

even if he lacks a general criterion of proper basicity, he is not obliged to suppose that just any or nearly any belief—belief in the Great Pumpkin, for example—is properly basic. Like everyone should, he begins with examples; and he may take belief in the Great Pumpkin as a paradigm of irrational basic belief.

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Toward a Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of "Needing Evidence"

In recent years, Alvin Plantinga has been attacking something he calls evidentialism. A number of philosophers have sided with Plantinga, developing what I shall call his "Calvinian view"; others have risen to the defence of evidentialism. The philosophical world has again been alvinized into debate.¹

But what is this "evidentialism" under debate? Or, put another way, what is

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¹For the Calvinian view see *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). For evidentialist replies see Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (Columbia University Press, 1984) and Gary Gutting, *Religious Faith and Religious Skepticism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), Ch. 2. Daniel Dennett's irreverent *Philosophical Lexicon* defines "alvinize" as "to stimulate protracted discussion by making a bizarre claim."

the issue dividing evidentialists and Calvinians? Stated intuitively, we shall see, the dividing issue is whether belief in God *needs evidence*: evidentialists claim that it does; Calvinians deny this. But what does it mean to claim (or deny) that something "needs evidence"? To explicate this, Plantinga reformulates the dividing issue in more technical terms. The issue, he says, is really whether belief in God can be *properly basic*. Evidentialism, as he then construes it, answers "No." This formulation of the dividing issue and this construal of evidentialism have been widely accepted by both sides in the current debate.

My aim in this essay is not to resolve this issue but to relocate it, so as to construe evidentialism more sensibly and deepen our understanding of the opposing perspectives. Section I examines the current formulation, arguing that it makes evidentialism an extravagant position and the Calvinian denial of it a banality. Seeking a more sensible evidentialism, Section II examines the way in which we take other beliefs (e.g., that electrons exist) to "need evidence." I locate the sense in which we take such beliefs to be *evidence essential* and propose that the real dividing issue is whether theistic belief is similarly evidence essential: construed as opposing answers to this issue, evidentialism is more sensible and Calvinianism more interesting. Section III defuses one of the Calvinian's main charges: exploiting an insight of Thomas Reid, I give evidentialism a rationale that has plausibility for theists and non-theists alike.

I. THE CURRENT EXPLICATION: PROPER BASICITY AND EXTRAVAGANT EVIDENTIALISM

As Plantinga observes, many non-believers charge not that there is strong evidence against theism, but that there is insufficient evidence *for* it. Thoughtful believers often respond by adducing evidence for theism, but Plantinga's way is different. As he sees it, such critics and defenders of theism often share a common supposition: they both suppose that theistic belief *needs evidence*, disagreeing only about whether it has the evidence needed. Plantinga calls this supposition "evidentialism." Against all evidentialists, believers and non-believers alike, he urges that "it is entirely right, reasonable, rational, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all."²

To a first approximation, then, the issue dividing evidentialists and Calvinians seems to be this: does theistic belief need evidence? I shall call this the "Pre-Analytic Formulation" of the dividing issue, for at least three things cry out for analysis:

- (Q1) What sort of thing is this "evidence" which evidentialists aver (and Calvinians deny) theism needs?
- (Q2) What *relation* to this evidence is it that evidentialists aver (and Calvinians deny) theistic belief needs to have?
- (Q3) *For the sake of what* do evidentialists aver (and Calvinians deny) that theism needs this relation to evidence?

²"Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, p. 17.

believe in a basic way in God? To claim the contrary—as does evidentialism on the current construal—seems utterly extravagant. Is this really what evidentialists mean to claim? Or is there, perhaps, some other way of explicating the dividing issue, yielding some more sensible construal—or retrenchment—of evidentialism?

II. RELOCATING THE ISSUE: EVIDENCE, ESSENTIALITY AND SENSIBLE EVIDENTIALISM

In seeking a more sensible evidentialism, I shall make two assumptions. The first is that theism is not the *only* belief evidentialists think “needs evidence”: what evidentialists want to say about theism they also want to say about many *other* beliefs—our belief that electrons exist, for example. The second is that, about many of these other beliefs, virtually all of us want to say the same thing as evidentialists—even if we are Calvinians who do not think it should be said of theism. Almost all of us, for example, are “evidentialists” about electrons: we take it that belief in electrons in some sense “needs evidence.” To understand what evidentialists want to say about theistic belief, then, we might begin by trying to clarify what *we* want to say about some of these other beliefs.

One thing we do not want to say: in taking, say, electron belief to need evidence, we do *not* mean that it cannot be properly basic. For as noted above, we allow that one can properly believe in electrons through spontaneous trust in the say-so of school teachers. But although person A might so believe by trusting the say-so of person B, and B by similarly trusting C, we take it that this chain of testimony is, *somewhere in the community*, anchored in something other than testimony. And for electrons, we take this “something other” to be an *evidential* case for electrons. Thus, though we may not know what the scientific evidence for electrons is, we take it that such evidence is *available* to us the *community* of electron believers. The role of epistemic community is vital, for the evidence might be inaccessible to you or me as individuals: perhaps we both have such an ineptitude for mathematics that we haven’t a hope of ever comprehending the equations ingredient in the case. So it is in some *communitarian* sense—not “individualistically”—that we take evidence to be available for our electron belief.

Not only do we take it that evidence for electrons is available in this sense; we also take it as *essential* that it be available. “Essential” in what sense? We can get initial bearings from a hypothetical situation. Suppose we were to discover that no evidential case is available for electrons—say, that the entire presumed case for electrons was a fraud propagated by clever con-men in Copenhagen in the 1920s. Would we, in this event, shrug our shoulders and continue unvexedly believing in electrons? Hardly. We would instead regard our electron belief as being in jeopardy, in epistemic hot water, in (let us put it) big doxastic trouble. Of course not all beliefs are like this: consider our beliefs in perceptual objects like dogs. To be sure, some of us may think an inferential case is available for such beliefs: maybe we endorse Descartes’ argument, for example. But we do not take this as essential: if we discovered that some flaw (some vicious circularity, say) rendered Descartes’ case worthless, we would not consider our confidence that dogs exist to be in big doxastic trouble. As convenient shorthand, let

us put this by saying that we take electron belief (but not dog belief) to be *evidence essential*.

For more clarity about evidence essential beliefs, we must press two questions. First, *what* is essential for such a belief: that an evidential case be *in fact* available, or that the believer *take* (and perhaps justifiably take) it to be available? Second, *for the sake of what* is it essential that evidence be (or be taken to be) available for such belief? We must disentangle two very different ways of answering these questions.

We might, following the Current Explication, assume that it is the *rationality* of belief that is at stake. This would no doubt incline us to say that what is essential is that the believer *take* evidence to be available for his belief. For consider the thousands of young people who have properly believed in electrons on the say-so of their grade school teachers. If the rationality of each of these youth's belief depended upon a case for electrons being in fact available, then were we to discover that the case for electrons is a fraud, we would have to reverse our judgment, deeming each youth irrational. But surely such a discovery would not, in itself, be cause to reverse our judgment; therefore, what is essential to the rationality of their belief is not that the evidential case in fact be available. If something is essential here, one is inclined to say it is that the *subject*, the person holding the belief, take (and perhaps justifiably take) such evidence to be available. When this is essential, let us say that the belief is "*subjectively* evidence essential."⁴

Now some beliefs do seem subjectively evidence essential: some beliefs are such that, to be rational in holding them, one must take it that there is evidence available for them (while perhaps not knowing what this evidence is). But this notion is not, I shall argue, the notion we are seeking. For, typically, whether a given belief of a person is subjectively evidence essential will depend upon that person's second-order view *about* whether this belief "needs evidence" in a different and more fundamental sense.

To see this, it will be helpful to consider a case in which thinkers have disagreed about whether some belief needs evidence. The history of geometry provides one example. Around 300 B.C., Euclid proved a large number of interesting geometrical theorems from five simple postulates—postulates like "between any two points exists one straight line." Now Euclid held the belief—call it "Euclidean belief"—that these five postulates are true. But, in addition, he held a view—call it "the Euclidean meta-view"—about how the truth of such postulates should be determined: the appropriate postulates of geometry, he thought, should be *self-evident*—so simple and clear that any rational person who understands them can see, without any proof at all, that they *must* be true. This view went unchallenged for over two thousand years. To be sure, various early critics doubted whether one of Euclid's postulates (the fifth "parallel thesis") *was* self-evident. But these critics meant to say that the parallel thesis needs to be proven as a theorem instead of

⁴This notion of "subjectively evidence essential" beliefs is closely allied to what Robert Audi calls "evidentially dependent" beliefs. See his "Direct Justification, Evidential Dependence, and Theistic Belief," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. R. Audi and W. Wainwright (Cornell University Press, 1986).

accepted as a postulate—which shows that they accepted Euclid's meta-view that the *appropriate* postulates of geometry are self-evident. Not until the nineteenth century was this metaview challenged, by (among others) the brilliant mathematician Carl Freidrich Gauss. As Gauss came to view it, Euclid's postulates define a physical theory which, as such, *needs evidence*: its truth or falsity must be inferred from delicate experimental tests—tests which, as Gauss knew, had not been done. Euclid's meta-view that geometrical postulates could be known by their "self-evident" quality was, Gauss allowed, a very natural one, and earlier thinkers may have been eminently reasonable in holding it; but it was, as Gauss saw it, utterly false.⁵

Now in seeing it this way (rightly or wrongly), what is Gauss claiming? Is he claiming that Euclid's postulates are *subjectively* evidence essential—i.e., that any person, to be rational in believing them, must *take* evidence to be available for them? Surely not. For, as noted above, Gauss allowed that many past thinkers were eminently reasonable (though mistaken) in holding the meta-view that we can know the truth of certain postulates by their self-evident character. Since he allows this, he may surely also allow that such thinkers were reasonable in believing the postulates without taking inferential evidence to be even available for them. But while regarding these thinkers as entirely rational, it is clear that he would also regard something as deeply defective in their believing as they do. For if their Euclidean beliefs turn out to be true, it is only by luck: as Gauss sees it, the "self-evident" quality of such postulates is an epistemic illusion which, so far as putting one in touch with the truth goes, is of no objective value whatever. We might put it this way: what Gauss means to say is that his predecessors' Euclidean beliefs, even if entirely rational (and true), are *epistemically inadequate*, or *deeply epistemically defective*.

What exactly is "epistemic defectiveness" (or its correlative, "epistemic adequacy")? This is not easy to answer. But our task here is to *locate* this concept, which is, as often in philosophy, distinct from the more arduous task of *explicating* the concept. We can locate the concept of epistemic defectiveness by reflecting on specific cases—on what we would want to say of widespread belief in electrons or (if we are Gaussians) Euclidean geometry if there were in fact no evidence available for these beliefs. Such cases make clear that beliefs can be found wanting in two very different ways (or families of ways). Beliefs can be found wanting in *rationality*, in which case we are diagnosing, as remarked above, a failure or malfunction on the part of the person forming the belief. But beliefs can also be found wanting because they are formed in a *noetic environment* which we judge somehow misleading, deceptive, or glitched. In such an environment, a person may form beliefs in a way we judge to be entirely rational, but nevertheless completely unreliable, so far as giving the person access to the way things are.

⁵The Gaussian episode opened fascinating issues concerning the relation of geometry and physics which must here be set aside. For clear introductions see Albert Einstein's "Geometry and Experience," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. H. Feigl and M. Brodbeck (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), pp. 189–94, or, more fully, Part III of Rudolf Carnap's *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Basic Books, 1966).

Beliefs which are entirely rational may thus be sorely lacking in epistemic adequacy; they may be deeply epistemically defective.⁶

Gauss means to claim, then, that Euclidean belief needs evidence for the sake of *epistemic adequacy* and that, for this, an evidential case must be *in fact* available for it. Gauss's claim, let us put it, is that Euclidean belief is an *objectively evidence essential* belief: if no evidential case is in fact available to the community for it, then those holding it have a deeply epistemically defective belief. In claiming this, Gauss is not saying that most people are in a position to *see* that Euclidean belief needs evidence in this sense. After all, the noetic environment is here a very "glitchy" one: the postulates might (Gauss could allow) have a halo of "self-evidentness" so compelling (though illusory) that believing the postulates without proof was the only rational course open to his predecessors. These are peripheral matters; Gauss's only claim—his revolutionary claim—is that however these matters turn out, Euclidean belief is *objectively evidence essential*—it needs an available case in order to be epistemically adequate, or free from deep epistemic defect. It is in this sense that Gauss is an evidentialist about Euclidean belief. In this sense, too, we are evidentialists about electron belief: we take belief in electrons to be *objectively evidence essential*. Since this sense has turned out to be the relevant one, I shall hereafter drop the adjective "objectively," shortening "objectively evidence essential" to "evidence essential."

We can now, on the two working assumptions with which I began this section, better understand what evidentialists want to say about theistic belief. The issue dividing evidentialists and Calvinians, I propose, is whether theistic belief is evidence essential. Evidentialists answer "Yes": their fundamental claim is that if theistic belief is to be free of deep epistemic defectiveness, it is essential that an evidential case for it be available to the theistic community. So construed, evidentialism does not extravagantly entail that individual theists need always base their theistic belief on their own inference from this evidence, or even that they need to know what the evidence is. And because such evidentialism is a claim about epistemic adequacy, it does not even entail that all theists must, to be *rational* in their belief, take such evidence to be available. Since evidentialism so construed avoids these extravagances, I shall call it "sensible evidentialism."

Sensible evidentialism is not, however, so modest as to be insipid. For on the issue of whether theism is *evidence essential*, the evidentialist's "Yes" will be deeply opposed by a Calvinian "No". Calvinians will insist that there does not need to be an evidential case available for theistic belief in order for it to be epistemically adequate. Indeed, I believe that it is only by so relocating the issue—by seeing the dividing issue as concerning not proper basicity but evidence essentiality—that we get at the heart of the Calvinian position. The claim that belief in God can be properly basic is, after all, rather innocuous: even electron belief, as we have seen, can be properly basic. What Calvinians really want to say is that belief

⁶Irrationality, I mean to claim, is not the *only* kind of epistemic defectiveness. A full account of epistemic defectiveness requires, I believe, adjudicating the current standoff between internalist and externalist theories of knowledge. See William Alston's "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986), pp. 179–220.

quite different truths. But in Reidian cases, inference and a basic faculty are intimate co-workers in producing one and the same belief. In the above case, I may realize on reflection that my father has no motive for dissembling to me on this particular matter, while my mother does. But if, finding some such "good reason" for taking one testimony over the other, I come to believe my father, I need not be relying on this evidence *instead* of my native credulity disposition. The evidence may instead resolve the ostensible parity by functioning as a discriminating feature; this, so to speak, cuts a channel for my credulity disposition, which itself then forcefully carries my belief toward trusting my father. So, also, when parity problems block the flow of memory, perception, or other basic faculties: in resolving such problems by appeal to "good reasons," our evidence discriminates, as it were, a *direction* for one's believing, while one's basic faculty continues to provide the *force*.

We must, then, distinguish two kinds of inferential evidence—one derivational, the other discriminational. How parity problems create a need for—and are resolved by—discriminational evidence requires far more analysis. For example, parity problems occur in a continuum of contexts, to very different effects. If the testimony of my parents conflicts only on isolated occasions, and I lack any way to discriminate between them, I may simply suspend belief on those occasions while continuing generally to rely on their word. But if the conflicts become more regular and I still find no procedures for evidential discrimination, this will (or should) put in a much more far-reaching crisis my propensity to trust them. A whole territory here deserves philosophical exploration.

Even our brief foray, however, opens an important option for sensible evidentialists. Some evidentialists may suppose that theistic belief needs evidence, because they think that to God, as to electrons, we can have no non-inferential access at all: belief in God, they hence think, needs *derivational* evidence. For reasons noted above, it may not be so sensible for non-theists to begin from such an evidentialism, nor for theists to end with it. But there is also a second way to be a sensible evidentialist. One might think evidence is essential because one sees religious experience as riddled with problems of ostensible epistemic parity. Antony Flew thus argues that religious experiences need "credentials" because from culture to culture such experiences "are enormously varied, ostensibly authenticating innumerable beliefs many of which are in contradiction with one another." John Locke finds similar problems within one culture: reflecting on the "enthusiasts" of his own time, Locke notes that if we trust every "inner light" of ostensibly Christian experience, then "contrary opinions may have the same title to be inspirations, and God will be the Father of opposite and contrary lights." For this reason, thought Locke, "the holy men of old, who had Revelations from God, had something else besides that internal light of assurance, to testify to them, that it was from God."⁹

Whether Flew and Locke are right about the *extent* of such parity problems is an important question for, as noted earlier, isolated parity problems need not

⁹See Flew's *God and Philosophy* (Harcourt Brace and World, 1966), p. 126, and Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, Ch. 19. For a contrasting view, see Richard Swinburne's discussion of defeaters in *The Existence of God* (Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 265-67.

undermine general reliance on a basic faculty. But insofar as such parity problems are pervasive, there is reason to regard experiential religious beliefs as needing evidence of (at least) the *discriminational* kind. And because the function of such evidence is to refine (not to replace) our basic dispositions, regarding such evidence as essential to theistic belief is not tantamount to denying that there is a God who has given us a *Sensus Divinitatis*. Non-theists can thus begin from such evidentialism without begging the question; theists can end with it without contradicting an important part of their own traditions.

It might be thought that such evidentialism, while perhaps not contradicting theism, is still not very harmonious with it. If theism is true, and God himself has given humans a *Sensus Divinitatis*, is it not odd that our experiential religious beliefs should need so much evidential refining? Here we might ask why our credulity disposition needs as much evidential refinement as it does. Clearly it would need far less if human beings never lied, flattered, spread rumors, or held irresponsible opinions. But in our world, we painfully learn, these glitches are endemic. Does human religiosity face anything like this? The Jew or Christian may here recall that the Biblical prophets reserve their strongest words not for non-belief but for an idolatrous mis-belief, by which even the religious "speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord" (Jer. 23:16). In this view our fallenness depraves (as Calvin put it) not just part but the totality of our nature: it corrupts even our spiritualities, distorting (not just suppressing) our dispositions to form experiential beliefs about God. The claim that theistic belief needs discriminational evidence is, I conclude, both philosophically plausible and harmonious with Judeo-Christian teaching. I submit it as *especially* sensible evidentialism.