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Warrant, Defeaters, and the Epistemic Basis  
of Religious Belief

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## Chapter 5

# Warrant, Defeaters, and the Epistemic Basis of Religious Belief

Christoph Jäger

## Introduction

One of the most influential movements in current philosophy of religion is Reformed Epistemology, a project powerfully developed and supported in recent decades by philosophers such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, and, at the very forefront, Alvin Plantinga. The core idea of the theory is that certain kinds of theistic belief can be, to use Plantinga's famous phrase, "properly basic." A belief is properly basic if it has positive epistemic status but does not owe this status to other beliefs the subject holds. This, at least, is the standard view: basic beliefs do not "rest on" other beliefs;<sup>1</sup> they are "justified in themselves,"<sup>2</sup> or "self-justifying";<sup>3</sup> "their credibility is naturally intrinsic";<sup>4</sup> they "owe their justification to something other than . . . justified beliefs or their interrelations."<sup>5</sup> Such descriptions are not meant to imply that basic beliefs are groundless. Although they are not formed as the conclusions of arguments, typically they will have nonpropositional grounds. According to Plantinga, on whose account I shall focus in this essay, typical grounds for basic theistic belief include

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<sup>1</sup> William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Keith Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1990), 13.

<sup>3</sup> John Pollock and Joseph Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 115.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Lehrer's Case against Foundationalism," *Erkenntnis* 60 (2004): 51.

experiences<sup>6</sup> that may occur, for instance, in the presence of “the marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky; the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us”; but also upon seeing “the dainty, articulate beauty of a tiny flower, . . . aspen leaves shimmering and dancing in the breeze,” or upon reading Scripture.<sup>7</sup> Following John Calvin, Plantinga suggests that it is a sense of the divine that is, for some people and under certain conditions, “triggered” in circumstances such as these.

What impact does this have on the relation between theistic beliefs and scientific explanations of phenomena such as the existence of the universe, its structure and design, and the conditions it provides for conscious and self-conscious life? If the central tenets of Reformed Epistemology (RE) are acceptable, many traditional controversies between religion and science would seem to be poorly motivated. At least it would be misguided to require that theistic belief be supported by, for example, cosmological considerations or arguments from design, construed as rival explanations to (purely) naturalistic worldviews. For if religious beliefs could be basic, they could have positive epistemic status even if the believer did not base them on any arguments, even if she did not know any arguments for these beliefs, and even if no such arguments existed. RE, in other words, is driving a wedge between the epistemic adequacy of certain kinds of religious beliefs and classical evidentialist desiderata. It thus seems to present, as Alston once put it, “a powerful challenge to the customary philosophical ways of thinking about the epistemic status of religious belief, and [it has] decisively altered the terms in which the problem must be posed.”<sup>8</sup>

But has it really? Plantinga develops his claim for various kinds of positive epistemic status, most importantly for deontological justification, “proper-function rationality,” and an externalist kind of warrant. In each case, however, the epistemic aptness of the religious belief is subject to a “no-defeater” constraint. An epistemic defeater for a belief is a condition that nullifies or at least decreases the belief’s positive epistemic status. Potential defeaters for theistic belief include for example charges of incoherence, problems of evil, or projection theories of religious belief formation. Plantinga concedes that the contemporary,

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<sup>6</sup> Plantinga shies away from using the term “religious experience” in this context, for religious experience “is construed in a thousand different ways to cover a vast and confusing variety of cases.” “Still,” he says, “perhaps we can say at least the following: the operation of the *sensus divinitatis* will always involve the presence of experience of some kind or other” (Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* ([Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 182f.).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 174, 258ff.

<sup>8</sup> William P. Alston, “Plantinga’s Epistemology of Religious Belief,” in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James E. Tombelin and Peter van Inwagen (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985).

culturally aware theist *will* encounter potential epistemic defeaters for her religious beliefs. But if this is so, defeater-defeaters are required to neutralize the counterarguments. Suppose that Jennifer, who has been a convinced “basic believer” for the past ten years, receives a copy of Lactantius’s *De Ira Dei* for her sixteenth birthday. She reads about Epicurus’s famous statement of the problem of evil. After chewing over the matter, she develops a deductive version of the problem of evil and concludes that it is impossible that evils exist side by side with an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly benevolent being. Jennifer’s religious beliefs no longer seem rational to her; she is able to abandon them, and converts to atheism. Three years later, however, she attends philosophy courses, learns more about philosophical theology, modal reasoning, etc., and realizes that the validity of her deductive argument from evil depends on a suppressed premise to the effect that it is *impossible* for an *ens perfectissimum* to have a morally sufficient reason for permitting evil. She also realizes that this premise cannot be known to be true and that, moreover, one could conceive of states of affairs that make it false. If that happens, Jennifer acquires a defeater-defeater for her deductive version of the problem of evil, and she can rationally reinstate her theistic belief.

In this essay I critically examine two features of RE. First, I argue that religious beliefs that are threatened by potential defeaters, but defended on the basis of higher-order defeaters, largely or even completely lose their basicity. Put bluntly, my point is that if the positive epistemic status of a belief depends on complex dialectical reasoning, it is in an important sense not basic. Second, I argue that Plantinga’s answer to what he considers to be the most reasonable *de jure* challenge is in any case unsatisfactory. His primary project is an evaluation of religious beliefs with respect to “warrant,” construed as that little property which distinguishes knowledge from true belief. Plantinga argues that certain religious (and specifically Christian) beliefs might indeed exemplify that property. Unfortunately, however, his account of warrant does not allow him to answer the question of whether the beliefs under consideration actually *are* warranted. This is a disappointing result. RE’s central conclusion boils down to one of Plantinga’s famous possibilist claims, in this case the claim that it is *possible* for certain religious beliefs to be warranted. But this is a view that many atheist critics will happily concede. The pressing question, I believe, is not so much whether it is *possible* for religious beliefs to enjoy positive epistemic status. The interesting question is whether they actually are intellectually acceptable in some appropriate sense. And with regard to this question, it turns out that RE is taken right back to its original point of departure: in order to arrive at a rational conclusion as to whether basic theistic beliefs actually are warranted

in Plantinga's sense, the theory would have to engage in natural theology and classical *de facto* apologetics.

### Warrant-Basicity and Epistemic Defeaters

"Proper basicity" may in a first approximation be characterized as follows:

- (PB) A belief *B* held by a person *S* at a given time *t* is properly basic for *S* at *t* if and only if (i) *B* has positive epistemic status for *S* at *t*, and (ii) *S* does not accept *B* on the basis of any other belief *B\** that *S* holds at *t*.

Let us begin with some comments on condition (i). "Positive epistemic status" is an umbrella term that covers a great variety of epistemic concepts. In his earlier work, Plantinga was primarily concerned with *deontological justification*.<sup>9</sup> Roughly, a belief is epistemically justified in a deontological sense of "epistemic justification" if and only if a person holds it without flouting any responsibilities, duties, or obligations that arise from the twin goals of maximizing the true beliefs and minimizing the false beliefs in his or her doxastic system. Deontological concepts of epistemic justification are a matter of controversy.<sup>10</sup> But let us grant that Plantinga is right when he says that there are many contexts in which deontological requirements on epistemic excellence are perfectly reasonable.<sup>11</sup> However, a crucial condition for a belief's being deontologically justified is that the subject does not believe it to have an undefeated defeater. Consider a belief *B* that a subject *S* holds at some time *t*<sub>1</sub> and that is defeated by another belief that enters *S*'s noetic system at some later time *t*<sub>2</sub>. Under these circumstances, it would be epistemically irresponsible for *S* to keep on holding *B*, or at least to continue holding it with the prior degree of firmness.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981): 41–51; and "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, 16–93 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed defense of deontological justification in the spirit of RE, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?" in *Faith and Rationality*, 135–86. One of the most important criticisms of deontological justification comes from the argument from doxastic involuntarism. In "Epistemic Deontology, Doxastic Voluntarism, and the Principle of Alternate Possibilities," in *Knowledge and Belief*, ed. Winfried Löffler and Paul Weingartner, 65–75 (Vienna: ÖBV & HPT, 2004), I defend deontological justification, or an important part of it, by arguing that this criticism relies on a problematic epistemic version of the principle of alternate possibilities.

<sup>11</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 100 and *passim*; see also Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 31.

<sup>12</sup> Could one say that *S* need not *have* an undefeated defeater instead of saying that *S* need not believe that a defeater exists? If "having a defeater" does not imply an awareness of having it, this would be too weak. Suppose *S* merely has an undefeated defeater for one of her beliefs, in the sense

In addition to deontological justification, in later work Plantinga considers different kinds of *rationality*. Most important in the present context is what he calls “rationality as proper function.” A mechanism is functioning properly if it is subject to no dysfunction with respect to its “design plan.”<sup>13</sup> Regarding epistemic forms of proper function rationality (henceforth: PF-rationality), Plantinga distinguishes external and internal aspects. You are externally PF-rational with respect to mental states such as your beliefs and experiences if the mechanisms responsible for their initial generation function as they ought to. You are internally PF-rational with respect to a mental state, by contrast, if, *given* that state, your reaction to, and further consideration of, that state are appropriate. (Thus, if you are “being appeared to *treely*” and have no reason to mistrust your experience, internal proper function requires that you form the belief that you are looking at a tree. If a given proposition strongly seems true to you, it is internally rational for you to accept it, and so forth.) Again, this yields an internalist no-defeater condition, for our cognitive “design plan” also includes proper-function requirements with respect to defeater systems.<sup>14</sup> An internal (and proper-function) rationality defeater, however, may be characterized without invoking deontological concepts. And a basic belief is internally rational only if no such internal rationality defeater is in force.

Neither deontological justification nor nondeontological internal rationality is a kind of positive epistemic status that can turn a true belief into *knowledge*. (We learned this long ago from Edmund Gettier.) Plantinga employs the term “warrant” to designate the epistemic property which in sufficient quantity does turn true belief into knowledge. A person *S* is warranted in holding a belief *B* at *t* if and only if *B* is produced in *S* at *t* (1) by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly, (2) in an environment that is appropriate for these faculties, (3) the segment of the “design plan” governing the generation of *B* is aimed at the production of true beliefs, and (4) there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions is true.<sup>15</sup> How, then, should we describe warrant defeaters?

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that the defeater is a member of *S*'s noetic system, but *S* does not recognize it as being a defeater, even if she has done her epistemic best. In that case she cannot be blamed for holding the belief in question and thus remains deontologically justified.

<sup>13</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 153f.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> See especially Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, chaps. 1 and 2; a summary appears on 46f. For a more recent statement, which includes slight refinements, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 156–61. Thorough discussions of the concept, with Plantinga's replies, can be found in the papers collected in Jonathan L. Kvanvig, ed., *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

Warrant, in contrast to deontological and other forms of internal justification, is primarily an *externalist* kind of positive epistemic status. It is externalist in the sense that the conditions which confer positive epistemic status on the belief are not directly accessible to the subject. *Internal* justifiers, which are typically constituted by beliefs and experiences, are internal in the sense that they are part of our cognitive perspective: we do have introspective cognitive access to whether we currently have certain experiences or beliefs; but whether our cognitive faculties are in fact working properly, whether the epistemic environment of a belief-forming process is congenial, and so on is not accessible by reflection alone.

A warrant defeater of a belief is a condition that cancels out at least one of the conditions of warrant.<sup>16</sup> But these conditions are, in the sense just outlined, external with respect to the subject's cognitive system, and hence warrant defeaters too can be external. Consider an example from Alexius Meinong that Roderick Chisholm has rediscovered for the debate:<sup>17</sup>

As is well known, one occasionally affixes so-called Aeolian harps to garden sheds or other more or less suitable places. These harps are made of whistles which sometimes, when the wafting wind blows, produce chords. Now suppose the hearing of a man who has been living in the vicinity of such a device has deteriorated over the time, but at the same time he has developed a tendency to have auditory hallucinations. Then it could well happen that he hallucinates the sounds of the Aeolian harp just when they can actually be heard. . . . If our hallucinating man, as he will normally do, judges: "The Aeolian harp is whistling," he is right.<sup>18</sup>

If we assume that our aging Austrian remains ignorant about his tendency to have auditory hallucinations, he is deontologically justified when he believes that the harp is whistling, and these beliefs also enjoy nondeontological forms of internal rationality. Nevertheless, his auditory beliefs, when based on hallucinations, do not generate knowledge; the man is not *warranted* when he believes that the harp is whistling. But the warrant defeater – in this case the fact that one of the man's cognitive faculties is not functioning properly – is not a condition he can know of just by reflection.

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<sup>16</sup> However, external warrant defeat may be defined in terms of internal defeat along the following lines: an external warrant defeater is a warrant defeater that would be an internal defeater for *S* if it entered into *S*'s cognitive perspective.

<sup>17</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 92. See also Plantinga's discussion in *Warrant and Proper Function*, 35f.

<sup>18</sup> Alexius Meinong, *Über die Erfahrungsgrundlagen unseres Wissens*, reprinted in *Alexius Meinong Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Rudolf Haller and Rudolf Kindinger, with Roderick Chisholm, vol. 5 (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1906), 398ff., my translation.

However, as recent discussions have highlighted, warrant defeaters need not be external.<sup>19</sup> For the warrant a belief enjoys can also be canceled out or diminished by a condition that defeats internal rationality. Proper-function constraints, which are integral to warrant, also apply to internal rationality and hence to internalist defeater systems. As Plantinga himself emphasizes, “the defeater system works in nearly every area of our cognitive design plan and is a most important part of it; we must therefore explicitly understand the proper-function condition of warrant as applying to the relevant portions of the defeater system.”<sup>20</sup> Remember Jennifer, who comes to believe a deductive version of the problem of evil. Internal proper-function rationality requires her to give up her religious belief or hold it less firmly than before if she believes this problem to be a successful defeater. In summary, then, it emerges that internalist defeaters affect all three notions of positive epistemic status that we have been considering: deontological justification, PF-rationality, and warrant.

### How Can Internalist No-Defeater Constraints Be Satisfied?

There are two types of situations in which such no-defeater conditions can be satisfied. One possibility is that the subject generates basic religious beliefs, but never comes across potential defeaters. Perhaps she never finds herself disturbed by problems of evil; perhaps she never reads Freud and friends, and never hears anyone argue that certain theistic beliefs are incoherent, improbable, or even meaningless. Believers whose minds remain uncontaminated by potential defeaters are not in troubled waters.

This kind of religious innocence, however, is a lost paradise, at least for “sophisticated, aware, educated, turn-of-the-millennium people who have read their Freud and Nietzsche, their Hume and Mackie (their Dennett and Dawkins).”<sup>21</sup> Such believers have come across projection theories of religious belief formation, they have encountered problems of evil, considered naturalism as an

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Bergmann, “Internalism, Externalism and the No-Defeater Condition,” *Synthese* 110 (1997): 399–417; Michael Sudduth, “The Evidentialist Implications of Internalist Plantingian Defeaters,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 45 (1999): 167–87; Michael Sudduth, “Proper Basicity and the Evidential Significance of Internalist Defeaters: A Proposal for Revising Classical Evidentialism,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Godehard Brüntrup and Ronald Tacelli, 215–36 (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 200; cf. also 100, 105, 203.

alternative to their religious convictions, and so on. And from what has been said so far it follows that one can only be justified, rational, or warranted in holding a belief if one does not dismiss potential defeaters right off the bat. Regarding internal rationality, Plantinga even says that it is required that “you have . . . engaged in the requisite seeking for defeaters, considered the objections that you have encountered, compared notes with the right people, and so on.”<sup>22</sup> But then projection theories, problems of evil, etc., *will* raise their ugly heads.

The second type of situation in which no-defeater conditions are met occurs when, for each potential epistemic defeater *D* that enters the subject’s cognitive perspective, she acquires (what in her opinion is) a successful epistemic meta-defeater *D*\*. This raises two questions. First, *are* there successful defeater-defeaters for all the objections the contemporary believer might encounter? This is a matter of great controversy. Plantinga himself and others have come up with subtle arguments to the effect that the defeaters for theism thus far presented are in fact inconclusive. Let us assume that this is true. Let us assume that projection theories, arguments from evil, etc., can all be answered. My question is whether a religious belief remains properly *basic* when one has to engage in a complex dialectical process of weighing defeaters, defeater-defeaters, and so forth in order to secure its positive epistemic status. My answer is that it does not.

### Meta-Defeaters and the Basing Relation

The view that there are basic beliefs originates in a larger epistemological story called foundationalism. Plantinga rejects what he calls *classical* foundationalism, which implies that basic beliefs must be incorrigible, self-evident, or evident to the senses.<sup>23</sup> He does endorse the idea, however, that certain (religious) beliefs are basic, and in this respect he stands in the tradition of foundationalist epistemologies. So let us consider once more some standard characterizations of basic or foundational beliefs. Alston writes, in the passage from which I have already quoted at the beginning of this essay:

The sense in which a foundation needs no support is that it is not justified by its relation to other justified beliefs; in that sense it does not “rest on” other beliefs. . . . Our beliefs

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<sup>22</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 255. He suggests that this might also hold for deontological justification.

<sup>23</sup> Cf., for instance, Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 95–99, and the extensive discussion in Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God.”

form a structure, in that some beliefs (the foundations) are justified by something other than their relation to other justified beliefs.<sup>24</sup>

Keith Lehrer says:

According to foundationalists, knowledge and justification are based on some sort of foundation, the first premises of justification. These premises provide us with basic beliefs that are justified in themselves, or self-justified beliefs, upon which the justification for all other beliefs rests.<sup>25</sup>

Here is a passage from Susan Haack:

A theory qualifies as foundationalist which subscribes to the theses: (FD1) Some justified beliefs are basic; a basic belief is justified independently of the support of any other belief; and: (FD2) All other justified beliefs are derived; a derived belief is justified via the support, direct or indirect, of a basic belief or beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

Or consider a characterization offered by Michael Williams:

According to foundationalists . . . , beliefs to which no beliefs are epistemologically prior are epistemologically basic. Their credibility is naturally intrinsic, as that of all other beliefs is naturally inferential.<sup>27</sup>

According to John Pollock and Joseph Cruz,

basic beliefs do not stand in need of justification – they are “self-justifying.”<sup>28</sup>

And Daniel Howard-Snyder has recently put the point thus:

A particular belief of a person is *basic* just in case it is epistemically justified and owes its justification to something other than her other justified beliefs or their interrelations.<sup>29</sup>

Many voices could be added to this list, but what has been quoted will suffice to highlight the crucial point: according to the standard view, a belief is properly basic only if it does not inherit its positive epistemic status from other beliefs. Applied to the notion of warrant, this gives us the necessary condition that:

<sup>24</sup> Alston, *Epistemic Justification*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge*, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 14.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Pollock and Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 29. Talk about “self-justification” in this quotation and in the one from Lehrer may be somewhat infelicitous, since it suggests that for basic beliefs there is nothing except these beliefs themselves that confers positive epistemic status upon them. In fact, however, neither Pollock and Cruz nor Lehrer want to deny that in foundationalist accounts nonpropositional mental states such as experiences, sensations, etc. can play the role of justifiers.

<sup>29</sup> Howard-Snyder, “Lehrer’s Case against Foundationalism,” 51.

A belief  $B$  held by a person  $S$  at a given time  $t$  is properly warrant-basic for  $S$  at  $t$  only if  $B$  is warranted for  $S$  at  $t$  and this property does not inherit its epistemic qualities from any other belief  $B^*$  that  $S$  holds at  $t$ .

Now, if potential epistemic defeaters arise for a religious belief, the subject must, in order to meet the no-defeater condition, neutralize these defeaters. But this will typically involve complex propositional reasoning. Hence, according to the necessary condition of warrant-basicality just sketched, such a belief does not remain warrant-basic.

I think that ultimately this will prove to be correct. But this is not the last word. Remember our initial characterization (PB), which rules that basic beliefs must not be held *on the basis of* other beliefs. Let us go back to that constraint and now ask what exactly it means for a belief to be “based” on other beliefs.

A major division between theories of the epistemic basing relation concerns the question whether a belief  $B^*$  that constitutes, or is part of, the epistemic basis of another belief  $B$  must be the psychological cause of the subject’s generating or sustaining  $B$ . Some authors, most notably Keith Lehrer, have argued to the contrary. “It is commonsense,” says Lehrer, “to distinguish between the reasons that justify a belief and the causes that produce it.”

The causes of belief are various, and, though the reasons we have for a belief sometimes cause the belief to arise, the belief may also arise from some other cause than having the reasons that justify it. Having the reasons we do may justify the belief, however, even though they have no causal influence upon the belief at all.<sup>30</sup>

Remember Lehrer’s classic example of the “gypsy lawyer” who from reading the cards derives the belief that his client is innocent.<sup>31</sup> Suppose that the lawyer eventually acquires, via long and complicated propositional reasoning, respectable reasons for this belief. However, what psychologically causes him to sustain it at this point is, due to his psychological dispositions and the emotional factors surrounding the case, *still* the outcome of the cards. Suppose further that the following counterfactual is true: were his faith in the cards to collapse, he would cease to believe that his client is innocent. Lehrer claims that in circumstances such as these the epistemic subject does have a justified belief, even though what causally and psychologically produces and sustains the belief is epistemically disreputable.

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<sup>30</sup> Lehrer, *Theory of Knowledge*, 169.

<sup>31</sup> Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 123–26. For similar arguments, see also Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 184–86.

I think much can be said in favor of Lehrer's account. And those who endorse it and accept a necessary condition of proper basicity such as the one outlined above will readily agree that, if a subject is required to justify a belief *B* by neutralizing defeaters, *B* loses its basicity. For whatever psychologically sustains the belief, its positive epistemic status will now (at least partially) depend on other beliefs and propositional reasoning.

Yet Lehrer's account is controversial. I don't have the time here to defend it, or to review the extensive debate about the epistemic basing relation. It should be noted, however, that Plantinga does not associate himself with the Lehrer camp. *He* joins the chorus of those who, *pace* Lehrer, require justifiers to be psychologically efficacious. Let us capture this idea by saying that a person *S* bases a belief *B* on another belief *B\** only if *B\** is a reason *for which S* holds *B*.<sup>32</sup> Hence a still more precise formulation of Plantinga's account of proper basicity is this:

(PB\*) A belief *B* held by a person *S* at a given time *t* is properly warrant-basic for *S* at *t* if and only if (i) *B* is warranted for *S* at *t*, and (ii) this property does not derive its epistemic qualities from any other belief *B\** that *S* holds at *t* and that serves as a reason *for which S* holds *B* at *t*.

Our challenge was that properly basic religious beliefs lose their basicity if they must be defended with propositional reasoning. Equipped with this clarification of proper basicity, a defense of RE against this challenge might go as follows. Consider again the case where a person has been assessing potential defeaters for a religious belief (that was originally generated, or sustained, in the basic way), but believes she has refuted them. Might not, nevertheless, the reason *for which* the subject now holds her belief still be the original non-argumentative ground – for example, a conglomerate consisting of testimonial belief and religious experience? In such cases, it might be argued, the religious belief is still properly basic. In fact this seems to be Plantinga's position. At any

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<sup>32</sup> For such accounts, see Robert Audi, "Belief, Reason, and Inference," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 27–65, reprinted in Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 233–73; William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 73f.; or Keith Allen Korcz, "Recent Work on the Basing Relation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34 (1997): 171, who says with reference to Gilbert Harman and John Pollock that "the basing relation is the epistemic relation obtaining [between] a reason and a belief when the reason is the reason for which the belief is held. . . . A belief is merely justifiable for a person *S* when *S* possesses reasons . . . sufficient to justify the belief, but has not made any appropriate connection between the reasons and the belief, and consequently remains unjustified in holding the belief. The appropriate connection would be the belief's being based on the reason." A very helpful recent discussion of basicity can also be found in Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chap. 5, where he recommends a mixed causal-doxastic account of the basing relation.

rate, in one of his earlier essays, still speaking in a more or less general fashion of "rationality," he writes:

If I accept a belief *A* as basic and then encounter a defeater for *A*, rationality may require that if I continue to believe *A*, then I rationally believe there is a defeater for that defeater; but it does not require that I believe *A* on the basis of that belief. It may be that the conditions under which a belief *A* is properly basic for me include my rationally holding some other belief *B*. But it does not follow that if I am *in* those conditions, then *A* is not properly basic for me.<sup>33</sup>

Why does this argument not follow? In light of Plantinga's causal-psychological account of the basing relation, we may construe this argument as suggesting that beliefs about defeated defeaters may reside in a system of psychologically ineffective background beliefs. And since in Plantinga's account the psychological efficacy of a justifier for a belief *B* is a necessary condition for *B*'s being *based* on that justifier, he might say that propositional reasoning about defeaters, defeater-defeaters, and so forth need not jeopardize *B*'s basicity. What are we to say about this argument?

I think that this line of reasoning misconstrues the epistemic situation. Let us say that a belief *B* is psychologically basic for a person *S* if no other belief in *S*'s noetic system psychologically explains why *S* holds or sustains *B*. Now suppose that a belief, or a system of beliefs, has completely been defeated. As a (rational) consequence, the subject has given up this belief. When *S* acquires a meta-defeater, *S* is entitled to reinstate the original belief. But when she does this, the fact that she has acquired a meta-defeater *will* form an essential part of the psychological explanation of the restoration of the original belief. For, had the meta-defeater not entered *S*'s noetic system, *S* would not have regenerated the original belief. True, since both belief and positive epistemic status come in degrees, the situation will often be more complicated. If your basic belief *B* has been very strong, but the defeater you acquire contains premises or inferences that do not seem entirely convincing to you, *B* might only be partially defeated, in the sense that you are still entitled to hold it, albeit with a lesser degree of firmness. Acquiring a defeater-defeater may then license either (a) that you revive *B* with your original degree of acceptance, (b) that you restore it with a lesser degree of firmness, or (c) with an ever higher degree of firmness than before. It may perhaps be conceded that in all these cases the original generation of the belief in the basic way is still a partial explanation of the ultimate doxastic state. Yet having acquired the defeater-defeater will in these cases at

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<sup>33</sup> Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," 85.

least partially explain why one holds *B*, or holds it with the respective degree of confidence. The general point is that in all such situations, where a person comes to regenerate a belief with a certain degree of firmness, but only or partly because she has acquired defeater-defeaters, that belief loses its psychological basicity. And since no belief can be *properly* basic if it is not even psychologically basic, defending and reinstating a belief in light of higher-order defeaters undermines its basicity.

### A Narrow Notion of Basic Belief

There is yet another string to Plantinga's bow. Although to my knowledge he has not developed an official account of the basing relation, he often says that a belief is basic if and only if it is not accepted on the *evidential* basis of other beliefs. According to this account a belief *B* is nonbasic only if the subject accepts it, at least partially, on the basis of other beliefs that provide *positive evidence* for it.<sup>34</sup> Philip Quinn, who was the first to call attention to the methodological significance of potential defeaters in the debate about RE, calls this a "narrow account of the basing relation."<sup>35</sup> In light of this consideration, an even more accurate characterization of Plantinga's account of basic beliefs than (PB\*) would seem to be this:

(PB\*\*) A belief *B* held by a person *S* at a given time *t* is properly warrant-basic for *S* at *t* if and only if (i) *B* is warranted for *S* at *t*, and (ii) this property does not derive its epistemic qualities from any other belief *B\** in *S*'s noetic structure that serves as a reason for which *S* holds *B* at *t* and which provides positive evidence for *B*.

If this is the relevant definition of proper basicity it may be argued that, even with respect to cases in which the epistemic subject has to refute defeaters, Plantinga's theory remains intact. For according to the qualification in condition (ii) about positive evidence, a religious belief's being basic does not rule out that the subject bases it on other beliefs which *in one way or another* contribute to *B*'s positive epistemic status. Remember Jennifer. In order for her to be justified in reinstating her theistic belief, it suffices for her to discover a flaw in the deductive argument from evil. But this does not provide her with propositional evidence

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<sup>34</sup> Cf., for instance, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 82f., 94, 175, 178, 250, 342; also his "Reformed Epistemology," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 384; and *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 70.

<sup>35</sup> Philip L. Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 469–86.

for theism. The situation can best be described in terms of a famous distinction originating with John Pollock: his distinction between *undercutting* and *rebutting* defeaters.<sup>36</sup> A rebutting defeater for a belief *B* is a defeater that provides reasons for accepting the negation of *B*, i.e., reasons which, if they are stronger than the reasons available in favor of *B*, should motivate a rational person to give up *B* and hold its negation. Undercutters, by contrast, are defeaters that are merely reasons for supposing that a given way of belief formation is defective and that this way thus fails to provide adequate grounds for a belief. Equipped with this distinction, it may be argued that, transferred to the level of meta-defeaters, all it takes rationally to revive a belief that has been defeated is belief in the existence of an *undercutting* meta-defeater. The Reformed Epistemologist may thus only have to engage in negative apologetics in order rationally to sustain his beliefs.<sup>37</sup> And that means that, according to the evidentialist conception of the basing relation at work in (PB\*\*), these beliefs can remain basic.

There are two answers to this. The first thing to be noted is that it may well be that a person does not see how to undercut a defeater for her religious belief, but that she does acquire a meta-defeater in form of some piece of natural theology. Some version of a cosmological argument, for instance, may have more epistemic force for the subject than the problem of evil, projection theories, etc. Hence, in that case a rational rejection of the counterargument *would* involve positive apologetics, and the original religious belief *would*, even on Plantinga's narrow construal of the basing relation, be based on propositional evidence.<sup>38</sup> A narrow construal of basicity, therefore, cannot be counted on to save the basicity claim in all cases.

The second thing to say is that, even if we accept the narrow notion of basic beliefs sketched above, and even if we assume that all epistemic defeaters for the religious beliefs in question can be neutralized by undercutting meta-defeaters, this does not help in any way to answer the question which is of ultimate concern. This question is *not* whether it is *possible* (metaphysically or epistemically) that the beliefs under consideration have positive epistemic status. The question is whether these beliefs actually are epistemically acceptable in some appropriate sense. Let us finally examine this question with respect to warrant.

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<sup>36</sup> For a recent statement see Pollock and Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 37, 195ff.

<sup>37</sup> This is what Plantinga ("The Foundations of Theism – A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 [1986]: 298–318) concludes in his reply to Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism."

<sup>38</sup> This point has been stressed by Sudduth: "The Evidentialist Implications of Internalist Plantingian Defeaters," and "Proper Basicity and the Evidential Significance of Internalist Defeaters."

### The Aquinas-(C)Alvin Model, and the Relation between De Jure and De Facto Apologetics

The heart of RE is a fusion of Plantinga's epistemological theory of warrant with a theological model inspired by Calvin. The notion of a "design plan," as it figures in Plantinga's notion of warrant, is not meant to presuppose a theistic worldview. But suppose, Plantinga says, that theism were true. In that case theistic beliefs accepted in the basic way would in all probability enjoy warrant. For in that case it is likely that the believer who forms such beliefs does not suffer from any cognitive dysfunction but actually *is* equipped with a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis* which, under the right conditions, delivers basic religious beliefs.<sup>39</sup> And that means that in all probability the believer would be warranted when generating such beliefs. (Plantinga thinks that similar views about "natural knowledge" of God can be attributed to Aquinas, and hence he dubs his model the "Aquinas-Calvin" model. I think it is doubtful, however, whether Aquinas can be assimilated to the model: we may prefer therefore to call it the "Calvin-Alvin" model.)

The idea that Calvin is indeed dealing with epistemic forms of rationality may well be disputed, and the introduction of a *sensus divinitatis* may be criticized as metaphysically extravagant. However, let us set such questions aside and look at the epistemological relevance of Plantinga's idea. The central aim of RE is to connect the de jure question about the epistemic adequacy of theistic beliefs with the de facto question of whether such beliefs are true. As Plantinga puts it, "the Reformed epistemologist will point out that (in all probability) theistic belief has warrant if and only if it is true; since she thinks it *is* true, she will also think it has warrant, and has it in the basic way."<sup>40</sup> Now Plantinga has been interpreted in this context as arguing that theistic belief actually *has* warrant. Thus, Linda Zagzebski writes that "armed with his . . . account of warrant, Plantinga . . . has the resources to defend the positive position that religious beliefs *have* warrant and, when true, constitute knowledge."<sup>41</sup> But this way of summarizing the theory

<sup>39</sup> For Plantinga's discussion of the *sensus divinitatis*, cf. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 168–74.

<sup>40</sup> Plantinga, "Reformed Epistemology," 388f.

<sup>41</sup> Linda Zagzebski, "Introduction," in *Rational Faith*, ed. Linda Zagzebski (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 2, my italics. For a similar statement, see Sudduth, "The Evidentialist Implications of Internalist Plantingian Defeaters," 109, who says that Plantinga claims that theistic beliefs "*are* PF-rational and warranted, and if true, also constitute knowledge" (my italics). In personal correspondence, Sudduth has said that this way of putting the point may indeed be misleading and that he did not mean to say that RE claims that certain theistic beliefs actually are warranted.

is inaccurate. It does not pay sufficient attention to its modal character. The truth is that Plantinga's account of warrant and the Calvin-Alvin model do *not* put him in a position to claim that the religious beliefs in question actually have warrant. At least they don't allow this without engaging in natural theology and classical de facto apologetics. Plantinga explicitly emphasizes that he wants to give a *model* of theistic belief's having warrant, and he explains that "to give a model of a proposition or state of affairs *S* is to show *how it could be* that *S* is true or actual. The model itself will be *another* proposition (or state of affairs), one such that it is clear (1) that it is possible, and (2) that if it is *true*, then so is the target proposition."<sup>42</sup> In our case the model is a proposition (or a set of propositions) describing a possible world in which theism is true, in which we function properly in a congenial environment, and in which some believers, by something like a *sensus divinitatis*, form basic theistic beliefs. The target proposition is that such beliefs are warranted. However, even if we grant Plantinga every detail of his epistemology and his construction of the model, all that can be concluded is that *if* the model is true, the target proposition (about warranted theistic belief) is true. But if one wanted a conclusion to the effect that the beliefs in question *are* true, it would have to be shown that the model actually is true. As Plantinga himself emphasizes, the Reformed Epistemologist can't claim . . . that it is just obvious that theistic belief has warrant; for it isn't just obvious that theism is true. Instead, she points out that theistic belief has warrant if and only if it is true; hence whether one thinks it has warrant will depend upon whether one thinks it true.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed. But this is a result the evidentialist objector will greet with pleasure. For it perfectly conforms with what evidentialist forms of classical apologetics have been claiming all along when relating the positive epistemic status of theistic beliefs to the quality and quantity of propositional evidence for them. Plantinga thinks that his argument invalidates a particularly popular way of criticizing theistic belief, found, for instance, in the evidentialist objection and in many versions of the argument from evil. This sort of criticism, he says, goes like this: "I don't know whether . . . theistic belief is *true* – how could anyone know a thing like that? But I do know that it is irrational, or rationally unacceptable or unjustified or without warrant (or in some other way epistemically challenged)."<sup>44</sup> However, most evidentialist objections I know of go rather like this: "There are no satisfactory (propositional) reasons to *believe* that theism is true;

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<sup>42</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 168.

<sup>43</sup> Plantinga, "Reformed Epistemology," 389.

<sup>44</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 169.

hence it is irrational (or rationally unacceptable, etc.) to hold theistic beliefs.” RE does nothing to fend off this kind of objection. The evidentialist objector argues that, as she sees it, the arguments in favor of theism do not work, that there are good arguments for its falsehood, and that Plantinga’s model, therefore, is in all probability false. And if it is false, the basic beliefs in question are, in all probability, not warranted.

Plantinga himself argues that the dispute about warrant or the rationality of theistic belief is ultimately not an epistemological dispute, but an ontological or theological issue. But how can we arrive at a proper position in this dispute? From the viewpoint of RE there are two options. We can arrive at a position in the basic way, or we can form the respective beliefs on the basis of propositional reasoning. The first alternative, however, is not open to RE. Adopting a position in the ontological or theological dispute in the basic way would beg the question. For whether it is legitimate to form the relevant beliefs in the basic way is precisely what is at issue. The reasoning, in other words, can certainly *not* go as follows. Question: “Are basic theistic beliefs warranted?” Answer: “If arrived at by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, yes!” Question: “But is there such a thing as a *sensus divinitatis*?” Answer: “Your opinion on this depends on your theological conviction as to whether theism is true.” Question: “And how am I supposed to form beliefs about this question?” Answer: “You may arrive at an answer simply by staring at the impressive beauty of the night sky, looking at the articulate beauty of a tiny flower, reading Scripture. . . .” Question: “All right, but will my view then be warranted?” Answer: “If arrived at by a properly functioning *sensus divinitatis*, yes!” Obviously, there would be something wrong with such an argument. So we are left with the other alternative, i.e., with the need to invoke arguments and propositional reasoning in order to arrive at a rational viewpoint in the theological dispute. But taking this route would lead RE right back to classical *de facto* apologetics.

### Conclusion

I have outlined no-defeater conditions for Plantinga’s notions of deontological justification, proper-function rationality, and warrant, and I have argued that these notions require the basic believer to look out for potential defeaters. I have argued, further, that she will both find such defeaters and, perhaps, be able to defeat them. But religious belief that systematically requires the neutralization of defeaters largely or even completely loses its basicity. I take these reflections to show that, if we ask which forms of *epistemic* rationality such religious beliefs

may enjoy, holistic considerations and discursive reasoning play a much more important role than Reformed Epistemology officially concedes. Furthermore, I have shown that Plantinga's theory of warrant by no means answers the question whether the religious beliefs under consideration actually are warranted. This is a feature of RE that Plantinga himself does not want to deny. But then RE is left in a very modest position with regard to the question that we started with and that most people who are discussing the epistemology of religious belief are ultimately concerned with: whether, and in what sense, religious belief actually does enjoy positive epistemic status.

# Scientific Explanation and Religious Belief

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