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Faith and the Many-Tiered Structure of Belief

Donald Wayne Viney

The title of J. L. Mackie's last book, *The Miracle of Theism*, typifies some atheological treatments of religious belief. The point of the title is that, because the case for God's existence is so poor, it is a miracle (that is, surprising) that belief in God persists among reasonable persons. George H. Smith ridicules belief in God as "irrational to the point of absurdity." Kai Nielsen is more flamboyant, "for people with a reasonable understanding of science and with a tolerably good understanding of philosophical analysis, acceptance of the Christian *Weltanschauung* is irrational because the primary religious beliefs it enshrines are, depending on how they are taken, either absurdly false or, in an important sense, incoherent."¹ There are at least three ways theists could respond to these allegations:

- 1) Deny that the case for God's existence is poor.
- 2) Deny that arguments for God's existence are relevant to a reasonable faith in God.
- 3) Deny that arguments for God's existence are the decisive factor in having a reasonable faith.

Elsewhere I have defended the first strategy.² This paper builds on the work of Alvin Plantinga and defends the third strategy. Although Plantinga's case requires modification, there is an important truth in what he wants to say. Elaborating on the concept of noetic structures, I argue that the concept of a rational belief is flexible enough to tolerate a certain degree of uncertainty and inability to answer criticism of the belief. This flexibility, moreover, is an essential component in the concept of a rational faith in God.

Plantinga claims that argument is not irrelevant to belief in God but that belief in God, to be rational, need not be based on argument. Thus, Plantinga adopts the third of the strategies mentioned above.³ Plantinga's argument rests on the concept of a belief being "properly basic." A belief is basic if it is not based on other beliefs. This is not to say that there could not be evidence for the belief, but only that in holding the belief, the evidence is not employed.⁴ For example, I believe " $2 + 1 = 3$ " and "I had breakfast this morning" but I need not believe these things based on other beliefs. As Plantinga says, "In these and other cases I do not *decide* what to believe; I don't total up the evidence . . . and make a decision as to what seems best supported; I simply believe."⁵ A basic belief could, therefore, be characterized as a belief that is not *consciously* based on other beliefs.

A belief is *properly* basic if it is (a) basic and (b) rational. When is a basic belief proper or rational? Plantinga does not offer criteria for proper basicity.⁶ However, he argues that a necessary condition of a basic belief

being rational is that it results from one's cognitive apparatus functioning according to its "design specifications."⁷ Says Plantinga, we have the idea of a natural organism, or its parts, working properly or improperly. For example, when a bird cannot fly because its wing is broken, we recognize that the wing is not working according to its design specifications. Analogously, a belief may be rational, or irrational depending on the proper functioning of one's cognitive apparatus.⁸ If, when I form the belief " $2 + 1 = 3$," my cognitive faculties are functioning properly, then my belief is a candidate for being rational.

Plantinga's next step is to say that belief in God can qualify as a properly basic belief. He gives the example of the 14-year-old theist who is brought up in a community of religious believers who never question the existence of God. The young girl may never have heard of the arguments for God's existence. Moreover, she never reasons that because those she respects and looks to for guidance believe in God, it is rational for her to believe; that is, she doesn't argue to God's existence from authority. She finds that belief in God comes to her naturally. For instance, when contemplating a star studded night, she has a sense of the majesty of God's creation. Thus, her belief in God is basic. Nor is she irrational in her belief. As Plantinga says, she is within her "epistemic rights" in believing that God exists—her belief in God is properly basic.

If her belief is not based on other beliefs, then how is reason relevant to her belief? Plantinga's answer is that, although belief in God may be properly basic, one may recognize that there are arguments which could either support or undermine theism (Plantinga calls these latter defeaters). Consider the 14-year-old theist six years later; she goes to college and enrolls in a course on the philosophy of religion. For the first time she learns about arguments for and against the existence of God. However, she still may not base her belief in God on any of these arguments; she does not use the arguments to support her belief. Moreover, let us further suppose that, to her satisfaction, she has answered the arguments against God's existence. She recognizes that reason is relevant to the question of God's existence. But her belief in God remains basic, and Plantinga avers, properly so.

Plantinga's argument makes considerable headway toward the idea that reason is a relevant, but not necessarily a decisive, component in rational theistic belief. However, the concept of proper basicity needs more work. For a belief being rational is not the same as the belief being not irrational. Let me illustrate with an analogy. We sometimes say of a person that she is "not unhappy." However, this is not the same as saying that she is "happy." To be happy is somehow to be satisfied or content with one's condition. To be not unhappy is to be neither happy nor unhappy, but somewhere between—closer to apathy or indifference than contentment. Analogously, a belief is not irrational if it is neither rational nor irrational. The difference between being rational and being not irrational is a difference between having a considered as opposed to an unreflective opi-

nion. The 14-year-old theist is not irrational in her belief; she has not, as Plantinga says, violated any of her "epistemic duties." It is unnecessarily laudatory to call her belief rational since she has not, at age 14, considered the reasons for and against theistic belief. Only after having considered the evidential case could her belief qualify as rational. If this is so, then her belief in God at age 14 is not *properly* basic, though her belief at age 20 is.

This change in Plantinga's notion of proper basicity allows for belief in God to be properly basic provided one has, to the best of one's ability, weighed the reasons for and against theism. But let us take the example of the young theist further. Suppose that after hearing the theistic and atheistic arguments, she is confused. She is unconvinced by the arguments for God's existence. More importantly, she is troubled because she has no good counter-argument to (say) the problem of evil (i.e. how could a good and all-powerful deity allow apparently undeserved suffering?). After a thorough study of the case, she is unable to refute the atheological argument. In Plantinga's words, she has no defeater for the problem of evil. Is she perforce irrational, or not rational, or not within her epistemic rights if she continues to believe in God? What exactly are her intellectual duties in this quandary? I wish to argue that she violates none of her intellectual obligations if she continues to believe in God.

Central to my argument is the idea that belief, especially belief in God, involves a many-tiered structure. Plantinga speaks of a person's noetic structure as "the set of propositions he [or she] believes, together with certain epistemic relations that hold among him [or her] and these propositions."⁹ Now the propositions within a noetic structure constitute a kind of hierarchy, varying in what I call abstractness and inclusiveness. If one proposition is more abstract than another, then it conveys less information, or is less specific than the second proposition. A proposition is included in another proposition if it is entailed by it. To take a homely example: "I had breakfast" is more abstract and is included by "I had eggs, bacon, and coffee for breakfast." These two propositions are more abstract and included by "I had two scrambled eggs, burnt bacon, and black coffee for breakfast." The characteristics of abstractness and inclusiveness are also found in religious beliefs. The belief that God is omniscient is more abstract and is included by the various concepts of omniscience (for example, is God's knowledge of the future the same as God's knowledge of the past?). Or again, the belief that God's will has been revealed is more abstract and is included by the ideas that the Bible or the Qur'an is the unique revelation of the divine will.

The varied levels of abstractness and inclusiveness suggest that some beliefs are more fundamental than others. The belief that I had breakfast is more fundamental than the belief that I had eggs, bacon, and coffee for breakfast. Similarly, the belief that God's will has been revealed is more fundamental than the belief that God's will is uniquely revealed in the

Qur'an. Let us say that when a proposition is included by several other propositions within a noetic structure that it forms the core of a nexus of propositions. It is a core proposition, or a core belief.¹⁰ The core belief of the theist is that God exists, for it is included by each of the propositions that the theist holds about God.

The hierarchy within noetic structures allows for a certain flexibility in the rationality of a belief. Suppose I believe that I had bacon for breakfast but then learn that the restaurant where I ate was out of bacon. This is evidence that my belief is false. However, I am still rational in believing that I had breakfast. Or again, the 20-year-old theist's inability to square God's goodness with undeserved suffering does not mean that her belief in God's goodness is irrational. The moral is that core beliefs tend to be more resistant to recalcitrant evidence than the members that compose their nexus.

The fact that some beliefs, especially the theist's beliefs, are resistant to falsification, has, since Antony Flew's "Theology and Falsification," been considered by many to be a flaw in the theistic worldview.¹¹ However, my thesis is that the concept of a rational faith in God is closely tied to the flexibility within noetic structures. The beliefs upon which a rational faith in God are founded are core beliefs. Less abstract propositions about God within the nexus may function to support the core beliefs, but they cannot, properly speaking, be part of a rational faith.

At a minimum, faith signifies a loving trust in God and a disposition to act on that trust.¹² Belief in God involves assent to certain propositions about God. Minimally, belief in God is assent to the proposition that God exists. However, belief in God does not require faith since one could believe in God without trusting or feeling dependent on God.¹³ The converse relation, however, is true—faith requires belief. Belief could be called the intellectual component of faith.

The beliefs upon which faith is properly founded are abstract, core beliefs. The theist's faith may require belief that God exists, is supreme in love, knowledge, and power, and acts in history. The exact beliefs upon which faith is founded varies from believer to believer. The point is that in each case it is the core beliefs that provide the foundations of faith. Imagine a family praying before the evening meal. The 4-year-old prays to a kindly old man with a long flowing beard living somewhere in the clouds. The 14-year-old prays to Jesus as she imagines he appeared to his disciples. The 20-year-old seminary student prays to Being-Itself. The *Father* prays to a timeless, simple, unchanging, and necessary being. And the mother prays to "the self-surpassing surpasser of all."¹⁴ The core beliefs remain the same for each member of the family. Thus, though their less abstract beliefs are different, it is reasonable to suppose they have faith in the same God.¹⁵

Being associated with belief in God at a high level of abstractness, faith can function in the life of a believer in a way other, less abstract beliefs

cannot. This is the strongest reason for placing core beliefs at the foundations of faith. Faith in God helps see the believer through tough times. This would not be possible if the beliefs on which faith were grounded were very specific. For example, if Jones believes that God always gives a person the material benefits necessary to a healthy life, her faith is not going to be of much use when the recession hits and she loses her job and cannot pay the dental bills. A faith which, more fundamentally and abstractly says that "in everything God works for good with those who love God and who are called according to the divine purpose" will be of more comfort.¹⁶ If faith is to be a resource to the believer in times of stress and crisis, it must be founded on core beliefs.

I have argued that a rational belief in God requires that one has examined the pros and cons of theism. This holds also for the core beliefs upon which faith is built. However, because core beliefs are more abstract than others in the nexus, they are more resistant to falsification. They tend to elude the grasp of reason because of their lack of specificity. Yet it is this quality that best qualifies them to serve faith.

This is not to say that reason is irrelevant to faith. On the positive side reason can help in faith's self-understanding. As one matures, for example, one's concept of God may become ever more sophisticated—the 4-year-old may eventually abandon her naive anthropomorphisms. This can only count as a positive gain to faith. Reason may also provide, as it has for many believers, arguments for God's existence. Nevertheless, reason is a two-edged sword. It can support or challenge faith. When one is at the end of one's intellectual rope, and when reason is more foe than friend, believers (and unbelievers) must face the demands of their own integrity. Can they honestly continue to believe and to have faith in God? I do not think there are any well-established norms on which an answer to this question can be founded. The rough waters of theological argument may be seen either as an occasion to abandon faith or as a call to trust in God even more. If there are any objective criteria for deciding which course is more justified, I do not know them. The fact is that reasonable people disagree about these things and there is no cure for that.

In summary, belief in God can be properly basic only when one has taken the trouble to examine the arguments for and against that belief. Without this critical scrutiny, the belief may be basic but it cannot be properly basic. Even so, belief in God can be rational even though one may be at a loss in how to respond to skeptical attacks on the specifics of one's belief system. The rationality of theism is a complex affair which involves the many-tiered hierarchy of a noetic structure. Finally, in associating faith with the core beliefs of a nexus, there is an explanation and justification for faith's resistance to the onslaughts of reason. In proper context, the apparent unfalsifiability of religious belief is not an intellectual embarrassment but a necessary consequence of the logic of faith and a theological virtue.

NOTES

1. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 12; George H. Smith, *Atheism The Case Against God*, Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1979, p. xi; Kai Nielsen, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982, p. 17.

2. Donald Wayne Viney, *Charles Hartshorne and the Existence of God*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985.

3. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," *Faith and Rationality*, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff eds., Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 16-93. Plantinga has also adopted the first strategy by defending versions of the design and ontological arguments. See his *God and Other Minds*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967, and *The Nature of Necessity*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, pp. 197-221. Recently (Summer 1986) I heard Plantinga defend a multiple argument strategy with no fewer than two dozen theistic arguments!

4. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 51.

5. Plantinga, "On Working Properly," unpublished manuscript given at the NEH Summer Institute for the Philosophy of Religion, Bellingham Washington, Summer 1986, p. 3.

6. Plantinga thinks that the best way to discover criteria for proper basicity is inductively, by framing hypotheses about the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and testing examples against the hypotheses, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 76.

7. "Design" does not imply a designer since, according to Plantinga, both theists and atheists recognize the difference, at least in principle, between proper and improper functioning. How the belief producing mechanism originally came about (for example, divine fiat, evolution, divinely guided evolution) is another question.

8. "On Working Properly," p. 2.

9. "Reason and Belief in God," p. 48.

10. Core propositions may themselves have cores. The proposition that God exists is the core of a host of other propositions about God. These propositions in turn form the core of other nexus of propositions.

11. Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre eds., New York: Macmillan, 1955.

12. This is the Pauline sense of faith, *pistis*.

13. Cf. James 2:19. It should be stressed that faith is no mere intellectual affair, but a movement of one's entire being. Elsewhere I argue that faith is a creative act. See my "Faith as a Creative Act," in *Faith and Creativity: Essays in Honor of Eugene Peters*, George Nordgulen and George W. Shields, eds., forthcoming from Bethany Press.

14. The seminarian prays to a Tillichian God; the father to a Thomistic God; the mother to a Hartshornean God. See Rem B. Edwards, *Reason and Religion*, New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972.

15. A complete account would require a discussion of the relation between levels within noetic structures and problems of meaning and reference in the philosophy of language.

16. Romans 8:28.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donald Wayne Viney received his doctorate in philosophy in 1982 from the University of Oklahoma. He has been Assistant Professor of Philosophy at PSU since the Fall of 1984. His research specialties include the philosophy of religion, process philosophy, and metaphysics. Dr. Viney is on the editorial board of *The Midwest Quarterly* and is the author of *Charles Hartshorne and the Existence of God* (State University of New York Press, 1985), and several articles and reviews in a variety of journals.

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