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Jonathan Malino

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COMMENTS ON QUINN

Jonathan Malino

In his introduction to a recent volume of essays entitled *Faith and Rationality*, N. Wolterstorff writes excitedly about the recent advances in epistemology. Using what he acknowledges to be overly-dramatic rhetoric, he proclaims the Enlightenment's evidentialist challenge to religion to have been *itself* challenged and, finally, overcome.¹ It is safe to say that Professor Quinn demurs. I take his reply to Plantinga to be a denial that evidentialism has in any way been overcome, along with the further claim that no epistemological excitement would be warranted for the mature theist even if it had. I basically (and I hope properly) agree with Quinn. In these remarks I shall try to amplify the framework of Quinn's arguments and pursue some related thoughts. I shall conclude on a different note, however, raising a general question about the direction of current philosophy of religion.

Quinn states the major conclusion of the first part of his paper as follows: "Plantinga's procedure for justifying criteria for proper basicity provides no better reason for adopting criteria according to which some propositions which self-evidently entail the existence of God can be properly basic than for adopting a criterion according to which no such propositions can be properly basic." And in a looser vein, he comments that Plantinga's game is "a game any number can play," implying that religious believers of a very different stripe than Christian theists can just as effectively use this procedure.

I find a certain ambiguity in Quinn's claim and in his arguments for it. Sometimes he seems to be saying that given Plantinga's procedure, we can actually construct good arguments for both the proper basicity of the proposition that God exists and for the classical foundationalist's criterion of proper basicity, and that these arguments are of equal strength. Sometimes, though, I feel Quinn is only advocating the weaker claim that there is no more reason to think Plantinga's procedure will enable us to construct good arguments for the proper basicity of the proposition that God exists than that it will enable us to support the classical foundationalist's criterion. On the first interpretation, Quinn's argument for his claim would be that he has actually produced a good argument for classical foundationalism using Plantinga's procedure, and that it is obvious that a similarly good one could be constructed for the proper basicity of theism. On the second interpretation, Quinn's argument would be that we can see how



arguments for the proper basicity of theism and for classical foundationalism can get started, given Plantinga's sketch of the first step of a procedure for selecting criteria, but that beyond that we have no clear idea since we do not know how the procedure will work.

It seems to me that on the first interpretation, Quinn's claim would be false and his argument weak. It is not at all obvious to me how Plantinga's procedure will yield a criterion for proper basicity that will include theism, and the argument Quinn presents for how the procedure will yield the criterion of classical foundationalism, though clearly helpful, seems equally clearly to be insufficient. The reason is not that our intuitions will include cases of properly basic propositions that do not meet the classical foundationalist's criterion—I think Quinn has dealt with that issue convincingly—but that part of the adequacy conditions for a criterion of proper basicity must be that the foundation, when constructed in accordance with the criterion, can support what we take to be built on it. But foundationalism notoriously has trouble showing this.

Now it may be that contrary to my intent, my observation is exactly the point Quinn is after; for haven't I criticized classical foundationalism's criterion of proper basicity by adding a further constraint to Plantinga's procedure? I am not sure that I have not, but it does not seem out of the question to think that intuitions about what is properly basic will include claims that certain propositions or types of propositions are evidentially justified under certain conditions. This would then subsume at least part of the trouble with foundationalism under Plantinga's procedure. But in any case, if Quinn's point is only that Plantinga needs to beef up his procedure in the direction of an additional constraint regarding what can be built on the foundation, then it would seem that Plantinga could easily do so without at all worsening his case for the proper basicity of theism as opposed to classical foundationalism. The reason is that whereas the classical foundationalist is arguing for a narrow class of properly basic propositions, the non-classical foundationalist is doing just the opposite.

On the second interpretation, Quinn's position seems to me correct. He has noted just how sketchy Plantinga's account of his procedure is. It really tells us little more than how to begin. But surely the hard part of constructing an inductive generalization, assuming one's data are readily available, comes only when one actually proposes generalizations and tries to make them fit. This in turn is difficult only in the presence of constraints on what (or at least how much) data can and cannot be thrown out as well as constraints on the "ad hocness" of the generalizations. But Plantinga is totally silent on these constraints.

We must, I think, assume that a full specification of Plantinga's procedure would include constraints of the above sort. For he is intent to emphasize that his approach should not be confused with a superficially similar fideistic position. Equally, I think he would reject assimilating his view to that of those who gain

confidence in theism through skepticism about natural reason. But neither of these contrasts is plausible without constraints on constructing inductive generalizations.

If then we assume that a full specification of Plantinga's procedure would include such constraints, we must conclude that at present we have no serious argument to show that we can construct a criterion for proper basicity that will include theism, and thus no more reason to assert that we can construct one than to assert that we can construct criteria which will include all sorts of wild views. Indeed we might even suggest that we have some reason to think we cannot construct a criterion for proper basicity which will include theism. For once we insist on constraints on the inductive process, it becomes evident that constructing a criterion of proper basicity which will include theism will depend much less on the fact that theism is part of the initial data set than on there being strong analogies between theism and the other members of the data set. But the disanalogies seem far stronger than the analogies. Quinn notes that in contrast to Plantinga's examples of other properly basic propositions, theism is not grounded in a mode of sensory experience which is known to be reliable in the right conditions. And Audi notes that unlike theism, these other properly basic propositions are such that normally the only plausible explanation of why one believes them in the relevant circumstances includes their truth.² Both of these apparent disanalogies need careful study to be sure they do not beg the question against the theist. But they certainly don't give comfort to the defender of the proper basicity of theism.

Since the objection to Plantinga which we have been exploring sounds much like the so-called Great Pumpkin objection, it may be worth looking at this latter objection and at Plantinga's replies to it. Plantinga formulates the objection as a question: "If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic [e.g. that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween], thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?"³ Plantinga's reply is "certainly not." To sustain this reply, Plantinga tries to imagine why one might think otherwise, criticizing each suggestion in turn. Does it follow from the rejection of the criteria for proper basicity purveyed by classical foundationalism? No more than the idea that nothing is senseless follows from the rejection of the verifiability criterion of meaning. Is it that we lack a criterion for proper basicity to replace the foundationalist's? How could this be a problem since the criteria are built upon judgments about what is and what is not properly basic, and not vice versa? Is it that different people may very well arrive at different criteria for proper basicity since they may start from different intuitions? But this could only show that the criteria have no polemic use, which is quite compatible with the view that only one criterion is right, and that those

whose beliefs are basic according to erroneous criteria are irrational.

In short, the Great Pumpkin objection holds only if the theist also includes the objectionable propositions in his initial set of properly basic propositions, or if he adopts a criterion for proper basicity which also applies to these propositions. The former is highly unlikely and avoiding the latter requires only that the theist be able to distinguish theism from these other propositions in a way relevant to the criterion.

Now aside from some uncertainty about Plantinga's remark regarding accusations of irrationality when there are conflicting criteria of proper basicity, I think Plantinga is correct in his reply to the Great Pumpkin objection. What bearing then does this have on the objection we explored earlier? Little, I think. For that objection did not imply that one who counted theism as properly basic was also bound to so view all sorts of other beliefs. Rather it was that there was no more reason to think that the theist could construct a criterion according to which his theism could be properly basic than that believers in various other incompatible views could do the same for theirs. But this objection, even when clearly distinguished from the Great Pumpkin objection, leaves us with the conclusion that the only justification presently available for the claim that theism could be properly basic is the justification afforded by its inclusion in the theist's initial data set. It follows then that the same justification is available to those with incompatible beliefs to believe that their beliefs could be properly basic. Claims of justified proper basicity will thus have no polemical value. Does this amount to throwing open the gates to irrationality and superstition? Certainly not in the sense of claiming that the irrational and superstitious beliefs are true. But apparently so in the sense of claiming that those who hold irrational and superstitious beliefs to be properly basic are just as justified in doing so as those who do not are justified in refraining. Of course we are still left to wonder just how justified this is. And there is always the potent force of defeaters to reintroduce distinctions.

Turning now to Part Two of Quinn's paper, I will restrict myself to two brief observations. Quinn discusses at some length the defeasibility conditions for properly basic propositions. Supposing that theism could be properly basic, Quinn claims that the problem of evil is a potential defeater that is sufficient to undermine the *prime facie* proper basicity of theism for most mature adults in our culture. He suggests interpreting Plantinga's free will defense as an attempt to defeat this defeater. Plantinga's recent remarks in "Reason and Belief in God" certainly confirm this suggestion. But this acknowledgment by Plantinga would seem to create a problem for what Plantinga calls the high road response to the inductive problem of evil. That response consists in noting that the probability of the non-existence of God given the amount and variety of evil in the world has to be assessed relative to a person's total evidence. Now if God's existence

could be properly basic for the theist, then it would be part of his total evidence and would undermine any otherwise high probability for the proposition that God does not exist. But this argument ignores the role of evil as a potential defeater for the *prima facie* proper basicity of God's existence. Given this role, the theist would be begging the question to appeal to the proper basicity of God's existence in assessing the inductive import of evil.

My second observation concerns Quinn's principle that the *prima facie* proper basicity of a proposition is undermined for me if I have sufficiently substantial reasons to think that any of its potential defeaters is true. No doubt it is pointless to expect a very precise measure of "sufficiently substantial reasons." It may nonetheless be imperative that we be as precise as possible. For an account of "sufficiently substantial reasons" would seem to be an essential part of any criterion of proper basicity and might well be the subject of dispute between the theist and non-theist. Finally, with respect to the issue of defeasibility, I wonder if Plantinga would not do well to try to develop an analogy between God's existence and our belief in free will. The proper resiliency of this belief in the face of reasons for potential defeaters might be more helpful than the case of basic perceptual judgments.

In concluding, I would like to raise a question about the entire direction of current philosophy of religion. When Gary Rosenkrantz showed me the brochure for the conference, I chuckled at the title. He immediately assumed I was commenting on what he admitted was a loose use of the word "logic". Actually, I was remarking on the narrow use of the word "religious". Now it is true that in one sense Plantinga's work is radical. For it challenges the deep assumption that religion must justify itself in terms of the non-religious. In another sense, however, it is extremely conservative; for it is built squarely on the assumption, which it seems to me deserves to be challenged, that the foundation of religion (or Western religion) consists in the classical theological claims interpreted in the metaphysically orthodox manner. To be sure, this assumption has been challenged at various times in discussions of religious language. But these challenges were most often weak—reflecting an inadequate understanding of the multifariousness of religious life—and implausible—insisting on the wild view that the orthodox claims *could* not be a part of religion. It is time, I think, to take a serious look at the place of orthodox theism in religious life. This will require an empirically adequate analysis of what can be included in a substantive religious commitment. And this in turn will call us to look philosophically at the idea of being committed to a *tradition*. Only in so doing, it seems to me, will we really succeed in probing the relation between religion and rationality.

NOTES

1. *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).
2. Robert Audi, "Direct Justification and Theistic Belief" (unpublished).
3. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," *Faith and Rationality*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.