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PROPERLY BASIC THEISTIC BELIEF: A SESAME STREET OBJECTION

Ken Nickel

Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga wants everyone to agree that while sceptics will always be with us, no one is irrational in accepting what only the stubborn sceptic denies. Plantinga claims no one should be considered irrational for accepting what the religious sceptic denies either. Rather, the claim goes, belief in God should be as uncontroversial as any other properly basic belief sensible people happily hold without absolute proof sufficient to silence the sceptic. The legitimacy of placing theistic belief alongside other properly basic beliefs is challenged by the Sesame Street Objection: 'one of these things is not like the others'.

Alvin Plantinga, undoubtedly one of the pre-eminent theistic philosophers of the last few decades, has bequeathed to apologists, and Christian apologists in particular, a reason to stop worrying about reasons for belief in God. The simple fact is this, we're told: people have always had basic beliefs in a variety of things and belief in God is among those really basic beliefs. It's only philosophers who come along and throw a wrench into the minds of ordinary people and get them to doubt the nose on their face. We should accept both the nose on our face and the existence of God. Scepticism has been around for as long as there has been philosophy. Religious belief, by contrast, has been around a good deal longer – for good reason, Plantinga has famously argued! Belief in God is a properly basic belief.

To defend theism as properly basic, Plantinga discourages appeal to arguments and proofs – the coin of the

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realm for Christian apologists. With Zen-like aplomb, he encourages the Christian philosopher to consider one's beliefs in the external world, about memories of past events, and about 'other minds'. We accept these things *without* proof or evidence. There are no proofs or unassailable arguments to which we can all turn to put sceptics in their place, nor even to silence our own doubts. But fear not! If we're justified in dismissing scepticism about these basic beliefs in the external world, the past, and other minds, then we shouldn't be so stingy with belief in God either. Everyone is sufficiently rational when we believe in stuff like the world around us, other people, the past, and God – you know, *basic* stuff.

Not so fast! The issue is not whether sceptics can be rightly put in their place; let's make the debateable assumption that they can. The issue is whether Plantinga and his legion of followers are making a whopping category mistake by smuggling theistic belief in alongside other candidates for properly basic belief. Queue the 'Sesame Street Objection': I will argue that one of these things is not like the others! After a bit of reflection, it should be obvious why theistic belief does not belong in a category of properly basic beliefs.

Beginning with beliefs in the external world, let's concede to the sceptic, with some customary eye-rolling, that the proof of or certainty about a world beyond our sense perception is not available to us. What belief in the external world has going for it, though, is an outstanding service record. Any concern we might experience about the absolute reliability of sense perception comes after years of trusting its reliability. Experience teaches us to know the difference between dreams and vivid sense experience, between illusions and reality. We don't need to get reality right every time to grant that sense perception doesn't get us into trouble too often and that it occurs involuntarily. We all live for a long time with involuntary experiences of 'a world out there' long before any of us become philosophical about the appearance/reality distinction. Whether people

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care to be philosophical about appearances is irrelevant. We simply have them, whether we want them or not. Explaining them *away* is a philosopher's trick – or maybe even a philosopher's job. So, we can agree with Plantinga that belief in the external world is a good candidate for a properly basic belief. If sceptics disagree, too bad!

Let's concede with Plantinga that there's no satisfactory proof that 'other minds' exist. René Descartes wrote centuries ago that the experience we commonly have of other human beings does not, by itself, constitute absolute proof that there really are 'other minds'. After some philosophical reflection upon these impressions of other people, we are forced, again with customary eye-rolling, to acknowledge that maybe these human look-alikes are machines, robots, or zombies. Damn sceptics! But notice again, the involuntary experience each of us has of others. The experience comes first; any doubt (if it arrives at all) comes years after the untutored acceptance of other people like us. None of us as children needed our parents or our friends to alert us to the fact that they were real. Nor did we have to will ourselves to believe in them. So, again, belief in other minds is a good candidate for a properly basic belief.

Let's concede with Plantinga that there's no absolute proof that our memories reveal the past we think it does. The sceptic tells us that maybe the world is only five minutes old and that God or a mad scientist has furnished us with experiences of the past. Maybe these false memories are implanted in us, or impressed on our minds somehow. Maybe God or the mad scientist furnished the world with old-looking mountains, trees, even pyramids and temples, and of course, mummies. After some philosophical reflection upon these impressions, we are forced to acknowledge that maybe we're deceived by these 'relics of the past'. Maybe we *are* living in the Matrix. Damn sceptics! But notice, the involuntary recollection of the past comes first. The incredulity and the regret of, say, having worn really ugly clothes in high school comes after. No one's memory is perfect, but when we talk to the other minds (we

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accept as basic) we find these people roughly remember the same things we do. So, memory beliefs are good candidates for properly basic beliefs.

So, let's quickly rehearse what these three candidates have in common. As general types, the beliefs are all involuntary and untaught. Instances of them could be mistaken, but as general types of belief we could not survive without them. As such, they're not reliant upon any particular language or culture. People throughout history and all over the world have had them.

Religious belief is not like these others. As a general type, religious belief and religious experience is most credibly – but not sceptically – explained by reference to some or all of the other three non-sceptical, properly basic beliefs. If you want to reject properly basic beliefs you need to be a sceptic in some sense, but you don't need to be a sceptic to explain theistic belief by reference to something far more basic. Let's consider further how this one thing is not like these other three. First of all, no one debates that properly basic beliefs must be *learned* in some sense, but they need not be *taught*. No child needs to be *taught* to believe that there's an external world or that other people exist. No child needs to be taught *how* to employ memory. We can just as easily think children need to be taught how to breathe. No basic beliefs rely on didactic assistance – none! One would fail to function properly as a human being if these beliefs were thought to require instructional support. In the 'natural' course of life, people will learn to trust their beliefs in an external world, to trust in their beliefs in other people, and to trust their memories of the past.

How we come to describe, interpret, and explain our impressions or our experiences is famously 'up for grabs'. Humans come to the interpretative task of making sense of experience not because we want to and not because we see the alternatives as arbitrary, but because in some deeply natural sense *we must*. We must interpret our basic impressions of the world and of life or we won't survive. If we asked psychologists to offer a provisional list of

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common human fears, that list would probably include fear of the dark, fear of heights, fear of snakes, etc. But why fear, among other things, dark spaces, high places, and threatening faces? Psychologists will also tell us we have a rather more basic fear of dying; so getting caught in dark spaces or falling from high places are things we instinctually learn to avoid. Fearing predators is fearing death too. It is entirely plausible to think that our ancestors tens of thousands of years ago learned to attribute agency and intentions to the things they feared. I'm referring here to the well-known theory of HADD (hyperactive agency detection device). The device, a supposed evolutionary innovation, explains that we survived more probably when we successfully avoided things we feared would kill us. Within however many countless generations, the instinctual innovation of 'better safe than sorry' becomes more and more deeply imprinted on our incipient cognitive faculties. Our 'agent detection' capacity becomes hyperactive, attributing agency – the capacity to act in the world – to virtually everything. Unless we learned to trust our beliefs in the external world, our memories, and 'other minds', we jeopardized our chances of survival.

It's worth noting that we didn't falsely attribute 'other minds' to non-human animals. As a general type of attribution, we did so rightly. We knew some of them at least could kill us when they set their minds to it, so to speak, and when we humans were sufficiently hungry and sufficiently intrepid we would try to kill some of them as well. We learned over time that our failures in agent detection could have rather grave consequences. Where we couldn't directly detect the actual agent, say, the lion or the cobra (perhaps because it was applying its own agency to *escape* detection), we survived more frequently when we *believed* that agency was 'in' the grass or 'in' a dense grove of trees. The cost of believing in what you could not see was quite low and sometimes the benefits were quite high. From rightly, but not in every instance truly, attributing agency to hidden things in visible things (e.g. believing

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there to be a tiger *we can't see* in grass *we can see*) we started to falsely believe that visible things possessed invisible intentions very similar to our own. The cobra may strike a human being out of instinctual self-defence, but not because it has evil intentions towards us. It's one thing to have a common human fear of snakes because their strike is often fatal; it's quite another to believe they have evil intentions towards us. A tiger may kill us to eat us, but just because it can *intend* to eat us is no reason for us to think it has evil intentions towards us. These kinds of attributions were always false, but we didn't know that back then.

Not everything we fear is a predator; we may reasonably fear thunderstorms, tornados, tsunamis, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes because these things can harm us too. It is not a great leap in common sense to see that our instinctual hyper-sensitivity to 'other minds' would result in our mistaken efforts to mollify, cajole, appease, and otherwise manipulate these observable but inanimate entities. That is, we started treating tigers, cobras, volcanoes, rivers, thunderstorms, the sun, and the moon as though they were *all* other minds like ours – some*one* we could try to reason with.

If we enlist the help of anthropologists and historians they could give us an inventory of all the different kinds of animate and inanimate things to which we humans have attributed our minds in a god/goddess-like fashion. And, if along with anthropologists and historians, we also enlist the help of scientists, philosophers, and even theologians, we could take that inventory and conclude with confidence that the entire list is metaphysically inert. For example, today we might know that something *in* a swamp could cause a fever, but we know that no swamp spirits cause fever. We know that earthquakes, tsunamis, and diseases cause countless deaths, but we also know that none of these observable entities are evil-doers. They can't be appeased, they can't be mollified. Try as we might, and we've obviously been trying for tens of thousands of years, these objects cannot be reasoned with.

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Today, some religious believers and theologians would insist that we, especially in the west, are a great deal more sophisticated in our religious beliefs. We no longer attempt to appease or manipulate visible things; we worship abstract entities, things without any physical properties like, for example, love, justice, and goodness. While this may be true, we should also acknowledge that the disembodied monotheism affirmed by contemporary Christianity and Islam makes up an astonishingly small percentage of all the religious belief expressed over the course of human history. In light of all the historical, anthropological, psychological, and sociological evidence isn't it far more obvious to explain religious belief as the result of using our primitive, basic beliefs about the regularities of the past, about the predictable external world, and about the agency of other minds? If that's the case, then belief in human *Good* might be properly basic, but belief in its personification is not. Given our evolutionary past, it might be predictable that we would *believe* in invisible agents and come to call them gods and goddesses – but that wouldn't make the belief basic.

Plantinga gives the proliferation of worldwide religious belief a very different explanation from the natural one provided above. While it's obvious to everyone that we have five empirical senses plus some rational capabilities, Plantinga also posits a special 'sixth sense', namely, *sensus divinitatis.* I've been describing our five senses along with memory as functioning involuntarily, but Plantinga argues that *sensus divinitatis* functions involuntarily as well. (At least it does to begin with.) We humans have simply been doing for millennia now what God originally created us to do, namely, believe in him! Religious belief is properly basic because of *sensus divinitatis*, not for some other reason related to evolutionary psychology. We accept other minds in a properly basic fashion; therefore, we should accept that belief in God is simply belief in *another* mind. Today, in the west we would call this the *ultimate* mind. If the mind of a friend is no more provable than the mind of God, and belief

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in other minds is properly basic, then belief in God's *mind* (i.e. God *as* mind) is properly basic too. Rather than think it an inveterate natural tendency to attribute agency to objects, why not, Plantinga could ask, think of it the other way around – why not think *sensus divinitatis* 'runneth over'? Why not think we've got a hyperactive divinity detection device (HADDD)?

The Sesame Street Objection is rather apropos in this regard as well. The problem of 'other minds' in contemporary philosophical debates is not really a problem about *other* minds. The conundrum for which there's yet no satisfying explanation is not about *other* minds *per se.* The big puzzle, rather, is about 'mind' or consciousness, indeed one's very *own* consciousness. It is no surprise that Plantinga is a card-carrying metaphysical dualist. That is, he believes mind or consciousness is metaphysically distinct from the brain in which the consciousness occurs. How the mind and the brain interact is anyone's guess, but the 'how' of interaction is not the problem. For Plantinga, the idea of a physical thing, such as a brain or computer, that is conscious is similar to the idea that the number '7' is blue or weighs five pounds. A physical thing that thinks is, according to Plantinga, logically incoherent. Naturalists, and a growing number of theists, accept that mind must somehow *emerge* from the brain, but there's little consensus on the *how* of emergence. It's difficult to see what is logically incoherent about this. On the contrary, there is not the slightest hint of evidence that consciousness could exist without something very much like a brain. The idea of brain-independent, even matter-independent consciousness anywhere in the cosmos is *today* incomprehensible – not so much a logical contradiction, just astonishingly difficult to envision. So, while everyone else is scrambling to explain consciousness in brain-dependent ways (because there's no credible alternative) Plantinga insists on believing what for sound empirical reasons virtually everyone else has rejected. Plantinga's answer to the mind–body problem is not like the others either!

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Plantinga could uncouple belief in God from his literally *incredible* commitment to dualism. He could simply argue that *sensus divinitatis* enables humans to detect God in nature, in his creation. Certainly, this has been an appealing notion among theists for centuries. Theists like to think they see God in rainbows, daffodils, and sunsets. On this account, then, belief in God is not reducible to belief in *another* mind; rather, it entails apprehension of God through his handiwork. But, this now grounds belief in God in a different properly basic belief, namely, belief in the external world. We see the rainbow *first* or the daffodil *first* and then we wait around for our parents or some other cultural authority or tradition to tell us that God is in the rainbow or daffodil. The experiences of the external world are unavoidable and untaught, while divine interpolations are all culturally dependent. Of course, many of these culturally dependent interpolations are mutually exclusive. Surely, culturally dependent beliefs are excluded as candidates for properly basic beliefs. Theologians are fond of talking about divine revelation, but it seems all revelation is dependent upon the cognitive faculties we have for believing *first* and more directly in other things in the world.

Perhaps in an effort to salvage properly basic belief in God, the theist would say that the external world, other minds, the past, and belief in God each have their own type of experience. Genuine experience of the external world is not like genuine experience of another person or a memory. So too, experience of God is unlike any other experience. It's common to experience the external world, other minds, and the past, and given the stunning proliferation of religious beliefs, it is 'common' to experience God as well. But, this claim plays on the ambiguity of 'common experience'. It's one thing to say that humans commonly experience hunger, thirst, colour, sound, other minds, and memories. It's quite another to say that humans commonly experience *God*. It is common amongst people to *believe* in God. It's common amongst people to parrot the religious language of a particular tradition. But it's difficult to imagine

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an ordinary person declaring his or her *belief* in sense experience or *belief* in other minds. Rather, we find ourselves unreflectively believing in the external world or in other minds. When a Christian tells a Muslim 'Jesus died for our sins', the Muslim can rightly reply, 'You mean *you believe* Jesus died for our sins.' Some religious people might confess that they unreflectively find themselves believing in *their particular* articles of faith in much the same way as they find themselves believing in the external world. But it would take a special kind of hubris to say, after a bit of reflection, that one's own articles of faith are properly basic while those of the rest of the planet are sadly mistaken.

Plantinga and his legion of followers will probably be undaunted by my Sesame Street Objection. He is fond of saying that Christian philosophers are answerable to their own theories, their own examples. They don't have to play by the epistemic rules imposed on them by the great unwashed. Fair enough, but a curiosity remains. If belief in God is thought to be properly basic on terms that suit the theist and not the atheist, then why analogize theistic belief with other properly *a*-theistic beliefs, that is, beliefs that are properly *without* God? If belief in God is properly basic *like those other* beliefs then surely the religious person would want that belief to be independent of a special *theistic* sense as well. It's obvious that the empirical senses, plus some cognitive capacity to interpret and give meaning to sense experience, are all that is necessary to explain our inveterate habit of sensing the divine. If Plantinga wants to argue that *sensus divinitatis* is the uniquely fashioned faculty that helped correct our mistaken attributions of deity to, say, the sun or cobras, one wonders when in our evolutionary past that sense was granted, when it successfully took hold, or when it started functioning properly. Nothing we see in Plantinga's extensive writings on *sensus divinitatis* encourages the reader to think its cognitive utility applies only to the detection of monotheism and certainly not just Christian theism. At the very best, *sensus divinitatis*

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seems an extravagant divine gift intended to sharply over-determine religious belief in the world. The sober reality seems to be this: anyone, including Christians and Muslims, could politely reject Plantinga's leg-up from *sensus divinitatis* and rely on the cognitive resources we already employ with fair, though hardly perfect, reliability. Plantinga places great stock in the fact that humans are and have always been inveterately religious, but he would have to grant that we've been hopelessly wrong in so many instances, as when we worshipped the sun, or stars, or animals, or chunks of stone, or even saintly people. Why would we need to dignify this embarrassing penchant for attributional failure with the belief that it was *God-given*? Surely we could fail this badly with the empirical senses and the cognitive capacities we've always had.

Here's the last reason to think that belief in God is not properly basic on Plantinga's own terms and it reveals something marginally spurious. I have been at pains to emphasize the involuntary, unavoidable, culture-independent nature of properly basic beliefs. Plantinga believes that *sensus divinitatis* functions properly and involuntarily in us as well. Until, that is, the fool comes along and says there is no God. People like Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx, and of course the 'new atheists', voluntarily ruin and corrupt this God-given sense. Unbelievers are not functioning properly; their rejection of God is evidence of this. On the other hand, if you in the Amazon basin believe in swamp spirits, you're functioning as God intended. It seems rather odd that people can ruin their divine sixth sense by honestly and sincerely saying 'I don't see what everyone else claims to be seeing.' After all, we can't ruin our vision by denying we've got it. We can't even ruin our vision by being sceptical about what it represents to us. How is it that when someone disbelieves in every conceivable God but his or her own they're just doing what comes naturally, but when an atheist disbelieves in *every* God that is disbelieved by at least someone, he or she is making a voluntary and morally culpable mistake? Deep down, Plantinga and many

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of his followers in the Reformed Tradition don't believe that anyone ever sincerely rejects God for epistemic reasons. People reject God for moral reasons. Now, should we really take seriously the idea that belief in God is just like those other properly basic beliefs? Not a chance!

What should be most obvious after looking at Plantinga's inventory of four properly basic beliefs is that theistic belief gets included only with special pleading. By asserting that theistic belief is properly basic, Plantinga's approach – well known for decades now among Christian apologists – continues to inspire the idea that religious belief is beyond personal and public scrutiny or criticism. The message seems to be that reflection on epistemic justification is for a different brand of thinker: maybe it's for sceptics or maybe for evidentialists, but it's not for we sophisticated epistemologists! In the final analysis, Plantinga's Zen-like aplomb masks a tenacity that makes lots of religious belief epistemically, morally, and politically reckless. I'm not saying the Sesame Street Objection should make it obvious to a preschooler that God does not exist. I'm saying that a bit of reflection should make it obvious to any thoughtful theist that belief in God is very much unlike our common human commitments to an external world, other minds, or beliefs about the past. Theistic belief is not like these others. Whether theistic belief is false is a different kettle of fish.

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