsely. If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences—that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles—we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.³³

Plantinga does not point out that the very next line, which he does not quote, reads "True, if we wished to proceed by arguments, we might advance many things that would easily prove—if there is any god in heaven—that the law, the prophets, and the gospel come from him."³⁴ In sum,

... it is important to emphasize that Calvin nowhere objects to rational demonstrations and arguments as such. On the contrary, he is delighted to report that, in addition to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, there are "other reasons, and those neither few or weak, "by which the divine authorship of the Bible is "not only maintained in the minds of the pious, but also completely vindicated against the subtleties and calumniators ..." (I.viii.13). That is to say, his objection to rational demonstrations and arguments is contextual: they cannot convince unbelievers or produce faith in the divine authorship of the Bible unless the Holy Spirit "places its authority beyond all controversy" (I.viii.13). At the same time, he is perfectly willing—indeed, eager—to grant that human testimonies in the form of rational demonstrations and arguments are not useless "if they follow that first and principle proof, as secondary aids to our imbecility" (I.viii.13). In short, while not the

³² pp. 81f. In this chapter Calvin asserts that Scripture is confirmed as divine on the basis of its wisdom, antiquity, recorded miracles, prophecy, simplicity, and authoritative nature.

³³ *Institutes* (I.vii.4), p. 78.

³⁴ *Institutes* (I.vii.4), p. 78.

source of the believer's confidence in the divine authorship of the Bible, they may nevertheless serve as *confirmations* of it. Although they cannot produce faith independently of the necessarily efficacious agency of the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with it they can make important contributions and are by no means to be disparaged as superfluous.³⁵

According to John Beversluis, Calvin is concerned with presenting how a believer knows God not in a propositional or theoretical sense, but in a personal way. Given that this is the kind of knowledge with which Calvin is concerned, some approaches will be ruled out as inappropriate.

Knowing God involves loving God. The trouble with natural theology is not that it is "foundationalist" and bases belief in God on argument and evidence, but rather that the knowledge of God which it yields is purely theoretical—highly abstract, grievously incomplete, emotionally sterile, and behaviorally inefficacious. Such knowledge cannot touch the heart. Nor can it elicit repentance and love.

... According to Calvin and traditional Reformed theologians generally, the problem of unbelief is not a problem of the intellect, i.e., a theoretical problem centering upon questions of proof and/or evidence; it is a problem of the will signaling a refusal to acknowledge what one believes—indeed, cannot help believing—but wickedly suppresses.

To my knowledge, Calvin nowhere objects to proofs for God's existence as such. ... The fact that one should not base one's faith on rational demonstrations and arguments does not preclude their having other uses.³⁶

How might the Reformed epistemologist respond to Calvin's presumed appeal to evidence and argument? At the very least it should warrant theological pause—for if the patriarch of Reformed thinking be in disagreement with their own position they are hard-pressed to continue maintaining that their position is in fact Reformed.

But I do not see how, even if Calvin *does* offer proofs, this discounts the approach of Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and others like them. It may be that Calvin himself vacillates as to the efficacy of proofs and evidence. At times Calvin stresses the sole adequacy of

³⁵ John Beversluis, "Reforming the 'Reformed' Objection to Natural Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 12.2 (April 1995): 197-198.

³⁶ p. 199.

the *sensus divinitatis*; at other points he does appear to offer arguments for the existence of God. At some points he boldly asserts that it is only the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit that confirms Scripture as authoritative; in others he appears to appeal to evidence such as miracles and prophecy. Consider, for example, the following passages in his *Institutes*:

Unless this certainty [the Holy Spirit's confirmation of the Scripture's own self-authentication], higher and stronger than any human judgment, be present, it will be vain to fortify the authority of Scripture by arguments, to establish it by common agreement of the church, or to confirm it with other helps. For unless this foundation is laid, its authority will always remain in doubt. Conversely, one we have embraced it devoutly as its dignity deserves, and have recognized it to be above the common sort of things, those arguments—not strong enough before to engraft and fix the certainty of Scripture in our minds—become very useful aids.³⁷

From the foregoing it is difficult to see the purposes of the numerous proofs for the divine nature of Scripture. Presumably, to those that are not persuaded by the Spirit the arguments are wholly unpersuasive. To those that are convinced of Scripture's authenticity by the Spirit and the Scripture's own authenticity the arguments are wholly unnecessary. So why does Calvin make use of them? The retort is "for confirmation for the believer." But where Calvin addresses the confirmatory evidence he appears to be more interested in their impact on the unbeliever (to whom such arguments presumably carry no weight). Appealing to simplicity, authority, and heavenly character of the New Testament, Calvin says the following:

Let all those sharp-nosed faultfinders—whose highest desire to drive the reverence for Scripture from their own and others' hearts—come into the open. Let them read John's Gospel: whether they want to or not, there they shall find a thousand sayings to arouse, at least, their dull minds—nay, I should rather say to burn a dreadful brand upon their consciences for the restraint of their mockery.³⁸

³⁷ I.viii.1; pp. 81-82.

³⁸ I.viii.11; p. 91.

Two responses can be given to those who would claim that this passage is referring to the Scripture's self-authentication and therefore is not, strictly speaking, a proof of its credibility. First, the claim is not made within the context of self-authentication. Calvin discusses the appropriate grounding of Scripture in Chapter 7. Here he appeals to the work of the Holy Spirit and the self-authentication of Scripture. The preceding remarks of Calvin are addressed in Chapter 8, whose heading reads "So Far as Human Reason Goes, Sufficiently Firm Proofs Are at Hand to Establish the Credibility of Scripture."³⁹ The statement in section 11 of this chapter should therefore be taken not as immediately-held belief but as mediated.

Second, even *if* this passage is speaking of an immediately-held belief, it is clear that other passages are not. Consider the cosmological argument offered by Calvin. There are three interesting elements to this proof. First, that he even offers it at all. If God is known by means of the *sensus divinitatis* such a proof is unnecessary—even as a confirmation. Second, Calvin offers this argument as a proof to believer and non-believer alike.⁴⁰ It is, then, not simply a confirmation for the believer—it serves as proof for the unbeliever. But perhaps there is a way out for Reformed thinkers. Perhaps they can claim that the argument is a form of *sensus divinitatis* and this is why it is accessible to all and is no proof or argument. Here one could argue similarly to Plantinga by claiming that one does not form a rigorous Thomistic argument for God's existence on the basis of the existence of the world. Rather, upon merely being confronted with the world's existence one immediately

³⁹ p. 81.

⁴⁰ Calvin states that "... this way of seeking God is common both to strangers and to those of his household ..." (I.v.6; p. 59.)

concludes God exists. But such an interpretation of Calvin will not do, for, and this is our third point, Calvin's argument here is clearly not immediate knowledge: he is presenting an argument. It is helpful to visit the passage again:

Now I have only wanted to touch upon the fact that this way of seeking God is common both to strangers and to those of his household, if they trace the outlines that above and below sketch a living likeness of him. This very might leads us to ponder his eternity; for he from whom all things draw their origin must be eternal and have beginning from himself. Furthermore, if the cause is sought by which he was led once to create all these things, and is now moved to preserve them, we shall find that it is his goodness alone.⁴¹

I think that it is clear that, regardless of whether or not Calvin is arguing soundly or even gives us an argument, he is trying to do so. Furthermore, even if Calvin is not attempting to present his readers with a proof for God's existence, he is trying to provide evidence for God's nature. Irrespective of the limitations in his reasoning Calvin believes such knowledge is, or can be, mediately held.

But, again, this does not necessitate the abandonment of Reformed epistemology. There is room for interpretation with regard to Calvin. Perhaps he was inconsistent in his writings. Or perhaps he did allow a role for evidence and proof. Plantinga could admit this without rejecting his own appeal to proper basicity. For, even if human reason can play a role for Calvin, it is an *inferior* one. Time and time again Calvin appeals to the *sensus divinitatis*, the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, and the self-attestation of Scripture to be sufficient to ground religious conviction. Human reason by itself is limited. It is not necessary and at best yields confirmation of what is already known with certainty and conviction.

⁴¹ I.v.6; p. 59.

Beyond this, Reformed epistemology is capable of existing as an autonomous system independently of Reformed thinking. The most that follows, then, even if one grants that Plantinga and others have misunderstood Calvin, is a change of name. The "Reformed" adjective is dropped and we are left with "Plantingian Epistemology" or an additional "Reformed" is added—resulting in "Reformed Reformed Epistemology." Either way the approach remains viable.

By way of summary, then, I do not think that the claim that Reformed epistemologists misinterpret Calvin is a serious objection. First, because there appears to be room for alternative readings of Calvin. Second, even if he does allow a greater role for evidence, his emphasis on the *sensus divinitatis* (the basis for Plantinga's claim that belief in God is properly basic) remains central. Third, even if Reformed epistemology is not truly Reformed, though I believe that it is, the epistemic theory is capable of existing independently of any theological or Biblical grounding.

2. DIRECT OBJECTIONS

A third category of surmountable objections applies to Reformed epistemology generally. In addition to raising difficulties with the interpretation of Christian philosophers and theologians, Reformed epistemologists have been chided for the view that belief in God is a properly basic belief. At this point, my goal is merely to address those objections that I consider surmountable. Many of the objections that have been raised against the system are due to misunderstandings or are limited in impact. Many of these objections are charges that have also been historically raised against the approaches of James and Van Til. Since these previously discussed thinkers are also open to some of the same difficulties, their responses and retorts can serve

to mirror and bolster the similar responses given by the Reformed epistemologist.

a. Belief in God is Not Properly Basic

Perhaps the foremost objection that requires a response is the claim that, even according to Reformed epistemology, belief in God is not a basic belief. It is not the existence of God that is immediately held, it is the supposed experience of God that is basic. George Mavrodes, who considers himself a Reformed thinker, was one of the first to raise this objection. "Plantinga ... sometimes argues that the belief that God exists is properly basic, and that it will in fact be basic in the cognitive system of any mature and well-instructed believer. But at other times, or in other moods, he suggests that this belief is not basic but derived, and that the theist's really basic beliefs are something like *God made the world*, or *God helped me when I was in trouble*, or *God speaks to me when I read the Bible*, or something of the sort."⁴²

At first glance this objection may appear a serious threat to Reformed epistemology. Time and time again proponents of the position maintain that belief in the existence of God is appropriately foundational. Yet the reasons given do not directly support the claim. Plantinga's own examples bear out this point:

Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I have done*. Upon confession and repentance I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgives me for what I have done*. A person in grave danger may turn to God, asking for his protection and help; and of course he or she then has the belief that God is indeed able to hear and help if he sees fit. When life is sweet and satisfying, a spontaneous sense of gratitude may well up within the soul; someone in this condition may thank and praise the Lord for his goodness, and will of course have the accompanying belief that indeed the Lord is to be thanked and praised.⁴³

⁴² "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," p. 203.

⁴³ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 80.

In none of the preceding is one directly affirming the proposition "God exists." Hence, even for the Reformed thinker the belief is not basic, let alone *properly* basic. Strictly speaking, the proposition "God exists" is not normally held immediately. Rather, it is mediate-held on the basis of, and from, such propositions as "God forgives me," "God loves me," "God made all of this," etc. But Plantinga can, and has, granted this, without abandoning his view. Certainly it is confusing, and strictly speaking incorrect, to continue affirming that belief in God is *properly* basic when in fact it is not. But this poses no serious threat to the approach. Plantinga acknowledges that "It is not the relatively high-level and general proposition *God exists* that is *properly* basic, but instead propositions detailing some of his attributes or actions."⁴⁴

How can Plantinga make such an admission on the one hand while continuing to maintain that belief in God is foundational? By appealing to the similar status of other foundational beliefs. General perceptual beliefs and memory beliefs are held on the basis of more specific instances. For example, the claim "There are trees" and "The world has existed for more than five minutes," each not basic, are entailed by propositions like "I see a tree" or "I had breakfast more than an hour ago."⁴⁵ Since we are epistemically within our rights

⁴⁴ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 81.

⁴⁵ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 81, 82; Plantinga goes on to claim that the latter propositions self-evidently and immediately entail the former propositions. I find this at worst a problematic assertion and, at best, a bit odd. Given his understanding of immediately and self-evidently held propositions it is difficult to see how they would be entailed by some other proposition. For if they are held on the basis of others then they are neither self-evident nor immediately-held. If they are both (can be justified mediate or immediately) then this would certainly undercut Plantinga's rejection of the use of evidence and natural theology as legitimate grounds for belief in God. As an interesting aside, it is just such an approach (claiming some self-evident, immediately-held beliefs can be justified, or at least modified, mediate) that I propose in chapter four of this work.

in affirming the former as properly basic on the basis of the latter, then the theist is also within his rights in claiming belief in God is properly basic. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Belief in God, though strictly speaking not properly basic, is in the same boat as all other beliefs considered as such. One cannot raise an objection against the former without also raising it against the latter. Though the criticism of Reformed epistemologists in this regard is not without merit, it in no way necessitates a rejection of their approach. At the very least, it reminds us to be clear as to the meaning of terms and phrases. At a deeper level, however, it suggests that a closer analysis of the relationship between mediating experiences and beliefs about objects (whether sensory or religious) is necessary.⁴⁶

b. Fideistic

A more popular criticism leveled against Reformed epistemology is that it is fideistic. In order to understand what is meant by this criticism it will be helpful to understand fideism.⁴⁷ For purposes of this work I will define fideism as "the reliance on faith rather than reason in matters of religious belief."⁴⁸ Such reliance can come in either one of two forms: moderate or extreme.

In moderate fideism the objects of faith are said to be beyond reason. Faith and reason are not incompatible, reason is simply limited in what it can ground or reveal. In this context, when one assents to a specific proposition of faith one is relying on faith for grounds and not reason. Faith and reason are not contrary to one

⁴⁶ Since such an inquiry is not critical at this juncture, this issue will be addressed later.

⁴⁷ What follows is largely my analysis of Kreeft and Tacelli's *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* pp. 29-38, Craig's *Reasonable Faith* p. 36, and Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God" pp. 87-91.

⁴⁸ Similar definitions can be found in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1984)

another—faith does not affirm X while reason affirms $\sim$ X. If, in moderate fideism, the relationship between the objects and faith and the scope of reason were represented with circles, the two circles would overlap but not completely. Areas of overlap would constitute issues that reason could ground; remaining objects of faith could best be described as nonrational. The objects of faith are not irrational, (contrary to reason) nor are they, strictly speaking, rational (conforming to reason). In these areas an individual must rely on faith rather than reason; hence it is a form of fideism—moderate.

In extreme fideism the objects of faith are contrary to reason. In this context faith and reason are incompatible. They represent mutually exclusive contradictories. Faith affirms X while reason affirms $\sim$ X. If circles were utilized to represent this perspective no overlap would be possible. This is obviously a type of fideism. I am not merely relying on faith rather than reason when the objections of faith go beyond what reason can justify. I am relying on faith in *all* matters of religious belief—in spite of, or in contradiction to, what reason affirms.

Historically speaking, extreme fideism appears to be the less popular of the two forms of fideism. In Christian circles most philosophers and theologians (e.g. Augustine, Aquinas, etc.) have affirmed some form of moderate fideism. According to these thinkers, while many proofs and evidences can be given for Christian truth-claims, it is certainly not the case that all objects of faith are revealable by reason.⁴⁹ For if this were true, there would be no need for faith even though it is said to play a critical role in Christian

and in Plantinga's "Reason and Belief in God," p. 87.

⁴⁹ Here I am using "reason" in its broadest possible sense. Although referring primarily to philosophical argumentation it would also include empirical evidence such as appeals to historical, geological, or archaeological research.

religious belief. There are specific Christian propositions, then, that lie outside the bounds of what reason can ground—either because their supposed confirmation stands outside the bounds of reason or religious conviction requires a certainty that reason cannot supply.

Extreme fideists, though present in history, appear to be a rare breed. Indeed, it is questionable whether or not such thinkers have ever really existed. For it is one thing to espouse the view that faith and reason are mutually exclusive and yet another to remain consistent with that view. Individuals who are classically referenced as extreme fideists would include Tertullian and Kierkegaard.⁵⁰ Tertullian, with his "I believe because it is absurd," and Kierkegaard's labeling of core Christian doctrines (like the trinity and the incarnation) as "absurdities" are illustrative of this approach.

When atheists or even fellow Christians raise the charge of fideism against Reformed epistemology I take it that they are claiming it is an extreme form of fideism. Belief in God is therefore irrational and contrary to reason. Interestingly, the same objection has been raised against both James and Van Til. For James, the intellectual nature (reason) does not play the final, decisive role in the decision-making process—it is primarily the passional (faith) that guides a person. Presuppositionalism is also branded as fideistic, and this charge comes largely from fellow believers. In their classic texts in opposition to presuppositionalism, *Classical Apologetics*,

⁵⁰ Again, even with these two individuals it is debatable whether their positions were truly fideistic in the extreme form. Even if they would assent to such a label I would consider it a simple matter to demonstrate that they did not, and could not, consistently live in this manner. For example, since Kierkegaard undoubtedly considered non-Christian approaches as faulty he inconsistently rejected their own appeals to fideism. Furthermore, he himself appears to give a reason, albeit a practical one, for believing in God in his discussion of life's three stages: life without God is one of despair and

Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley assert "we are aware that Van Til and others deny that they are fideistic, but while we honor their sincerity, we will try to prove their self-estimate wrong."⁵¹ Sproul and others justify their labeling of presuppositionalism along the following lines:

If the presuppositionalist offers any reason, he ceases to be a presuppositionalist. Bahnsen is too consistent to do that. But a faith in Scripture, or in anything for that matter, that does not rest on reasons, is fideism. Thus, if Van Til or Bahnsen deny that their faith in Scripture is fideistic they will be denying their presuppositionalism. If they admit it, they admit fideism. In short, presuppositionalism is a form of fideism, and this theory cannot be denied without denying presuppositionalism.⁵²

If charges of extreme fideism against any of these views is correct I believe this would be a serious objection. For extreme fideism, in addition to admitting irrationality, entails several troublesome consequences, such that belief is groundless or that any belief is justified.⁵³ But I do not think that Reformed epistemology is an extreme form of fideism. Rather, it is a moderate form of fideism. Moderate fideism is not a troublesome position. Most other religious thinkers also embrace it and even non-theists affirm beliefs held along similar lines. If the Reformed thinker can therefore demonstrate his system is a moderate form of fideism, the charge of fideism, in the extreme sense, is surmountable. This is precisely the position taken. According to Plantinga, "... the Reformed epistemologist need not be an extreme fideist. His views on the proper basicity of belief in God surely do not commit him to thinking that faith and reason conflict."⁵⁴ The Reformed theist is not an extreme fideist because reason plays a role. Reason is not

hopelessness.

⁵¹ p. 184.

⁵² p. 309.

⁵³ These are objections that will be independently evaluated later.

⁵⁴ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 87-88.

adversarial to religious belief—rather, to use Luther's term, reason serves a *ministerial* role in religious belief. Belief in God is rational precisely because it is an appropriately foundational belief.

Of course the nontheist may disagree; he may deny that the existence of God is part of the deliverances of reason. A former professor of mine for whom I had and have enormous respect once said that theists and nontheists have different conceptions of reason. At the time I did not know what he meant, but now I think I do. On the Reformed view I have been urging, the deliverances of reason include the existence of God just as much as perceptual beliefs, self-evident truths, memory truths, and the like. It is not that theist and nontheist agree as to what reason delivers, the theist then going on to accept the existence of God by faith; there is, instead, disagreement in the first place as to what are the deliverances of reason. But then the Reformed epistemologist is no more a fideist with respect to belief in God than is, for example, Thomas Aquinas.⁵⁵

If the moderate fideist, herself a believer, continues to attack Reformed epistemology, she is in this sense attacking her own position. Both are in agreement as to the relationship between the objects of faith and reason. To the atheist who now thinks he can raise objections to all forms of fideism the Reformed epistemologist need merely point out that the atheist is also a fideist in regard to many non-religious issues. Many of Reid's first principles of common-sense serve as the basis for rational thought and therefore cannot, without begging the question, be utilized in grounding themselves. In this sense they are nonrational beliefs—neither rational, in the strict sense of the word, nor irrational. Although they are not supportable or based upon reasons, since they are held immediately, to reject them would itself be absurd. Though not rational, their denial is irrational.

Of course an objector could always reply that making belief in God properly basic does not necessarily place it on a firmer foundation.⁵⁶ But I do not see how this damages Reformed epistemology

⁵⁵ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 90.

⁵⁶ Cf. Russman, "'Reformed' Epistemology" p. 197 and Mavrodes,

in a serious way. Plantinga himself acknowledges that all beliefs, whether they be held immediately or mediately, basic or nonbasic, differ as to degree of strength. He even goes so far as to claim that some nonbasic beliefs are held more firmly than others taken as basic. Perhaps the most surprising admission is that "... a belief can easily change status from nonbasic to basic and vice versa. Now the proposition that $21 \times 21 = 441$ is not basic for me; I accept it on the basis of the belief that I have just calculated it, and that is how it came out. Later, however, I may remember that $21 \times 21 = 441$ and forget that I calculated it. In that case I simply remember it and no longer believe it on the basis of other beliefs; it will be basic for me."⁵⁷ I believe that Plantinga's claims here are symptomatic of a fundamental misunderstanding and misapplication of Reid's epistemology. As such, I will analyze these sorts of statements under the auspices of the "Serious Objections" section in this chapter. Presently, it is enough to point out that Plantinga is willing to admit that different beliefs, even those that are basic, are held with different degrees of firmness and even that beliefs may vacillate between being basic or nonbasic, without this in any way impugning his approach.

A final retort possibly proffered by an opponent to Reformed epistemology would be that a properly basic belief in God may not be true. Even if such a belief is an appropriately foundational belief there is no way to substantiate its truthfulness. Again, Plantinga admits the validity of such a counter but points out that other foundational beliefs suffer the same fate. To the question 'How do we know a belief in God as properly basic is true?' Plantinga asserts

"Jerusalem and Athens Revisited" pp. 214ff.

⁵⁷ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 50-51.

that

You have to think about that in the context of the same question with respect to perception or memory or other minds. Fundamentally, in these cases it is a matter of trusting one's cognitive faculties, I guess. It seems true. One's inclined to believe in other minds, one's inclined to believe in the past, one's inclined to believe in immaterial objects and many of us are also under certain circumstances inclined to believe in God. I don't know if there's any way of getting outside of our faculties in these cases and sort of checking the matter independently.⁵⁸

Again, the objection is valid in only a limited way. An individual can attack Plantinga's system at this point only at the cost of damaging his own. All foundational beliefs are open to this criticism. The means by which Plantinga responds to this criticism is by pointing out that belief in God is not a groundless belief. Simply because the belief is properly basic and is therefore held immediately does not entail that it is a groundless belief. All foundational beliefs, though appropriately deemed basic, have grounds.

If I see someone displaying typical pain behavior, I take it that he or she is in pain. Again, I do not take the displayed behavior as evidence for that belief; I do not infer that belief from others I hold; I do not accept it on the basis of other beliefs. ... The same holds for memory beliefs. ...

In each of these cases a belief is taken as basic, and in each case properly taken as basic. In each case there is some circumstance or condition that confers justification; there is a circumstance that serves as the *ground* of justification.⁵⁹

Plantinga identifies proper function with the grounds for properly basic beliefs. Applied to the issue of memory, he asks his reader to:

Suppose I know that my memory is unreliable; it often plays me tricks. In particular, when I seem to remember having breakfast, then, more often than not, I have not had breakfast. Under these conditions I am not justified in taking it as basic that I had breakfast, even though I seem to remember that I did.

So being appropriately appeared to, in the perceptual case, is not sufficient for justification; some further condition—a condition hard to state in detail—is clearly

⁵⁸ "An Interview with Professor Alvin Plantinga" by Roy Varghese, Executive Editor of *Truth Journal*, p. 1 of 4, <http://www.leaderu.com/truth/3truth06.html>.

⁵⁹ Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 79.

necessary. The central point here, however, is that a belief is properly basic only in certain conditions; these conditions are, we might say, the ground of its justification and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself. In this sense basic beliefs are not, or are not necessarily, *groundless* beliefs.⁶⁰

It is then asserted that all of this is analogous to the way in which the Reformed thinker, following Calvin, grounds the properly basic belief in God. Given the correct conditions, upon viewing an impressive landscape, reading the Bible, or singing a hymn in church, an individual has the theistic belief triggered. The belief is formed immediately (again, in the epistemic and not a temporal sense). In viewing the impressive landscape one is not appealing to some cosmological or teleological argument for God's existence. The perception does not serve as a premise in some *a posteriori* argument. Rather, it triggers what Calvin referred to as the *sensus divinitatis*.

I believe that there is something to be said for Frame's assertion that the Reformed epistemologists' distinction between evidence, which they reject, and grounds, which they affirm, is tenuous at best.

Plantinga and Wolterstorff seem to think that there is an important difference between accepting the deliverances of our natural dispositions and accepting conclusions on the basis of argument. In the case of perceptual knowledge, they argue, it is not that our perceptual experience implies or renders probable the existence of physical objects, but rather that we have a natural disposition to believe in such objects when confronted with such experience. And the same is true, they argue, for Christian belief. But what is an argument if it is not an attempt to put into words the deliverances of such natural dispositions? ... Responding to evidence is a natural disposition, and evidence refers to data that engages that natural disposition.⁶¹

While the belief itself is not held on the basis of others, its grounding may turn on the existence of evidence. Although the Reformed thinker need not appeal to evidence for belief in God

⁶⁰ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 80.

⁶¹ *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p. 394.

directly, we might demand of him that he provide evidence for the notion that his *disposition which grounds that belief* is functioning properly.

c. Religious And Perceptual Experience Are Not Analogous

Since many responses to purported objections to Reformed epistemology appear to hinge upon the similarities between religious and perceptual experience, and since the Reformed epistemologist himself appears to justify the claim that belief in God is properly basic upon such similarities, it is understandable that many have attempted to discredit this linking. If it can be shown that the two practices are dissimilar then, so the argument goes, even if beliefs associated with perceptual practice are properly basic, that does not help make it plausible to suppose that religious beliefs are. It is therefore incumbent upon us to examine three central objections to religious experience as grounds for belief in God: 1) the lack of a criterion for falsifiability; 2) the possibility of alternative explanations; and 3) its lack of parallel to perceptual practice.⁶²

1.) Falsifiability

Antony Flew is the individual most often associated with claiming that belief in God is not falsifiable. His linking of belief in God with the parable of the Invisible Gardener has become a classic. According to Flew and others, if a belief or theory is not possibly falsifiable it is a cognitively meaningless theory. In effect, if it is impossible for me to even conceive of some piece of evidence that would disconfirm any proposition then that belief is at the same epistemic level of justification as beliefs in fairies, elves, and invisible gardeners. Said claims are the irrational beliefs of madmen. Flew's approach can perhaps best be viewed as a

⁶² Each is discussed in detail by Alston in his "Christian Experience

new twist on the old verifiability criterion. As opposed to claiming belief in God is cognitively meaningless since it is neither an analytic proposition nor confirmable by appealing to experience, Flew is asserting belief in God is cognitively meaningless since there is no way, even in principle, for falsifying the belief. For every possible objection raised against the belief the theist responds with a qualification until, finally, theistic belief dies the death of a thousand qualifications.

I examined this type of objection to theistic belief in chapter one when I discussed the Reformed epistemologist's view of natural theology, so this objection is not new to us. Furthermore, I believe that the family of responses typically given to this objection are adequate in addressing the supposed problem. As I stated earlier, criteria for falsifiability can be, and have been, offered for religious belief and experience. Additionally, the falsifiability criterion, since in reality a form of the verifiability criterion, falls prey to many of the same objections, foremost of which is the inability to pass its own test: it is self-referentially absurd. Add to this the fact that many other beliefs do not pass some forms of the falsifiability test.

Consider unrestricted existential generalizations like "There are unicorns (somewhere, at some time)." These too are not susceptible of decisive empirical disconfirmation. No matter how long and how hard we look, without finding any traces of past, present, or future unicorns, it is always possible that there are, have been, or will be some unicorns that have escaped our notice. We may become tired of looking and conclude that the possibility can be safely neglected, as far as our corner of the universe is concerned, but that does not amount to decisive disconfirmation.⁶³

Falsifiability, therefore, is an inadequate and self-contradictory criterion that no belief should be required to pass to

and Christian Belief," pp. 105-108, 121-130.

⁶³ Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 106.

be labeled "meaningful." But even if we are wrong in our assessment, it appears possible for the theist to provide grounds which would, in principle, falsify her position.

2.) Alternative Explanations

Appeals to alternative explanations would include the psychological (like that of Freud), sociological (like that of Marx), or some naturalistic explanation for the experience. Here the Reformed epistemologist takes a nontraditional route of response. The typical believer in God counters that the theistic explanation of the experience is superior to all alternatives or is more adequate—has better explanatory power. Alston asserts that this approach acknowledges that believers do not experience God directly, so he opts for an approach that does. He claims, "I shall resist the bifurcation of Christian experience into psychological datum and theological explanation and defend the original claim that it is God Himself, or, if you like, some activity or aspect of God, that is directly presented or given to our experience in these transactions."⁶⁴ Such would be the response expected of a thorough-going Reformed epistemologist. Conceiving experience and belief in God in this fashion safeguards the belief from the typical objections raised against religious experience. In effect, Alston is lifting theistic belief and experience out of the muck and mire of appealing to evidence by placing it on the shelf of perceptual practice. In the same way that perceptual practice is appropriately foundational, so is theistic practice, or, within Alston's framework, "Christian practice."

⁶⁴ "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 107.

3.) Lack of Parallel

It is therefore all the more incumbent upon him to reply to those who claim that the two are disparate practices. The charge of dissimilarity is not raised solely by the atheist; the strongest objections come from within the theistic camp.⁶⁵ Alston acknowledges the existence of possible differences and even provides his reader with what he considers the core ways in which theistic practice is said to differ from perceptual practice:

1. Within ... [perceptual practice] ... there are standard ways of checking the accuracy of any particular perceptual belief. If, by looking at a cup, I form the belief that there is coffee in it, I can check this belief for accuracy by smelling or tasting the contents; I can get other observers to look at it, smell it, or taste it; I can run chemical tests on it and get other people to do so.
2. By engaging in ... [perceptual practice] ... we can discover regularities in the behavior of objects putatively observed, and on this basis we can, to a certain extent, effectively predict the course of events.
3. Capacity for ... [perceptual practice] ..., and practice of it, is found universally among normal adult human beings.
4. All normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience.⁶⁶

According to Alston the first is in reality contingent upon the second, and so he links them. He then goes on to admit their validity: "Religious experience does not put us in a position to make predictions about the divine, despite the persistent claims of apocalyptic groups. ... Hence we are *not* in a position to devise checking procedures, to specify what experiences some other subject would have under certain conditions if what the first subject reported

⁶⁵ Cf. Stewart C. Goetz, "Belief in God Is Not Properly Basic" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 168-177 and Dennis McInerny's "Some Considerations Concerning Perceptual Practice and Christian Practice," in *Thomistic Papers IV*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy (Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988), pp. 101-127.

⁶⁶ "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 121.

of God is correct."⁶⁷ Likewise, with respect to point number three, Christian practice is certainly not universally undertaken like perceptual practice. Many do not engage in religious practice at all, and of those that do, their awareness of God is "elusive" and "subject to doubt." Finally, Alston also admits that the objectification of religious experience differs wildly; depending upon religious tradition.⁶⁸ He therefore admits marked differences in the two practices. But Alston questions how this in any way impugns the reliability of Christian religious experience. "Since ... [perceptual practice] ... possess these virtues and ... [Christian practice] ... do not, the former is, to that extent and in that way, superior from a cognitive point of view. But granting all this, why should we suppose that the lack of these features indicates unreliability?"⁶⁹

Those who affirm the reliability of perceptual practice but not theistic practice would most likely respond by stating that the fact that the former possesses these four characteristics demonstrates its reliability. Since the latter does not possess them it is unreliable. But there are two problems with this kind of reasoning. First, the four characteristics of perceptual practice do not render it reliable.

Our only access to these features is through ... [perceptual practice] ... itself. How do we know that ... [perceptual practice] ... puts us in a position to make accurate predictions? More specifically, how do we know that the predictions it enables us to make are often correct? ... Hence if we tried to take these features as a reason for judging ... [perceptual practice] ... to be reliable, we would be involved in vicious circularity. We would be accepting ... [perceptual practice] ... as reliable in order to obtain reasons for accepting it as reliable.⁷⁰

Second, theistic practice can be deemed reliable even in the absence of the four features:

⁶⁷ "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 122.

⁶⁸ "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 122-123.

⁶⁹ "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 124.

⁷⁰ "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 124.

Suppose, then, that (A) God is too different from created beings, too "wholly other," for us to be able to grasp any regularities in His behavior. Suppose further that (B) for the same reason we can only attain the faintest, sketchiest, and most insecure grasp of what God is like. Finally, suppose that (C) God has decreed that a human being will be aware of His presence in any clear and unmistakable fashion only when certain special and difficult conditions are satisfied. If all this is the case, then it is the reverse of surprising that ... [Christian practice] ... should lack 1-4, even if it does involve a genuine experience of God. It would lack 1-2 because of (A). It is quite understandable that it should lack 4 because of (B). ... 3 is missing because of (C).⁷¹

I find Alston's reasoning here convincing. But he appears to be beating a dead horse. The central criticism raised against theistic practice mirroring perceptual practice is not given along the lines he gives. Stewart Goetz and Dennis McInerny independently argue that theistic practice or experience differs from perceptual practice not because the former fails to meet the reliability criteria but because with the former the belief is already present and therefore the experience only confirms the belief—it does not ground it. As McInerny states,

In order to accept the reading of Christian experiences as confirmatory of how God deals with His people I must already be possessed of Christian belief. ... One must have Christian belief in the first instance, before one can have Christian experience; so, one cannot engage in ... [Christian practice] ... without a Christian belief. ... Now I do not see this to be the case with respect to ... [perceptual practice] ... The very possibility of my engaging in ... [perceptual practice] ... does not depend, as far as I can see, upon the antecedent possession of a belief of a certain kind—an epistemological belief, let us say—or of any belief whatsoever. Unlike ... [Christian practice] ..., in which there are conditions which must be met before it is put into play, there is something of the automatic about ... [perceptual practice] ...; it is put into play willy-nilly.⁷²

Alston does not appear to anticipate this objection to the linking of perceptual and theistic experience. This is why non-Reformed thinkers believe that the foregoing reveals the Achilles' heel of Reformed

⁷¹ "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 129.

⁷² pp. 107, 108; Cf. Goetz, pp. 170-175.

epistemology. Several points can be made on behalf of the Reformed epistemologist, however.

McInerny appears to be arguing along the following lines: First, a Christian must possess Christian beliefs before he is able to have a Christian experience. Second, perceptual practice does not require antecedent beliefs—rather, belief is automatic. Therefore, Christian experience does not sufficiently parallel perceptual experience. Criticisms can be raised against the two initial claims. It does not appear to be true that commitment and belief necessarily precedes experience: belief often follows as a result of experience. In numerous cases individuals have embraced Christianity due to a religious experience. The experience served as the catalyst for conversion. Whether it be the Apostle Paul or St. Augustine, the experience preceded the belief and was a subsequent reason for belief. McInerny appears to have reversed a common order of events. Even if I am mistaken about Paul or Augustine and even if I am unable to provide a conclusive example of anyone who has had an experience which precipitated belief, I do not see how this would entail McInerny's position. There appears no logical necessity for beliefs preceding experience.

Even if a general belief does come before experience, this does not imply that the beliefs formed on the basis of that experience are not basic. Often the knowledge supplements or confirms what is already known or believed, but not always. Christian and non-Christian alike can relate details of an experience that they underwent that "changed their lives" or "changed their conception of God." For the atheist who becomes a believer on the basis of such an experience, obviously belief did not precede experience. But even for the Christian the experience, since noetic, may result in a belief

about God not previously embraced—an attribute or action of God formerly unknown.

Perhaps McInerny would find the foregoing unconvincing. It may be helpful to point out that perceptual beliefs appear to be in the same epistemic boat. If McInerny desires to maintain his claim that belief precedes experience with regard to religious practice, to remain consistent he must hold that the same applies with regard to perceptual practice. My belief in the existence of a particular tree may precede my perceptual experience of that tree. But that does not entail that my experience is not automatic or immediate or independent grounds for belief. McInerny and Goetz seem to think that priority of belief in some way discounts the possibility of a subsequent experience serving as basic grounds for the belief. I simply do not see the link. I believe that the Grand Canyon exists on the basis of testimony. I have never experienced it myself. My belief precedes my experience. Yet, if I travel to Arizona and perceive the Grand Canyon directly, my belief is grounded by experience. Admittedly, the perceptual experience confirms the original belief that preceded the experience. But I do not see how this entails that the belief subsequently formed is not immediate⁷³ or held as properly basic. McInerny fails to realize (even the Reformed epistemologist is lax on this point) that a belief can be appropriately held as foundational on the basis of more than one first principle: in this case, testimony and perceptual practice.

Even if belief always preceded experience, specific experiences could serve to modify corresponding beliefs. I am fairly certain that if I ever have a chance to visit the Grand Canyon the experience will not perfectly conform to my current set of beliefs about it. The

⁷³ Or, to use McInerny's terminology, "automatic."

experience will be noetic and modify my original set of beliefs. In sum, then, contrary to McInerny's claim, belief does not always precede experience for the believer.⁷⁴ Even if it did, this is not problematic: the experience often conveys information not present in the original belief. Lastly, even granting that experience only confirms an identical original belief does not imply that the experience is not an independently immediately-held belief. This is often the case with perceptual practice which McInerny accepts.

Hence the similarities between perceptual and religious experience are substantial and any dissimilarities are inconsequential or are to be expected given the nature of religious belief. That being said, I believe that it is unnecessary to find parallels. Plantinga and Alston attempt to substantiate their claim that belief in God is properly basic or foundational by demonstrating how similar it is to other beliefs that are properly basic or foundational. Plantinga, in his book *God and Other Minds*, attempts to illustrate how belief in God is analogous to the belief in other minds. In *Faith and Rationality* he and Alston provide their readers with illustration after illustration of parallels between religious experience and perceptual experience. In each case, if the latter is appropriately foundational, so, it is reasonable to claim, is the former.

There is something to be said for this approach, for, if it is successful, it lends credence to the assertion that belief in God is properly basic. Belief in God is more like basic beliefs held immediately than mediated non-basic beliefs. The problem with this approach is that it is misguided. Plantinga's basis for claiming that belief in God is properly basic is that it is like other basic beliefs. There are two difficulties with this approach: it lends

⁷⁴ Indeed, if McInerny were consistent he would have to claim that no

itself to the objection of dissimilarity that we have been examining, and not all basic beliefs are similar. Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston need to go back and reread Reid. A cursory examination of his first principles reveals that no two are alike in kind. I would hate to think that I had to substantiate the foundational belief in the reliability of memory by appeal to ways in which it parallels other basic beliefs. If this were my approach I would fail. Now if I *could* find parallels among those beliefs held immediately this would lend credence to my assertion that the disposition in question is foundational. Such confirmation is desirable, not necessary. For most foundational beliefs, no parallels can be found. Reid discussed how first principles can be identified without appealing to similarities among them. If he had appealed solely to similarities, he would have found himself in the Cartesian camp he rejected. Arguing for first principles on the basis of similarities with other first principles would severely curtail their number. If he were to argue along these lines he would be left with the few first principles with which Descartes and company began, and end up with the identical skeptical consequences.

Rather than appeal to similarities among first principles for their identification, Reid pointed to identifying characteristics. He did not directly argue for the first principles, for, if they were in fact first principles, no argument could be given. Reid claimed that there were three advantages in identifying the first principles: all people are qualified to judge them; what contradicts them is absurd; and they are capable of indirect proof (it is possible to appeal to *ad hominem*, *ad absurdum*, universal consent, conditions of origin, and practical proofs to demonstrate their veracity). The Reformed

knowledge is acquired on the basis of perceptual experience.

thinkers' appeal to similarities between religious experience as analogous to sensory experience is therefore dangerous and unnecessary. It is dangerous because it opens the view up to a Pandora's Box of arguments of disanalogy. If the objector can point out ways in which the two experiences are dissimilar the claims of the Reformed epistemologists are weakened. At best, the claim that belief in God is properly basic is less probable; at worst, it is refuted. Seeking similarities between religious and perceptual practice is also not necessary. Even if there are no parallels between the two, this does not entail that both cannot be independently deemed foundational. If religious experience and belief elicit most or all of Reid's identifying characteristics of first principles there is no need to appeal to ways in which they mirror perceptual experience. This is not to say that identifying commonalities between the two practices is without merit. After independently establishing that belief in God is foundational, identifying parallels with other foundational beliefs, such as perceptual practice, can confirm that belief in God is basic. Any links between theistic and perceptual experience is icing on the cake: they bolster a claim already independently confirmed.

Though Alston and others can respond to those who criticize the comparison between religious and perceptual practice, I do not believe this is necessary. There is a superior method of establishing that a belief is properly basic, outlined by Reid himself: the five indirect proofs. Comparisons have merit, but only insofar as they confirm what has been previously independently established.

d. Justifies Any Belief

The assertion that the system of Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and others justifies any belief is related to the claim that Reformed epistemology is a form of fideism. If affirming God's existence is

simply a matter of belief, and evidence is not necessary and, in fact cannot be given, then presumably one would be justified in assenting to any belief. This objection was raised (perhaps unfairly) against James' approach. Plantinga acknowledges this criticism and labels it "The Great Pumpkin Objection." He states that, "according to the Reformed epistemologist certain beliefs are properly basic in certain circumstances; those same beliefs may not be properly basic in other circumstances."⁷⁵ Widening foundational beliefs to include belief in God does not entail that any and all beliefs therefore become rational. By way of analogy, rejecting the logical positivists' verifiability criterion does not entail that the claim "T'was brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymblye in the wabe" is rational.⁷⁶ If the atheist counters by claiming that the problem is that the Reformed thinker, while rejecting the criteria for proper basicity of classical foundationalism, offers no criteria of his own, Plantinga responds by asserting the objection betrays a misconception. "Must one have such a criterion before one can sensibly make any judgment—positive or negative—about proper basicity? Surely not."⁷⁷ An individual can therefore conclude our statement about toves is meaningless without some criterion of meaning. Any foundationalist must admit this, for:

What is the status of criteria for knowledge, or proper basicity, or justified belief? Typically these are universal statements. The modern foundationalist's criterion for proper basicity, for example, is doubly universal:

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

But how could one know a thing like that? What are its credentials? Clearly enough, ... [it] ... is not self-evident or just obviously true. But if it is not, how does one arrive at it? What sorts of arguments would be appropriate? Of course a foundationalist might find ... [it] ... so appealing he simply takes

⁷⁵ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 74.

⁷⁶ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 75.

⁷⁷ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 75.

it to be true, neither offering argument for it nor accepting it on the basis of other things he believes. If he does, however, his noetic structure will be self-referentially incoherent. ... On the other hand, perhaps the foundationalist will try to produce some argument for it from premises that are self-evident or incorrigible: it is exceedingly⁷⁸ hard to see, however, what such an argument might be like.

According to Plantinga, one arrives at criteria for proper basicity inductively, on the basis of a relevant set of examples that mold and shape them. Due to the importance of his claims and the fact that they will serve as the basis for later criticism, I will quote Plantinga at length:

But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree; but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible for its set of examples, not to theirs.

... If you and I start from different examples—if my set of examples includes a pair <B,C> (where B is, say, belief in God and C is some condition) and your set of examples does not include <BC>—then we may very well arrive at different criteria for proper basicity. Furthermore I cannot sensibly use my criterion to try to convince you that B is in fact properly basic in C, for you will point out, quite properly, that my criterion is based upon a set of examples that, as you see it, erroneously includes <BC> as an example of a belief and condition such that the former is properly basic in the latter. You will thus be quite within your rights in claiming that my criterion is mistaken, although of course you may concede that, given my set of examples, I followed correct procedure in arriving at it. But of course by the same token you cannot sensibly use your criterion to try to convince me that B is not, in fact, properly basic in C. ...

Of course it does not follow that there is no truth in the matter; if our criteria conflict, then at least one of them is mistaken, even if we cannot by further discussion agree as to which it is. Similarly, either I am mistaken in holding that B is properly basic in C, or you are mistaken in holding that it is not. Still further, if I am mistaken in this matter, then if I take B as basic in C—that is, if I am in C and believe B without evidential support of other beliefs—then I am irrational in so doing. Particularism does not imply *subjectivism*.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 75-76.

⁷⁹ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 77-78.

There is a relevant distinction between belief in the Great Pumpkin and belief in God. Following Calvin, Plantinga claims that there is no natural tendency to accept beliefs regarding the former while there is regarding the latter.⁸⁰ Wolterstorff echoes the comments of Plantinga and claims the rejection of classical foundationalism does not open the floodgates to irrationality.

*On all fronts foundationalism is in bad shape. It seems to me that there is nothing to do but give it up for mortally ill and learn to live in its absence. ... From this it does not follow that there is no structured reality independent of our concernings and believings—though the difficulties of foundationalism have led many to this position. Nor does it follow that we must give up truth as the goal of theoretical inquiry—though the difficulties of foundationalism have made this view particularly attractive to many. Nor does it follow that we can never know the truth—though the difficulties of foundationalism have led to a wave of agnosticism. Nor does it follow that one belief is as warranted for me as another. All that follows is that theorizing is without a foundation of indubitables.*⁸¹

Wolterstorff disavows the assertion that any belief can be deemed rational on Reformed thinking. Referring back to Locke's attack on the Enthusiasts, he reiterates that Locke's evidentialist challenge is untenable. "But that does not mean that anything goes. Rather than demanding evidence from the enthusiast, one offers him adequate reasons for the falsehood of his beliefs."⁸²

I must admit that I can make little sense of Wolterstorff's claims. What does it mean to reject evidence but affirm reasons? Wolterstorff wants to draw a distinction between the two, but no clear difference is forthcoming. Evidence can be viewed as the presentation of reasons. Whether by utilizing evidence or reasons, one is affirming a proposition by appealing to other propositions that ground or support it. The proposition is held mediately: it is not basic.

⁸⁰ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 78.

⁸¹ Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, pp. 56, 57; cf. p. 102.

⁸² "Can Belief in God Be Rational?" p. 177; cf. p. 172.

Perhaps Wolterstorff would appeal to a distinction between types of evidence. Plantinga himself appears to make a distinction in his discussion of natural theology and atheology. Arguments for the existence of God are unnecessary and border on the blasphemous whereas arguments against God's existence are deemed serious and should be countered. As I will argue later, this distinction appears capricious and arbitrary at best and wholly irrational at worst.

Reformed epistemologists can escape the charge that their approach justifies any belief—for clearly it does not. An abandonment of a criterion does not necessitate the abandonment of rationality—the two are not so inextricably linked that in rejecting one one also rejects the other. To paraphrase Plantinga, one's examples rule out some beliefs as being properly basic. Likewise, James was also able to dispel any claims of irrational justification with regard to his system.

... sad experience makes me fear that some of you may still shrink from radically saying with me, *in abstracto*, that we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will. I suspect, however, that if this is so, it is because you have got away from the abstract logical point of view altogether, and are thinking (perhaps without realizing it) of some particular religious hypothesis which for you is dead. The freedom to 'believe what we will' you apply to the case of some patent superstition; and the faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy when he said, "Faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true." I can only repeat that is misapprehension. *In concreto*, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.⁸³

It is patently false that Reformed epistemology or similar approaches encourage the justification of any belief, no matter how silly or irrational—examples and experiences limit what counts as rational. "Rational" and "irrational" are legitimate categories in Reformed epistemology and a line of demarcation can be drawn between

⁸³ *The Will to Believe*, p. 29.

them. The problem is, and this is a major objection that must be addressed, since the line of demarcation is person-relative according to Plantinga, rival claims are equally labeled rational. The serious difficulty is not that Reformed epistemology justifies any belief. It does not. The problem is that it justifies rival beliefs that are incompatible with one another.⁸⁴

B. MORE SERIOUS OBJECTIONS

1. Justifies Contradictory Alternatives

Although Reformed epistemology does not justify all beliefs, it justifies too many. That a theory is unable to adjudicate between rival claims is a limitation. That it grounds all equally is a mark of irrationality. The theory is defective and should either be scrapped or overhauled. The works of James, Van Til, and Plantinga are all open to this criticism in one way or another.

Consider William James. He admits that what defines an option as living or dead is relative depending upon the individual. If this is so, then a genuine option for one may not be for another. Referring to Pascal's discussion of masses and holy water he acknowledges that theism is not a living option, and therefore not a genuine option, for all.

It is evident that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will by Pascal is not a living option. Certainly no Turk ever took to masses and holy water on its account; and even to us Protestants these means of salvation seem such foregone impossibilities that Pascal's logic, invoked for them specifically, leaves us unmoved. As well might the Mahdi write to us, saying, "I am the Expected One whom God has created in his effulgence. You shall be infinitely happy if you confess me; otherwise you shall be cut off from the light of the sun. Weigh, then, your infinite gain if I am genuine against your finite sacrifice if I am not!" His logic would be that of Pascal; but he would vainly use it on us, for the hypothesis he offers us is dead. No tendency to act on it exists in us to any degree.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ This is also a problem inherent in the work of William James.

⁸⁵ *The Will to Believe*, p. 6.

Theism is not a genuine option to those for whom religious belief is not a living option. James' approach carries no weight. He says that "if we are to discuss the question at all, it must involve a living option. If for any of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility be true, then you need go no farther. I speak to the 'saving remnant' alone."⁸⁶ The problem is not simply that theistic belief cannot be grounded or considered rational for some. Any number of rival beliefs, religious or not, theistic or not, can presumably be considered rational. Furthermore, there are no means by which we can adjudicate between these rival claims. As long as what determines an option as living, dead, trivial, momentous, or genuine remains person-relative we are at an impasse. James' approach, like that of Plantinga, does not justify any belief. Since an option must be genuine to be decidable on passional grounds, this rules out all beliefs that are dead, trivial, or avoidable. But since opposing alternatives may be viewed as genuine options by different people numerous rival beliefs are justified.

I doubt that James would deny this. He would admit the possibility of contradictory beliefs being equally grounded. With his pragmatic conception of truth this is not a serious defect—it is to be expected. But Plantinga and company would, or at least should, feel uncomfortable with James as a bedfellow. Their foundationalism, revised though it might be, is incompatible with James' pragmatism.

It is not simply James who appears to have opened a can of worms. As a method, Van Til's presuppositionalism has been criticized as justifying a multitude of rival alternatives. This is a natural consequence of the presuppositionalist's acknowledged use of circular

⁸⁶ *The Will to Believe*, p. 26.

reasoning. Most rational individuals do all within their power to answer any charges of *petitio principii*; the presuppositionalist, on the other hand, revels in it. According to Van Til, all reasoning is circular reasoning.⁸⁷ "To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, *circular reasoning*. The starting point, the method, and the conclusions are always contained in one another."⁸⁸

The degree of seriousness with which Van Til takes his method is revealed in his discussion of God and the Bible. According to him, "The Bible must be true because it alone speaks of an absolute God. And equally true is it that we believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one."⁸⁹ Obviously one can substantiate any belief along these lines, for any writing could be deemed authoritative utilizing this method.⁹⁰

In admitting that different sets of examples ground opposing beliefs, Plantinga may have safeguarded belief in God from the Great Pumpkin objection, but he protected it at great cost. It is not simply his Christian belief that is grounded, opposing religious beliefs, and even O'Hare's atheism, are similarly justified. Even fellow Calvinists have found Plantinga's assertion that "the Christian

⁸⁷ A sentiment echoed by Plantinga.

⁸⁸ *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 118; cf. *Classical Apologetics*, p. 322.

⁸⁹ *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Vol. II of the *In Defense of Biblical Christianity* series (n.p.: n.p., 1969), p. 12; cf. *Classical Apologetics*, p. 321.

⁹⁰ Thankfully, I do not think that presuppositionalists are consistent in their thinking here. Desiring to emphasize a lack of neutral ground, which they reject, many fail to take note of common ground, which they accept. As Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley point out, when pushed for reasons presuppositionalists do not argue circularly (*Classical Apologetics*, pp. 328-329). The difficulties with strict presuppositionalism appear to stem from confusing the order of being, or ontology, with the order of knowing, or epistemology (cf. *Classical Apologetics*, pp. 215-216, 229).

community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs" a bit alarming. Commenting on this very passage Alston claims,

This strikes me as a bit hard-nosed. Certainly a philosopher must accustom himself to the persistence of fundamental disagreements. Certainly one should not renounce what seems clearly so, just because many others reject it. But perhaps we should try harder than Plantinga does to find some basis on which the conversation can continue. Even in the absence of general substantive criteria for proper basicity of the sort laid down by modern foundationalism, considerations might be found that are relevant to the question of whether propositions of a given kind, in conditions of a given kind, are properly taken as basic. No matter how convinced one feels of ones [sic] samples of proper basicity, the existence of widespread diversity on this point, the frequency with which people change their positions, and a general sense of human fallibility should lead him to investigate further the question of whether it is he or his opponent who is mistaken.⁹¹

It could be argued that Plantinga is inconsistent when he asserts it is permissible for each thinker to appeal to his own set of examples in grounding a particular belief. Recall his criticism of coherence theories of truth: that coherence was a necessary but not a sufficient condition for truth. In effect coherence theories fail to account for the relationship between one's beliefs and the world of facts.⁹² But what Plantinga gave with one hand in his criticism of coherence theories he takes back with the other in his appeal to different individuals' appealing to different examples, and arriving at different properly basic beliefs. Plantinga, too, appeals to no world of facts precisely because there is none. Each can appeal to his or her own set of examples. He is quick to point out that this only yields an affirmation of particularism and not relativism, but both face equally problematic consequences. Admittedly one does not

⁹¹ "Epistemology of Religious Belief," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), p. 301. As illustrative of Alston's point, one need look no farther than the seventh chapter of his own *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Here Alston recognizes the need to arbitrate between rival religious experiences.

⁹² This, I take it, was Plantinga's point in his rock climber illustration.

imply the other. Plantinga can maintain that "... if our criteria conflict, then at least one of them is mistaken ..." ⁹³ But if he goes on to admit that "... even if we cannot by further discussion agree as to which it is" ⁹⁴ the particularist has now joined hands with the relativist. Not that the particularist and relativist both affirm the proposition "truth is relative," but both acknowledge "truth cannot be known." On paper, perhaps, one can distinguish between Plantinga's particularist and a relativist; but for all practical purposes they lead identical lives. One may claim truth exists while the other does not, but both assert truth cannot be known. ⁹⁵ We are left in a situation similar to the coherence theorist or the postmodernist. If Plantinga's earlier criticisms were cogent, as I believe them to be, he now finds himself impaled on his own arguments.

Plantinga is open to the charge of pluralism because he has forgotten his Reid. Foundational beliefs cannot be person-relative because they are foundational and therefore universal. Hence, all individuals can and must appeal to identical beliefs or examples. Admittedly, some of these beliefs can be misinterpreted or even modified, and one can reason illogically from these beliefs—but if there are such things as principles of common sense there must be some beliefs or examples all share, explicitly or implicitly. I believe that if Reid were alive today he would place Plantinga in the ancient philosophers' camp: they all affirm the existence of too many first principles. I am not simply referring to Plantinga's claim that belief in God is properly basic—obviously Reid did not claim this was a principle of common sense. Plantinga goes much farther than this. For him, the list of basic, immediately-held first principles is

⁹³ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 78.

⁹⁴ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 78.

⁹⁵ Which, since in itself a truth-statement serves as a count against

endless. Reid, on the other hand, though his list is admittedly not exhaustive, is more reserved regarding their number. Plantinga asserts beliefs can shift between being basic and non-basic⁹⁶—foundational beliefs are person-relative. Reid would not dare to make such an assertion—particularly if their key feature is universality. Reid's first principles are largely categorical and dispositional in nature. Recall the contingent first principles since they are most relevant to our discussion. It is the reliability of sense experience, reasoning, and testimony that is foundational—not the *judgments* of sense experience, reasoning, and testimony. Plantinga appears to think it is not simply the principles that are foundational or basic but the objects or content of those principles as well. There is a correlation between disposition and content; for example, the reliability of sense experience implies the existence of an external world. But the first principles are not on the same epistemic level as the dispositions from which they spring—though Plantinga appears to believe that they are. This is because evidence and argument can, and oftentimes must, be utilized to modify these judgments or choose between them when they conflict. The use of evidence and argument illustrates that the derived judgments are not on par with the first principles where evidence and arguments are not required. Reid himself appears to allow a role for evidence and argument with respect to specific beliefs that Plantinga does not. Judgments of first principles can be corrected by reason and experience. For example, Reid points out that experience and reason play a role in modifying and correcting the judgment that other minds exist:

both.

⁹⁶ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 50-51.

It cannot be said that the judgments we form concerning life and intelligence in other beings are at first free from error. But the errors of children in this matter lie on the safe side; they are prone to attribute intelligence to things inanimate. These errors are of small consequence, *and are gradually corrected by experience and ripe judgment.*⁹⁷

Likewise, though the reliability of testimony is a first principle, experience and reason will teach a child not to be gullible. Having granted the reliability of memory, I believe it is possible for people to claim their memory is not what it used to be. Once the dispositional first principles have been ascertained the judgments derivable from them are not likewise foundational, but are open to the use of evidence and argument. To argue that one's memory is reliable is, on the level of first principles, impossible: it begs the question. But once this has been confirmed as a first principle—not by argument but by appealing to identifying characteristics—we can grant one can argue that his or her memory is good or bad without charge of circularity. We do this all the time. Indeed, we often *demand* that argument and evidence be given for judgments stemming from first principles.

By way of summary, then, Plantinga's Reformed epistemology, though it does not justify all beliefs, justifies too many. This is a serious problem for any epistemic theory, but is doubly so for Plantinga since he acknowledged a similar problem with rival coherence systems and rejected them because of it. Plantinga leaves himself open to this criticism due to a fundamental misunderstanding of Reid. The existence of a limited number of universal and objective first principles should allow one to adjudicate between rival truth claims. This is especially the case when one acknowledges that the judgments

⁹⁷ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, VI.5; p. 449, emphasis mine.

stemming from the first principles are themselves not first principles but allow for, and sometimes require, evidence and argument.

2. FAULTY USE OF EVIDENCE

The Reformed epistemologist does not rule out the use of evidence completely. Most acknowledge the utilization of evidence as defeaters of beliefs. Alston, for example, speaks of beliefs that are normatively justified in a weak sense and counts belief in God among their number. Following James' distinction, he claims such beliefs are innocent unless proven guilty.⁹⁸ Plantinga, too, though he rejects the use of natural theology to aid in grounding belief in God, deems natural atheology a serious enterprise. It is not necessary or even desirable for one to provide arguments for the existence of God, but one is obligated to counter serious arguments against the existence of God. Similarly, Wolterstorff makes a distinction between confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence. He opposes the latter and holds the former is unnecessary, leaving his reader with the distinct impression that it borders on the blasphemous. Hence, the three central figures in Reformed epistemology all share a similar attitude regarding the use of evidence and argument and the existence of God: though arguments for the belief are neither required nor desired, arguments against the belief are serious and responses must be forthcoming.

Why is this distinction made? Is it appropriate? Answers may be found in the work of another well-known Reformed epistemologist: George I. Mavrodes. Articles by Mavrodes appear prominently in the magnum opus of Reformed epistemology, *Faith and Rationality*. Mavrodes does not share the distinction between what he refers to as "positive

⁹⁸ Cf. "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 116.

and negative apologetics" that we find in Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and Alston.⁹⁹

a. Confirmatory Evidence

Mavrodes is critical of the positive versus negative apologetics distinction present in traditional Reformed epistemology and finds Wolterstorff's defense of engaging solely in the latter wholly unconvincing.¹⁰⁰

In general, the fact that a certain circumstance, event, and so on—call it "C"—activates a disposition to form and hold a certain belief, B, does not at all make C evidence for B. Some men, for example, apparently have a disposition to believe that they are wonderful entertainers, and this disposition is activated by drinking two or three cocktails. That fact, however, does not make the existence of alcohol evidence that these people are great entertainers. We need not deny either the disposition or its triggering mechanism in order to maintain that the resulting belief is groundless. In the same way, the mere fact that the design of the world naturally triggers a belief in God does not constitute that design as evidence of the existence of God. And people may resist the activation of that disposition without thereby resisting evidence.

He goes on to assert that,

No doubt there are cases in which something triggers a disposition to believe is also evidence for the corresponding belief. (In fact, we may have a general disposition to believe in accordance with evidence.) But the triggering relation and the evidential relation are not identical. Maybe the design of the world is, after all, good evidence for the existence of God. But the fact that it naturally triggers the belief does not show that it is. And perhaps Wolterstorff, given his unenthusiastic attitude toward positive apologetics, would not be much interested in trying to show that it is.¹⁰¹

With respect to belief in God, Mavrodes finds it odd that the traditional Reformed epistemologist, who claims that evidence for God's existence is not necessary since all have the *sensus divinitatis*, seemingly inconsistently deems it necessary to combat

⁹⁹ I, therefore, do not consider his approach regarding belief in God as typical and would not label him a "pure" Reformed epistemologist.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Mavrodes' "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited" wherein he analyzes and criticizes Wolterstorff's "Is Reason Enough?" *The Reformed Journal*, 31:4 (April 1981).

¹⁰¹ "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," p. 199.

objections to belief.

Why does not the Reformed apologist rather say, "All this talk about counterevidence, objections, irrationality, the problem of evil, and so on, is just a smokescreen, a mere rationalization. It is useless to argue about such things. It would be futile to produce theodicies and defenses with reference to evil, or to show that theistic belief is rational after all. These alleged objections are symptoms of a deep-seated resistance against the truth of God. What is needed is therapy, the evangelist's analogue of the psychoanalyst's couch. When the resistance is overcome, the objections will not amount to a hill of beans!"

I do not know why the Reformed thinker does not respond in this way. Whatever reason there is for thinking that "No evidence!" is a rationalization also supports the judgment that "I have objections!" is a rationalization.¹⁰²

Mavrodes goes on to claim that if negative apologetics is useful and necessary, then it is just as likely that positive apologetics is as well.

If we think that unbelief is basically a matter of resistance, then there is something plausible, as I said before, in undertaking some therapeutic procedure. But that is not the only plausible response. If we think that someone is resisting or ignoring evidence, then we might try to make that evidence still more insistent, more explicit, and so on. That, too, seems to be a plausible response. And that, of course, is what the positive apologist tries to do. He tries to find something which the unbeliever already knows and acknowledges, and to show that this acknowledged fact supports, in one way or another, the belief that God exists.¹⁰³

Mavrodes is asserting that "positive apologetics", wherein one attempts to supplement an implicit belief by making "the available evidence plainer and more explicit"¹⁰⁴ should play a role in the discussion of belief in God. I interpret Mavrodes as calling the Reformed epistemologist to consistency. If arguments against belief in God can legitimately be raised so can arguments for belief in God; if arguments are not required for belief in God why deem it necessary to refute those against belief? I find Mavrodes convincing and wholeheartedly agree that "we can retain the Reformed analysis of

¹⁰² "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," pp. 200-201.

¹⁰³ "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," p. 201.

¹⁰⁴ "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," p. 202.

unbelief without any compulsion to take up different attitudes toward the propriety or utility of positive and negative apologetics. ... suppose that negative apologetics may sometimes be appropriate and useful, we may also, without any logical difficulty, suppose the same of positive apologetics."¹⁰⁵

The case for the use of positive apologetics or confirmatory evidence can be made stronger. First, in many cases the positive-negative distinction is only apparent—a matter of perspective. Second, corroboration for the use of confirmatory evidence can be found in Reid. Third, the traditional Reformed epistemologist does refer to evidence of a specific sort.

Some arguments against a set of beliefs indirectly affirm alternative claims. With mutually exclusive disjuncts an argument against one is an argument for the other. Likewise, an argument for one serves as an indirect argument against the other. This also applies to contraries. Suppose one is not presented with two mutually exclusive contradictories but with a collection of theories to explain an event. If evidence or argument can be given against one of the theories this raises the probability of the others; if evidence can be given in support of one, this lessens the probability of the others.

Admittedly, not all responses to objections can be viewed as confirmatory evidence. This is especially true with theistic belief. Unfortunately, thinkers oftentimes view successful counters as lending support to their claims. It is not the case that a successful defense or theodicy implies that God exists. From the fact that no incompatibility is present I cannot conclude God exists. All I can claim is that God and evil are compatible; conditions are favorable for God's existence. But this is a limitation for both sides. Too

¹⁰⁵ "Jerusalem and Athens Revisited," p. 204.

often atheists incorrectly think that successful responses to claims imply their opposite. Some atheists are fond of claiming that if all known arguments for God's existence fail then God does not exist. This, too, does not follow. All that follows is that a successful argument has not been given. This does not imply that a successful argument *cannot* be given. As a matter of fact, if the Reformed epistemologist is correct, limitations in the traditional arguments should be expected. Successful rebuttals of claims do not imply their opposite.

However, that an exhaustive set of arguments for a particular position have been refuted and no other form of grounding appears tenable is a strike against the position. How much more so when the objections are successful? That the theist can provide a successful argument against atheism would serve as an argument for theism. In a like manner, if the atheist presents a sound argument against theism this is an argument for atheism. There is no sharp line of demarcation between positive and negative apologetics or confirmatory and disconfirmatory evidence. Better to view them as often two sides of the same coin. For the Reformed thinker to espouse one while rejecting the other illustrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the dual nature of evidence.

Reid himself appears to have made use of evidence and argument—even with regard to his first principles. He does not use evidence to ground these principles which are by their very nature foundational, but rather as confirmation. For example, with the existence of other minds Reid asserted that, "setting aside this natural conviction, I believe that the best reason we can give, to prove that other men are

living and intelligent, is, that their words and actions indicate like powers of understanding as we are conscious of in ourselves."¹⁰⁶

In his discussion of the reliability of testimony Reid claimed that "the wise Author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon this evidence *before we can give a reason for doing so.*"¹⁰⁷ Reid is claiming here that at some points reasons are not forthcoming whereas under differing circumstances they are. Reasons can be given, they are simply not necessary. Since some situations preclude the possibility of reasoning we should not expect them to be required.

Perhaps the clearest example of a first principle where reason and evidence are neither necessary nor required but serve as confirmation is the principle of induction.

The last principle of contingent truths I mention is, *That, in the phenomena of nature, what is to be, will probably be like to what has been similar circumstances.*

We must have this conviction as soon as we are capable of learning anything from experience; for all experience is grounded upon a belief that the future will be like the past. Take away this principle, and the experience of a hundred years makes us no wiser with regard to what is to come.

This is one of those principles which, when we grow up and observe the course of nature, we can confirm by reasoning. We perceive that Nature is governed by fixed laws, and that, if it were not so, there could be no such thing as prudence in human conduct; there would be no fitness in any means to promote an end; and what, on one occasion, promoted it, might as probably, on another occasion, obstruct it.

But the principle is necessary for us before we are able to discover it by reasoning, and therefore is made a part of our constitution, and produces its effects before the use of reason.

This principle is necessary for us before we are able to discover it by reasoning, and therefore is made a part of our constitution, and produces its effects before the use of reason.

This principle remains in all its force when we come to the use of reason; but we learn to be more cautious in the application of it. We observe more carefully the circumstances on which the past even depended, and learn to distinguish them from those which were accidentally conjoined with it. ...

I need hardly mention, that the whole fabric of natural philosophy is built upon this principle, and if it be taken away, must tumble down to the foundation. ...

¹⁰⁶ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; pp. 448-449.

¹⁰⁷ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; p. 450, emphasis mine.

This is what every man assents to, as soon as he understands it, and no man asks a reason for it. It has, therefore, the most genuine marks of a first principle. ...

... as this belief is universal among mankind, and is not grounded upon any antecedent reasoning, but upon the constitution of the mind itself, it must be acknowledged to be a first principle, in the sense in which I use that word.¹⁰⁸

Note Reid's main points. First, this truth has all the marks of a first principle: all assent to the proposition as soon as they understand it, no one asks for an argument for it, the belief is universal, and it is not grounded on reasoning but on the constitution of the mind itself. Second, although reason and experience do not ground the principle, they play an important role: together they can confirm the principle. Indeed, Reid makes the stronger claim that they can discover the principle. Additionally, reason and experience serve to modify its application. Evidence is not necessary to ground it. Its function is confirmation, discovery, and modification.

Even the Reformed epistemologists appear to admit a role for evidence in conferring warrant upon a belief.¹⁰⁹ For example, Plantinga holds that evidence is necessary for a belief to be warranted in that I need to determine whether my faculties are functioning properly: "Suppose I know that my memory is unreliable; it often plays me tricks. In particular, when I seem to remember having breakfast, then, more often than not, I have not had breakfast. Under these conditions I am not justified in taking it as basic that I had breakfast, even though I seem to remember that I did."¹¹⁰ Plantinga is arguing that evidence aids in grounding a properly basic belief—a claim not even Reid would make. Yet even here, where he acknowledges a place for evidence, he is inconsistent: he allows only that which

¹⁰⁸ *Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI.5; pp. 451, 452.

¹⁰⁹ Although, as I stated previously, I do not believe that they take the ramifications of this position seriously.

¹¹⁰ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 80.

disconfirms and not that which confirms—hopelessly attempting to make a blurred distinction clear.

b. Argument and Natural Theology

1.) Argument

What sort of an impact does this have on the legitimacy of argument and natural theology? According to Plantinga, argument is not irrelevant to a basic belief in God. Someone might assent to God's existence as properly basic and yet derive beliefs from other properly basic beliefs that are incompatible with it. Belief in God, even if held as properly basic, need not, therefore, be held dogmatically.¹¹¹ But can one hold the belief dogmatically, in spite of counterarguments and counterevidence given? Plantinga thinks not. Justification-conferring conditions confer *prima facie* justification—not *ultima facie* justification. Hence the justification can be overridden by defeaters. As an example he asserts that "my being appeared to treely gives me a *prima facie* right to take as basic the proposition *I see a tree*. But of course this right can be overridden; I might know, for example, that I suffer from the dreaded dendrological disorder, whose victims are appeared to treely only when there are no trees present. If I do know that, then I am not within my rights as taking as basic the proposition *I see a tree* when I am appeared to treely."¹¹²

I disagree. Once again I believe Plantinga has confused the first principles with the judgments which spring from them. Reid would deny that the latter have the same status or degree of certainty as the former. He would also disagree with the claim that conclusions can be validly drawn from some first principles that contradict

¹¹¹ "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 82-83.

¹¹² "Reason and Belief in God," p. 83.

others. In effect, one would be admitting that his epistemic theory is incoherent and inconsistent with itself at its very core—Plantinga has shot himself in the foot. The properly basic foundational principles of which Reid speaks are dogmatically held and justifiably so—for we cannot do otherwise. For example, to trust in our reasoning faculty is a necessity—to argue against it is to utilize reason and therefore implicitly grant its veracity.

Admittedly, those judgments which spring from the first principles are only *prima facie* justified. Sometimes I reason incorrectly and can be, and have been, shown to be wrong—but only wrong with respect to the *use* of my natural faculty, not the faculty itself. If belief in God is counted among the first principles it is immune from such attack and can therefore be held dogmatically. I legitimately can, and must, hold the first principles dogmatically. I dogmatically affirm a belief in other minds, the reliability of memory, the reliability of sense experience—if not explicitly then implicitly. They are *ultima facie* justified. I do not, and should not, affirm associated judgments dogmatically. I do not dogmatically affirm that object X has a mind, that a particular memory is true, or that I am currently experiencing a tree. Since they spring from, or are judgments of, first principles they are *prima facie* justified but can be overridden by defeaters: object X is a mannequin, 40 reliable witnesses disconfirm my memory, or I am hallucinating.

2.) Natural Theology

What does Plantinga have to say about natural theology? Given his harsh criticisms in *God and Other Minds* and *God, Freedom, and Evil* and in most of what he has to say in *Faith and Rationality* it is curious that we find a tiny paragraph where Plantinga appears to sing its praises.

In the first place, if there were good arguments for the existence of God, that would be a fact worth knowing in itself—just as it would be worth knowing (if true) that the analogical argument for other minds is successful, or that there are good arguments from self-evident and incorrigible propositions to the existence of other minds. Second, natural theology could be useful in helping someone move from unbelief to belief. The arguments are not successful from the point of classical foundationalism; probably, that is, they do not start from premises that are self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses and then proceed by argument forms that are self-evidently valid to the conclusion that God exists. Nevertheless there may be (in fact there are) people who accept propositions and argument forms out of which a theistic argument can be constructed; for these people theistic arguments can be useful as a means of moving toward what Calvin sees as the best way to believe in God: as basic.¹¹³

How is this to be harmonized with his earlier negative views of natural theology? Perhaps Plantinga changed his view. *God and Other Minds* and *God, Freedom, and Evil* were written 16 and 9 years respectively prior to "Reason and Belief in God." This mitigates charges of inconsistency; but it does not dismiss them altogether. In his preface to the 1990 edition of *God, Freedom, and Evil* he acknowledged having been too demanding of the proofs but continued to maintain that they were unsound or unconvincing. Where he had the chance to revise his analysis and examine other formulations in greater detail he failed to do so. I therefore question the seriousness of Plantinga's comments regarding the possible positive qualities of natural theology.

Consider, first, a general criticism of natural theology (an enterprise he, with the exception of our paragraph, frowns upon) that is not raised against natural atheology (an enterprise he finds legitimate). Plantinga asserts that "if my belief in God is based on argument, then if I am to be properly rational, epistemically responsible, I shall have to keep checking the philosophical journals to see whether, say, Anthony Flew has finally come up with a good

¹¹³ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 73.

objection to my favorite argument."¹¹⁴ Plantinga fails to realize that his claim cuts both ways. For, if my belief in God *can be defeated* by argument, which he acknowledges since he believes it is only *prima facie* justified and the arguments of natural atheology must be countered, then the same holds for arguments *against* the existence of God. I must keep checking the journals to see if *they* have been defeated. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander: Flew may raise an objection to my argument for God, but someone else may raise an argument against Mackie's statement of the problem of evil.

My more serious difficulty with Plantinga's discussion of natural theology is his weak portrayal of the classical arguments coupled with his unwarranted abdication of their usefulness. Perhaps this was understandable before "Reason and Belief in God," but certainly it is no longer. Consider his discussion of the cosmological argument. Even if we grant that his exposition of the Thomistic cosmological argument is accurate and that the argument is therefore unsound, this does not entail that a successful reformulation is not possible or that Aquinas himself did not present other avenues of argument which Plantinga does not address.¹¹⁵ Aquinas was presenting an argument based upon contingency—even if Plantinga can successfully argue his formulation is faulty, this does not imply that other formulations based upon contingency are not successful.

Not only are additional formulations possible, one can appeal to more than one type of cosmological argument. There is more than one way to argue from the existence of the world to the existence of God. Like Thomas Aquinas, we can appeal to the nature of the universe: that

¹¹⁴ "Reason and Belief in God," p. 67.

¹¹⁵ Consider, for example, a contemporary defense of a reformulated Thomistic cosmological argument presented by Bruce Reichenbach in his *The Cosmological Argument: A Reassessment* (Springfield, IL: Thomas,

it is contingent and therefore dependent upon a necessary being. Like William Craig, we can appeal to the age of the universe: that it had a beginning and therefore requires a cause. Or like Gottfried Leibniz, we can appeal to the reason for the universe: that only God is a sufficient reason for the world's existence.¹¹⁶ We can find numerous formulations of each of these cosmological arguments. Even if Plantinga's assessment of Aquinas' argument is accurate, this does not mean that Aquinas did not present other successful forms of the argument based upon contingency, or that other individuals have not devised successful forms based upon contingency, or that still others have not formulated successful examples of the cosmological argument not based upon contingency, such as that based on the age of the cosmos. To summarily dismiss the cosmological argument as unsuccessful after rejecting one formulation of one type of the proof is premature.

Plantinga's discussion of the teleological argument is equally troublesome. Because there are different kinds of order or design, there are different formulations of the teleological argument. To discuss one and then dismiss them all is too hasty. I doubt seriously, however, that any formulation could be bolstered to Plantinga's satisfaction, for he seems to be more concerned with what is concluded than how one arrives there. Plantinga, agreeing with Hume, believed that the argument could not determine whether the designer is one or many, corporeal or spirit, limited or unlimited. I think a formulation of the teleological argument can be bolstered to rule out some of these alternatives. For example, uniformity of order and Ockham's Razor increases the probability of one designer. But

1972).

¹¹⁶ Cf. William Lane Craig's *The Cosmological Argument from Plato to Leibniz* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980).

even if this is not possible I do not see why the teleological argument cannot be viewed as successful in a limited way. Plantinga has set the bar too high. He acknowledged this in his preface to the 1990 edition of *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Granting that the argument does not conclusively prove the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob does not entail it has no worth. If the argument is construed probabilistically and analogically one would not expect the conclusion to be necessary or the designer's exact nature exhaustively detailed. Even granting the criticisms of Hume and Plantinga, naturalistic atheism is ruled out and a belief in God, or *some* kind of god, is confirmed.

Plantinga's rejection of the ontological argument is even more problematic, for he acknowledges it is a sound argument. To many his reformulation meets the stringent criteria of classical natural theology. It clears the high bar and yet he continues to downplay its significance. Plantinga appears to present two separate reasons for rejecting the proof. First, there are the argument's intricacies and sophistication: "it is unlikely that it has played the role of in strengthening and confirming religious belief that, for example, the teleological argument has played."¹¹⁷ Second, not all will accept its main premise: that the existence of a maximally great being is possible. By means of analogy, Plantinga presents a curious argument for God's existence that is very similar to the following argument formulated by Mavrodes:

- (1a) Either nothing exists or God exists.
- (1b) Something exists.
- (1c) Therefore, God exists.¹¹⁸

Mavrodes asserts that this argument is a sound disjunctive

¹¹⁷ *God and Other Minds*, p. 26.

¹¹⁸ *Belief in God*, p. 22.

syllogism: its form is valid and its premises are true. Few, however, would find the argument convincing, since *anything* can be proved utilizing this method. Mavrodes himself outlines how this can be accomplished: "To prove any true proposition *q* choose some other true proposition *p* and use it as the second premise. For the first premise construct the proposition *not-p* or *q*. These two premises will both be true and will validly entail *q*."¹¹⁹ The difficulty is that individuals disagree as to which propositions can stand for *p*. Referring to God's existence, Mavrodes states that

Even given that the argument under discussion is in fact sound, the rule [the termination rule: "The series of challenges and replies will end when a proof is obtained whose soundness is known [sic] to the participants in the discussion."¹²⁰] does not tell us how to construct a satisfactory support for it. The participants in the discussion know that they will have to find premises that all of them know to be true and a form of argument that they all know to be valid. But the fulfilling of these requirements depends entirely on their own perseverance and ingenuity, which, like initial knowledge, varies from group to group. Consequently, the rule provides no guarantee that, even when the argument under consideration is in fact sound, any particular group will be able to reach the termination point that will convince all the participants. Any teacher presenting an introductory course in geometry faces this problem and very few of them surmount it with respect to the entire class.¹²¹

Something more than mere soundness is required. Mavrodes therefore draws a distinction between an argument that is sound and one that is cogent. An argument that is cogent is one that is sound, and known by an individual to be so. But even this is not enough for proof, since "it seems implausible and unprofitable to speak of an argument's proving its conclusion to someone who must derive his knowledge of the truth of its premises from his prior knowledge of the truth of its conclusion. For such an argument neither enables him to know a conclusion that he did not know before, nor does it provide him

¹¹⁹ *Belief in God*, p. 30.

¹²⁰ *Belief in God*, p. 27.

¹²¹ *Belief in God*, p. 28.

with any new grounds for a piece of knowledge that he may already have had. We can therefore conclude that cogent arguments are not always sufficient to prove their conclusions, even to those for whom they are cogent."¹²²

Something more is needed—the argument must be convincing. An argument is convincing for an individual if it is cogent for him and he "... knows that each of its premises is true without having to infer any of them from its conclusion or from any other statement or statements that he knows only by an inference from that conclusion."¹²³ We are therefore presented with a hierarchy of arguments. Strength increases as we progress from valid, to sound, cogent, and finally, convincing. Valid, sound, and cogent arguments are not proofs—only a convincing argument proves its conclusion.

I believe that there is something to be said for Mavrodes' claims. There are limitations with regard to logic. I do not think, however, that the situation is as grim as Mavrodes paints it to be. Not all arguments are convincing but the issue is whether they should be. I believe that cogency and convincingness are psychological and not logical concepts. Using Mavrodes' own analogy, geometry students who do not find a specific proof convincing *should*—and given enough time, review, and clarification, they likely will. Rationality, coupled with common ground and agreement, serves as a springboard for continued dialogue and learning. Pluralism with regard to belief does not imply pluralism with regard to truth. If a student remains unconvinced this says more about the student as a rational thinker than it does about the proof.

But even if the difficulty is more serious than I am willing to

¹²² *Belief in God*, p. 34.

¹²³ *Belief in God*, p. 34.

admit I do not see how this affects Plantinga's ontological argument, which is unlike Mavrodes' sound disjunctive syllogism—in both form and content. To some extent Plantinga admits this.¹²⁴ The questioned premise is not an affirmation of the conclusion in disguise; we do not have an argument that presents its conclusion in its premises, as is the case with those of Mavrodes. The central premise, that the existence of a maximally great being is possible, can be evaluated independently. Unless an argument can be presented illustrating that the concept is logically incoherent, all are justified in assenting to the proposition. If the most damaging objection that can be raised against the argument is that not all will be convinced, the proponent has nothing to fear; this says nothing about the argument and is therefore trivial and irrelevant. The same can be said of any argument. The issue is not whether an individual is convinced by an argument but whether a rational individual should be. Granted, beliefs are not always under our control. I may realize that I should be convinced by an argument and even want to believe its conclusion and yet be unable to do so. Not all will come to believe God exists on the basis of Plantinga's formulation of the ontological argument—but if it is sound they should, and so long as they withhold assent they are behaving irrationally.

In sum, then, Plantinga's analysis of natural theology is defective. First, because he inconsistently downplays its significance while affirming the legitimacy of its sister-discipline, natural atheology. Second, even if we grant his criticism of particular arguments, since he limits himself to singular formulations he does not anticipate other formulations being sound. Third, he demands too much of the classical arguments. An argument with a

¹²⁴ *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 112.

limited conclusion is not equivalent to no argument. Though not able conclusively to demonstrate the traditional conception of God, some arguments may serve to confirm this belief or rule out others, such as atheism. Fourth, he acknowledges the soundness of at least one argument yet minimizes its significance since it is not convincing to all—not realizing that any argument is open to this charge and that the criticism itself reveals more about an individual than the argument.

C. CONCLUSION

Many objections traditionally raised against Reformed epistemology are surmountable. The most likely proposed alternative to foundationalism, coherentism, is too problematic to be seriously entertained. Similarly, charges of misinterpretation of various thinkers can be met. Although Aquinas and Calvin can, and probably should, be construed differently, this does not pose a serious threat to Reformed epistemology. The system does not entail that beliefs are fideistically held in an extreme sense or that they are groundless; nor does it justify just any belief. Charges that belief in God is not, strictly speaking, properly basic can be met, and religious and perceptual experience can be shown to be analogous.

This is not to say that Reformed epistemology is not without its difficulties. Though it does not justify all beliefs it justifies too many. Misunderstanding Reid, Plantinga and others inappropriately attempt to ground the belief that our belief in God is basic by analogy with particular sorts of other basic beliefs as opposed to utilizing Reid's indirect proofs, and confuse the first principles with their corresponding judgments. Additionally, the typical Reformed epistemologist has a faulty conception of the role and use of

evidence that is inconsistent with the work of Thomas Reid. To combat these objections Reformed epistemology must itself be reformed. To confront the limitations and difficulties of the system, evidence must serve a role. It therefore becomes necessary to propose a new outline for grounding belief in God, detailing an expanded role for evidence.

CHAPTER IV

EPILOGUE

CONCLUDING SPECULATION REGARDING A LARGER ROLE FOR EVIDENCE

Despite several difficulties with Reformed epistemology, I find the overall approach persuasive. Calvinist thinkers like Plantinga and Wolterstorff have demonstrated that classical foundationalism faces internal and external objections that are insurmountable. They have not in this rejection, however, vacillated to an equally problematic extreme of post-modernism and skepticism. Their approach is one of moderation: classical foundationalism need only be broadened, not scrapped. Following Reid, they argue that the inclusion of additional foundational principles will yield a more coherent epistemic system and that belief in God is appropriately counted among these first principles.

The Reformed epistemologists are to be commended for their attempt to provide a form of non-evidential grounds for belief in God. If successful, it provides thinkers who deem the classical arguments for the existence of God with an alternate reason for belief. Additionally, as will be pointed out later, if the belief in God is a foundational belief one would actually expect the classical arguments to be limited in their persuasiveness.

Reformed epistemology has also served to shift attention to a topic in the philosophy of religion that has for too long been neglected: religious experience. Many would echo Ronald Nash who

claims "... far more people are religious believers because of religious experiences they've had than because of arguments they've heard."¹

"Thomas [Aquinas] himself seems to have experienced some kind of ecstatic realization two years before his death ... which caused him to cease writing. He said that in the face of that experience, all his words were like mere straw."²

The persuasiveness of religious experience may be due to the directness of the experience. As David Elton Trueblood points out, "the most convincing reason for believing that the moon is in the sky is not the inferential evidence concerning the existence of tides, but the direct evidence that men see it. Consequently, we should expect that thoughtful men would be more impressed by direct experience of God than by any other arguments."³ To their credit, Reformed thinkers build upon the type of religious experience with which most are familiar: the common experiences of the layperson who experiences God while on a mountaintop, in prayer, in worship, or while reading a sacred text. Traditionally, when religious experience is discussed, if at all, the focus is placed on mysticism—a form few have experienced and can comprehend.

Finally, if convincing, Reformed epistemology succeeds in demonstrating how one can have certainty in one's belief while still maintaining it is a matter of faith. If belief in the existence of God is a properly basic belief then no direct rational argument can be given; in fact, all first principles are affirmed fideistically.

As discussed in chapter three, however, the current form of Reformed epistemology faces critical objections that must be

¹ *Faith & Reason*, p. 143.

² Donald Palmer, *Looking at Philosophy: The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter*, 2nd ed. (Mountain View, California: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1994), p. 122.

³ *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 143.

addressed. On Plantinga's view, contradictory alternatives may be simultaneously affirmed. Though not a problem for a coherentist, this certainly is for a foundationalist like Plantinga—especially since he claims that this affirmation by coherentists is a reason for rejecting their view of truth. Though his view does not justify all beliefs, if it justifies mutually-exclusive beliefs it justifies too many.

Reformed thinkers also appear to be at odds with their philosophical mentor, Thomas Reid. Instead of utilizing Reid's own independent indirect tests for determining the first principles, they devote their energies to identifying parallels between sensory and religious experience. Though parallels should exist if belief in God is properly basic, depending solely upon analogy is risky since some features may differ. The Calvinists also misunderstand Reid by confusing the first principles with their corresponding judgments. Claims like "I see a tree" or "I ate breakfast" are not properly basic for Reid—though they appear to be so for the Reformed thinkers. They are not foundational because they are supported by other propositions, namely, that sense experience and memory are reliable. Judgments concerning external objects and memory are therefore *prima facie* trustworthy. Finally, several Reformers are inconsistent with their use and view of evidence and natural theology. They make a "positive" and "negative" distinction that is indefensible; they claim that challenges to theism must be met while rejecting those arguments that confirm theism.

I believe that the view of Reformed thinkers can be bolstered to confront these difficulties by expanding the role for evidence. Reformed epistemology should itself be reformed to be more in line with Reid philosophically and Calvin theologically, for both speak of a confirmatory role for evidence and argument. My critique of

Reformed epistemology is therefore a critique from within and not from without. The view need not be rejected but merely refined. The following is a proposed revision of Reformed epistemology. As such, this epilogue is more speculative than the previous three chapters. My goal in this chapter is to assist in fostering possible future research. In the following sections I will discuss, first, mitigating factors with respect to grounding belief in the existence of God. This will be followed by a discussion of independent grounds for thinking that the existence of God is a first principle, i.e. belief in the existence of God is a basic belief. Finally, an analysis of religious experience will demonstrate the need for an expanded role for evidence.

A. MITIGATING FACTORS

Our ability to know is often constrained by internal and external factors. In any act of knowing there are at least three elements or factors at work. There is the object or the thing known, the knower, and the relationship between the two. Factors in any of the three areas mitigate the possibility for knowledge and the degree to which something is known. The intelligence and capacity of the knower, the complexity of the object, and the means for knowledge all have an impact on what can be known.

Philosophers and theologians rarely address the issue of mitigating factors with respect to knowledge of God. Of those who do, the discussion rarely rises above lip-service. They affirm the difficulty of the task and then proceed as if knowledge of God is as simple a matter as coming to know a rubber ball. Though few take the notion of mitigating factors seriously, if the Judeo-Christian

conception of God is correct several issues curtail the degree to which one can have knowledge of God.⁴

1. NATURE OF THE OBJECT

The first epistemic element is the object or thing known. For the theist, this is God. God is classically described as an infinite Being with respect to His perfections. If this is true then this will affect our ability to know Him. Here terms like "mystery," "inscrutable," and "ineffable" rise to the fore. If God exists, we should expect His thoughts to be above our thoughts and His ways different from our ways.⁵ Our position would be that of Job's when questioned by God:

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt'? ... What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!"⁶

Consider the following statements by Augustine: "We can know what God is not, but we cannot know what He is"⁷; "God is more truly

⁴ Even atheists have to acknowledge this. If the greatest conceivable being whose existence they deny were to exist certain epistemic consequences would naturally follow.

⁵ Cf. Isaiah 55:8.

⁶ Job 38:4-11, 19-21. The notion that God is beyond description is not a purely Judeo-Christian one. Eastern traditions also make reference to the mysterious Ultimate Reality, whether it be the ineffable Tao or Brahman.

⁷ *De Trinitate*, c. 397 in *The World Treasury of Religious Quotations*, comp. and ed. Ralph L. Woods (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1966), p. 384. Some, like William E. Hocking, have formulated something similar: "I shall always be more certain that God is, than what He is." (*The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, 1912 in *The World Treasury*, p. 364.)

imagined than expressed, and he exists more truly than is imagined"⁸; "understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore seek not to understand that thou mayest believe, but believe that thou mayest understand"⁹; "God is not what you imagine or what you think you understand. If you understand you have failed"¹⁰; "All things can be said of God, yet is nothing worthily said of God"¹¹; "The Almighty does nothing without reason, though the frail mind of man cannot explain the reason."¹² As Voltaire has said, "God has made thee to love Him, and not to understand Him."¹³ Calvin himself goes so far as to poke fun at those who would claim to traverse the depths of God's purposes: "When a certain shameless fellow mockingly asked a pious old man what God had done before the creation of the world, the latter aptly countered that he had been building hell for the curious."¹⁴ Elsewhere Calvin claims this is why believers must cling to revelation. For "it is Satan's wisdom to tell what God is, and by doing so he will draw you into the abyss. Therefore keep to revelation and do not try to understand."¹⁵ Aquinas also affirms the inscrutability of God: "We cannot know in what consists the Essence of God ..."¹⁶ According to Aquinas, "the highest knowledge we can have of God in this life is to know that He is above all we can think concerning Him."¹⁷

If God is infinite and we are finite this would entail that God's nature and acts would be, in large part, mysterious and

⁸ *De Trinitate*, part vii, sec. 6 in *The Home Book of Quotations*, selected and arranged by Burton Stevenson, 10th ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1967), p. 796.

⁹ On the Gospel of St. John XXIX, c. 416 in *The World Treasury*, p. 49.

¹⁰ In Boet. *De Trinitate* in *The World Treasury*, p. 362.

¹¹ *Sermon LII* in *The World Treasury*, p. 362.

¹² *City of God* xxi, 426 in *The World Treasury*, p. 818.

¹³ *La Henriade* in *The Home Book*, p. 797.

¹⁴ *Institutes*, I, 1536 in *The World Treasury*, p. 197.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, 1536 in *The World Treasury*, p. 385.

¹⁶ *Summa Theologiae* I, 11, 1272 in *The World Treasury*, p. 379.

¹⁷ *De Veritate*, 1259 in *The World Treasury*, p. 385.

inscrutable. To claim, therefore, that the theist must provide a rigorous and exhaustive defense of specific doctrines regarding God's nature or acts would be asking too much. Obviously the theist is walking a fine line here. Oftentimes the line between the nonrational and the irrational is blurred. Pushed to its extreme, recourse to mystery, inscrutability, and ineffability does little to differentiate between the claims of the theist and those of the madman. Such a position has led some, like John Henry Newman, to claim that "I do not see much difference between avowing that there is no God, and implying that nothing definite can for certain be known about Him."¹⁸

Clearly an object cannot be known apart from its properties. Insofar as theists have spoken in such a way with respect to God I take them to be speaking metaphorically and for emphasis—for if not their claims are irrational. Exhaustive and complete knowledge of an infinite Being by finite minds is not possible. However, a *limited* concept of God is not the same thing as *no* concept.¹⁹

Following Aquinas, though terms and concepts are used neither equivocally nor univocally, they can be used analogously—they can serve as pointers to God's nature.

In Spinoza's formulation God's nature resembles our words about as much as the dog star resembles a dog. The most that can be said for these words is that they are pointers; our minds do better to move in their direction than in the opposite. God lies on the further side of being as we understand it, not nothingness; beyond minds as we know them, not mindless clay; beyond ecstasy, not agony.²⁰

I am not claiming, then, that nothing about God can be known, for such an assertion is itself a claim about God and therefore faces the same

¹⁸ *On the Scope and Nature of University Education*, 1852 in *The World Treasury*, pp. 385-386.

¹⁹ Cf. Rem B. Edwards, *Reason and Religion: An Introduction to The Philosophy of Religion* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1979), p. 232.

²⁰ Huston Smith, *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), p. 61.

difficulties as Kant's classical noumenal/phenomenal world distinction. I do, however, think it prudent to acknowledge from the outset of any discussion concerning God's existence, nature, acts, or purposes to affirm with Tersteegen that "A God comprehended is no God."²¹ Difficulties with respect to descriptors and arguments concerning knowledge of God do not necessarily entail that a position is incorrect or faulty. In fact, just the opposite is the case. Ironically, given the purported nature of God as mysterious and inscrutable—though not completely so—an exhaustive theology or philosophy with no difficulties or problems is a sure sign that the theology or philosophy is faulty. Discussing the possibility and degree of knowledge of finite objects is a challenge—to demand a rigorous defense of knowledge of a largely ineffable infinite Being is unwarranted and unfair.

2. NATURE OF THE SUBJECT

The second element in any act of knowledge concerns the knower. Here again, mitigating factors are also present for knowledge of God. Individuals are finite beings with limited intellects. This affects the degree to which any object can be known, let alone the existence of an infinite Being. As Reid points out, "every conjecture we can form with regard to the works of God has as little probability as the conjectures of a child with regard to the works of a man."²² In the same way that an infant or child struggles with adult concepts and ideas, so one should expect constraints to exist on a finite adult's understanding of God. Indeed, given the traditional conception of God, the gulf in understanding between the Creator and the creation is much greater than any gap between an adult and a child.

²¹ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 25.

²² *Intellectual Powers* Vol. I in *The Home Book*, p. 797.

If the Judeo-Christian conception of God is true then this further curtails the ability of the human mind. For it is not simply a finite being trying to grasp the Infinite—it is a fallen, corrupted, and sinful being who is, according to Calvin and others, suppressing the truth and rebelling against this Being. This compounds the difficulty in coming to know God and His nature. If true, difficulties should, once again, be expected with respect to the formulation and persuasiveness of grounds provided for belief in God.

3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECT AND OBJECT

The relationship between the knower and the known also affects the possibility, degree, and certainty of knowledge. Hick, Pascal, and others are quick to point out that human freedom necessitates epistemic distance. The reason that the traditional arguments for the existence of God are not efficacious, according to Pascal, is that God is a hidden God. In response to those who disparage the claims of Christianity due to lack of proof Pascal claims

Let them at least learn what this religion is which they are attacking before attacking it. If this religion boasted that it had a clear sight of God and plain and manifest evidence of his existence, it would be an effective objection to say that there is nothing to be seen in the world which proves him so obviously. But since on the contrary it says that men are in darkness and remote from God, that he has hidden himself from their understanding, that this is the very name which he gives himself in Scripture: *Deus absconditus* [the hidden God]; and, in a word, if it strives equally to establish these two facts: that God has appointed visible signs in the Church so that he shall be recognized by those who genuinely seek him with all their heart, then what advantage can they derive when, unconcerned to seek the truth as they profess to be, they protest that nothing show it to them? For the obscurity in which they find themselves, and which they use as an objection against the Church, simply establishes one of the things the Church maintains without affecting the other, and far from proving her teaching false, confirms it.²³

These sentiments are echoed by contemporary philosophers of religion. Hick asserts that

²³ *Penseés*, p. 155 [427/194].

... human freedom *vis-à-vis* God presupposes an initial separateness and consequent degree of independence on man's part. In creating finite persons to love and be loved by Him God must endow them with a certain relative autonomy over against Himself. But how can a finite creature, dependent upon the infinite Creator for its very existence and for every power and quality of its being, possess any significant autonomy in relation to that Creator? The only way we can conceive is that suggested by our actual situation. God must set man at a distance from Himself, from which he can then voluntarily come to God. But how can anything be set at a distance from One who is infinite and omnipresent? Clearly spatial distance means nothing in this case. The kind of distance between God and man that would make room for a degree of human autonomy is epistemic distance. In other words, the reality and presence of God must not be borne in upon men in the coercive way in which their natural environment forces itself upon their attention. The world must be to man, to some extent at least, *etsi deus non daretur*, 'as if there were no God'. God must be a hidden deity, veiled by His creation. He must be knowable, but only by a mode of knowledge that involves a free personal response on man's part, this response consisting in an uncompelled interpretative activity whereby we experience the world as mediating the divine presence. Such a need for a human faith-response will secure for man the only kind of freedom that is possible for him in relation to God, namely cognitive freedom, carrying with it the momentous possibility of being either aware or unaware of his Maker.²⁴

According to Pascal, therefore, "there is sufficient obscurity to blind the reprobate, and sufficient clearness to condemn them."²⁵ The well-known Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, similarly affirms God's hidden nature: "God dwells in a secret and hidden way in all souls, in their very substance, for if He did not they could not exist at all."²⁶ The concept of epistemic distance can therefore be interpreted as standing behind the Biblical mandate to "come near to God and He will come near to you."²⁷ The relation between the knower (human persons) and the known (God) is therefore partly contingent upon the nature of the known. In this case, due to His love, God is said to desire that persons freely reciprocate that love—a coerced

²⁴ *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 281; cf. also 280-291, 315-323.

²⁵ *Penseés*, sec. Viii, no. 578, quoting St. Augustine and Montaigne in *The Home Book*, p. 797.

²⁶ *Living Flame of Love in The World Treasury*, p. 595.

²⁷ James 4:8.

conversion is not a genuine conversion.

If God is a free Being, other consequences also follow. As was pointed out by Alston in his discussion of religious experience, since God is a free person He ultimately determines the degree of His revelation—if at all. Knowing God is not as simple a matter as coming to know a rock or some other inanimate object. Non-persons are stable and constant in their manifestations. Persons, being free, can determine the degree to which they are known. If this is true with respect to finite persons, how much more so for a Person infinite in power and knowledge?

If God exists as classically conceived then I believe that even the atheist would have to acknowledge that the foregoing mitigating factors are present. The degree to which knowledge of Him is possible will be mitigated by the metaphysical and epistemic distance between God and humans. If other specific Christian doctrines are true, such as that God or Satan blinds individuals from the truth, or that the earth is cursed due to man's fall²⁸, our metaphysical and epistemic plight is only exacerbated.

On the face of it, an initial discussion of mitigating factors might appear as a classic case of stacking the deck. A critic of reasons for belief in God may appear justified in yelling "foul" if his objections are met with "God's ways are inscrutable," "our understanding is limited," or "God is hidden." Yet, given a basic understanding of God's nature were He to exist, these kinds of responses should be expected for some issues. The difficulty is in deciding for which issues. Here I do not think a specific answer is possible. Thresholds for persuasiveness differ from person to person;

²⁸ If the earth is cursed and in some sense "fallen" this may affect the possibility of coming to know God truly. For though God may be known directly, many instances of religious experience are mediated by

people rationally differ about the application of concepts they accept. Take for instance Thomas S. Kuhn's discussion of agreement regarding shared values in the scientific community. Agreement on values does not necessitate agreement about their *application*.

Usually they [values] are more widely shared among different communities than either symbolic generalizations or models, and they do much to provide a sense of community to natural scientists as a whole. ... Probably the most deeply held values concern predictions: they should be accurate; quantitative predictions are preferable to qualitative ones; whatever the margin of permissible error, it should be consistently satisfied in a given field; and so on. There are also, however, values to be used in judging whole theories: they must, first and foremost, permit puzzle-formulation and solution; where possible they should be simple, self-consistent, and plausible, compatible, that is, with other theories currently deployed. ... Other sorts of values exist as well—for example, science should (or need not) be socially useful—but the preceding should indicate what I have in mind.

One aspect of shared values does, however, require particular mention. To a greater extent than other sorts of components of the disciplinary matrix, values may be shared by men who differ in their application. Judgments of accuracy are relatively, though not entirely, stable from one time to another and from one member to another in a particular group. But judgments of simplicity, consistency, plausibility, and so on often vary greatly from individual to individual. ... Even more important, in those situations where values must be applied, different values, taken alone, would often dictate different choices. One theory may be more accurate but less consistent or plausible than another ... In short, though values are widely shared by scientists and though commitment to them is both deep and constitutive of science, the application of values is sometimes considerably affected by the features of individual personality and biography that differentiate the members of the group.²⁹

A similar difficulty presents itself for philosophy and logic. As an example, rational men and women agree a hasty or lazy induction is irrational but oftentimes disagree as to when such a mistake in reasoning takes place. Those accused of hasty induction claim those who do not make the inference are lazy *and vice versa*. Shared values in science and logic do not necessitate a common application of those values. Since, then, the line between the rational and irrational is

His creation.

²⁹ *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University

often blurred we should expect different rational people to differ once the nonrational category has been thrown into the mix.³⁰ To rule out appeals to God's mystery, inscrutability, hiddenness, or man's limits is just as irrational as always hiding behind them. Where exactly along the continuum between the two extremes the rational theist should stand is open to debate. Clearly, given the nature of God and man, the possibility and scope of knowledge of God is curtailed, though rational people may differ as to the extent of curtailment. Classically, while Reformed thinkers limit the extent to which knowledge is possible, Roman Catholics are more optimistic. I do not presume to defend either position. My point is only that in the following discussion of the grounds for belief in God, the atheist or agnostic, if consistent with what is known about herself, the purported traditional concept of God, and any probable discussion of the relationship between such a Being and humanity, must not demand too much. Given these mitigating factors, a complete absence of difficulties may be the surest sign of failure with respect to knowledge of God.

B. FIRST PRINCIPLES

Demonstrating that a belief is foundational is no simple matter; by definition direct proof is not possible. However, I believe foundationalists are successful in their rejection of alternate conceptions of epistemology—coherence theories simply do not meet the minimal demands of a cogent system. That foundational propositions or beliefs must exist was first demonstrated by Aristotle in his discussion of the law of non-contradiction.

of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 184-185; cf. also 199-200 and 205-206.

³⁰ If, in fact, Otto is correct in claiming that the nonrational lies at the heart of religion (*The Idea of the Holy*, p. 3.).

There are those who, as we said, both themselves assert that it is possible for the same thing to be and not to be, and assert that it is possible to believe so. Many even of writers on nature make use of this statement. But we have just accepted that it is impossible to be and not be simultaneously, and we have shown by means of this that it is the firmest of all principles. Some, owing to lack of training, actually ask that it be demonstrated: for it is lack of training not to recognize of which things demonstration ought to be sought, and of which not. For in general it is impossible that there should be demonstration of everything, since it would go on to infinity so that not even so would it be demonstration. But if there are some things of which demonstration ought not to be sought, they could not say what they regard as a principle more fully of that kind.³¹

To reject the existence of foundational or first principles is irrational. To require proof for everything—aside from being self-referentially absurd—is to misunderstand the nature of proof: an infinite series of responses does not answer a question or address an issue—it merely puts it off. As Reid pointed out, all admit the existence of first principles: where philosophers disagree is with respect to their names and number. On the whole I approve of Reid's criteria for the determination of the first principles. His arguments for the determination of common-sense principles are themselves in line with common sense. Though direct proof would be both unnecessary and impossible, indirect tests are available for determining the foundational beliefs. It is possible, by means of an *ad hominem* proof, to show that an opponent is inconsistent because the first principle she rejects serves as the foundation for other principles she accepts. A principle can also be established utilizing an *ad absurdum* proof, by demonstrating that its denial entails absurdities. It also seems plausible to think that, as with the universal consent proof, everyone would affirm it, either explicitly or implicitly. Conditions of origin (assenting to a belief independently of appeal to argument or experience) also appears relevant. Finally, there is the

³¹ *Metaphysics*, Book IV, Chapter 4 [1006a] in *A New Aristotle Reader*,

practical proof: if a proposition is a first principle or a foundational belief it is not possible to live consistently with its denial.

In the sections that follow I will sketch what I believe is the kind of approach that Reformed epistemologists should follow. Given their philosophical reliance upon Reid, Reformed thinkers should attempt to demonstrate that belief in God is foundational by appealing to indirect arguments and by identifying general characteristics of the first principles. I will outline the general approach first by examining how one might substantiate the claim that the law of non-contradiction is foundational. This will be followed by a proposal for how the existence of God and the reliability of religious experience can independently be grounded as first principles. It should be noted that evidence plays an important role with respect to both projects.

1. CASE STUDY: LAW OF NON-CONTRADICTION

The five tests (*ad hominem*, *ad absurdum*, universal consent, conditions of origin, and practical) all appear to be reasonable marks for identifying foundational beliefs. For example, one can and should use these characteristics to identify the law of non-contradiction as foundational. Eastern traditions often reject the principle. Jainism, for example, espouses a non-mutually exclusive logic.³² Discussions of other forms of logic, many of which reject the law of non-contradiction, can also be found.³³ But the issue here is not whether expression can be given to such constructs, for I can speak of square-circles and other such nonsense without there actually being

p. 267.

³² L.B. Cebik, *Formal Deductive Logic: A First Course* (unpublished class text), p. 12.

³³ Cf. John Eric Nolt's *Logics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1997).

such things. Nor is the issue one of usefulness or even the predictability of certain beliefs (pragmatic values). I can appeal to negative numbers—and often do when attempting to balance my checkbook—or to epicycles, to predict planetary motion, without beliefs corresponding to anything in reality. Differing forms of non-Euclidean geometry may prove helpful in solving dilemmas without necessitating that they make up the world as we know it. Relativism with respect to beliefs and practices does not entail relativism with respect to truth. Students who achieve different responses to an identical math problem would not, and should not, thereby conclude that a correct answer does not exist, or that all answers are correct, or that, necessarily, none are correct. The mere presence of disagreement, rather than implying that truth is relative, typically implies that there is an objective truth that all are seeking.³⁴

The issue before us is whether or not a rejection of the law of non-contradiction has any merit. It is a simple matter, utilizing Reid's five indirect tests for the first principles, to show that it does not: the law of non-contradiction is a principle of common sense. With respect to universal consent and practical proofs,

... the extent to which such thinking represents "the Eastern mind" has been greatly exaggerated. In the East the common man—and the philosopher, too—lives by the Laws of Contradiction and Excluded Middle in his everyday life; he affirms them every time he walks through a doorway rather than into a wall.³⁵ It is only at an extremely theoretical level of philosophical speculation that such laws are denied. And even at that level, the situation is not monochromatic: Confucianism, Hinayana Buddhism, pluralistic Hinduism as exemplified in Sankya-Yoga, Vaisheshika-Nyaya, and Mimamsa schools of thought, and even Jainism do not

³⁴ Similar points have been made with respect to moral relativism. Cf. Ed. L. Miller's *Questions That Matter: An Invitation to Philosophy*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), chapter 16 and Louis P. Pojman's *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), chapter 2.

³⁵ Here Craig is claiming that the rational individual implicitly affirms that a doorway cannot both be and not be a doorway at the same time and in the same respect.

deny the application of the classical laws of thought to ultimate reality.³⁶

An *ad absurdum* proof for the law of non-contradiction can be found in Ravi Zacharias' *Can Man Live Without God*.³⁷ Zacharias relates an incident when he pointed out the major difficulties present in Hinduism only to be chastised by a Western philosopher for his misconstrual of the Eastern mindset. The Western philosopher claimed that two types of logic exist: an either/or logic (Western) and a both/and logic (Eastern).

I said, "Sir, are you telling me that when I am studying Hinduism I either use the both/and system of logic or nothing else?"

There was a pin-drop silence for what seemed an eternity. I repeated my question: "Are you telling me that when I am studying Hinduism I either use the both/and logic or nothing else? Have I got that right?"

He threw his head back and said, "The either/or does seem to emerge, doesn't it?"

"Indeed, it does emerge," I said. "And as a matter of fact, even in India we look both ways before we cross the street—it is either the bus or me, not both of us."

... He was using the either/or logic in order to prove the both/and. The more you try to hammer the law of noncontradiction [sic], the more it hammers you. (Another way to consider this discussion is to say that if the both/and logic is all you make it to be, why can't I use *both* the both/and and the either/or? Why just one of them?³⁸

Once again, explicit statements are at odds with implicit beliefs; actions speak louder than words. It is easy to claim that "the jug is and is not"—it is an altogether different matter to produce the jug or describe its ontological status.

Unfortunately, instead of being buried as a universally dead option (to use James' terminology), a rejection of the foundations for logic has found new life in post-modernism.

³⁶ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, pp. 41-42.

³⁷ Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994.

³⁸ P. 129. Himself from India and immersed in Eastern thought, Zacharias is immanently qualified to speak not only with respect to the way in which Eastern thought is conceived by Westerners, but why it is problematic.

[Postmodernists] ... reject altogether Western rationality and metaphysics, claiming that there is no objective truth about reality. "The truth," as John Caputo says, "is that there is no truth." ... the postmodernist claim is not really distinguishable from certain Buddhist philosophies. To assert that "the truth is that there is no truth" is both self-refuting and arbitrary. For if this statement is true, it is not true, since there is no truth. So-called deconstructionism thus cannot be halted from deconstructing itself. Moreover, there is also no reason for adopting the postmodern perspective rather than, say, the outlooks of Western capitalism, male chauvinism, white racism and so forth, since postmodernism has no more truth to it than these perspectives. Caught in this self-defeating trap, some postmodernists have been forced to the same recourse as Buddhist mystics: denying that postmodernism is really a view or position at all. But then, once again, why do they continue to write books and talk about it? They are obviously making some cognitive claims--and if not, then they literally have nothing to say and no objection to our employment of the classical canons of logic.³⁹

Couple these "proofs" with the fact that the principle is explicitly known to be true or implicitly lived as true by those early in their development and one has a conclusive case for the laws of thought being foundational.

Not all first principles are as easily grounded as the law of non-contradiction. I think Reid was lax for not addressing the fact that the five indirect tests are not always all applicable with respect to all first principles. Principles associated with the reasoning process itself, like the laws of thought or the principle of induction, enjoy a greater number of criteria available for their substantiation. Other first principles, such as the moral first principles, are not always directly linked with other accepted first principles. Tests like the *ad hominem* may not be ubiquitous with respect to the first principles.

This should not be troubling since I do not believe it is necessary that all five of Reid's methods be applicable for a principle to be deemed foundational. Given the diverse nature of the

³⁹ William Lane Craig, "Politically Incorrect Salvation," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and

first principles, relevance of specific arguments may also differ. It does appear, however, that the number of tests available abductively lends weight to the cumulative case being presented as to the foundational status of a specific belief. Though all criteria need not be satisfied to demonstrate that a principle is foundational—indeed, some tests appear to be by themselves sufficient conditions for labeling a proposition a first principle—the satisfaction of several or all criteria lends additional credence to the claim.

Though all of Reid's tests may be genuine, this does not entail that they are exhaustive. Though I agree with those indirect arguments he lists, additional arguments can be given. Here I am not referring explicitly to supplemental proofs but to defining characteristics of the first principles. Since foundational principles are foundational, I take difficulty in demonstrating them by appealing to pure reason or experience to be a mark of their classification as foundational.⁴⁰

A second defining characteristic of the first principles would be their degree of importance. This characteristic is even weaker than the first, for it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient

Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 82.

⁴⁰ I believe that it is possible to recognize this feature but to misapply it. For example, Christian presuppositionalists recognize that many of the attempts to substantiate the first principles will be viciously circular. If propositions are basic this should be expected, *but this is not why we accept them as foundational*. To revel in circularity is to reveal a misunderstanding of the first principles—specifically those principles associated with logic. The first principles are partly identified by their inability to be directly substantiated, they are *not* identified in that one uses circular reasoning to ground them. To say that *if* one tried to prove them one would oftentimes be arguing in a circle is *not* the same thing as saying that they are deemed first principles because they are circularly grounded. The Christian presuppositionalist therefore often fallaciously appeals to circularity as an argument and not as an identifying characteristic of foundational beliefs. Circularity is to be eschewed whatever the context.

condition for determining the status of a belief as foundational.⁴¹ A cursory examination of Reid's list of contingent and necessary first principles reveals that they support a substantial number of subsequent propositions and beliefs, and that their denial or affirmation has a critical impact upon the capacity for, and scope of, knowledge. This should be expected if the principle is genuinely foundational.

2. THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AS A METAPHYSICAL NECESSARY FIRST PRINCIPLE

How is the foregoing applicable to belief in God and an affirmation of His existence? As discussed in chapter two, the Reformed epistemologist desires to categorize Christian belief as foundational, with demands for argument and evidence thereby being deemed unnecessary. But, as we saw in chapter three, these Calvinists choose a puzzling and circuitous route for achieving this goal. Instead of appealing to those tests Reid offers as indirect proofs for foundational beliefs, they attempt to identify parallels between an accepted foundational belief (the reliability of sense experience) and a Christian practice (the reliability of religious experience). I have no qualms with their arguments; I find them on the whole persuasive.⁴² I do find this back-door approach odd however, since a more direct route, utilizing Reid's five arguments and the identification of additional key features, is available.

⁴¹ I do not think, however, that this in any way detracts from its importance as a test or identifying feature. Universal consent is also neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for proper basicity. Some beliefs may be universally-held without being first principles whereas some, at least explicitly, might say a genuine first principle is not foundational.

⁴² As previously stated, two troubling aspects would include the fact that 1) Plantinga appears to allow for the existence of mutually-exclusive beliefs to be rationally held—a claim that he earlier gave as a reason for rejecting coherentism, and 2) he treats judgments of first principles ("I see a tree" or "God loves me") as though they themselves were basic.

The Reformed thinkers fail to realize that some of Reid's first principles are linked with, or are correlates of, one another. For example, the reliability of sense experience, a contingent first principle, is associated with the existence of physical substances, a necessary first principle. The latter principle is connected with the former: from the reliability of sense experience I think it reasonable to infer the existence of a world that is experienced; experiences are of objects. The latter necessary first principle stipulates the nature of that object: it is material (though, admittedly, one may still debate what this means or amounts to⁴³). Applied to the Reformed thinkers' discussion of the existence of God, it seems reasonable to conclude that a necessary correlate to the contingent first principle (that religious experience is reliable) exists. Religious experience implies a Being perceived (an Object) but direct grounds for considering the belief properly basic should also exist. It should be possible, utilizing Reid's indirect tests and identifying other key features, to abductively demonstrate that the existence of God is a metaphysical necessary first principle.

a. Key Features

1.) Importance of Issue

Theists and atheists alike acknowledge that the issue of God's existence is significant.

More consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other basic question. They follow for those who regard the question as answerable only by faith or only by reason, and even for those who insist upon suspending judgment entirely. ...

The whole tenor of human life is certainly affected by whether men regard themselves as the supreme beings in the universe or acknowledge a superior [Being] ...

The most radical differences in man's conception of his own nature follow from the exclusion of divinity as its source

⁴³ I am indebted to Richard Aquila for this point.

or model on the one hand, and from the various ways in which man is seen as participating in divinity on the other.⁴⁴

Will Durant asserts that all other issues pale in importance:

"The greatest question of our time is not communism vs. individualism, not Europe vs. America, not even the East vs. the West; it is whether man can bear to live without God."⁴⁵ The entirety of metaphysics is ultimately tied to this issue. As Johannes Scotus Erigena stated, "metaphysics begins and ends with God."⁴⁶ Similar sentiments were expressed by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Metaphysics has as the proper object of its enquiries three ideas only: *God, freedom, and immortality ...*"⁴⁷

A defining characteristic of a foundational belief is its significance for the possibility, scope, and nature of knowledge. The issue of God's existence reflects this characteristic, but it also meets a second feature: if belief in God were basic, we should expect arguments for God's existence to fall short of apodictic certainty. To demand otherwise is to misunderstand the nature of the principles of common-sense.

2.) Absence of Direct Proof

Theists, like Pascal and Kierkegaard, and atheists, like Sartre and Russell, should not lament the lack of direct proof for God's existence. If belief in God is foundational and mitigating factors

⁴⁴ Mortimer Adler, *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*, editor in chief Mortimer Adler, general editor William Gorman, vol. 1 (Chicago: William Benton, 1952) in *Great Books of the Western World*, editor in chief Robert Hutchins, vol. 2, p. 543; cf. Paul Little's *Know Why You Believe*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 23.

⁴⁵ *On the Meaning of Life in The World Treasury*, p. 592.

⁴⁶ *The Division of Nature in The World Treasury*, p. 627.

⁴⁷ Note to B 395; p. 325n.

concerning the traditional conception of God⁴⁸ and humanity⁴⁹ exist, the absence of direct proof should be anticipated. "We demand 'proof' of God, forgetting that if we could prove God He would be within the compass of our rationalities, and that then our logical mind would be our own grotesque God."⁵⁰

Few, save perhaps the institutionalized, fret over the absence of argument for the existence of other minds or the inductive principle. It is only "due to lack of training" that proof would be demanded. As first principles they are immune from the attack of lack of direct evidence or proof. This lack is itself a feature of such principles. Given what is believed about the natures of God and humanity and their relationship with one another, absence of direct proof is not unexpected. Further, it lends indirect support to the claim that the existence of God is a foundational belief.

b. Reid's Five Tests

Several of Reid's indirect tests for the identification of the first principles are interrelated. His *ad hominem*, *ad absurdum*, and practical tests are often connected⁵¹ as are his universal consent and conditions of origin tests.⁵² Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, not all first principles are provable by appeal to all five routes. The five arguments are merely elements of an abductive case that may be presented in identifying the foundational principles.

⁴⁸ God is infinite (and therefore beyond our complete and exhaustive understanding) and loving (and therefore placing epistemic distance between Himself and the creation).

⁴⁹ Mankind is finite, limited, fallen, and sinful.

⁵⁰ George A. Buttrick, *Christ and History*, in *The World Treasury*, p. 374.

⁵¹ Rational and practical absurdities result from rejecting foundational principles.

⁵² If principles are derivable neither by experience nor pure reason then they should, in turn, be ubiquitous in scope.

1.) *Ad Hominem*, *Ad Absurdum*, and Practical Tests

The *ad hominem* test asserts that one's opponent is inconsistent because the first principle he rejects serves as the foundation for other principles he accepts. This is often born out by appeal to *reductio ad absurdum* arguments which demonstrate that irrational consequences stem from such a denial. One way to substantiate the claim that belief in God is foundational is to show that the propositions accepted by the atheist are inconsistent with a rejection or denial of the existence of God.⁵³

A case can be made for thinking that the existence of God is itself the foundation for the first principles. As a first principle it is akin to Plato's Form of the Forms. In some sense, the first principles themselves cry out for a grounding. The fact that philosophers refer to issues like induction and other minds as "problems" is reflective of this feeling of uneasiness. It appears present at the earliest of ages with the child's incessant "why?" and continues through adulthood as expressed in the oft-quoted "all men by nature desire to know."⁵⁴ I grant that arguments cannot be given for the first principles, but a restlessness with respect to their truth remains. Intuitions and natural inclinations make philosophers uneasy; having to admit that their discipline of rigorous argumentation, proof, and evidence is at base fideistic is a difficult

⁵³ Let me be clear, I do not believe that the proofs to follow are direct—that is not my goal and is not possible if God's existence is properly foundational. Rather, I will seek to present a reason for thinking that, without positing God, epistemic absurdities result. As Voltaire has said, "in the opinion that there is a God, there are difficulties; but in the contrary opinion there are absurdities" (*Traité de Métaphysique*, chapter II, in *The World Treasury*, p. 363) or, as William L. Sullivan has put it, "the best proof of God's existence is what follows when we deny it." (*Epigrams and Criticisms in Miniature*, in *The World Treasury*, p. 373.).

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 1, chapter 1 [980A] in *A New Aristotle Reader*, p. 255.

pill to swallow. Though I can give no direct argument for the claim, my argument is more aesthetic than logical, I find the existence of one "hanging" foundational belief preferable to multiple "hanging" beliefs. It is irrational to choose complexity over simplicity. Of course there are difficulties with this approach. This argument will only be convincing to someone who already believes since the person who does not believe is now faced with the added complexities of adding God to their system. My argument, however, is not offered in a vacuum. The first to reason similarly in modern philosophy was Descartes. Although often chided for the circular argument for the existence of God presented in his *Meditations*, there was a method to his madness. Epistemically and logically speaking, there is absolutely no guarantee with respect to the powers of our reasoning abilities. *That* we have to accept our powers of reasoning is true, but *why* they should be trusted is another matter. Descartes realized that only God could serve as the *ultimate* first principle for the first principle of the reliability of reason. In the words of A.J. Balfour, "we are driven in mere self-defense to hold that behind these non-rational forces, and above them, guiding them by slow degrees, and, as it were, with difficulty, stands that supreme Reason in whom we must believe, if we are to believe anything."⁵⁵ Naturalistic explanations are not simply inferior and inadequate, they are impossible.

Plantinga points out that naturalism's epistemology is more compatible with theism's metaphysics.⁵⁶ In *Warrant and Proper*

⁵⁵ *Foundations of Belief in The World Treasury*, p. 51.

⁵⁶ I believe that a similar case can be made for thinking that axiological issues are unexplainable on purely naturalistic terms. Cf. George I. Mavrodes, "Religion and the Queerness of Morality," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright,

Function, he states that traditional naturalistic approaches (given by Pollock, Millikan, or Bigelow and Pargetter) provide neither a necessary nor sufficient account of proper function:

... any argument he [a naturalist] offers, for R [the claim that our cognitive faculties are reliable], is ... delicately circular or question-begging. It is not *formally* circular; its conclusion does not appear among its premises. It is instead (we might say) *pragmatically* circular in that it purports to give a reason for trusting our cognitive faculties, but is itself trustworthy only if those faculties (at least the ones involved in its production) are indeed trustworthy. In following this procedure and giving this argument, therefore, he subtly assumes the very proposition he proposes to argue for. Once I come to doubt the reliability of my cognitive faculties, I can't properly try to allay that doubt by producing an argument; for in so doing I rely on the very faculties I am doubting. The conjunction of evolution with naturalism gives its adherents a reason for doubting that our beliefs are mostly true; perhaps they are mostly wildly mistaken. But then it won't help to argue that they can't be wildly mistaken; for the very reason for mistrusting our cognitive faculties generally will be a reason for mistrusting the faculties generating the beliefs involved in the argument. ...

Once again, therefore, we see that naturalistic epistemology flourishes best in the garden of supernaturalistic metaphysics. Naturalistic epistemology conjoined with naturalistic metaphysics leads *via* evolution to skepticism or to violation of canons of rationality; conjoined with theism it does not. The naturalistic epistemologist should therefore prefer theism to metaphysical naturalism.⁵⁷

Plantinga is providing his reader with an argument similar to those offered by the presuppositionalists addressed in Chapter Two, though it is, admittedly, a much weaker claim. Their argument was that a rejection of theism spawns absurdities and that the world as experienced and thought only makes sense on theistic presuppositions. Their goal can be viewed as substantiating the claim that the

(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 215-218; Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, pp. 65-66; Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 47-62; and Alvin Plantinga, "A Christian Life Partly Lived," in *Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journey of 11 Leading Thinkers*, ed. Kelly James Clark (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 72-73.

⁵⁷ pp. 234, 237. Jim Bennett has suggested, however, that the theist also faces this difficulty. Any form of reasoning that appeals to God could still be seen as open to the charge of being circular.

existence of God is foundational. I find many of their core arguments persuasive. However, they have incorrectly multiplied the number of first principles. The classical presuppositionalist does not merely claim that belief in God is foundational but that "the Bible is the Word of God" and that "Christianity is true" are as well. Clearly the latter two are not foundational but are, at least in part, supported by the first. Theism is just as compatible with other monotheistic traditions—perhaps initially more so when difficulties with the concepts of the trinity and the incarnation arise—as it is with Christianity. Certainly Christians could not deny this with respect to Judaism since Christianity is viewed not as a rejection of but as a fulfillment and completion of Jewish thought. Similarly, Muslims retain the same basic beliefs regarding God's existence and nature as Christians. Evidence and argument are necessary to support the claim that the Bible is God's Word⁵⁸ and that Christianity is God's avenue for salvation.⁵⁹

I readily admit that few atheists would acknowledge that their atheism consists of blatant absurdities and inconsistencies. But I do not see this as damaging to the previous points. Once again, a distinction between explicit and implicit beliefs is relevant. In line with Reid's practical criterion we must ask if a denial of the proposition deemed basic (God's existence) is consistently livable.

2.) Universal Consent and Conditions of Origin Tests

As previously stated, appeal to universal consent as a test for a first principle is not a direct or apodictic proof; it is not an *ad populum* argument—it is an indirect argument. If an explicitly or

⁵⁸ Even the Bible, while attesting to the Holy Spirit's ultimate and supreme authority, commands that believers "test the spirits" (I John 4:1).

⁵⁹ Jesus Christ Himself appears to have recognized this when He claimed that His resurrection would serve as proof for His claim as Messiah

implicitly universally-held belief is affirmed without appeal to pure reason or experience this is a reason for thinking that it is foundational. The mode of argumentation is therefore not solely philosophical. Anthropological and sociological factors may contribute in the determination as to whether such conditions are met. Applied to the existence of God, I will therefore appeal to scholars in anthropology and the history of religion to ascertain the scope of religion and belief in God.

Reasons for belief in God on the basis of consensus have been discussed since at least the time of Plato.⁶⁰ Many view the argument as *ad populum* in nature, and so refuse to take it seriously. Others think that, even though the existence of common consent may not prove God's existence, it certainly confirms it.⁶¹ If belief in God is properly basic, however, an analysis of the scope and content of religious belief takes on added importance—for one of the tests for a proposition being foundational is that it be affirmed by all, whether explicitly or implicitly. Thus, whether or not the consensus argument adequately establishes the existence of God, it may well establish—or contribute to the case—that belief in God is foundational. Universal consent should be anticipated if, according to Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis* can be found in all. "We find our true home in God and in being in close relationship with him. 'There is a God-shaped vacuum

(cf. Matthew 12:38-40; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29; Mark 8:31; and John 2:19).

⁶⁰ Laws X, 886-888, trans. A. E. Taylor, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 1441-1444; cf. David Elton Trueblood's *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p 144n.

⁶¹ This is not, obviously, always the case. Some consider universal consent to be a direct proof for the existence of God. In fact, some consider it the sole proof. Cicero, for example, claimed that "the belief in the gods has not been established by authority, custom or law, but rests upon the unanimous and abiding consensus of mankind" (*De Natura Deorum*, Bk I, chapter 17, 44 in *The Home Book of*

in the heart of every man,' wrote Pascal. 'Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee,' wrote Augustine."⁶² As Herbert Benson has said, "... we are wired to believe in God."⁶³ If belief in God's existence is innately and instinctually believed to be true, as Aristotle asserts, it is a natural truth.⁶⁴ The issue is therefore whether the belief is instinctual. Is there a God-shaped vacuum or a *sensus divinitatis* implanted in all? Answering this question requires identifying the scope of belief.

There is widespread agreement, among theists and non-theists alike, that common consent exists with respect to belief in God or gods. As was stated in 44 B.C. by Cicero, "there is no race so wild and untamed as to be ignorant of the existence of God."⁶⁵

Now it is a fact abundantly established by historians and anthropologists that mankind in all ages, in all countries and in all stages of civilization has believed in the existence of a Supreme Being. No matter whether the race or tribe was civilized or uncivilized, whether it was in communication with other races or whether it was isolated in the darkness of an African jungle, we find the clear and unmistakable evidence of

Quotations, p. 798.).

⁶² James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 28. Although there is no proof that it was Pascal who claimed the existence of a God-shaped vacuum, similar comments have been made by many. Rudolf Otto writes that

The *predisposition* which the human reason brought with it when the species Man entered history became long ago, not merely for individuals but for the species as a whole, a *religious impulsion*, to which incitements from without and pressure from within the mind both contributed. It begins in undirected, groping emotion, a seeking and shaping of representations, and goes on, by a continual onward striving, to generate ideas, till its nature is self-illuminated and made clear by an explication of the obscure *a priori* foundation of thought itself, out of which it originated. (*The Idea of the Holy*, p. 116.)

⁶³ Interviewed by John Koch in *Boston Globe Magazine* in *Reader's Digest*, May 1998, p. 111.

⁶⁴ Cf. Fr. John Laux, *Catholic Apologetics: God, Christianity and the Church*, Book IV (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1990), p. 18.

⁶⁵ *De Natura Deorum* in *The World Treasury*, p. 372; cf. also C. H. Toy in his "Introduction to the History of Religions" and Voltaire's definition of "Theist" in his *Philosophical Dictionary* in *The World Treasury*, pp. 829, 982.

the belief in a Ruler of the universe. True, individuals who doubted or denied the existence of such an Infinite Power can be found here and there. These are the exceptions, however, which prove the rule. ...

This question [whether belief in a Supreme Being is universal] formerly a subject of warm dispute, has now been relegated, as the competent authority, F. B. Jevons, writes, "to the limbo of dead controversies." The findings of research workers approaching the problem from widely different points of view, such as Professor Tyler, Max Müller, Ratzel, de Quatrefages, Tiele, Waitz, Gerland, Peschel, and the greatest of all, Father Wilhelm Schmidt of Vienna, are in agreement that no race, no matter how primitive, has been found without religious beliefs and practices. While many superstitious elements, such as animism, fetishism, totemism and magic may be found in them, at the core of their religion will be found the belief in a Supreme Ruler of the universe.⁶⁶

To be truly universal, belief must be found among all, whether primal or modern, uneducated or the learned. This is in fact the case with respect to religious belief. Regarding primal peoples J. Strachan says "increasing research into the mental habits of the least advanced races of mankind now living tends to demonstrate that, side by side with the most foolish, tedious, and often repulsive myths, there is almost invariably a high, if vague, conception of a good Being who is Maker of all things, the undying Guardian of the moral life of men."⁶⁷

Perhaps none have written so forcefully with respect to a ubiquitous belief in God as has Wilhelm Schmidt:

Comparing the primitive cultures with the later ones we may lay down the general principle that in none of the latter is the Supreme Being to be found in so clear, so definite, vivid and direct a form as among the peoples belonging to the former [sic] We may now proceed to supplement this by another, of no less importance. This Supreme Being is to be found among all the peoples of the primitive culture, not indeed everywhere in

⁶⁶ John A. O'Brien, *God: Can We Find Him?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1942), pp. 38, 39; cf. also Leander S. Keyser, *A System of Natural Theism* (Burlington, IA: The German Literary Board, 1917), pp. 28-33; John Laux's *Catholic Apologetics*, pp. 17-18; and Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Task (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), pp. 202-203.

⁶⁷ "Creation" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, Vol. IV (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 227.

the same form or the same vigour, but still everywhere prominent enough to make his dominant position indubitable.⁶⁸

Though some contemporary thinkers have criticized Schmidt's conclusions, Huston Smith asserts that, with some minor qualifications, the bulk of the anthropological evidence supports his claims.

A common stereotype pegs primal religions as polytheistic, and this is not altogether wrong if the word tokens that the divine can congeal in hallowed places and alight on specific objects. But this has nothing to do with the flat Olympian, and Mediterranean polytheism generally that the Bible had to contend with; nor does it militate against a single Ultimate of which the many gods are instantiations or expressions. Wilhelm Schmidt's twelve-volume *Ursprung der Gottesidee*, concluded that every then-known tribe—the work was published between 1912 and 1955—had its High God who lives and works through its deputies. The Yoruba of West Africa, for example, never rank their Supreme Being, Olodimave, with lesser divinities (*orisa*), nor do the Edo confuse Osanobuwa with the *ebo*. Even if Schmidt overstates the case, however, this scarcely matters, for the issue is not whether the tribal people explicitly identify a Supreme Being who coordinates the gods but instead, whether they *sense* such a being whether they name and personify it or not. The evidence suggests that they do. As the Navajo artist Carl Gorman points out: "Some researchers into Navajo religion say that we have no supreme God because he is not named. This is not so. The Supreme Being is not named because he is unknowable. He is simply the Unknown Power. We worship him through his creation for he is everything in his creation. The various forms of creation have some of his spirit within them." One can call this pan- or poly-monotheism if one wishes. The fact remains that though primal religions affirm the divine Unity less exclusively, and in some cases seem even to veil it, they contain nothing that is strictly comparable to the anthropomorphic polytheism of the early Europeans. It is just that the holy, the sacred, the *wakan* as the Sioux call it, need not be exclusively attached, or consciously attached at all, to a distinguishable Supreme Being.⁶⁹

Modern thinking, expressed in the historic or traditional religions, is no less adamant with respect to belief in an Ultimate Reality, variously expressed as Brahman, the Tao, God, Yahweh, Allah, or Shang Ti. Certainly atheistic religions can be found, Theravada

⁶⁸ *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories*, trans. H. J. Rose, 2nd ed. (New York: The Humanities Press, 1935), p. 257; with respect to the above passage Schmidt references his own *magnum opus*, *Ursprung der Gottesidee*, vols. 2-4.

⁶⁹ *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (San Francisco:

Buddhism being the most well-known example. But this does not discount the main thrust of the universal consent proof. First, many have pointed out that the descriptors of Nirvana provide eerie parallels to theistic mystical experiences, implying that perhaps a common referent is the goal in both. Second, many Buddhists deny that Buddhism is atheistic.⁷⁰ Third, absence of complete and exhaustive verbal agreement with respect to the first principles is not necessary to verify their status as foundational. From the fact that some explicitly deny some first principles little follows; for implicit belief may still be present. In fact, there are two reasons why it should not be surprising to see some Buddhists rejecting a belief in God. First, if Reformed thinkers are correct and knowledge of God is suppressed, explicit denials of God's existence should be expected. Second, the Buddha claimed *all* metaphysical musings were considered superfluous in a world replete with suffering.⁷¹ It is not simply belief in God that is rejected by Buddhists but most other first principles as well. The principle of causality, the existence of anything truly substantial, as well as the notion of a self or an "I" are all verbally denied by Buddhists.⁷²

Harper, 1991), p. 378.

⁷⁰ Certainly Mahayana Buddhism is more lax with respect to a rejection of theism. Additionally, some have claimed that an atheistic elucidation by the Buddha was necessary due to the ignorance of his audience. Anne Gage, in her *The One Work, a Journey towards the Self*, relates a story of an encounter she had with a Buddhist monk in Bangkok. When asked whether the Buddha believed in God the monk replied,

'He didn't speak of God, which is different. If a man realizes God and is among other men who do not, it is useless to speak about Him for they would not understand. It is better to indicate how they can come to know Him themselves. Man must discover God and his true Self or Ego by following the Path of Enlightenment.' (quoted in F. C. Happold's *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*, [London: Penguin Books, 1970], p. 83)

⁷¹ This is perhaps best expressed in his story of the man wounded by a poisoned arrow; cf. Walpola Rahula's *What the Buddha Taught*, rev. ed. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1959), p. 14.

⁷² Cf. C. W. Huntington, Jr. And Geshé Namgal Wangchen's *The Emptiness*

Common consent is also obviously found among the educated.

Speaking of Hume, Dallas Willard claims that

... he puts in the mouth of Philo, at the end of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, the somewhat more modestly formulated conclusion "That the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence." Now I am aware of the carefully weighted meaning which Hume assigned to these words, and, indeed, I accept them in that meaning as an adequate formulation of the results of my stage two [by stage two theism Willard refers to a belief in God on the basis of teleology]. But it is necessary at the same time to insist that he really did mean what he did say in these two passages. (I take Philo to speak for him.) Hume was a minimal or stage-two theist. He believed that the physical universe rationally required a mind or mind-like being as its source, and for the reasons I have indicated above. His further views, to the effect that the world offers no rational support for the full-blown God or Christian theism, do not diminish this one bit.

We should occasionally think about the fact that all of the "great" philosophers—the ones which, up to very recently, all of the better graduate programs in philosophy thought you had to know something about before professional respect could rest upon you (Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, "St. Occam," Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley [sic], Kant, and Hegel)—accepted either second stage theism or (Spinoza, Kant, Hegel) something stronger. Kant, who along with Hume is generally credited among professional philosophers with destroying any possibility of significant theistic evidences, said that "belief in a God and in another world is so interwoven with my moral sentiment that as there is little danger of my losing the latter, there is equally little cause for fear that the former can ever be taken from me" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 857). At the very least, he held, it is impossible to prove "that there is no such being and no such life" (B 858). His belief was that if the moral life is possible, there is "another world," the "intelligible world," which alone makes the moral life possible. And he indeed believed the moral life to be possible. So here is an argument which, to his own mind, secured the existence of a person-like transcendental being with its world. That it is in some sense a "moral argument" does not mean that it is not as logically serious as any other argument. Kant did not regard the moral world as nebulous or non-existent in the contemporary manner.

Now I do not cite these great philosophers as authorities on the points here at issue, though it is about time that the actual role of authority in professional philosophy and in the intellectual world generally got a candid and thorough reexamination. (There's a whole lot of faking going on.) It is just that the general impression that philosophers—especially the "real" ones—are explicit or closet atheists, needs occasionally to be brought over against certain historical

of *Emptiness: An Introduction to Early Madhyamika* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989) for an excellent comparison with pragmatic, existential, and post-modern thought.

facts. And the often suggested idea that, if Aristotle or Descartes or Locke had only lived today, they too would have been atheists, needs to be faced with the challenge to point out exactly what it is that we now know or can do that would have modified the arguments upon which they based their theism. (I have even heard it suggested that these philosophers were just hypocrites and only seemed to accept theism from fear of their society!)⁷³

Clearly, then, a belief in a Supreme Being or Ultimate is pervasive, regardless of station in life, philosophical training, or historical time period. Given the nature of first principles—that occasional hold-outs or least explicit denials can be found—it is not at all surprising that some verbally deny God's existence (though associated beliefs and actual practices may prove otherwise). If fact, given the mitigating factors discussed earlier, it is surprising that belief in God is as widespread as it is. The presence of these mitigating factors also goes a long way in explaining the disagreement that exists with respect to the nature of this Ultimate.

Once the existence of common consent is coupled with an analysis of the conditions of origin, I believe we are left with a very strong cumulative case for belief in God being foundational. Though philosophers and intellectuals have traditionally appealed to arguments in natural theology to support the claim that God exists, very few theists have either the time or intellectual capacity for such appeals. As Reformed thinkers point out, it may be that natural theologians incorrectly hold that belief is formed on the basis of arguments like the teleological when, in fact, God is seen directly in the design of creation.⁷⁴ Few believe in God on the basis of argument, and of those who say they do, their belief usually preceded rational grounding and in fact may be due not to a direct argument but to a

⁷³ "Language, Being, God, and the Three Stages of Theistic Evidence" in J. P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen's *Does God Exist? The Great Debate* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), pp. 211-212.

⁷⁴ Cf. Clark, *Return to Reason*, p. 49.

direct, though mediated, perception of God. The existence of God is normally affirmed independently of pure reason or experience. Furthermore, alternative explanations for belief, whether natural, psychological, or sociological, are either inadequate in light of historical evidence or beg the question with respect to God's existence.⁷⁵

3. THE RELIABILITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS A CONTINGENT FIRST PRINCIPLE

It is not within the scope of this chapter to address the topic of religious experience in detail. A possible problem with discussing religious experience is the difficulty in determining what exactly is meant by religious experience. Those who define or describe it always run the risk of singling out those experiences that give preferences to their own religious system.⁷⁶ Though a complete treatment of religious experience would necessitate addressing this difficulty, I believe that the reliability of religious experience can still be discussed here in a general way.

The correlate to the metaphysical necessary first principle "God exists" is the contingent first principle "religious experience is

⁷⁵ For example, Tyler's animistic theory, Müller's nature-worship theory, and Frazer's magic theory (cf. Lewis M. Hopfe's *Religions of the World*, 4th ed. [New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987], pp. 5-8 for a cursory discussion of each) have all been deemed inadequate naturalistic explanations for the origin of religion. Psychological explanations, like Freud's projection theory or Feuerbach's wish-fulfillment theory, assume theism is not true. If the Judeo-Christian conception of God is correct one should expect to conceive of God in such terms. One could just as easily reply, with respect to Freud and Feuerbach, that they fail to project God because they did not have good relationships with their fathers or because they would prefer that He did not exist. Similarly, with respect to Marx, the fact that religion may be, and often has been, used as an opiate is irrelevant with respect to its truthfulness. Psychological and sociological explanations are therefore disguised *ad hominem circumstantial* arguments.

⁷⁶ I am indebted to Richard Aquila for bringing this point to my attention.

reliable." On the whole Reformed thinkers have made a strong case for thinking that religious experience is a legitimate avenue for truth.

As William J. Wainwright proposes:

A pramana is a 'source or means of acquiring new knowledge'. For example, sense perception, yogic intuition, inference and testimony are pramanas. According to Advaita Vedanta, all pramanas are 'intrinsically valid'.

... I would suggest that the Advaitin doctrine contains an important truth. If there is no type of apparent cognition which is presumptively valid, then it is impossible to avoid an infinite regress. Furthermore, to suppose that one type of apparent cognition is presumptively valid while another is not is arbitrary.⁷⁷

Where Plantinga errs is with respect to the status of the contents of religious experience. Religious experiences are only *prima facie* justified because they rest upon the foundational belief that religious experience is a reliable avenue for truth. Specific judgments stemming from these first principles, such as "God is speaking to me" is therefore capable of being defeated; they are innocent unless proven guilty. The reliability of religious experience does, however, as a first principle, entail that something is experienced (God) in the same way that the reliability of sense experience implies something is perceived (a world).

The misunderstanding of the nature of claims resting upon religious experience is linked with another difficulty. Plantinga seems to think that since specific religious experiences are basic, evidence and argument is unnecessary and impossible. However, as even Alston realizes, specific experiences are only *prima facie* justified—evidence and argument that defeat are therefore legitimate and necessary. Additionally, as Mavrodes pointed out, to embrace "negative" evidence while rejecting "positive" evidence is capricious.

⁷⁷ *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), pp. 125, 126.

Objections to religious experience fall into three main categories. Critics tend to claim either that 1) there is an absence of independent justification for the notion that religious experience is a source for truth, 2) religious and sense experience are not analogous, or 3) propositions derivable from religious experience are limited in their scope of application.⁷⁸ I believe that, following the general approach outlined by Plantinga and Alston, coupled with a more rigorous use of argument and evidence, successful responses can be given to each.

a. Absence of Independent Justification

As previously noted, those who demand that justification be provided for the claim that religious experience delivers truth or is a genuine source for knowledge fail to understand the ramifications of their objection.

The implication is clear. If a mode of experience provides primary access to a domain of reality, it can't be independently justified. Any justification begs the question by implicitly appealing to facts established by that mode of experience. Hence if religious experience provides our primary access to divine reality, a lack of independent justification casts no more doubt on its reliability than on the reliability of sense perception.⁷⁹

If the reliability of religious experience is a first principle, religious experience is in the same epistemic boat as sensory experience. The critic of religious experience as a mode of experience sinks the one at the expense of sinking the other.

Our ordinary daily activity presupposes a general trust in the veridical character of perceptual experience. For whilst we are aware that we are sometimes subject to illusions,

⁷⁸ Some might claim the possibility of alternative explanations serves as a fourth objection. But, as Alston pointed out earlier in our discussion ("Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 107), this retort is only relevant if perception of God is indirect. Analogous to the direct perception of sensory objects, experiencing God directly (though often mediated) entails a dismissal of alternate explanations (cf. Mavrodes' *Belief in God*, chapter 3).

⁷⁹ Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 124; cf. Alston "Christian Experience," pp. 117-119.

hallucinations and misperceptions of various kinds, this awareness presupposes a general trust in the main bulk and normal run of our apparently cognitive experience. It is only on the basis of this trust that we can have reason to distrust particular moments of it which fail to cohere with the rest. We are here up against something that is for us foundational. ...

And yet, as has often been pointed out, western philosophy from Descartes to Hume has shown by default that we cannot prove the existence of an external world. None of the philosophical arguments that have been advanced has proved generally convincing; and all the empirical evidences that might be taken as confirming our ordinary belief in the reality of the perceived world ... are circular, presupposing the reality of that world. We thus come to rest in something like the 'natural belief' that Hume ... adumbrated. ...

Now although Hume himself resisted such a move it would clearly be possible to offer a parallel account of religious belief. ... It grants that it is no more possible to prove the existence of God than the existence of a material world but claims that theistic belief arises, like perceptual belief, from a natural response of the human mind to its experiences.⁸⁰

If the reliability of religious experience is a first principle, then, like sensory experiences, specific religious experiences should be afforded the luxury of being assumed true unless certain defeaters exist. Richard Swinburne deems this the Principle of Credulity.⁸¹ The idea finds classic expression in C. D. Broad's *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research*:

When there is nucleus of agreement between the experiences of men in different places, times, and traditions, and when they all tend to put much the same kind of interpretation on the cognitive content of these experiences, it is reasonable to ascribe this agreement to their all being in contact with a certain objective aspect of reality unless there be some positive reason to think otherwise. The practical postulate which we go upon everywhere else is to treat cognitive claims as veridical unless there be some positive reason to think them delusive. This, after all, is our only guarantee for believing that ordinary sense-perception is veridical. We cannot prove that what people agree in perceiving really exists independently of them; but we do always assume that ordinary waking sense-perception is veridical unless we can produce some positive ground for thinking that it is delusive in any given case. I think it would be inconsistent to treat the experiences of religious mystics on different principles. So far as they agree they should be provisionally accepted as veridical unless there be some positive ground for thinking that they are not.⁸²

⁸⁰ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 213-214.

⁸¹ *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 254-260.

⁸² (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, Inc., 1953), p. 197.

To demand that the theist provide independent justification for the reliability of religious experience as a legitimate avenue for truth is therefore unreasonable; sense experience itself is incapable of meeting the charge. To deny foundational status to religious experience is therefore arbitrary and capricious.⁸³

b. Lack of Analogy

Undoubtedly the skeptic would respond, and traditionally has, by pointing out that there are relevant differences between sensory and religious experience. This would entail that sensory experience could be deemed veridical while religious experience would not. Typically, critics of religious experience have claimed that there is an absence of any checks or tests for religious experience while there are for sensory experience.⁸⁴ It has also been claimed that even if some checks for religious experience are present, some specific checks or tests present with respect to sensory experience are absent with respect to religious experience. In either case a lack of analogy between the two modes of experiences is said to cast doubt upon the cognitive status of religious experience.

Those who claim that there are no checks or tests for religious experience are basically claiming that while defeaters and confirmation are present with respect to sensory experience they are absent with respect to religious experience. But this is patently false. For there are tests which confirm/disconfirm, validate/invalidate, or verify/falsify religious experience. There are tests concerning 1) the reliability of the object, 2) the

⁸³ Cf. Wainwright's *Mysticism*, section II. A.

⁸⁴ In effect, the critic is asserting that believers are claiming their religious experiences are incorrigible, a claim no one makes with respect to sensory experience.

genuineness of the experience, and 3) the reliability of the perceiver.⁸⁵

Arguments for or against the existence of God play a role with respect to the reliability of the object of religious experience. If the problem of evil demonstrated that God could not exist then clearly any experience or perception of Him would be faulty. Likewise, a successful argument for God's existence would serve as external confirmation or corroborative evidence for a specific religious experience—especially if the cognitive content of that experience was directly related to that argument (e.g., an experience of God's goodness coupled with an independently justified moral argument). In addition to arguments for or against the existence of God, considerations of logic also appear relevant. The content of religious experience cannot be self-contradictory and remain cognitive.⁸⁶

Tests also exist with respect to the genuineness of the experience. Few believers claim that all religious experiences are genuine. As such, tests have been established which verify or falsify whether an experience is genuine. Wainwright lists six tests with respect to mystical experience:

(1) The consequences of the experience must be good for the mystic. ... (2) One must consider the effect which the experience has on others. ... (3) The depth, the profundity and the 'sweetness' (Jonathan Edwards) of what the mystic says on the basis of his experiences counts in favor of the genuineness of that experience. ... (4) We must examine what the mystic says on the basis of his experience and see whether it agrees or disagrees with orthodox talk. ... (5) It will be helpful to determine whether the experience in question resembles other mystical experiences regarded as paradigmatic by the religious community. ... (6) We must also consider the pronouncements of authority. In some communities (for example, Zen) the word of the spiritual director, guru or master is final. In other religious communities, the voice of the spiritual director is

⁸⁵ Here I am indebted to the works of Moreland, Trueblood, Hick, and particularly Wainwright.

⁸⁶ Wainwright, *Mysticism*, pp. 85-86, 87.

important though not conclusive. In some cases the relevant authority may be the community as a whole, or some special organ of it.⁸⁷

Tests also exist with respect to the reliability of the perceiver. The character of the reporters of religious experience as well as their stability and sanity lend credence to the trustworthiness of their claims and experiences.⁸⁸

Given the existence of three sorts of tests for the veracity of specific religious experiences some critics have resorted to claiming that even though *some* tests exist, *relevant* tests are missing. Certain checks are present with respect to sensory experience that are absent in religious experience. There is an absence of universal capacity, agreement, and predictions. To each the theist need merely respond that differences in tests for sensory and religious experience should be expected given the differences in the object experienced. Religious thinkers are not claiming religious experience is identical to sensory experience, merely analogous. To demand that identical tests be utilized is to presuppose that the objects are identical.

The first test applicable for sensory experience but not numinous experience is universal capacity. The skeptic of religious experience claims that all have sensory experiences whereas only a

⁸⁷ *Mysticism*, pp. 86, 87. In addition to the six tests listed here one could also add a seventh: eschatological confirmation (cf. Nash, *Faith and Reason*, p. 149; cf. also J. P. Moreland's *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987], pp. 239-240 for a listing of seven tests of numinous experience.)

⁸⁸ Cf. Trueblood's *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 156-157 and Swinburne's *The Existence of God*, p. 260. James, in his discussion of medical materialism in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (first lecture), and Broad present a convincing case that mental stability may not be a requisite condition for ascertaining an experience's veracity: "Suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is an aspect of the world which remains altogether outside the ken of ordinary persons in their daily life. Then it seems very likely that some degree of mental and physical abnormality would be a necessary condition for getting sufficiently loosened from the objects of ordinary sense-perception to come into cognitive contact with that aspect of reality"

select few seem to experience religious perception. There are several responses open to the theist. The first is to point out that all modes of sensory experience are not available to all at all times. Though to a lesser degree, this objection can therefore also be raised against those who stand behind sensory experience. Secondly, if Calvin is correct with respect to the *sensus divinitatis*, it is not the case that only a few experience God; an explicit denial of religious experience may be at odds with an implicit affirmation. Given the nature of the subject or perceiver, as a rebellious being suppressing the known truth, an absence of universal capacity (or at least universal affirmation) should be expected.

Other critics of religious experience claim that sensory and religious experience are not analogous since a wide degree of consensus exists with respect to the former but not with the latter. Here again several responses are open to the religious thinker. First, it can be pointed out that a large degree of agreement exists with respect to religious experiences, particularly the mystical forms (admittedly this is a very small percentage).

Mystics from different traditions frequently describe their experiences in similar ways. For example, theistic mystical experiences occur in Christianity, Vaisnavism, Saiva Siddhanta, and Islam. Monistic mystical consciousness plays an important role in Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, Yoga, and other traditions. Apparent perceptions of nature's unity, or its "life" or "soul," also occur cross-culturally. Furthermore, men and women who are comparatively untouched by any religious tradition sometimes have experiences like these ... These facts suggest that (1) mystical experiences aren't simply reflections of the mystic's tradition and that (2) their phenomenological object can be distinguished from their apparent object or their object as described by a particular tradition.

For example, the phenomenological object of theistic mystical consciousness appears to be an overwhelming loving presence that transcends nature and draws the mystic to itself. Its apparent object is an unembodied person or mind that various traditions then identify as Vishnu, Allah, or the triune God of Christianity. The phenomenological object of monistic mystical consciousness seems to be one's own empty consciousness.

Different traditions identify this as the true self, the Brahman, and so on.⁸⁹

The charge that agreement exists with respect to sensory experience but not with respect to religious experience is simply not in line with the facts. An even more troubling response for the atheist, however, is that complete agreement is not necessary. Disagreement is also present with respect to sensory experience. Surely this does not discount its general reliability. The absence of complete agreement with respect to religious experience would only be an issue if religious thinkers claimed all experiences of the Ultimate were genuine—but clearly they do not. "St. Teresa of Avila, for example, was much concerned about the authenticity of her own mystical experiences. One of the main criteria that she and the church used was conformity with the scriptures."⁹⁰ The objection that agreement is not present with respect to religious experience is therefore met by pointing out that a large amount of agreement *is* present even though—and even the proponent of the reliability of sense experience admits this—complete agreement is not necessary. Additionally, given the aforementioned mitigating factors, complete agreement should not be expected.

The differences [between sensory and mystical experiences] can be explained by the fact that the *objects* of these two kinds of experience are radically different.

Suppose that God is the object of mystical experience (rather than Nibbana or the Atman, etc.). If God is what He is supposed to be (omnipotent, omniscient, mysterious other, transcendent and so on), then whether or not one has an experience of Him will, in the last analysis, depend upon His will; there will be not [sic] set of procedures the correct use of which invariably results in illumination or union. Hence, while these experiences may be repeatable in the weak sense that given *exactly* the same conditions (including God's gracious activity), the same experience will occur, there is no reason to suppose that they will be repeatable in the strong sense, viz, that certain procedures or methods can be described which are

⁸⁹ Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 118.

⁹⁰ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 224.

such that (almost) all who correctly employ them will obtain the experience in question.

God is radically unlike physical objects in this respect. Physical objects exhibit spatio-temporal continuity, are relatively accessible and behave in law-like and regular ways. Given the nature of physical objects, one reasonably supposes that if one's experience of the object is veridical, others will enjoy similar experiences under similar conditions. One expects experiences of these objects to cohere and mutually support one another in certain familiar ways. If the nature of physical objects were different, however, these expectations would not be reasonable; experiences of these objects would not be repeatable in the strong sense, *even though the objects were real and experiences of them veridical*. Suppose, for example, that mountains jumped about in a discontinuous fashion, randomly appeared and disappeared, and behaved in other lawless and unpredictable ways. If these conditions obtained, observation under similar conditions would not normally yield similar results even if mountains were real and experiences of them were veridical. There would be no reason to expect experiences in this area to cohere and support one another in the way they do.

The general point is this. The nature of an object should (at least partly) determine the tests for its presence. Given the nature of physical objects it is reasonable to suppose that genuine experiences of those objects can be confirmed by employing appropriate procedures and obtaining similar experiences, and that non-genuine experiences can be disconfirmed by employing the same procedures and obtaining different experiences. God's nature, on the other hand, is radically different from the nature of physical objects. It is therefore not clearly reasonable to suppose that (apparent) experiences of God can be confirmed or disconfirmed in the same fashion.⁹¹

Complete agreement should also not be expected due to the work of the perceiver. As with sensory experience, the "given" or "brute experience" is often filtered through an interpretive framework. Disagreement with respect to religious experience is often explainable by appeal to an experience vs. interpretation distinction. Differing interpretations may stem from identical experiences.⁹² As Thomas Aquinas has noted, "the thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower."⁹³ Speaking of mystical experiences, Broad thinks that

⁹¹ Wainwright, *Mysticism*, pp. 93-95.

⁹² This point is most clearly made in Ninian Smart's "Interpretation and Mystical Experience" *Religious Studies* 1 (1965): pp. 75-87.

⁹³ The "Summa Theologica" of St. Thomas Aquinas, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: R. & T. Washbourne, Ltd., 1917),

... if we compare and contrast the statements made by religious mystics of various times, races, and religions, we find a common nucleus combined with very great differences in detail. Of course the interpretations which they have put on their experiences are much more varied than the experiences themselves. It is obvious that the interpretations will depend in a large measure on the traditional religious beliefs in which various mystics have been brought up.⁹⁴

Perhaps the distinction would be clearer if it were compared to sensory experience:

Suppose I see a hat on the table. We can distinguish (1) the "given"—visual sensations caused by the stimulation of the optic nerve, (2) the experience's "phenomenological object"—a hat-like surface apprehended from a particular point of view, and (3) the experience's "apparent object"—a hat. ... These perceptual claims should be distinguished from (4) perceptual claims partly based on beliefs that are indirectly connected with the experience and may not be shared by other observers. For example, thinking that the hat belongs to John, I might say, "I see John's hat."

While all three perceptual claims may be correct, only the first ("I see a hat-like surface") is *immediately* warranted by the experience. That is, the first is the only one which *must* be true for my experience to be veridical. ...

When we ask whether an ordinary perceptual experience is veridical, we are thus asking whether its phenomenological object is really perceived. It is therefore important to distinguish its phenomenological object from its apparent object or its object as described by perceptual claims like "I see John's hat." It is equally important to distinguish mysticism's phenomenological object from its apparent object or its object as described by doctrinal systems like Buddhism or Christianity.⁹⁵

p. 6 [Part II, Second Part, Question 1, Second Article]; cf. Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 153.

⁹⁴ *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research*, p. 193; cf. Michael Peterson, et al., *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 21.

⁹⁵ Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 117-118. Perhaps the best example of interpretation "coloring" an experience is found in the Buddha's tale of the blind men and the elephant (*The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, Part II: *Udana: Verses of Uplift*, trans. F. L. Woodward [London: The Pali Text Society, 1987], p. 81-83). Each individual had an authentic experience of the elephant, yet inferred a faulty interpretation on the basis of it. Interpretation takes on added significance when one is confronted with novel experiences. Thomas Kuhn, for example, references a psychological experiment with cards of wrongly-colored pips on pages 62-64 of his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In this experiment, participants often failed to identify the cards as faulty or as incongruous when compared with normal cards. The subjects unconsciously "forced" a traditional interpretation upon the unique experience; a black heart was viewed as

Some question whether or not it is possible to arrive at the noumenal object of religious experience since all experience is interpreted. Several responses can be offered. First, if this a legitimate difficulty for religious experience it is not less with respect to sensory experience. Second, it is simply not true that all of one's beliefs constitute all of one's experiences. For, if this were true, it would not be possible for experiences to affect or change one's beliefs. Since experiences often do affect a change in one's noetic structure, the relationship is obviously not one-way.⁹⁶ Argument and evidence are required to adjudicate between rival religious claims and assist in the process of unveiling the underlying perceived object. This can take place between two opposing religious systems or from within a single religious perspective. For example, Ninian Smart relates a situation where the noted Sufi mystic, al-Ghazali, corrects an interpretation given by a fellow Sufi regarding his experience of God.

The mystics, after their ascent to the heavens of Reality, agree that they saw nothing in existence except God the One. Some of them attained this state through discursive reasoning, others reached it by savouring and experiencing it. From these all plurality entirely fell away. They were drowned in pure solitude: their reason was lost in it, and they became as if dazed in it. They no longer had the capacity to recollect aught but God, nor could they in any wise remember themselves. Nothing was left to them but God. They became drunk with a drunkenness in which their reason collapsed. One of them said, 'I am God (the Truth)'. Another said, 'Glory be to me. How great is my

a black spade or a red heart. Given the mitigating factors with respect to religious experience, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose many experiences of God are likewise "interpreted."

⁹⁶ Cf. Winfried Corduan's *Mysticism: An Evangelical Option?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), pp. 52-53. A similar retort can be made to the post-modernist. The ability to recognize rival worldviews as rivals requires that at least some overlap exists between them (cf. Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), pp. 79-80.). Additionally, the fact that some are persuaded to shift paradigms implies some interpretative values transcend them (cf. Mitchell's *The Justification of Religious Belief*, p. 80f.).

glory', while another said, 'Within my robe is naught but God'. But the words of lovers when in a state of drunkenness must be hidden away and not broadcast. However, when their drunkenness abates and the sovereignty of their reason is restored,—and reason is God's scale upon earth,—they know that this was not actual identity. ... For it is not impossible that a man should be confronted by a mirror and should look into it, and not see the mirror at all, and that he should think that the form he saw in the mirror was the form of the mirror itself and identical with it. ...

What Ghazali is saying here—to translate into my own jargon—is that the mystic's auto-interpretation of his experience as involving actual identity with God is mistaken, and that the correct interpretation must say that there is some distinction between the soul and God.⁹⁷

The absence of complete agreement with respect to religious experience is, therefore, not a difficulty for a theist. While a large amount of agreement exists, complete agreement is not necessary; furthermore, complete agreement should not be expected (given the experience/interpretation distinction, the acknowledgment that some experiences are delusional, and the nature of the object).

Similar responses can be given to those who claim religious experience is unlike sensory experience with respect to predictions. Predictive power is limited due to the nature of the object perceived. As Wainwright pointed out, if God exists He is wholly unlike sensory objects. As such, a demand for predictive power is unwarranted. However, since God would not be a Being who acts chaotically it would not be impossible for a minimal amount of predictions to exist.⁹⁸ This is, in fact, what one finds.

A few predictions do appear to be based upon mystical experience. On the basis of their experience mystics frequently assert that the soul is immortal and, of course, this involves a prediction. Furthermore, mystics occasionally claim that their experiences confirm theological systems which include certain predictions as an integral part. Thus, Christian mystics have sometimes regarded their experiences as confirmations of the truth of Christian dogma, and Christian dogma includes a belief in the general resurrection and the transfiguration of heaven and earth. A mystic may also, on the basis of his experience,

⁹⁷ "Interpretation and Mystical Experience," p. 85.

⁹⁸ Cf. Wainwright, *Mysticism*, p. 100.

predict that if one subjects oneself to the appropriate discipline (for example, practices the Jesus prayer or follows the noble eight-fold path) he will obtain a vision of God or pass into Nibbana or something of the sort.⁹⁹

In summary then, objects of a form of experience affect what sorts of tests are relevant. If the object of religious experience is an ultimately incomprehensible Being who reveals Himself only when He chooses it follows that successful predictions and massive agreement are inappropriate tests for assessing religious experience. Other tests, however, are relevant. An experience of a maximally perfect being would yield beneficial consequences and insight that is compatible with known truths. Since the object is holy, holiness would presumably be a requirement for being an appropriately situated observer. It would therefore be reasonable to compare experiences with those of the saints. Appeals to authority would also be relevant tests for establishing a religious experience as veridical if there are independent reasons for thinking their authority comes from God.¹⁰⁰

c. Limited in Scope of Application

Some may argue that even if religious experience is a genuine mode of knowledge and that relevant tests exist, this does not entail that the content of that knowledge is available to all. Perhaps those who have had a religious experience have grounds for belief in God, but the persuasiveness of the experience does not extend beyond the experiencer. Religious experience serves as a ground for belief solely for those who have had religious experiences. I believe such a conclusion is unduly hasty. For, as Broad states,

... when we find that there are certain experiences which, though never very frequent in a high degree of intensity, have happened in a high degree among a few men at all times and places; and when we find that, in spite of differences in detail which we can explain, they involve certain fundamental conditions which are common and peculiar to them, two alternatives are open to

⁹⁹ Wainwright, *Mysticism*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁰ Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 122.

us. (i) We may suppose that these men are in contact with an aspect of reality which is not revealed to ordinary persons in their everyday experience. And we may suppose that the characteristics which they agree in ascribing to reality on the basis of these experiences probably do belong to it. Or (ii) we may suppose that they are all subject to delusion from which other men are free.¹⁰¹

As we noted earlier, tests exist which rule out the possibility of the latter option being true. If something more than these checks is demanded the objector himself falls prey to his own objection—no mode of knowledge can meet this demand. The rational individual must therefore prudently embrace Broad's initial option. In point of fact, this is precisely what takes place with respect to sensory experience. For, coupled with the general reliability of sensory experience, is the equally foundational belief that testimony is, on the whole, reliable. The Principle of Credulity is linked with the Principle of Testimony. Once an experience of another has met the tests required to establish its veracity, the principle of testimony calls for the experience to be accepted by others. "One who has not himself had an experience apparently of God is not in as strong a position as those who have. He will have less evidence for the existence of God; but not much less, for he will have testimony of many who have had such experiences."¹⁰²

I have never directly experienced Paris but believe it exists on the basis of the testimony of others. "Ah, but you *could* go to Paris and independently verify its existence," comes the reply. Yes, I could, but I need not—claims of others are deemed veridical in a *prima facie* way. Additionally, applied to religious experience, those who have not experienced God may be able to verify the claim for themselves by "taking holy waters" as Pascal would say, or following a

¹⁰¹ Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research, p. 194.

¹⁰² Cf. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p. 274, cf. 272f.

path of meditation laid out by a mystic. "But what of those who have never had, and never will have, a religious experience?" This does not detract from the meaningfulness of the claim or the actual existence of the referent. I take one born blind to be irrational if he denies the existence of colors, even though he never has and never will directly experience colors for himself. The testimony of others deemed reliable is sufficient to ground a belief in their existence. Similarly, though not all have experienced God, the Principle of Testimony necessitates that claims of those who have experienced God be afforded *prima facie* justification. Unless another can demonstrate that the relevant tests for religious experience are not met, the claims must be accepted. To do otherwise is to capriciously and inconsistently grant privileges with respect to sensory experience while rejecting them for religious experience.

C. CONCLUSION

Reformed epistemology can and should be bolstered by an expanded use of evidence. Though foundational beliefs are by definition unsupported, Reid himself acknowledged that evidence oftentimes confirms and modifies the first principles.¹⁰³ Calvin also spoke of evidence confirming theological beliefs. Though a belief in God can be affirmed on the basis of Reid's five tests and other identifiable characteristics, the concept of God remains somewhat vague and undefined. Reformed epistemologists should realize that some of the traditional arguments for God may modify that concept. These modifications may, in turn, confirm or disconfirm some specific interpretations of God's nature. For example, if a form of the cosmological argument based upon a temporally finite universe is

¹⁰³ Recall, for example, his discussion of the reliability of testimony

successful this may have implications for whether pantheism or panentheism are viable.¹⁰⁴ In a similar manner, reasoning and logic may assist in rejecting some self-contradictory conceptions of the Ultimate. Without appeal to evidence and argument the Reformed thinker is left with numerous mutually-exclusive religious systems—many perhaps compatible with a basic understanding of God but none compatible with each other. Two options are available: one can modify the specific religious traditions (as a pluralist like John Hick might do), or one can use evidence and argument to further delineate God's nature and substantiate that only one religious tradition (in the case of Reformed epistemology, Christianity) is true. The latter option is only feasible if evidence is granted a role in religious belief.

The difficulties for Plantinga and others appear to stem from misunderstanding the status of specific claims of religious experience, drawing a distinction between "positive" and "negative" apologetics and argument, failing to realize that Reid himself asserted evidence and argument can play a role with respect to foundational beliefs, and attempting to ground belief in God solely by an analogy with the reliability of sensory experience. I disagree with each of these points. First, specific religious experiences are not foundational but are supported by the first principle that religious experience in general is reliable. Second, there is no distinction between positive and negative arguments; what falsifies one theory either verifies or lends credence to another. Third, evidence, according to Reid, can confirm and modify foundational beliefs. Finally, belief in God can be grounded in other ways besides analogy with sense experience. If Reformed epistemologists embrace

and the principle of induction.

¹⁰⁴ This fact was first brought to my attention in personal correspondence with William Lane Craig.

these modifications, thereby affording evidence a greater role in religious belief, the persuasiveness of their position would be greatly enhanced.

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