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# THE FOUNDATIONS OF THEISM: A REPLY

Alvin Plantinga

Philip Quinn's "On Finding the Foundations of Theism"<sup>1</sup> is both challenging and important. Quinn proposes at least the following four theses: (a) my argument against the criteria of proper basicity proposed by classical foundationalism is unsuccessful, (b) the quasi-inductive method I suggest for arriving at criteria of proper basicity is defective, (c) even if belief in God is properly basic, it could without loss of justification be accepted on the basis of other propositions, and (d) belief in God is probably not nowadays properly basic for intellectually sophisticated adults. There is much to be said about each of these four theses; I shall say just a bit about them. I take the fourth claim to be the most important and devote the most space to it.

## *I. The Argument Against Classical Foundationalism*

In "Reason and Belief in God"<sup>2</sup> (pp. 60-63) I argued that the criteria for proper basicity offered by classical foundationalism ancient and modern—are self-referentially incoherent. More precisely, what I said was self-referentially incoherent is

(34) **p** is rationally acceptable for **S** only if either (1) **p** is self-evident or evident to the sense or incorrigible for **S**, or (2) there are paths in **S**'s noetic structure from **p** to propositions **q**<sub>1</sub>, . . . , **q**<sub>n</sub> that (a) are basic for **S**, (b) are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible for **S**, and (c) support **p** (R&BG p. 61).

(34) is the classical foundationalist's criterion for rational belief;<sup>3</sup> and according to (34) a proposition **p** is rationally acceptable for a person **S** only if either **p** meets the classical foundationalist's conditions for being properly basic, or else **p** is believed on the basis of propositions that meet those conditions and support it. I argued that (34) is not itself either self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, and thus fails to meet the classical foundationalist's conditions for proper basicity. I added that if (34) is true, then if the classical foundationalist is to be rational in accepting it he must believe it on the basis of propositions that (a) are self-evident, evident to the sense, or incorrigible and (b) support (34). But no foundationalist, I said, has ever produced an argument for (34)



from propositions that meet those conditions; furthermore it is exceedingly hard to think of propositions that meet these conditions and support (34). I concluded that "It is therefore unlikely that the foundationalist's acceptance of (34) conforms to the necessary condition of rationality that (34) lays down" (R&BG p. 61).

Now Quinn points out (p. 4) that, for all *I* said, it *could* be that the classical foundationalist accepts (34), his criterion for proper basicity, on the basis of propositions that are self-evident or incorrigible and support it, even if he can't tell us what those propositions are. This is quite correct; as I said in R&BG, that could indeed be, "Just as it could be that every theist accepts belief in God on the basis of propositions that both support that belief and are properly basic according to the classical foundationalist's criterion of proper basicity" (pp. 61-62). I went on to say, however, that it seems unlikely in either case, so that in all likelihood classical foundationalists are indeed self-referentially incoherent; hence you and I would also be self-referentially incoherent if the classical foundationalist succeeded in persuading us to adopt her criterion of rational belief.

Here Quinn makes a most interesting move: he suggests a way in which, as he sees it, the classical foundationalist *can* rightly accept (34) on the basis of propositions that meet her conditions for being properly basic. Suppose we restrict our attention to the modern classical foundationalist, who holds that a proposition is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident or incorrigible. Why, says Quinn, can't she adopt the broadly inductive procedure that (following Chisholm) I recommended for finding a criterion for proper basicity? She can assemble pairs of propositions and circumstances such that the propositions are properly basic in the circumstances, and other pairs where the propositions are not properly basic in the circumstances; she can then try to fashion a criterion that fits this evidential base. If she did, she would be accepting the resulting criterion on the basis of such proposition as **p<sub>2</sub> is properly basic in circumstances C<sub>2</sub>, p<sub>3</sub> is not properly basic in C<sub>3</sub>, p<sub>4</sub> is not properly basic in C<sub>4</sub>** and so on; and these propositions would presumably provide inductive support for the criterion she endorses. Why couldn't she arrive at (34) by a process of this sort?

The initial problem with this suggestion is that the propositions in her evidential base, i.e., such propositions as

(1) the proposition **2 + 1 = 3** is properly basic in circumstances **C**

and

(2) the proposition **there is a table before me** is not properly basic in circumstances **C**

do not seem to be either self-evident or incorrigible. But here Quinn suggests, interestingly enough, that perhaps such propositions *are* self-evident—or perhaps he is suggesting only that the classical foundationalist can sensibly take them to

be so:

Suppose a modern foundationalist is contemplating believing that she is being appeared to redly in conditions optimal for visual experience . . . . Surely she can plausibly say that it is self-evident to her that that belief would be properly basic for her in those conditions . . . . Now suppose the same modern foundationalist is contemplating believing that Jove is expressing disapproval in conditions optimal for auditory experience in which she is being appeared to thunderously. Surely she can then plausibly say that it is self-evident to her that that belief would not be properly basic for her in those conditions . . . (p. 474).

This is an interesting suggestion; but I doubt that it has much real promise. We have two questions: (a) can the modern foundationalist plausibly *take* such propositions to be self-evident? And (b) *are* such propositions really self-evident? An affirmative answer to (a) doesn't show that she isn't self-referentially inconsistent; it shows only that she can plausibly think that she isn't. But in fact I think the answer to both questions is negative. A belief is properly basic for a person at a time, in Quinn's words "just in case it is basic for the person at the time and its being basic for the person at the time is contrary to no correct canon of epistemic propriety and results from no epistemic deficiency on his or her part at that time" (p. 469). So to say that a belief is properly basic in a set of circumstances is to say that in those circumstances a person could accept the belief without either violating an epistemic duty or displaying some kind of noetic defect—the intellectual equivalent of a limp, say, or an ulcer, or an astigmatism. Now perhaps it is plausible to say that a proposition of the sort

(3) S can accept **p** as basic in circumstances **C** without violating any epistemic duty

can be self-evident; it isn't obvious that that kind of proposition can't be self-evident. But how can it be *self-evident* that a person could accept **p** in circumstances **C** without thereby displaying some kind of epistemic defect or deficiency? According to Freudians, theists accept their theistic beliefs because of a certain noetic defect, or deficiency, or dysfunction: Freud sees religious beliefs as "illusions, fulfillments of the oldest strongest and most insistent wishes of mankind."<sup>4</sup> He adds that religion is the "universal obsessional neurosis of humanity"; it is destined to disappear when human beings learn to face reality as it is, resisting the tendency to edit it to suit their fancies. Now could a theist correctly or even plausibly claim that it was just self-evident that Freud was wrong here, and that theistic belief, in a given set of circumstances, is not a result of cognitive dysfunction? I don't think so. I can't see how a proposition to the effect that a

certain person on a certain occasion is suffering from no such defect can possibly be or plausibly be thought to be self-evident.

Here Quinn makes the following suggestion. Even though it is not *in general* self-evident that a person's intellectual or cognitive apparatus is functioning properly on a given occasion, it might still be self-evident that a particular belief in a particular set of circumstances does not arise as a result of cognitive malfunction: "Our modern foundationalist is supposed to be contemplating believing that she is being appeared to redly in conditions optimal for visual experience . . . . It seems quite clear to me that it could be self-evident to her that she would display no noetic defect in accepting that belief in those conditions" (p. 475).

This doesn't seem clear to me at all; but neither does it seem clearly mistaken. There is indeed something special about such beliefs as **I am being appeared to redly**—something by virtue of which such propositions have been thought to be incorrigible. So suppose we concede for purposes of argument that such beliefs as

(4) the belief that I am being appeared to redly in circumstances **C** is properly basic

can indeed be self-evident. But this won't be nearly enough for the classical foundationalist. On Quinn's suggestion she must also suppose that such beliefs as

(5) the belief that  $2 + 1 = 3$  is properly basic in circumstances **C**

can be self-evident; she must accordingly suppose that it is self-evident that in those circumstances her intellectual or cognitive equipment is functioning properly in producing such beliefs in her. It would therefore have to be self-evident to her that, for example, her accepting these beliefs is not due to the malevolent activity of a Cartesian evil demon. I don't see how such a thing as that could possibly be just *self-evident* to her.

But further, there are the *negative* members of the evidential base as well as the positive members; according to Quinn (4) is plausibly thought to be self-evident, but so is

(6) the belief **Jove is expressing disapproval** is not properly basic in circumstances optimal for auditory experience.

But if it is self-evident that this belief is not properly basic in those circumstances, then it must be self-evident that a person who accepted it in those circumstances would either be going contrary to an epistemic duty or be displaying a cognitive defect or malfunction in accepting it in those circumstances. It seems to me entirely clear that neither of these nor their disjunction could be self-evident to a human being. Obviously a person need not be going contrary to his epistemic duties in accepting the relevant proposition. Indeed, it may be *impossible* for

him not to accept the proposition on an occasion when he does accept it; our beliefs are not for the most part within our direct control. And how could it be just *self-evident* that in accepting such a proposition one would be displaying some cognitive malfunction? It is not self-evidently false that there is such a person as Jove; and not self-evidently false that he has created us in just such a way as to be aware of his disapproval upon being appeared to thunderously. So I don't think Quinn's suggestion provides much succor for the classical foundationalist.

## II. Epistemic Criteria

Following Roderick Chisholm<sup>5</sup> I argued (R&BG pp. 76ff.) that correct criteria of proper basicity, epistemic justification and allied notions are not self-evident; they should not be adapted *a priori* and handed down *ex cathedra*. Instead, they should be arrived at and argued for in a broadly *inductive* fashion:

We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously not properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples<sup>6</sup> (R&BG p. 76).

Now here Quinn objects as follows:

Plantinga's sketch of the first stage of a procedure for justifying criteria of proper basicity is . . . well enough developed to permit us to see that it confronts at the outset at least one important difficulty. This is because, as Plantinga himself acknowledges, there is no reason to assume in advance that everyone will agree on what is to go into the initial set . . . . The difficulty, is, of course, that this is a game any number can play. Followers of Muhammed, followers of Buddha, and even followers of the Reverend Moon can join in the fun. Even the modern foundationalist can play (p. 473).

Calvinists, Moonies, Great Pumpkinites—all can follow my prescription; and probably no two will arrive at the same criteria. Rhetoric aside, Quinn's point here seems to be the following. If this inductive procedure were correct, then different philosophers (and others) could quite properly employ it to arrived at different (and conflicting) criteria; for there is no reason in advance to assume that everyone who employs the method will agree on the initial sets of positive and negative examples. But then a criterion arrived at in this way cannot be used to settle the issue between, say, a Calvinist and a Great Pumpkinite.

This point is indeed correct, and one I meant to emphasize in R&BG: " . . . there is no reason to assume in advance that everyone will agree on the examples" (77). But is there a difficulty here? I accept, indeed, insist upon this consequence, but fail to see that it is grounds for legitimate complaint. Different philosophers employing this method may arrive at different conclusions: true enough, but do we know of some reasonably viable philosophical method (for reaching epistemic criteria) of which this is not true? That's just life in philosophy. Relevant to the question of proper basicity, for example, is the question what sorts of beings human beings are: what sorts of things will they believe when their faculties are functioning properly, are not subject to noetic defect or deficiency? Here Aquinas and Freud will have radically different views; and these differences may be reflected in their criteria for proper basicity. That fact, however, doesn't show that they employed the wrong method for constructing their criteria of proper basicity. One or the other of them, of course, has a *mistaken* criterion; but (given their initial disagreements) each may have adopted the correct procedure for constructing such criteria. But the same holds with respect to the quasi-inductive method I recommended for coming to a criterion of proper basicity. It is indeed true that if people start with different beliefs as to which propositions are properly basic in various circumstances, then following the method I sketched, they may well come to different conclusions. But why think this is a defect in the proposed method? If it is, it is a defect this method shares with such paragons of propriety as deductive reasoning. Is there a method for arriving at criteria of proper basicity which can properly promise that all reasonable and responsible thinkers who follow it will arrive at the same conclusion? I know of no reason to think there is any such thing.

### III. *Could Basic Belief Just As Well Be Non-Basic?*

One of my main aims in R&BG was to endorse the view that belief in God can be properly basic. Now Quinn concedes this may indeed be so; but even if it is, he says, it isn't of much moment:

So, oddly enough, if certain propositions which self-evidently entail the existence of God can be properly basic for a person at a time, it is epistemically unimportant whether such propositions actually are properly basic for that person at that time. Without loss of any degree of justification, such theistic propositions can just as well be properly based, at least in part, on others which are descriptive of the person's experience at the time and are then properly basic for the person (p. 479).

Quinn's views here have nothing specifically to do with beliefs about the existence of God; he is apparently prepared to say the same thing about beliefs

*generally* (or at any rate about perceptual beliefs). Thus he considers

(8) I see a hand in front of me

and

(9) It seems to me that I see a hand in front of me.

He holds that (8) is indeed properly basic in certain circumstances; but in any such circumstances, he argues, it could also be believed on the basis of (9) without loss of epistemic justification:

If the proposition expressed by (8) were indirectly justified by being properly based on the proposition expressed by (9), it would be no less well justified than if it were directly justified by being directly grounded in visual experience. Since, by hypothesis, my visual experience in those conditions suffices to confer a certain degree of justification on the proposition expressed by (8), the amount of justification that reaches the proposition expressed by (8) from that experience will not be less in those conditions if it passes by way of the proposition expressed by (9) than if it is transmitted directly without intermediary (p. 478).

I think Quinn is mistaken here. This is a large and complex issue, however, and here I can say only a bit of what needs to be said. We have two quite different suggestions as to how a belief like (8) could be justified, or acquire warrant, or have positive epistemic status. On one of these suggestions, such a belief gets justification by being believed on the evidential basis of other beliefs—such beliefs as (9), for example. On this suggestion, one accepts (9) directly or immediately; one then believes (8) on the basis of (9), (9) serving as evidence—deductive, inductive or abductive—for (8). (8) then acquires what warrant it has by virtue of being believed on the evidential basis of other propositions that already have warrant. On the other suggestion, a belief like (9) is taken as basic, believed in the basic way. Typically, such a belief is taken as basic in certain characteristic circumstances—circumstances including one's having the appropriate experience, or (to use Roderick Chisholm's terminology) one's being appropriately appeared to. Furthermore, when such a belief as (9) is taken as basic in these circumstances, it has positive epistemic status or warrant, and has it just by virtue of being formed in those circumstances. And Quinn's suggestion, so far as I understand it, is that if a belief acquires warrant in the second way, i.e., by virtue of being taken as basic in the right circumstances, then it could have acquired equal warrant by virtue of being believed on the evidential basis of propositions recording the experiences involved in those circumstances.

Now this suggestion is true only if such propositions as (9) are in fact good evidence—deductive, inductive or abductive—for such propositions as (8). But



are they? I think not. The whole development of modern philosophy from Descartes to Hume and Reid shows that they are not. Thomas Reid was correct, I take it, in agreeing with Hume (as he understood him) that such beliefs as (9) do not in fact constitute much by way of (non-circular) *evidence* for such propositions as (8); if beliefs like (8) get what warrant they have by virtue of being believed on the evidential basis of propositions like (9), then they have little if any warrant. (The same should be said, says Reid, for memory propositions, propositions about the mental states of other persons, propositions accepted by way of testimony, and so on.) It is exceedingly hard to see how to construct a cogent argument—deductive, inductive, abductive or whatever—from experiential beliefs (beliefs like (9)) to propositions which, like (8), entail the existence of such material objects as tables, houses, and horses. But if experiential propositions do not furnish much by way of evidence for such propositions as (8), then if such a proposition is believed on the basis of such experiential propositions (and has no other source of warrant or positive epistemic status) it will have little if any warrant.

If doesn't follow, however, as Reid goes on to point out, that such propositions as (8) have little by way of positive epistemic status if taken as basic. Why, he asks, should we suppose that experiential propositions alone are a source of warrant or positive epistemic status, and that other propositions, if they are to have any of this commodity, must get it from them, by virtue of being believed on the basis of them? He goes on to argue that perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, beliefs about the mental states of other persons (and still other kinds of belief) typically have a great deal of warrant—warrant they do not get by way of being believed on the evidential basis of experiential propositions. Reid claims that there is nothing but an arbitrary partiality in holding, as he takes Hume to hold, that only self-evident and experiential propositions are the sources of warrant.<sup>7</sup>

Reid's position, therefore, is two-fold. Such propositions as (8) get little if any warrant by virtue of being believed on the evidential basis of such propositions as (9); for the latter provide little evidence for them. Secondly, such propositions as (8), if taken as basic, typically have a good deal of warrant.<sup>8</sup> But then it follows, of course, that such propositions as (8), if taken as basic, can have much more by way of warrant or positive epistemic status if taken as basic than they could have if believed on the basis of such propositions as (9).

I believe Reid is right here; but if he is, then Quinn is wrong. Quinn, indeed, has a sort of argument for thinking that (8) could have as much warrant if believed on the basis of (9) as it could if taken as basic: "Since, by hypothesis my visual experience in those conditions suffices to confer a certain degree of justification on the proposition expressed by (8), the amount of justification that reaches the proposition expressed by (8) from that experience will not be less in those

conditions if it passes by way of the proposition expressed by (9) than if it is transmitted directly without intermediary.” but what is the reason for the “Since” here? In a given situation a certain proposition is properly basic for me; and it may be that it is properly basic for me partly because in that situation I am being appeared to in a certain way. Thus what justified me in believing the corresponding conditional of *Modus Ponens*, say, is my having a certain sort of experience; and no doubt *Modus Ponens* has a great deal of warrant for me. It does not follow, however, that my having that sort of experience is much by way of *evidence* for *Modus Ponens*; that I am appeared to in a certain way is weak evidence indeed, if it is evidence at all, for the truth of *Modus Ponens*. So there are two crucially different ways in which a proposition can acquire warrant for me: by virtue of being believed in the basic way in the right circumstances (circumstances perhaps including my being appeared to in a certain way), on the one hand, and by virtue of being believed on the evidential basis of beliefs about how I am being appeared to, on the other. These two are quite different. I can see no reason at all for supposing that these two processes are bound to yield the same degree of warrant.

#### IV. Intellectual Sophistication and Basic Belief in God

In R&BG I suggested that such propositions as

- (5) God is speaking to me,
- (6) God disapproves of what I have done

and

- (7) God forgives me for what I have done (numbering from Quinn’s paper)

are properly basic for at least some believers in God; there are widely realized sets of conditions, I suggested, in which such propositions are indeed properly basic. And when I said that these beliefs are properly basic, I had in mind what Quinn (pp. 20-21) calls the *narrow* conception of the basing relation: I was taking it that a person **S** accepts a belief **A** on the basis of a belief **B** only if (roughly) **S** believes both **A** and **B** and could correctly claim (on reflection) that **B** is part of his *evidence* for **A**. **S**’s belief that there is an error in some argument *against* **p** will not typically be a belief on the basis of which he accepts **p** and will not be part of his evidence for **p** (See R&BG, pp. 84-85).

This is important for the following reason. In arguing that belief in God is properly basic, I meant to rebut the claim made by the evidentialist objector: the claim that the theist who has no evidence for theism is in some way irrational. What the evidentialist objector objects to, however, is not just believing in god

without having a response to such objections to theism as the argument from evil. He concedes that the theist may perfectly well have an answer to that objection and to others; but as long as she has no evidence *for* the existence of God, he says, she can't rationally believe. As the evidentialist objector thinks of evidence, then, you don't have evidence for a belief just by virtue of refuting objections against it; you must also have something like an argument *for* the belief, or some positive reason to think that the belief is true. I think this conception of evidence is an appropriate conception; but in any event it is the relevant conception, since it is this conception of evidence that the evidentialist objector has in mind in claiming that the theist without evidence is irrational.

As I see it, then, propositions like (5)-(7) are properly basic for many persons, including even such intellectually sophisticated adults as you and I. Quinn disagrees: ". . . I conclude that many, perhaps most, intellectually sophisticated adult theists in our culture are seldom if ever, in conditions which are right for propositions like those expressed by (5)-(7) to be properly basic for them" (p. 481). Why so? I think Quinn is inclined to agree, first, that there *are* conditions in which such beliefs are properly basic for a person; such conditions might be those of a child brought up by believing parents, or perhaps of an adult in a culture in which sceptics had not produced the sorts of alleged reasons for rejecting theistic belief that are at present fashionable. The problem for intellectually sophisticated adults in our culture, he says, is that many potential *defeaters* of theistic belief are available; and we have substantial reason to think them true. One kind of defeater for a belief (the kind Quinn is concerned with here) is a proposition incompatible with the belief; Quinn cites

(12) God does not exist

as a potential defeater of theism. And the problem for the intellectually sophisticated adult theist in our culture, says Quinn, is that many substantial reasons for believing (12) have been produced.

There are defeaters for theistic belief, then; and in the presence of defeaters, an otherwise properly basic belief may no longer be properly basic. More exactly, according to Quinn

it seems plausible to suppose that conditions are right for propositions like those expressed by (5)-(7) to be . . . properly basic for me only if (i) either I have no sufficiently substantial reason to think that any of their potential defeaters is true, or I do have some such reason, but for each such reason I have, I have an even better reason for thinking the potential defeater in question is false, and (ii) in either case my situation involves no epistemic negligence on my part (p. 483; call this principle 'Q\*').

Quinn goes on to say that he is not in this fortunate condition with respect to theistic belief; he knows of substantial reason, he says, to think that (12) is true, and it is not the case that for each such reason he has, he has an even better reason for thinking (12) false. So (by Q\*) belief in God is not properly basic for him; and he suspects the same goes for most of the rest of us.

Now here I find myself in solid disagreement. We must first ask what these “very substantial reasons for thinking that what (12) expresses is true” (p. 481) *are*. What would be some examples of such substantial reasons for atheism? Quinn’s answer: “After all, nontrivial atheological reasons, ranging from various problems of evil to naturalist theories according to which theistic belief is illusory or merely projective, are a pervasive, if not obtrusive, component of the rational portion of our intellectual heritage” (p. 481). So these substantial reasons for thinking theism false would be the atheological argument from evil together with theories according to which theistic belief is illusory or merely projective; here perhaps Quinn has in mind Marxist and Freudian theories of religious belief.

I should remark immediately that the Marxist and Freudian theories he alludes to don’t seem to be even reasonably cogent if taken as reasons for believing (12), or as evidence for the nonexistence of God, or as reasons for rejecting belief in God. Freud’s jejune speculations as to the psychological origin of religion and Marx’s careless claims about its social role can’t sensibly be taken as providing argument or reason for (12), i.e., for the nonexistence of God; so taken they present textbook cases (which in fact are pretty rare) of the genetic fallacy. If such speculations and claims have a respectable role to play, it is instead perhaps that of providing a naturalistic explanation for the wide currency of religious belief, or perhaps that of attempting to discredit religious belief by tracing it to a disreputable source. But of course that doesn’t constitute anything like evidence for (12) or a reason to think theism false. One might as well cite as evidence for the existence of God St. Paul’s claim (*Romans* 1) that failure to believe in God is a result of sin and rebellion against God. None of the naturalistic theories according to which theism is illusory or merely projective seem to me to have any strength at all as arguments or evidence for the nonexistence of God—although they may be of interest in other ways.

This leaves us with the atheological argument from evil as the sole substantial reason for thinking (12) true. And initially this argument seems much stronger as a reason for rejecting theistic belief. But is it really? Until recently, most atheologians who urged an atheological argument from evil held that

(10) God exists and is omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good  
is logically incompatible with the proposition

(11) there are  $10^{13}$  turps of evil

(where (11) is just a way of referring to all the evil our world in fact displays). At present, I think atheologians have given up the claim that (10) and (11) are incompatible, and quite properly so.<sup>9</sup> What they now say is that (10) is *unlikely* or *improbable* with respect to (11); and Quinn (himself, of course, no atheologist) says, "What I know, partly from experience and partly from testimony, about the amount and variety of non-moral evil in the universe confirms highly for me the proposition expressed by (12)" (p. 481). But is this really true? Does what Quinn and the rest of us know about the amount and variety of non-moral evil in the world confirm highly the nonexistence of God? This is not the place to enter a discussion of that difficult and knotty problem (difficult and knotty at least in part because of the difficult and confusing character of the notion of confirmation); for what it is worth, however, I can't see that it does so at all. So far as I can see, no atheologist has given a successful or cogent way of working out or developing a probabilistic atheological argument from evil; and I believe there are good reasons for thinking that it can't be done.<sup>10</sup> I am therefore very much inclined to doubt that (11) "highly disconfirms" (10) for Quinn. At the least what we need here is some explanation to show just how (or even approximately how) this disconfirmation is supposed to go.

So first, these alleged substantial reasons for rejecting theism warrant a good deal of scepticism. But secondly, even if we concede that there are such reasons, Quinn's conclusion won't follow; this is because (Q\*), as it stands, is pretty clearly false. The suggestion is that if I have a substantial reason for thinking some defeater of a proposition (for example, its denial) is true, then I can't properly take the proposition as basic unless I have an even stronger reason for thinking the defeater in question false. But surely this is to require too much. Suppose an atheologist gives me an initially convincing argument for thinking that (10) is in fact extremely unlikely or improbable on (11). Upon grasping this argument, perhaps I have a substantial reason for accepting a defeater of theistic belief, namely that (10) is extremely improbable on (11). But in order to defeat this potential defeater, I need not know or have very good reason to think that it is *false* that (10) is improbable on (11); it would suffice to show that the atheologist's argument (for the claim that (10) improbable on (11)) is unsuccessful. To defeat this potential defeater, all I need to do is refute this argument; I am not obliged to go further and produce an argument for the denial of its conclusion. Quinn takes

(12) God does not exist

to be a potential defeater for the propositions (5)-(7); but to defeat the potential defeater offered by an argument for (12) I need not necessarily have some argument *for* the existence of God. There are undercutting defeaters as well as

rebutting defeaters.<sup>11</sup>

There is another and more subtle point here. Quinn seems to be thinking along the following lines: suppose I take some proposition as basic, but have substantial evidence from other things I believe for some defeater of this proposition—a proposition incompatible with it, let's say. Then (according to Q\*) I am irrational if I continue to accept the proposition in question, unless I also have good evidence for the falsehood of that defeater. So if I accept a proposition **p**, but believe or know other things that constitute strong evidence for some defeater **q** of **p**, then, says Q\*, if I am not to be irrational in continuing to accept **p** as basic, I must have a reason for thinking **q** false—a reason that is stronger than the reasons I have for thinking **q** true.

Now my question is this: could **p** *itself* be my reason for thinking **q** false? Or must that reason be some proposition distinct from **p**? Consider an example. I am applying to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a fellowship; I write a letter to a colleague, trying to bribe him to write the Endowment a glowing letter on my behalf; he indignantly refuses and sends the letter to my chairman. The letter disappears from the chairman's office under mysterious circumstances. I have a motive for stealing it; I have the opportunity to do so; and I have been known to do such things in the past. Furthermore an extremely reliable member of the department claims to have seen me furtively entering the chairman's office at about the time when the letter must have been stolen. The evidence against me is very strong; my colleagues reproach me for such underhanded behavior and treat me with evident distaste. The facts of the matter, however, are that I didn't steal the letter and in fact spent the entire afternoon in question on a solitary walk in the woods; furthermore I clearly remember spending that afternoon walking in the woods. Hence I believe in the basic way

(13) I was alone in the woods all that afternoon, and I did not steal the letter.

But I do have strong evidence for the denial of (13). For I have the same evidence as everyone else that I was in the chairman's office and took the letter; and this evidence is sufficient to convince my colleagues (who are eminently fairminded and initially well disposed towards me) of my guilt. They are convinced on the basis of what they know that I took the letter; and I know everything they know.

So I take (13) as basic; but I have a substantial reason to believe a defeater of (13). According to Q\*, if I am to be rational in this situation, I must have even better reason to believe that this potential defeater is false. Do I? Well, the only reason I have for thinking this potential defeater false is just (13) itself; I don't have any *independent* reason to think the defeater false. (The warrant I have for (13) is *nonpropositional* warrant; it is not conferred upon (13) by virtue of my believing that proposition, on the basis of some other proposition, for I

don't believe (13) on the basis of any other proposition.)

In this situation it is obvious, I take it, that I am perfectly rational in continuing to believe (13) in the basic way. The reason is that in this situation the positive epistemic status or warrant that (13) has for me (by virtue of my memory) is greater than that conferred upon its potential defeater by the evidence I share with my colleagues. We might say that (13) *itself* defeats the potential defeater; no further reason for the denial of this defeater is needed for me to be rational. Suppose we say that in this sort of situation a proposition like (13) is an *intrinsic* defeater of its potential defeater. When a basic belief **p** has more by way of warrant than a potential defeater **q** of **p**, then **p** is an intrinsic defeater of **q**—an intrinsic defeater-defeater, we might say. (A belief **r** is an *extrinsic* defeater-defeater if it defeats a defeater **q** of a belief **p** distinct from **r**.)

So my question here is this: how is Quinn thinking of these reasons for thinking the defeating proposition false? I am *inclined* to believe that he intends Q\* to be read in such a way that these reasons have to be *extrinsic* defeater-defeaters; but if so, then his principle, I think, is clearly false. On the other hand, perhaps it is to be understood as saying something like

Q\*\* If you believe **p** in the basic way and you have reason to believe a defeater **q** of **p**, then if you are to be rational in continuing to believe **p** in this way, **p** must have more warrant for you than **q** does.

I am not certain this principle is correct, but I am also not inclined to dispute it. The central point to see, however, is that if a belief **p** is properly basic in certain circumstances, then it has warrant or positive epistemic status in those circumstances in which it is properly basic—warrant it does not get by virtue of being believed on the evidential basis of other propositions. (By hypothesis it is not believed on the evidential basis of other propositions.) To be successful, a potential defeater for **p** must have as much or more warrant as **p** does. And **p** can withstand the challenge offered by a given defeater even if there is no independent evidence that serves either to rebut or undercut the defeater in question; perhaps the nonpropositional warrant that **p** enjoys is itself sufficient (as in the above case of the missing letter) to withstand the challenge.

But how does all this apply in the case in question, the case of belief in God and the alleged defeaters Quinn mentions? As follows. If there are circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic, then in those circumstances such belief has a certain degree of warrant or positive epistemic status. Now suppose a potential defeater arises: someone claims that the existence of  $10^{13}$  turps of evil makes theism improbable, or he claims that theistic belief arises out of nothing more reputable than a kind of widespread human neurosis. Two questions then arise. First how does the degree of nonpropositional warrant enjoyed by your belief in God compare with the warrant possessed by the alleged potential defea-

ter? It could be that your belief, even though accepted as basic, has more warrant than the proposed defeater and thus constitutes an intrinsic defeater-defeater. When God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, the belief that God was speaking to him, I daresay, had more by way of warrant for him than would have been provided for its denial by an early Freudian who strolled by and proposed the thesis that belief in God is merely a matter of neurotic wish fulfillment. And secondly, are there any extrinsic defeaters for these defeaters? Someone argues that the existence of  $10^{13}$  turps of evil is inconsistent with the existence of God; I may then have an extrinsic defeater for this potential defeater. This defeater-defeater need not take the form of a proof that these propositions are indeed consistent; if I see that the argument is unsound, then I also have a defeater for it. But I needn't do even that much to have a defeater. Perhaps I am no expert in these matters but learn from reliable sources that someone else has shown the argument unsound; or perhaps I learn that the experts think it is unsound, or that the experts are evenly divided as to its soundness. Then too I have or may have a defeater for the potential defeater in question, and can continue to accept theistic belief in the basic way without irrationality.

By way of conclusion then: Quinn claims that intellectually sophisticated adult theists in our culture are seldom in epistemic circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic; for they have substantial reason to think that some potential defeater of theism is true, and do not have, for each such defeater, even stronger reason to think it is false. But first, it isn't necessary that they have reason *independent* of their belief in God for the falsehood of the alleged defeaters. Perhaps the nonpropositional warrant enjoyed by your belief in God is itself sufficient to turn back the challenge offered by the alleged defeaters, so that your theistic belief is an intrinsic defeater-defeater. And second, extrinsic defeaters of the alleged defeaters need not be evidence for the falsehood of those defeaters; they may instead undercut the alleged defeaters; they may be, for example, refutations of atheological arguments. (And here Christian philosophers can clearly be of service to the rest of the Christian community.) My opinion (for what it is worth) is that for many theists, the nonpropositional warrant belief in God has for them is indeed greater than that of alleged potential defeaters of theistic belief—for example, Freudian or Marxist theories of religion. Furthermore, there are powerful extrinsic defeaters for the sorts of potential defeaters of theism Quinn suggests. The atheological argument from evil, for example, is formidable; but there are equally formidable defeaters for this potential defeater. I am therefore inclined to believe that belief in God is properly basic for most theists—even intellectually sophisticated adult theists.

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#### NOTES



2. In *Faith and Rationality*, ed A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff (South Bend: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) (hereafter 'R&BG').

3. More exactly, the result of replacing 'only if' in (34) by 'if and only if' is the criterion of rational belief that results from combining ancient classical foundationalism with modern classical foundationalism: see R&BG pp. 58-59.

4. *The Future of an Illusion*, XXI, 30. Compare *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: The Hogarth Press Ltd., 1930) e.g.p. 42: "At such a cost—by the forcible imposition of mental infantilism and inducing a mass-delusion—religion succeeds in saving many people from individual neuroses."

5. See, e.g., *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973).

6. Here I should add that what I say about the proper way to arrive at criteria of proper basicity in R&BG needs supplementation and revision. For example, various constraints on such criteria may indeed be self evident; more important, there are theoretical constraints arising from one's general philosophical views as to what sorts of beings human beings are.

7. "The skeptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external objects which you perceive? This belief, Sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: I ever took it upon trust, and without suspicion. Reason [i.e., the faculty whereby one comes to believe experiential propositions and self-evident propositions-A.P.] says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why, Sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception; they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another?" (*Inquiry into the Human Mind* VI, 20).

8. Perhaps the most impressive contemporary development of similar themes is to be found in the work of Roderick Chisholm; see again *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1973).

9. See for example Chapter IX of my *The Nature of the Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974).

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

11. I owe these terms to John Pollock. The distinction between undercutting and rebutting defeaters is of central importance to apologetics. If the propriety of basic belief in God is threatened by defeaters, there are two ways to respond. First, there is *negative* apologetics: the attempt to refute the arguments brought *against* theism (the atheological argument from evil, the claim that the conception of God is incoherent, and so on). Second, there is *positive* apologetics: the attempt to develop arguments *for* the existence of God. These are both important disciplines; but it is only the first, clearly enough, that is required to defeat those defeaters.