The Crucial Disanalogies Between Properly Basic Belief and Belief in God

Richard Grigg
Sacred Heart University, griggr@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/rel_fac
Part of the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons


This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu, lysobeyb@sacredheart.edu.
RICHARD GRIGG

THE CRUCIAL DISANALOGIES BETWEEN PROPERLY BASIC BELIEF AND BELIEF IN GOD

The antifoundationalist defence of belief in God set forth by Alvin Plantinga has been widely discussed in recent years. Classical foundationalism assumes that there are two kinds of beliefs that we are justified in holding: beliefs supported by evidence, and basic beliefs. Our basic beliefs are those bedrock beliefs that need no evidence to support them and upon which our other beliefs must rest. For the foundationalist, the only beliefs that can be properly basic are either self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Belief in God is none of these. Thus, says the foundationalist, belief in God is justified only if there is sufficient evidence to back it up.

Plantinga questions the foundationalist’s criteria for basicality. First, he points out that these criteria are self-referentially incoherent: they fail their own test of basicality. In addition, he argues that, although we may not be able to propose any alternative criteria, we can put together a list of beliefs that are obviously properly basic, and when we do so, we discover that by no means all of them fit the criteria offered by foundationalism. Consider, for instance, certain kinds of perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs about other persons, beliefs such as (1) I see a tree, (2) I had breakfast this morning, and (3) that person is angry. Such beliefs are not based on evidence, yet they are not simply groundless. Rather, they are grounded in particular experiences. In most circumstances, I am surely justified in taking these beliefs as basic. Yet, neither (2) nor (3) fit the foundationalist criteria; they are neither self-evident, nor incorrigible, nor evident to the senses (belief (1) probably would meet the foundationalist criterion of being evident to the senses).

Having attempted to show that some beliefs are obviously properly basic despite the fact that they do not meet the foundationalist’s criteria for basicality, Plantinga goes on to suggest that the theist is perfectly justified in holding belief in God to be properly basic, even though the theist may not be able to offer specific alternative criteria for properly basic belief. More exactly, the theist is justified in taking beliefs such as the following as basic: ‘God is speaking to me’, ‘God has created all this’, and ‘God disapproves of what I have done’. And beliefs such as these self-evidently entail the
existence of God. Thus, for Plantinga, belief in God is properly basic at least in a loose, indirect sense.¹

Elsewhere, I have contended that, whatever the actual status of belief in God, Plantinga’s argument fails.² The plausibility of Plantinga’s case for the proper basicity of theism is linked to his claim that, foundationalism notwithstanding, beliefs such as (1), (2), and (3) are obviously properly basic; these beliefs play a paradigmatic role in Plantinga’s argument. But there are at least three significant disanalogies between (1), (2), and (3) on the one hand, and belief in God on the other. First, there is a psychological benefit to belief in God, and hence a bias toward that belief, which does not exist in the case of the paradigm beliefs. Second, there is a universality about the genesis of the paradigm beliefs that does not attach to the genesis of belief in God. For example, nearly all persons, upon having perceptual experience x, will automatically form the belief that they are seeing a tree. By contrast, the theist may form the belief, ‘God created all of this’, on the basis of experience y – the experience of encountering the starry heavens, for instance – but this belief does not follow automatically for all persons upon having experience y. Third, Plantinga argues that beliefs such as (1), (2), and (3) are properly basic as long as we have no reason to suppose that our experiential equipment is defective. If I know, for example, that my memory plays tricks on me, than I am not justified in taking (2) as basic. But how do we know that our experiential equipment is in order? We know that it is in order because we constantly have outside sources for confirmation of the beliefs generated by that equipment. For example, I believe that I had breakfast this morning, and I hold that belief on the basis of my memory. The belief is basic; it is not based on evidence. But when I return home this evening, I will see dirty dishes sitting in my sink, one less egg in my refrigerator, etc. One of the reasons that I can take my memory beliefs as properly basic is that, if any questions arise, the beliefs can almost always be subsequently confirmed by empirical evidence. The same cannot be said for beliefs about God.

If these disanalogies are genuine, then Plantinga must find some other way to press his claim that belief in God can be properly basic. Mark McLeod has attempted to come to Plantinga’s aid in two articles which purport to show, each in a somewhat different way, that I am mistaken in claiming that the disanalogies exist.³ The purpose of this present essay, then, is to indicate what I take to be the difficulties in McLeod’s case and, thus, why I believe


that the disanalogies are indeed genuine. The first three sections will deal
with each of the disanalogies in turn.4 In the fourth, concluding section, I
shall argue that a tempting alternative reading of Plantinga, which would
allow him to escape the dilemma created by the disanalogies, is not a
legitimate option.

I

I hold that belief in God differs from the paradigm beliefs in that there is
often, perhaps usually, a bias in favour of belief in God – people want to
believe in God – and that such a bias does not come into play in the
formation of beliefs such as (1), (2), and (3): it is not the case, ordinarily,
that I want to believe that I see a tree, or believe that I had breakfast this
morning, or believe that some person is angry. McLeod has a two-pronged
reply. First, though he has difficulties imagining a biased perceptual belief,
McLeod argues that one can imagine instances where bias does in fact have
a role in the formation of the sorts of memory beliefs and beliefs about other
persons which we are taking as paradigmatic of proper basicality. Suppose
my boss asks me if I mailed an important letter when I should have. I consult
my memory, and I seem to remember mailing the letter. Surely bias may
enter here, for I want to remember that I did indeed mail the letter. My
desire is influencing my belief-forming practice. Again, perhaps I badly want
to believe that a certain person loves me.

The problem with McLeod’s argument at this point is that he has not
shown that bias ordinarily enters into the paradigmatic belief-forming mechan-
isms and thus into beliefs such as (1), (2), and (3), but only that it is possible
to find isolated instances in which bias may play a part. This hardly under-
mines the disanalogy. As a matter of fact, the instances which McLeod cites
probably exemplify just the kind of situation in which I ought to seriously
entertain the possibility that my belief-forming mechanisms are, in Plantinga’s
formulation, playing tricks on me. I might well conclude that, in these
circumstances, my beliefs cannot be taken as properly basic.5 When dis-
cussing my desire to remember having mailed the letter, McLeod himself
suggests that I must be ‘unaware that my desire is directly influencing my
memory’ if my memory belief is to be properly basic.6 In short, the instances
to which McLeod calls our attention, far from lessening the gap between the
paradigms of proper basicality and belief in God, simply clarify the fact that
perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs about other persons can serve
as paradigms of proper basicality only in those conditions wherein we have
every reason to trust that our belief-forming mechanisms are not playing
tricks on us.

4 McLeod’s first essay treats each of the three disanalogies, while his second essay treats only the third
disanalogy. Hence, I will discuss only his first essay in Sections I and II, and both essays in Section III.
5 Plantinga, ‘Basic’, p. 45.
But McLeod, logically enough, also examines the other side of the coin. He claims that we can find instances in which theistic beliefs do not involve any bias. Take, for example, the belief, 'God disapproves of what I have done', or even, 'God is angry with me'. Surely, says McLeod, one would not desire to believe this. But what needs to be kept in view here is the larger context of the belief. Why might I, supposing that I am a Christian theist, come to believe that God is angry with me? Probably because I have not fulfilled his will for me as that will has been revealed through his prophets, through the Christ, etc. Thus, while I will not want to believe 'God is angry with me' in isolation, I probably will want to believe the larger context in which it arises and makes sense; I will find it comforting to believe that there is a God who provides a purpose for human life, a purpose that is revealed through commandments which, alas, I must obey on pain of inciting that God to anger.

These considerations may lead us back to McLeod's first claim, namely that the paradigms are not immune from bias. We have seen that the paradigms of proper basicity cannot be products of desire to believe. But what about the larger context of beliefs such as (1), (2), and (3)? Might not McLeod want to ask whether a bias towards believing enters there, as it does the larger context of the belief that God is angry? Beliefs (1), (2), and (3) imply the beliefs, 'there is an external world' (or, more narrowly, 'there are trees'), 'the world has existed for more than five minutes', and 'there are other persons'? Do we find ourselves wanting to believe these things? Clearly, we do not. Such beliefs are presupposed in our very sense of what it means to exist as human beings at all. In order for us to desire to hold a belief, there must be room for doubt about that belief; desire, epistemic or otherwise, implies lack of immediate possession. There is, of course, just such room for doubt where belief in God is concerned, a fact underscored throughout the Christian tradition, from the biblical, 'I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mark 9:24), to the Kierkegaardian emphasis on the risk of faith. The fact that the theist must always contend with an element of doubt does not mean that his or her belief lacks intensity: God may well be his or her ultimate concern. Nor, perhaps, does the presence of doubt, by itself, prevent belief in God from being basic. Basicity is a function of a belief's place in one's noetic structure, not of the absolute certainty of that belief. But the fact that, partly due to the presence of doubt, desire enters theistic belief in a way that it does not enter the paradigmatic instances of properly basic belief does seriously undermine the particular argument Plantinga advances for the proper basicity of theism, since his argument depends upon an analogy between the paradigms and belief in God.

---

7 See Plantinga, 'Reason', pp. 17 and 81.

8 On noetic structure, see Ibid. pp. 48–55.
II

All persons whose noetic equipment is in order, upon having perceptual experience \( x \), will automatically form the belief that they are seeing a tree. The same kind of universality belongs to the generation of beliefs \((2)\) and \((3)\). In each of these paradigmatic cases, the grounding experience guarantees the formation of a particular belief. The theist’s beliefs about God may also be grounded in certain experiences, but the generation of these beliefs will not be universal. Suppose that the theist and the agnostic share experience \( y \), the perceptual experience of surveying the starry heavens. This experience \( y \) may lead the theist to believe ‘God created all this’, but the agnostic will form no such belief.

McLeod suggests that all experiences probably guarantee the universal formation of some particular belief. He calls these ‘first-level’ beliefs. Experience \( x \) results in the first-level belief, ‘I am seeing a tree’; all persons form this belief on the basis of perceptual experience \( x \). Experience \( y \) also guarantees some belief, such as, ‘I am seeing the starry heavens’. What is not universal, what cannot be guaranteed, is the second-level belief(\( s \)) that may be formed on the basis of any given experience, for second-level beliefs depend upon a complicated set of background beliefs unique to a certain person or group of persons. Thus, for example, upon having experience \( x \), you and I both form the belief, ‘I am seeing a tree’. But I go on to form the second-level belief, ‘this tree is not worth all the effort I spend on raking up its leaves each fall’, while you form the second-level belief, ‘the leaves of this tree turn such a beautiful red each fall!’ The theist’s belief, ‘God created all of this’, is a second-level belief generated in response to experience \( y \). The agnostic will form different second-level beliefs on the basis of \( y \).

Where does all of this leave McLeod? Thus far, the theist’s belief about God, which is a second-level belief, is still disanalogous to the paradigms of proper basicity, which are first-level beliefs. McLeod explains the situation this way:

There are three questions to be raised here. First, could one successfully argue that from any experience a group of believers might have, if the other relevant background conditions are right (that is, kept constant for the group of believers being questioned), then all members of the group of believers will form the same second-level belief? In other words, if one includes in the set of belief-generating conditions all of the relevant background, would everyone in those exact conditions form the same belief? Is it possible for there to be guaranteed second-level beliefs, beliefs which will show up in, or at least not be denied by, anyone in those conditions? The second question is whether second-level beliefs can be properly basic. The third is whether some non-religious and commonly accepted second-level beliefs might be formed into a set of paradigm beliefs and then used as a basis for another analogy argument for the proper basicity of belief in God.9

It is McLeod’s task to show that all of these questions can be answered in the affirmative. What he ends up with is a scenario in which the ‘very complicated set of background beliefs’, indeed the ‘very substantive beliefs’, that would have to be present to generate the right sort of second-level belief about God, are such that:

...an unbelief or an immature believer...may not yet have the appropriate information which allows the formation of the belief.... It may be very important that one has learned and understood the concept of God (so far as that is possible), but this is not enough. Just as the spouse must know more about her husband than merely understanding him on the level of concepts, one must know more about God than merely understanding the concept ‘God’.... It may be crucial, in some circumstances, that one has been in other conditions in which another theistic belief has been taken as properly basic.10

In other words, one would need to presuppose other, very significant beliefs about God. But what, then, of these background beliefs? If they are to be justified beliefs, they must be either beliefs that are based on evidence or basic beliefs. Plantinga rejects natural theology and the attempt to find evidence for theistic beliefs. Thus, it seems that these theistic background beliefs must themselves be basic, second-level beliefs. Now, on the basis of the account McLeod provides, we can only conclude that a second-level theistic belief always requires other theistic beliefs as a part of its background conditions. But this results in the following dilemma: either we find ourselves in an infinite regress, or there must be, at some point, a theistic belief that does not require other theistic beliefs as background. That is, there must exist some theistic belief that is not a second-level belief, but a first-level belief. But there are no first-level theistic beliefs, that is, theistic beliefs that follow automatically for all persons from a given experience. We are right back at the disanalogy.

III

Perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs about other persons such as (1), (2), and (3) are properly basic for me, according to Plantinga, assuming that I have no reason to distrust my belief-forming mechanisms. If I know that my memory plays tricks on me, for instance, then I am not entitled to take my memory belief of having had breakfast this morning as a properly basic belief. How do I determine whether my memory is in fact reliable? Suppose that I seem to remember having had breakfast this morning. When I get home this evening, I find dirty dishes in my sink, one less egg in my refrigerator, etc. In other words, though I take perceptual beliefs, memory

10 Ibid. p. 81.
beliefs, and beliefs about other persons like (1), (2), and (3) as basic, they can usually be confirmed or disconfirmed subsequently by outside sources of empirical evidence. By extension, such confirmation or disconfirmation supports or calls into question the reliability of the belief-forming mechanisms which give rise to the beliefs. There is, however, no way to check the reliability of theistic beliefs in this fashion. Hence the third disanalogy.

McLeod begins his analysis of this disanalogy by conjecturing, correctly, that when I speak of ‘outside’ sources for confirmation of a belief, I do not mean that we can turn, in the case of memory for example, simply to another memory belief (i.e. to a memory that is ‘outside’ the first memory). This would be straightforwardly circular. Instead, we need to be able to stand outside of the whole memory belief mechanism in order to check its reliability. This is what is suggested by my example of coming home to find empirical evidence of having eaten breakfast. But, says McLeod, this too is circular, for I have to remember that the dishes in the sink are from breakfast, not last night’s dinner, that I had twelve eggs in the refrigerator yesterday, etc. In other words, I have to rely on my memory. This is all quite true, but it is of less significance than McLeod seems to realize. What is crucial here is that this confirmation procedure does stand outside the realm of memory to a sufficient degree that it can, and in actual practice does, provide a check on the reliability of memory. Of course, if my memory is totally useless, I couldn’t possibly employ this confirmation procedure (or even remember that memory can in theory be unreliable and needs to be checked). But note how people, perhaps as they get older, come to the unfortunate realization that their memory is failing. Suppose I say to myself that I need to turn on the oven to prepare dinner. When I go into the kitchen, I see a red light glowing on the control panel of the oven and realize that the oven is already on, and I say to myself, ‘I forgot that I had already turned the oven on’. If this sort of thing occurs more and more frequently, I begin to worry that my memory is not reliable. The oven example does involve relying on my memory to tell me that the red light I see means the oven is on, that ovens don’t just turn on by themselves, that I turned off the oven last time I used it, etc. But note that if I were to say to myself, ‘I don’t know whether ovens can turn on by themselves, and I don’t know whether I turned off the oven last time I used it’, this would surely not lead me to disregard my initial sense that my memory is not functioning reliably. Of course, if my memory were to provide me with the false belief that ovens do often turn on by themselves without any human intervention, then I would not be able to determine that my memory was failing. But this only shows, once again, that I cannot test the reliability of my memory if my memory is totally deficient. However, as the example suggests, persons often do get outside memory to a sufficient degree to find that their memories are unreliable. Similarly, as the example of confirming my memory of having eaten breakfast indicates, assuming that
my memory is not simply defunct, I can often find outside sources that confirm the reliability of my memory.\textsuperscript{11}

Though unsure of these outside checks on beliefs and belief-forming practices, McLeod suggests that beliefs in God need not be disanalogous to the paradigms even if the paradigms can be so checked: 'What is true of the paradigm beliefs is true of the religious belief. If the paradigm beliefs are confirmed by some belief not formed by the same practice, then religious beliefs can be so confirmed, as I will argue.' \textsuperscript{12} His argument, taking the belief that God created the world as an example, goes this way:

... to expect empirical confirmation is to expect too much. Other beliefs about God, however, must be true if 'God created the world' is true. If God created the world (that is, sustains the world), then surely God also created this flower or that tree. Beliefs like 'God created the red poppies' or 'God created this eucalyptus tree' would be true and could confirm the belief in question. But how would one know that these beliefs were true? Wouldn't one have to rely on the reliability of the very belief-forming practice at stake? The answer appears to be affirmative. But isn't this confirmation circular? Once again, yes, but no more circular than the confirmation provided for the other belief-forming practices.\textsuperscript{13}

There are two major difficulties here. First, though the paradigms can be confirmed empirically, McLeod says that I am expecting too much if I look for empirical confirmation of theistic belief. Now it is doubtless true that, if God exists, God's being is such that he is not available to us for empirical examination. But that is Plantinga's problem. His argument depends on an analogy between the paradigms and beliefs about God. The lack of empirical testing for beliefs about God and the theistic belief-forming mechanism provides an important disanalogy.

Second, it is of course not true that McLeod's example of how theistic belief might be confirmed is 'no more circular than the confirmation provided for the other belief-forming practices'. On the contrary, his example reverts to that first, bogus sense of 'outside' sources of confirmation discussed above, wherein one tries to check one belief by simply referring directly to another belief formed by the very same mechanism, as when I check one memory belief by looking immediately to another memory belief. By contrast, we have seen that the paradigm beliefs can be checked by a procedure that gets outside the belief-forming mechanism in question, not entirely, but

\textsuperscript{11} McLeod confuses matters when, in his second essay, he equates outside confirmation of a belief (and, by extension, of a belief-forming mechanism) with the ill-fated quest to prove that our epistemic equipment puts us in touch with an external world. In the case of the outside confirmation under discussion here, I confirm a memory belief by stepping outside of my memory in order to consult other epistemic mechanisms. Whether one of these mechanisms, or all of them together, i.e. my whole human epistemic apparatus, genuinely puts me in touch with an external world, is a wholly different question. In addition, McLeod incorrectly identifies the kind of beliefs under discussion as those which are either self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses. But Plantinga's whole point is that, contrary to foundationalism, other kinds of beliefs—beliefs (2) and (3) are examples—can be properly basic. See McLeod, 'Belief', p. 313.

\textsuperscript{12} McLeod, 'Analogy', p. 8.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p. 10.
to a degree sufficient to test the reliability of the mechanism (assuming the mechanism is not simply defunct).

But perhaps this particular dispute is no longer relevant, for in his second essay, McLeod disavows his claim that belief in God can be confirmed in the fashion suggested by the quotation we have just analyzed. Now McLeod focuses on a suggestion by William Alston that ‘God is too different from created beings, too “wholly other”, for us to be able to grasp any regularities in His behaviour.’\(^\text{14}\) McLeod concludes that ‘God does not provide regular, consistent behaviour in which we can find patterns by which we can predict how or when he will reveal himself or truths about his relationship to the world.’\(^\text{15}\) The point seems to be that, in order for me to claim that I can confirm the belief, ‘God created the world’ by referring to the belief, ‘God created this flower’, I must assume a degree of regularity in God’s behaviour vis-à-vis my awareness of him, for I have to assume that I will in fact form the belief, ‘God created this flower’. I will have to rely on a linking belief such as, ‘the (divine) beauty of the flower can only be explained by God’s creation’. This linking belief ‘is necessary for predictive confirmation, for it provides for the necessary regularity – the prediction that I will form the belief that God created the flower.’\(^\text{16}\) Since God’s behaviour is not regular, predictive confirmation is not an option where beliefs about God are concerned.

Perhaps, says McLeod, there is the possibility of some type of non-predictive confirmation: ‘Suppose I hold the belief that God created the world. If I also form (by happenstance or God’s grace which is not due to the regularity of God’s activity) the belief that God created the flower then in some sense “God created the world” would be confirmed.’\(^\text{17}\) Of course this non-predictive confirmation, which is an any case ‘somewhat strange and very weak’,\(^\text{18}\) is clearly disanalogous to the kind of confirmation available for the paradigms of properly basic belief, for this non-predictive confirmation is not a procedure at our disposal. We cannot decide to employ it, because it is not something within our control; it depends on happenstance or the grace of God.

But this disanalogy brings us to what is, in fact, McLeod’s central point:

We can go ahead and admit that there is the disanalogy Grigg suggests between the paradigm practices and the theistic practice, viz. that the paradigm practices have objects which are regular in their relation to the knower while the theistic practice does not. But we can also claim that this is as it should be and the disanalogy is irrelevant.\(^\text{19}\)

In other words, the paradigms can be confirmed in a way that beliefs about God cannot. But the confirmation process in question assumes regularity, and regularity is not available to us where God is concerned, given his very

\(^{14}\text{Quoted in McLeod, “Belief”, p. 319.}\)
\(^{15}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{16}\text{Ibid. p. 320.}\)
\(^{17}\text{Ibid. (my emphasis).}\)
\(^{18}\text{Ibid. p. 322.}\)
\(^{19}\text{Ibid. p. 320.}\)
nature. Thus, if someone were to charge that belief in God is not rational because such belief cannot be predictively confirmed, that charge would be irrelevant, since God is just the sort of being from whom we should not expect the kind of regularity upon which predictive confirmation is predicated. But who has made that charge? McLeod has apparently forgotten what is at issue here. We are discussing the particular argument offered by Alvin Plantinga on behalf of the proper basicity of belief in God. That argument depends upon an analogy between certain paradigms of properly basic belief and beliefs about God. If the paradigms and theistic beliefs turn out to be disanalogous, then Plantinga’s argument fails. Perhaps someone else can construct a different argument for the proper basicity of theism that will succeed, but that is another matter. McLeod has been sidetracked by his detour into Alston’s argument and has lost sight of the main road, on which he was planning to rush to Alvin Plantinga’s defence. At the end of the day, with McLeod having failed to arrive with the requisite aid for Plantinga’s position, the force of the disanalogies remains undiminished.

IV

In the opening paragraphs of his first essay, McLeod mentions in passing the possibility that Plantinga does not actually intend an analogical argument at all. Perhaps Plantinga is only making a negative case, namely that since the foundationalist’s criteria for properly basic belief are not convincing and there are no obvious candidates to replace them, there is nothing to prevent the theist from taking his or her beliefs as properly basic. Maybe Plantinga is simply arguing that the burden of proof is on the critic to show why belief in God cannot be properly basic. This is a suggestion worth considering, not only because it seems to hold out the possibility that Plantinga can escape the dilemmas created by the disanalogies, but also because there are sufficient ambiguities in Plantinga’s presentation to lead the reader to wonder if this negative argument might not, indeed, be the one Plantinga intends. But there are at least three major reasons for concluding that, whatever Plantinga’s intention, this route is not legitimately open to him.

First, consider what would result if Plantinga were simply making the negative point that the foundationalist’s criteria for proper basicity break down and that we have no others to put in their place. Rather then giving the theist, or anyone else, the right to go ahead and claim that his or her beliefs are properly basic, and putting the burden of proof upon some challenger, this negative argument would lead to the conclusion that we have no justification for assuming that any of our beliefs are properly basic. Of course, we would probably be driven by practical necessity to go on treating certain beliefs as basic — beliefs such as (1), (2), and (3) come to mind, though they would not be paradigms in this situation — but there would be no such
practical necessity to treat beliefs about God as basic. Theistic beliefs would remain wholly unjustified.

Second, it is important to keep in mind the structure of Plantinga’s argument. How does he propose to convince us of his negative contention that foundationalism’s criteria for properly basic belief are bogus? For one thing, he argues that they are self-referentially incoherent: foundationalism’s criteria fail their own test of basicality, being neither self-evident, or incorrigible, nor evident to the senses. But suppose someone were to reply, ‘Granted, the foundationalist’s criteria are self-referentially incoherent, indeed the foundationalist has no arguments of any sort by which to prove the validity of these criteria. But that does not mean the foundationalist is wrong. After all, these particular criteria have seemed to make a lot of sense to a lot of people over the years. Perhaps it remains true that the only beliefs that should be accepted as properly basic are those that are either self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses.’ Thus it is that Plantinga must go on to show that there are beliefs such as (2) and (3) which, in the right circumstances, are obviously properly basic even though beliefs (2) and (3) do not meet the foundationalist’s criteria. In other words, the paradigmatic status of (2) and (3) is already built into the negative, antifoundationalist moment of Plantinga’s argument. It is on the basis of (2) and (3) that we are supposed to be convinced that beliefs other than those accepted as basic by foundationalism can in fact be properly basic. If Plantinga now wants to go on and suggest that beliefs about God can be properly basic, it is only logical that we should expect these theistic beliefs to be analogous to (2) and (3) (and also to [1], since that too is obviously properly basic; belief [1], however, would probably also be accepted as properly basic by the foundationalist, inasmuch as it is evident to the senses).

Third, there is the famous Great Pumpkin dilemma. Plantinga anticipates the following challenge to his argument: if the theist can now claim that belief in God is properly basic, even though he or she has no explicit criteria of basicality at his or her disposal, what is to prevent just any belief from being basic? Why can’t a devotee of the Great Pumpkin claim with equal justification that his or her belief is properly basic? The theist, says Plantinga, will have no problem rejecting the claim that belief in the Great Pumpkin is properly basic. Plantinga proposes an analogy to make this point: even if I have no philosophical criterion of meaning at my disposal, I can easily judge that it is meaningless to say, ‘Twas billig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gymble in the wabe’. Similarly, even though I have no explicit criteria of proper basicality at my disposal, I can judge claims to basicality. Thus, it should be possible to arrive at criteria of proper basicality by means of induction:

We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such
that the former are obviously not properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples.  

Of course, says Plantinga, the theist will choose belief in God as one of his or her examples of proper basicity:

... there is no reason to assume in advance that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he does not accept this on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so.  

At this point, it looks suspiciously as if Plantinga’s defense against the Great Pumpkin challenge does not really amount to much, that is, that it only amounts to showing that the theist can reject the claim that belief in the Great Pumpkin is basic for the theist, but that it leaves open the possibility that belief in the Great Pumpkin is properly basic for the devotee of the Great Pumpkin. Won’t followers of the Great Pumpkin include their beliefs about the Great Pumpkin in their list of examples of basic beliefs? Plantinga admits that,

... criteria for proper basicity arrived at in this particularistic way may not be polemically useful. If you and I start from different examples – if my set of examples includes a pair \( \langle B, C \rangle \) (where B is, say, belief in God and C is some condition) and your set of examples does not include \( \langle BC \rangle \) – then we may very well arrive at different criteria for proper basicity. Furthermore I cannot sensibly use my criterion to try to convince you that B is in fact properly basic in C, for you will point out, quite properly, that my criterion is based upon a set of examples that, as you see it, erroneously includes \( \langle BC \rangle \) as an example of a belief and a condition such that the former is properly basic in the latter.  

But Plantinga adds an important qualification that suggests he wants a stronger defence against the Great Pumpkin challenge than just to say that belief in the Great Pumpkin cannot be basic for the theist:

Of course it does not follow that there is no truth of the matter; if our criteria conflict, then at least one of them is mistaken, even if we cannot by further discussion agree as to which it is. Similarly, either I am mistaken in holding that B is properly basic in C, or you are mistaken in holding that it is not. Still further, if I am mistaken in this matter, then if I take B as basic in C – that is, if I am in C and believe B without the evidential support of other beliefs – then I am irrational in doing so. Particularism does not imply subjectivism.  

We might reply that, for all practical purposes, it does imply subjectivism, unless it is possible, at least in principle, for further discussion to clarify who is in fact mistaken. And surely there is a way to do this. The theist’s list of examples will include some not on the list put together by the follower of the Great Pumpkin, and vice versa. But it seems likely that, in addition to the items unique to each list, there will be some common items, i.e. some that

---

20 Plantinga, ‘Reason’, p. 76. 21 Ibid. p. 77. 22 Ibid. 23 Ibid. p. 78.
both sides take as examples of beliefs that are obviously properly basic. It should then be possible to turn to those agreed upon examples and investigate to what extent the beliefs in dispute resemble or differ from the examples held in common. In other words, a meaningful defence against the Great Pumpkin dilemma entails showing that belief in God is analogous to certain commonly agreed upon examples of proper basicity in a way that belief in the Great Pumpkin is not. Thus, we have yet a third reason for supposing that Plantinga’s argument for the proper basicity of theism is dependent upon a definite analogy between beliefs about God and certain paradigms of properly basic belief.24

Sacred Heart University,
Connecticut,
U.S.A.

24 It is worth noting that, by the time of his second essay, McLeod holds that the claim that there is an analogy between belief in God and certain examples of properly basic belief is a ‘basic thrust’ of Plantinga’s argument. See McLeod, ‘Belief’, p. 311.