



Does one need evidence for belief in God?

1516603

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1 Introduction

It is commonly the case that sound, epistemological principles such as basic beliefs immediately become regarded as invalid when applied to theistic contexts. I will show that despite this, there is a strong sense of comparability between beliefs in God with beliefs in non-theistic beings and other commonly-held basic beliefs such as qualities of love and trust. To establish that both the belief in the existence of God and the existence of other beings and non-perceptual qualities are justified as evidence in the same way, I will have to establish that they are both what Plantinga calls properly basic beliefs. I will argue that this comparability makes it equally justifiable for the belief in God's existence in itself to be basic, in the same way that it is with other commonly-held beliefs. This argument does however require strong grounds to prove its viability, so I will be examining and critiquing the arguments which allude to a contradiction of this conclusion. By carefully examining these arguments, I will ultimately attempt to provide further justification for Plantinga's claim that the mere belief in God is sufficient to be regarded as evident to the self, without needing to be justified through logical arguments.

2 Plantinga's argument

Plantinga maintains that the belief in the existence of God is basic, axiomatic, and defeasible, and therefore does not require logical argument in order to justify this belief as true. He writes, "to believe or assert that God exists is to believe that there exists a being of a certain very special sort" [1]. This sort, according to Plantinga, is comparable to the belief in a sort of corporeal person who holds beliefs and has purposes, goodness, knowledge and power. Similarly, Herman Bavinck points out that belief in God resembles belief in the existence of other minds, and the self, in the sense that we do not need arguments to believe that other minds do in fact exist, as we can know how to identify rational beings by being a rational being ourselves [2]. Plantinga's ideas stem from reformer John Calvin who believed that God can be recognised in the same way as a person can, as a result of the "innate disposition" that God has planted in us, the "sensus divinitatis" [3] (the divine sense which leads us to an immediate belief in God, rather than one reached by argument). This works in the same way as sense perception and is a part of the natural noetic structure of man, constituting as empirical evidence. This is what Calvin believes to have

caused in people a natural, strong tendency to believe in God in the same way that we believe in physical beings and sensory qualities that are clear to our senses and imagination. I will begin to analyse exactly what makes Calvin and therefore Plantinga justified in forming this comparison.

3 What makes belief in God properly basic?

Both the belief in the existence of God and the existence of other beings and non-perceptual qualities are linked by the sufficiency of the belief as being evident to the self. Evidence is a body of facts which indicate the truthfulness and validity of a belief or proposition. It is difficult to say what counts as actual evidence, since there are no absolute criteria for how evidence should be constituted. Many attempts have been made to conjure a criterion for what counts as evidence, including those from classical foundationalists and evidentialists. Rather, a decision for what constitutes as evidence is often made based on subjective judgments, and much of the decision-making process relies on accounts of personal experiences and perception. As with other beliefs, we can say that the belief in God indeed requires evidence in order for it to be verified as a true belief. However, it can be shown that like many beliefs, evidence for the belief in God is grounded in non-inferential reasoning. There is, of course, the need to defend one's belief in God from its critics in order that it is a properly basic belief. It is not enough for one to think that a belief is properly basic, as this is not rational. In all definitions of proper basicity, the belief must actually be properly basic. By this, I mean that there must be rational, strong grounds through which the belief is formed. Plantinga nevertheless holds that when people say they hold a belief in God, they are referring to belief in the many conditions that call forth this belief in God, comprised according to Plantinga of "guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, a sense that he speaks and perception of various parts of the universe" [4]. There must also be certain perceptual conditions in place in order for one to have strong and rational grounds for their beliefs, such as having reliable belief-forming mechanisms (i.e. knowing that one is not in a dreaming state, and knowing that one is mentally capable of forming a rational belief).

By establishing a solid criterion for proper basicity, we can come to know how to justify evidence, and therefore determine which beliefs are permissible in being classed as basic beliefs.

A classical foundationalist proposes the following universal criterion for proper basicity:

(1) 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. [5]

According to the classical foundationalist, there is a presupposition that there must be definite rules to deciding which beliefs should be properly basic. Put into practice, we can see how flawed this criterion is. For example, a person who claims they felt nauseous in the morning would not be justified in believing this, as there is insufficient evidence to prove that they experienced this sensation. This seems absurd to say that one cannot be justified in experiencing what they thought they felt, particularly as the person is likely to be entirely convinced that they did indeed experience the sensation of nausea, accompanied by strong evidence that their mind is in a stable state and not playing tricks on them.

The classical foundationalist's rules for proper basicity are simply not feasible. As with the example of the nauseous sensation, certain memory beliefs, perceptual beliefs and beliefs that ascribe mental states are all examples of beliefs which do not fit this criterion as not all are directly evident to the senses, yet they are still universally believed. Thus, basic beliefs do not require a strict criterion, they can be regarded as evidence in themselves without being backed up by empirical proof that is evident to the senses, insofar as they are believed on strong and rational grounds. To illustrate this, Plantinga gives examples of three beliefs which are commonly-held, and evident to the self without the requirement of argument to prove their truthfulness [6].

1. I see a tree
2. I had breakfast this morning
3. That person is angry

Since many simple, commonly-held beliefs follow the same structure as these paradigms that Plantinga provides, the classical foundationalist's criteria for basic beliefs becomes nonsensical, as such simple beliefs would not be classed as properly basic although they can indeed be applied universally.

4 The Great Pumpkin Objection

Plantinga thinks that the belief in God's existence must have strong, circumstantial grounds which would qualify in making these beliefs justified in being properly basic. He uses the Great Pumpkin objection as a way of demonstrating the feasibility of beliefs in God as basic compared to propositions which have no grounds for properly basic belief. For example, it would not be reasonable to take the proposition that "the Great Pumpkin returns every year for Halloween" [7] as a properly basic belief. This is because there are no strong circumstantial grounds in which this belief can be justified, as there are no circumstances in which the great pumpkin is likely to appear since its existence has never been accounted for. We can play around with this example and say that person A has just as much evidence to believe that the Great Pumpkin will return every year for Halloween (x) as a person who believes in the existence of God, as both people have no perceptual evidence for their existences. However, if we take what constitutes as evidence according to the reformed epistemologist, we can say that there are no circumstances in which this belief in the Great Pumpkin could be classed as proper, and so it is an irrational and groundless claim. This makes reasonable sense when applied to real life situations. For example, the belief that "I see a bush" is properly basic in circumstances where I am outside in a park and sitting on a bench. However, the same belief is not likely to be true and would not be properly basic if I were sitting on my couch in a dark room with my eyes closed. It is therefore simple non-inferential beliefs such as "I see a bush" which are reasonable, as such propositions are informed by good judgement and strong grounds for belief.

In the same way, similar non-theistic and non-inferential paradigms like these are comparable to assigning the observation of the universe to the creation of the world, thus providing grounds for justification of the belief in God's existence. Plantinga's argument for whether self-evidence is sufficient for basic belief in God, relies on the analogousness between the paradigmatic basic beliefs and the basic belief that God exists. To provide strong proof of the analogousness between these two categories of basic beliefs (theistic and non-theistic), I will disprove three disanalogies Richard Grigg has in response to Plantinga, between paradigmatic basic beliefs (1) (2) and (3), and the belief in God. In forming these disanalogies, Grigg aims for Plantinga to reconsider his reasoning to beliefs in God being properly basic.

5 Grigg's disanalogies

The first claim of disanalogy between the paradigmatic basic beliefs and theistic beliefs which Grigg makes is that the theistic belief-formation is influenced by bias, whilst (1), (2) and (3) are not [8]. He thinks that with theistic beliefs, there is a will for the belief in question to be true, whereas with non-theistic basic beliefs like the paradigms, the belief is not influenced by a will for it to be true. Firstly, with all beliefs there is a sense of willingness or hope that the belief that is held is true, but because of the basicity of the belief, the belief itself is not affected by this willingness. Grigg seems to make a fundamental mistake in assuming that the desire to believe in the existence of God necessarily makes the belief biased, implying that the belief is disingenuous. As with any belief, it is quite reasonable for there to be a hope or will for the belief in question to be based on truth, without it being a factor of bias. This means that it is possible that our willingness for the truthfulness of the belief in question, is ordinarily engrained into our beliefs, happening as an automatic result of the beliefs forming. Even if the desire to believe was involved in the belief-forming mechanism, this does not necessarily make it biased. Bias would only have an impact on the belief or belief-forming mechanism if it were to be influenced by another factor, e.g. an incentive to persuade. Wanting a belief to be true in itself is not valid reasoning for Grigg to say a belief is biased, as it is not necessarily the case that wanting something to be true in itself leads to a heavy influence on the way the belief is formed, as Grigg assumes it does. It seems logical enough for desire to ordinarily play a role within the belief itself, which would make it no different from the role of desire within the paradigmatic beliefs. The theistic believer may subconsciously hold a desire for their theistic beliefs to be heard and understood by others, yet this is not an indication of a bias either as it is ordinary to hold this desire with any belief and does not influence the belief itself. If an alien being came to Earth and was unaware that the object in front of them was a tree, one would feel the desire to convince them otherwise, but they would not use this desire to form their belief that the object in question is a tree. Similarly, if a believer in God were to be confronted with somebody who was not aware of the nature of God, the believer would feel a desire to inform the person of the nature of God, yet this desire is separate from the belief itself. Once a belief is formed, one may want to maintain their belief, but beliefs tend to be based on a form of subjective rationality which makes the information believable enough to the person without the separate desire for it to be true to have any real effect on the belief. Desire seems to be a separate element altogether. For exam-

ple, by holding the belief ‘there is a tree’, one may primarily truly believe that there is in fact a tree, yet they may subconsciously hold the desire, not for their belief to be true, but for their belief-forming mechanisms to be in working order so that the belief is indeed justified. Thus, it seems that willingness in theistic beliefs plays the same role as in paradigmatic beliefs, in that it is an ordinary element in any belief, and that the desire is separate from the belief itself, proving Grigg’s disanalogy to hold little weight.

The second claim of a disanalogy that Grigg makes is the element of universality to paradigm beliefs, as opposed to theistic beliefs which there is no universality. By this, he means that if one were to stand in a park and observe a tree-like figure, they would deduce that “there is a tree”. One would be automatically disposed to believe it on the basis that it is a perceptual experience that they immediately deem as correct, yet if one were to say that “there is a starry night, God must have created it”, it would not be a universal belief that this were true. An agnostic may look at the sky and deduce that it is there by chance, the initial perceptual experience does not always lead to the belief that there is a God. Grigg thinks that if it were correct for God to be a basic belief, this universality would have to be analogous with the universality of the paradigmatic beliefs, so therefore it cannot be a basic belief. I do not believe that this successfully proves his point that this is a disanalogy. As McLeod points out, there are two-levels of a belief; the ‘first-level belief’ in which immediately forms a belief on the basis of perceptual experience x , and ‘second-level belief’ in which a belief is formed from a set of other beliefs which are unique to a person or thing [9]. Grigg seems to be wrong in saying that the paradigmatic beliefs are all first-level beliefs. While paradigm (1) is clearly a first-level belief, paradigms (2) and (3) are second-level beliefs. This is because two different individuals can deduce completely different beliefs on the basis of the same belief. For paradigm (3): “that person is angry”, the universal ‘first-level’ basic belief may be that ‘there exists a living person who can feel emotions’, in which both parties would agree on. But from this belief, one may deduce that ‘this person is concentrating very hard on their work at hand’ whilst the other deduces that ‘this person is angry’. What branches off of the first-level beliefs are subjective and dependent on interpretation. This could be because person (b) is mistaken and has not examined the person enough, hence forming a premature conclusion about the emotional state of the person in question. My theory is that theistic beliefs work in the same way as the paradigmatics (2) and (3), as perhaps one who is more informed would deduce from the first-level belief ‘it is a starry night’ that ‘God cre-

ated the stars, and therefore God exists', whilst an agnostic might deduce that it exists by chance, whilst another might deduce that it was created by aliens. Thus, the belief in God's existence can be tested by induction, which justifies it as properly basic. Just as all people belonging to the same religious group will have different ideas based on the same theistic beliefs, as it is with regular basic beliefs. Therefore, the paradigmatic beliefs can be paralleled to theistic beliefs in God.

The final disanalogy Grigg has is in my opinion his strongest claim. He says it is possible to either confirm or deny with outside sources whether a memory is true, whilst this is not possible with theistic beliefs. Empirically, this is true, one can indeed confirm they had breakfast by looking at their empty cereal bowl in the sink, or one can rely on their own past experiences of seeing a tree to confirm whether what they are now seeing is in fact a tree. He goes on to say that if one's memory were to gradually become more unreliable in their old age, it is still possible to a certain degree to recognise this deficiency, so one cannot claim that it is because of their failing memory that they cannot recognise whether their memory is actually reliable. Whereas, with theistic beliefs there are no outside sources to confirm the reliability of their memories, e.g. if God spoke to them in a dream. However, this does not prove to be a disanalogy if we are to follow Plantinga's claim that different types of evidence can be classed as empirical, and can be proved as empirical if a belief is evident to the self. This type of evidence does not need confirmation through outside sources, but is sufficient for one to have a basic belief on the basis of their own personal experience. I am claiming that Grigg's disanalogy is weak because in many cases, one cannot know for sure whether the evidence their experience is based on is in fact empirical knowledge because there is usually always a chance that one can be mistaken in both cases of paradigmatic and theistic beliefs. Using Grigg's example of recalling whether one had breakfast in the morning, it is the case that one cannot be completely sure that they had eaten breakfast strictly on the basis of the cereal bowl being in the sink. One may think that they know the cereal bowl belonged to them, causing them to form a belief that they did indeed have breakfast, but circumstances such as being in a rush may have caused them to mistake their bowl for another person's bowl. Even if they strongly believed the bowl belonged to them and if they did not doubt the reliability of their memory, they could still be wrong. Thus, one could falsely believe something based on what they believe of their own experience, falsely qualifying it as empirical evidence. Similarly, they could be completely correct in their recollection of whether they had eaten break-

fast that morning, as it is a matter of chance whether one can remember the correct information. This is the same with theistic beliefs, in that an experience may be recalled wrongly, and there is unreliability through outside sources. They may have had a dream where God appears and tells them to leave Peru, but through false recollection, they may recall that God had told them to stay in Peru, leading them to a false belief which they classify as empirical. This is an example of one finding empirical evidence through the self, which to some degree both paradigmatic and theistic beliefs do. This means that there is no flawless verification method for the complete reliability of our belief-forming practices like memory, or with outside sources. There is therefore no disanalogy between the paradigmatic basic beliefs and the belief of God's existence.

6 Are properly basic beliefs immoral?

William Clifford holds the evidentialist theory that it is “morally wrong” to accept any beliefs that are not based on ‘sufficient evidence. He thinks that these beliefs act “in defiance of our duty to mankind” [10]. His thinking is that beliefs such as these can dangerously compromise the welfare of other people, or influence people in a way that can be harmful. The problem with this is that it is largely presumptuous and mostly inaccurate, as he has not considered many beliefs which do not morally compromise the lives of others, but act independently of this sense of influence on others. In his essay *The Ethics of Belief*, he gives the example of the shipowner sending out an emigrant ship to sea, despite having the knowledge that the foundations of the ship were weak and damaged. Although he was aware that the state of the ship could compromise several lives when sent out to sea, the shipowner convinced himself to believe that the ship was safe to send out to sea. In this case, Clifford thinks that the shipowner had no right to believe based on the evidence he had, and so he must be held responsible for the consequences as he stifled his doubts about the unsafe nature of the ship before sending it out [11]. Similarly, Clifford thinks that one who holds a belief in God, believes without sufficient evidence, for example one cannot say that there is in fact solid evidence provided by arguments such as the cosmological or ontological arguments. Thus, he argues that in putting his passions of belief before his moral responsibility to others, one he defies his duty to mankind in the same way that the shipowner had done.

This argument is flawed in two ways, and can easily be shown to be unreasonable. Firstly, it is unreasonable because Clifford makes the fundamental mistake of attacking the argument by beginning with the assumption that God does not exist, which would make the argument too easy. Flew puts it like this; “the affirmative cannot properly appeal, in its arguments, to such premises as that there is such a person as God” [12]. In the same way, one cannot appeal to the presumption of atheism, that is, that there is no such a person as God.

Secondly, Clifford provides a weak demonstration of his argument. He chooses an extreme example of when a person chooses to perform an immoral action through a belief that deliberately disregards important facts. Though he points out that the shipowner forces himself to believe that the ship is fine, he still carries vital information which cannot simply be disregarded; the faultiness of the ship and its potential to harm people on board. This underlying knowledge of potential harm makes the example a special case, one which differs from other cases of holding basic beliefs which have the consequence of harming others. To show this, we can take the example of the doctor. A well-informed, experienced doctor could issue the wrong prescription to a patient who has a rare condition which there has been little research of, and which there have been only four others to have inherited the condition, slowly causing the patient to be killed by the prescription over time. It would not be fair to say that the incorrect basis by which this belief was formed, was immoral, as there was a desire for the patient to be cured as well as what was thought of as good judgement of which prescription should have been issued. Though having a harmful end, there was no immorality in holding this mistaken belief that the prescription would cure the patient, as it is the job of the doctor to make informed judgements, and the doctor was fulfilling his duty in issuing the prescription. This is a more viable example of how a basic belief can result in having harmful consequences. However, it is easy to confuse this for ones holding of a belief immorally, which Clifford appears to do in the example of the shipowner. It is only a matter of luck that a basic belief has unfortunate ends, and it is rarely the case that the belief itself is immoral as it was in the example of the shipowner, as basic beliefs do not specify a particular moral code.

Clifford has disregarded an important point, that basic beliefs are incorporated into situations that are not immoral every day. In his lecture *The Will to Believe*, James provides practical examples of how we already naturally apply faith and belief in others in every-day social situations, and

how this is justification for us to apply the same logic to theistic situations.

7 Self-fulfilling beliefs

William James thinks that much of society and political bodies rely on having faith in the personal actions of others. This is what he calls “self-fulfilling beliefs” [13], which he says in themselves are evidence which is enough to justify the belief. These self-fulfilling beliefs originate through adopting social expectations and faith in others. He states that “wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned” [14]. In order that one unified body can form, there is a reliance on the cooperation of collective individuals to work together in forming this body. For this, there must be a preliminary sense of trust and expectation in order to form the desired result of unification in a ‘body of individuals such as the army or the government. This can also be applied to many different social situations in every day contexts. James provides the example of the passengers on the train:

“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 anyone 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” [15]

This preliminary faith in the collective civilised manner of individuals eventually becomes a social norm. In fact, because it becomes naturally implemented into normal situations, it becomes irrational to believe that the system works in any other way. As James points out, if the system were any different from how it naturally is, e.g. ‘if we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once’, then the outcome would be completely different. As this would defy the norm, it is often quite unimaginable for the systematic reactions to a train-robbing to be any other way than it already is. This shows the preliminary bar of expectation is set by societal norms, which normalises the commonality of our beliefs that the outcome will be the same each time, such as our expectations of how a train-robbing would go. Hardly anybody would expect a car-full of people to rise against the robbing, so the strong

belief that there will be fear and passivity as a result of the robbing, would be considered as properly basic, as it is a commonly-held belief that these will be the reactions of people being robbed. Similarly, there are cases in which a fact cannot come at all without this sense of preliminary faith, such as one having faith that they are able to succeed in the field of triple jump. Without this preliminary faith, the person would not believe in themselves enough to enter into competitions, and they may stop practicing, it is only with preliminary belief in oneself that one would complete all of the steps which would lead them to establishing themselves as a successful athlete.

Thus, there are strong grounds to the belief that this predisposed trust in others can be applied to having a predisposed faith and trust in the existence of God, which needs no logical argument in the same way that trust in others needs no argument to justify it. The preliminary trust and faith is crucial in regular social situations, which Clifford tends to disregard. By Clifford's logic, basic beliefs in others such as natural trust and faith, would be regarded as irrational in any situation, as there is often no strong evidence which suggests this trust should be applied, yet we can see that it naturally happens in many situations such as the example on the bus which James describes. If this belief can be rationally and naturally applied to social situations, then there is nothing in the belief itself that morally compromises the welfare of others, since there are only high stakes when the belief is accompanied by a disregard of another person's welfare. Similarly, in examining Clifford's argument, we can see that there is a difference in the moral conditions of forming a belief while disregarding known important facts, and forming a belief based on obliviousness to the danger the consequences of enacting this belief may have. It is merely a matter of coincidence for harm to ensue as a result of a belief, which can happen with theistic and non-theistic basic beliefs, yet the beliefs in themselves are both non-harmful. When the basic beliefs are based on sound judgment in that they use reason and self-evidence to make informed opinions, the consequences of a basic belief have the equal potential to have a positive impact on others.

8 Conclusion

To conclude, we have seen the similarities between non-theistic paradigmatic basic beliefs, and the belief in the existence of God. Through analysing Grigg's disanalogies we have seen that his claims cannot indefinitely prove

the disanalogousness between the paradigmatic cases and theistic cases. Plantinga's arguments and paradigms provide a feasible guideline for how we should analyse the ways in which we can show that beliefs based on self-evidence are sufficient for evidence for the belief in God's existence. We have seen that the belief in God is held on the same basis as qualities such as love, trust and expectation, as well as other basic beliefs casually held and implemented in day-to-day social activity. Thus, it is reasonable for the belief in God to be understood in the same way as non-theistic basic beliefs. James' ideas on self-fulfilling beliefs show that when considering basicity with beliefs in God, we can adopt the same method of belief that human emotions exist, because we do not doubt our trust or faith in other people unless there is reason for this doubt. As a result, Plantinga's 'no criterion' alternative to classical foundationalism is the most feasible form of justification for basicity of belief in God.

Word count: 5093

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