A Critique of Plantinga’s Reformed Epistemology

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This paper aims to address the question of whether theistic belief could be rational without propositional evidence or any support by argument. In a series of articles, Plantinga argues that the theist is rationally justified in believing in God without much further evidence. His method is first to criticize classical foundationalism. After showing its inadequacy, he then identifies certain immediate non-inferential beliefs which most persons would agree are reasonable to hold. Having established the reasonableness of such beliefs, he claims that religious beliefs are analogous to such commonly held nontheistic beliefs.

I wish to examine Plantinga’s claim that belief in God is properly basic within some non-classical version of foundationalism. First, the basic theory of Plantinga’s Reformed epistemology shall be laid out. Then, I argue that his position is untenable as the method given by his account for demarcating proper and improper basic beliefs raises some difficulties. It is my contention that there are significant differences between theistic beliefs and properly basic nontheistic beliefs and so I question the legitimacy of asserting the proper basicity of theistic beliefs. Thus, Plantinga’s central claim that theistic beliefs have the same epistemic status as other more
commonly accepted nontheistic beliefs would be flawed. I also argue that Plantinga’s account of criteria for proper basicality is not consistent.

I.

In this paper I shall concern myself with the question of whether theistic belief could be rational without propositional evidence or any support by argument. In a series of articles Plantinga juxtaposes what he calls ‘Reformed epistemology’ (or Calvinist epistemology) with ‘classical foundationalism’ (which he finds in Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Hume, and many others) and concludes that the theist is rationally justified in believing in God without much further evidence.¹) Plantinga’s method is first to criticize classical foundationalism. After showing its inadequacy, he then identifies certain immediate non-inferential beliefs which most persons would agree are reasonable to hold, such as “I see a tree”, “I ate breakfast this morning”, or “that person is in pain.” Having established the reasonableness of such beliefs, he claims that religious beliefs are analogous to such commonly held nontheistic

¹) Cf. Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God(henceforth RBG),” in Reason and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 16–93; “Is Belief in God Rational?,” in Rationality and Religious Belief, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 1979, pp. 7–29; “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?,” Nous 15 (1981): pp. 41–51. Later, Plantinga has expanded his Reformed epistemology project much further in a three volume work on epistemology. He argues that theistic belief has ‘warrant’ because there is an epistemically possible model according to which theistic belief is justified in a basic way. Warrant is defined as that which, when added to true belief, yields knowledge. I do not deal with Plantinga’s theory of warrant in this paper.