

## CURRENT THEOLOGY

### THE NEW CALVINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

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One of the most important developments in recent philosophical theology has come from a group of scholars centered around Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The most important representatives are Alvin Plantinga, who has moved to Notre Dame, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. What characterizes their work is the utilization and extension of some of the most sophisticated developments in contemporary American epistemology to support an approach to theistic belief which is consciously in continuity with the Calvinist tradition. Plantinga and Wolterstorff have recently published a collection of essays which arose from a yearlong project at the Calvin (College) Center for Christian Studies on the topic "Toward a Reformed View of Faith and Reason."<sup>1</sup> These essays make clear that a major project of theological and philosophical research and reflection has been initiated. I want to comment on this movement and put it in context.

#### I

The first major work of the new Calvinist school was Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* (1967).<sup>2</sup> In this book he did three things. First, he examined with great analytic rigor various traditional cosmological, ontological, and teleological arguments for the existence of God. The teleological argument he considered the best of the lot, but concluded that all of them are subject to very serious objections. Plantinga is the most meticulous of scholars. He does not claim to have considered all possible arguments for a natural theology, but feels confident he has adequately sampled the most promising and found them deficient. His conclusion is that, based on what he has seen, natural theology must be judged unsuccessful.

Secondly, Plantinga investigated the arguments of a natural atheology, the attempt to show that it is impossible or unlikely that God exists. He considered the problem of evil, verificationism, what he calls the paradox of omnipotence, and an ontological disproof of God's existence. He

<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1967).

concluded that these arguments do not stand up to serious examination, and that therefore natural atheology is no more successful than natural theology.

Finally, Plantinga tried a third way, and it is here that the first substantive step in the development of the new Calvinist epistemology is taken. He raises the old philosophical problem of the justification of our belief in other minds, a problem which he believes has important structural similarities to the problem of the existence of God. The best of the traditional solutions to this problem is the argument from analogy. Plantinga quotes Ayer's version of the argument:

On the basis of my own experience I form a general hypothesis to the effect that certain physical phenomena are accompanied by certain feelings. When I observe that some other person is in the appropriate state, I am thereby enabled to infer that he is having these feelings; feelings which are similar to those that in similar circumstances I have myself.<sup>3</sup>

The argument from analogy has been much commented on in recent philosophy. Few philosophers find it completely satisfactory, but, however weak, it seems to be the best direct answer which can be given to a challenge to provide a rational justification for the belief in other minds. Earlier in this century Wittgenstein thought the whole problem misconceived and sought to provide an indirect response in terms of the implication of his famous private-language discussion.<sup>4</sup> Plantinga accepts the challenge as presented, but argues that the argument from analogy as a rational justification for our belief in other minds is subject to the same kind of objections which argue for the inadequacy of the teleological argument as a rational justification for our belief in God.

What conclusion should we draw from all this? Plantinga suggests that if the argument from analogy is as weak as many philosophers seem to think and as he himself has tried to show, and if that argument is the best we can provide to justify rationally a belief in other minds, then it just may be that to have a rational belief in other minds we may not need an answer to the philosophical challenge for justification at all. But if my belief in other minds can be rational without the support of an argument which provides a rational justification, so too it may be possible that my belief in God can be rational without the support of a philosophical argument. Plantinga concludes:

<sup>3</sup> A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Edinburgh: Penguin, 1956) 219.

<sup>4</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. from 2nd ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958) 243 ff. One of the better discussions of some of the implications of Wittgenstein's ideas is Norman Malcolm, *Problems of Mind: Descartes to Wittgenstein* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971).

Of course there may be other reasons for supposing that although rational belief in other minds does not require an answer to the epistemological question, rational belief in the existence of God does. But it is certainly hard to see what these reasons might be. Hence my tentative conclusion: if my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, what we have at the end of *God and Other Minds* is the suggestion that just as in certain circumstances we may look at another person and, without need of justifying reasons, rationally believe that there is at least one other mind, so too in certain circumstances we may look at the world and, without need of justifying reasons, rationally believe there is a Maker of heaven and earth. How is this possible?

## II

Much of the subsequent work of the new Calvinist school has been an attempt to answer the above question. In 1976 Nicholas Wolterstorff published a short "tract for Christians" entitled *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*.<sup>6</sup> In this work he identified the epistemological tradition of foundationalism as the main source of confusions concerning the question of rational belief in God. Plantinga himself has pursued the same line of thought in his contribution to the collection of essays cited above.<sup>7</sup>

Foundationalism is a presupposition of epistemological analysis which has characterized Western philosophy from the Greeks and medievalists to the logical positivists and beyond. It is the doctrine that all of us have *beliefs* which are *in some way* related to other beliefs, and that our beliefs are rational in so far as they are based on a solid foundation of *a particular sort*. It should be noted that "belief" is here being used in the sense of any assertion or proposition which I *accept*; it is not being used in the sense in which what I *believe* is opposed to what I *know*. Thus, in the intended sense, if I know something, I also believe (accept) it.

When we consider our beliefs, it seems obvious, so the foundationalist argues, that some of them are based on other beliefs while others are

<sup>5</sup> Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* 271.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality* 16-93. This essay is the most developed statement of the new Calvinist position, and most of my references to Plantinga will be to this text. Earlier and much less complete versions of much the same material by Plantinga are the following: "Is Belief in God Rational?" in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1979) 7-27; "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980) 49-62; "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981) 41-51.

accepted immediately without further need of evidence. For example, if I am asked why I believe a particular apple tree will bear fruit this season, I give as reasons the fact that the tree is healthy, the weather is good, and that in similar circumstances the tree has always borne fruit in the past. On the other hand, if I am asked why I believe I have a headache, I will reply that it is self-evident to me simply because I have it. It is further argued that there must be at least some immediately accepted beliefs or I would be led into an infinite regress in the search for reasons for beliefs which are based on other beliefs.

The foundationalist then enunciates his fundamental principle: our beliefs are rational in so far as they are either immediately acceptable to us or are based *in an appropriate way* on beliefs which are immediately acceptable to us.<sup>8</sup> This is the most general formulation of the principle. Since our immediately acceptable beliefs are the basis of our other beliefs, let us agree to call them "basic beliefs." Foundationalists have differed on precisely what beliefs they will accept as basic beliefs and in precisely what way one belief must be based on another in order to be well-founded.

According to Plantinga, a medieval foundationalist such as Thomas Aquinas would accept as properly basic beliefs those which are either self-evident to him (such as logical truths or definitions) or evident to the senses (such as my belief in certain circumstances that I see a tree). Modern foundationalists, in the tradition of Cartesian rationalism or British empiricism, were even more stringent. They would accept as properly basic only those beliefs which are either self-evident to the subject or *incorrigible* for him (where a belief is incorrigible for someone if and only if it is impossible for the subject to have the belief and the belief be false, and it is impossible for the subject to reject the belief and the belief be true).<sup>9</sup> The requirement of incorrigibility is, in effect, the requirement that the belief be able to resist Cartesian doubt. Thus, in circumstances where a medieval foundationalist such as Aquinas would accept as a basic belief my belief that I see a tree, the modern foundationalist would accept only my belief that I have the idea of a tree, or, to use the fetching jargon of some contemporary epistemologists, that I am being appeared to *treely*.

Foundationalists will also differ on what constitutes the proper relationship for one belief to provide an adequate foundation for another belief. Some have insisted that the relationship be deductive, i.e., that it be impossible for the evidential beliefs to be true and the belief they are

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of simplicity I am here following Wolterstorff and Plantinga in formulating the principle of foundationalism in terms of a theory of *rationality*. It may also be formulated as a theory of knowledge or as a theory of science. See Wolterstorff's introduction to *Faith and Rationality 2*.

<sup>9</sup> See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" 55-59.

supporting false. Others have admitted various kinds of inductive or probabilistic reasoning.<sup>10</sup>

According to the new Calvinism, classical foundationalism, as represented by the above theses, has been shown by contemporary epistemological reflection to have completely collapsed. Its fundamental principle is self-refuting and its conclusions are demonstrably false.

The charge of self-refutation is supported by a line of argumentation very similar to that used against the now completely abandoned principle of verification. The classical foundationalist claims that a person is rational in accepting a belief only if it is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses, or if it is based on propositions which are supported by beliefs which are self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses. But is it rational to accept this claim? By its own criteria it will be rationally acceptable only if it is self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses or is evidentially supported by beliefs which are of these sorts. But none of these conditions seems satisfied. Therefore, on its own terms, the principle should not be rationally accepted.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, one could try to defend the foundationalist principle by variations on the numerous attempts to defend the verifiability principle. However, the demise of verificationism does not offer much hope that this approach will be successful. An alternative would be simply to accept the principle without any evidential justification, i.e., to accept the principle as a properly basic one on an equal footing with those which are self-evident or incorrigible or evident to the senses. To this the obvious retort is that, if I can rationally accept the principle of classical foundationalism without further reason, then why can I not rationally accept belief in the existence of a Maker of heaven and earth without further reason.

Plantinga has an additional refutation of the claims of classical foundationalism which has the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*. If classical foundationalism is correct, then much of what we all in fact rationally believe is believed irrationally.

We should note first that if this thesis, and the correlative foundationalist thesis that a proposition is rationally acceptable only if it follows from or is probable with respect to what is properly basic—if these claims are true, then enormous quantities of what we all in fact believe are irrational. One crucial lesson to be learned from the development of modern philosophy—Descartes through Hume, roughly—is just this: relative to propositions what are self-evident and incorrigible, most of the beliefs that form the stock in trade of ordinary everyday life are not probable—at any rate there is no reason to think they are probable.

<sup>10</sup> See Wolterstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* 31–41.

<sup>11</sup> See Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" 60.

Consider all those propositions that entail, say, that there are enduring physical objects, or that there are persons distinct from myself, or that the world has existed for more than five minutes: none of these propositions, I think, is more probable than not with respect to what is self-evident or incorrigible for me; at any rate no one has given good reasons to think any of them is. And now suppose we add to the foundations propositions that are evident to the senses, thereby moving from modern to ancient and medieval foundationalism. Then propositions entailing the existence of material objects will of course be probable with respect to the foundations, because included therein. But the same cannot be said either for propositions about the past or for propositions entailing the existence of persons distinct from myself; as before, these will not be probable with respect to what is properly basic.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to me that the above argument is decisive with regard to modern foundationalism as represented by the tradition of Descartes to Hume and the logical positivists. It seems to me much less persuasive with regard to medieval foundationalism, especially as represented by Plantinga's only example of a medieval foundationalist, Aquinas. Plantinga has obviously assimilated Aquinas' appeal to what is "evident to the senses" to a classical modern notion of sense experience. However, many students of Aquinas would dispute this reading. One could argue that for Aquinas it is simply evident to my internal sense of memory that in certain circumstances a particular belief about the past is true, and in this way the belief is a properly basic one for me. It could similarly be urged that in the nonempiricistic way in which Aquinas appeals to "what is evident to the senses" it is for him "evident to the senses" that other persons exist, i.e., that this belief also is for him a properly basic one. However, proving a historical thesis concerning the text of Aquinas is not of the first moment to Plantinga. He would, in fact, welcome safely within the portals of the new Calvinism anyone willing to extend his properly basic beliefs in the direction I have suggested for Aquinas, since he would argue that there is no significant difference from an epistemological point of view between my belief that the world has existed for more than five minutes or that there are other persons besides myself and the belief that God exists. If the first two beliefs can be properly basic, i.e., not require supporting argumentation, why should the belief in the existence of God be different?

### III

At this point we have followed Plantinga's argument back full circle to the point at which he concluded *God and Other Minds*. Classical foundationalism tried to offer a criterion for distinguishing those beliefs which require a rational justification from those properly basic beliefs

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 59-60.

which do not. But if the analysis of the previous section is correct, classical foundationalism is either self-refuting, demonstrably false, or incapable of providing criteria for the distinction which it set out to make.

In the absence of a compelling case from his opponents, Plantinga feels justified in making a case of his own for distinguishing those beliefs which may be properly basic for someone and those which may not. The intended result of his analysis is, of course, that belief in God may be properly basic, thereby establishing the fundamental thesis of the new Calvinism. It is important to notice that Plantinga rejects classical foundationalism in either its modern or medieval versions, but he does not reject foundationalism completely. He admits that our beliefs have a structure which admits of the distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs. It is how one draws the distinction that is all-important.

Plantinga takes as a clue our intuitive conviction that not every possible judgment can in all circumstances be taken as properly basic. I am justified in believing that there is a tree in my yard *in certain circumstances* which are hard to spell out in detail but which include items like the fact that I seem to be looking at a tree, conditions are normal, my eyes are functioning properly, etc. In other circumstances my belief that there is a tree in my yard might well be nonbasic and thus require evidential justification. Following Wittgenstein's advice, we must "look and see." "Criteria for proper basicity must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented *ex cathedra* but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples."<sup>13</sup>

The new Calvinism does not feel confident that it can present a new set of necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity to replace those of modern or medieval foundationalism. It does feel, however, that attention to a multiplicity of examples will enable us to identify intuitively those beliefs which in certain circumstances are clearly properly basic for a particular subject from those which are clearly not, while admitting that there will also be a gray area in between. It is the presence or absence of the *right circumstances* for the belief which makes all the difference. It is the circumstances which provide the justification for the basicity of the belief.

When the Reformers claim that this belief [in God] is properly basic, they do not mean to say, of course, that there are no justifying circumstances for it, or that it is in that sense groundless or gratuitous. Quite the contrary. Calvin holds that God "reveals and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe," and the divine art "reveals itself in the innumerable and yet distinct and well ordered variety of the heavenly host." God has so created us that we

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 77.

have a tendency or disposition to see his hand in the world about us. More precisely, there is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe. . . . Upon reading the Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I have done*. . . . When life is sweet and satisfying, a spontaneous sense of gratitude may well up within the soul; someone in this condition may thank and praise the Lord for his goodness, and will of course have the accompanying belief that indeed the Lord is to be thanked and praised.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, *in the right circumstances* belief in God may be properly basic, just as *in the right circumstances* belief in the existence of other persons, perceptual objects, or the past may be basic. This does not imply that reason or argument may not be relevant to my basic belief in God. If someone presents me with what seems to me a valid argument from premises which I accept as true to the conclusion that what I take to be a tree in my yard is not indeed so, I must either accept the conclusion or adjust my beliefs about the truth of the premises or the validity of the process of argumentation. Nevertheless, my properly basic belief that I see a tree, if it survives argumentation, does not *depend* on argumentation for its basis. So too, the new Calvinism argues, is the case of our belief in God.

#### IV

There is a certain circularity in the case made by the new Calvinism as I have presented it, but like all good circles it is a wide one. The point is to lead to a position where one broods over the question whether belief in God may not be properly basic for me or, if it is not, whether it ought to be. I may then be in a position to listen more receptively to some of the classic texts of the Calvinist tradition, while separating out what may be exaggerations or ambiguities.

Calvin wrote: "There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. . . . God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his majesty . . . men one and all perceive that there is a God and that he is their Maker."<sup>15</sup> Man has a natural tendency or *nisus* to affirm God's existence and to understand something of His nature. This natural tendency may be obscured and suppressed by sin, but, as Plantinga develops Calvin's insight,

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 80.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1, 3, 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

the fact remains that a capacity to apprehend God's existence is as much part of our natural noetic equipment as is the capacity to apprehend perceptual truths, truths about the past, and truths about other minds. Belief in the existence of God is in the same boat as belief in other minds, the past, and perceptual objects; in each case God has so constructed us that in the right circumstances we form the belief in question. But then the belief that there is such a person as God is as much among the deliverances of reason as those other beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

The New Calvinism is thus not fideistic, in the sense that it clearly affirms that God's existence can be believed (accepted) and indeed *known* by natural reason.

The Reformed epistemologist is no more a fideist with respect to belief in God than is, for example, Thomas Aquinas. Like the latter, he will no doubt hold that there are other truths of Christianity that are not to be found among the deliverances of reasons—such truths, for example, as that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. But he is not a fideist by virtue of his views on our knowledge of God.<sup>17</sup>

A central difference between the Reformed epistemologist and, for example, the Thomist is the attitude taken toward natural theology. The Reformed epistemologist claims that one does not *need* philosophical demonstrations in order to know that God exists. He does not necessarily deny that such demonstrations are possible, although he is highly sceptical of the results so far achieved. He is certainly not against the use of reason in defending theism against even the most sophisticated philosophical objections. In *The Nature of Necessity* (1974), written after *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga even defends a version of the ontological argument as both valid and sound.<sup>18</sup> The Reformed epistemologist, however, argues that, even if it is possible that our belief in God be based on argumentation, it is better and indeed more natural that it be simply a basic belief. It is better because a belief based on argument always runs the risk of being “unstable and wavering, subject to all the wayward whim and fancy of the latest academic fashion.”<sup>19</sup> Like the Hegelian professor lampooned by Kierkegaard, one who depends on proofs must

<sup>16</sup> Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God” 90.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) 196–221. Plantinga does not, however, consider the ontological argument which he defends as a “successful piece” of natural theology since natural theology, as he understands it, “typically draws its premisses from the stock of propositions accepted by nearly every sane man, or perhaps nearly every rational man” (221–22). Plantinga’s ontological argument, however, depends on a central premise, which he is convinced is true, but on which, he admits, rational men may reasonably differ.

<sup>19</sup> Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God” 72.

constantly be checking the latest periodicals to learn the status of his belief. It is more natural because man, as created by God and unsullied by sin, would simply perceive the existence of the Creator in the beauty and majesty of His creation.

## V

What are we to think about all this? I will offer two sets of comments: first from a theological point of view and then from the perspective of epistemology.

It seems obvious that philosophical theologians in the Roman Catholic and in the Reformed traditions conceptually map the area which they are analyzing in significantly different ways. The Catholic is characteristically apt to make much more of a metaphysical distinction between natural and supernatural belief than is his Reformed colleague, even though it is obvious that something *like* such a distinction is also operative in the Reformed analysis. Thus, a Catholic, in approaching the question of belief in God, is quite likely to assume that the average Christian simply believes in God in virtue of a supernatural act of faith, the expression of a supernatural *habitus* which is the theological virtue of faith. In what is probably the ordinary (or at least a very common) genesis of belief in God, as the Catholic theologian sees it, Christian nurture leads to religious practices such as prayer and worship and to the acquisition, acceptance, and expression of beliefs such as that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that God listens to my prayers, and that God cares for me and my parents, brothers, and sisters. Such beliefs are the expression of the supernatural virtue of faith. They also clearly imply belief in the existence of God. In this way the belief of the average Christian in the existence of God is taken to be a supernatural belief; it is embedded in beliefs and practices which are intrinsically supernatural, such as Trinitarian belief and worship. The Reformed theologian, on the other hand, shapes his analysis much more in terms of the remnants of the image of God present in all men and women and the consequences of the distortion of that image by sin.

It is interesting to compare what a Catholic theologian is inclined to say about supernatural belief in God with what Plantinga says about a properly basic belief. For Plantinga, a properly basic belief is not based on reason or argument, either deductive, inductive, or probabilistic. It is, nevertheless, reasonable for someone to have the basic belief in the (negative) sense that one does not violate one's epistemic responsibilities in holding the belief. This sounds very much like the way a Catholic apologist or fundamental theologian might formulate the judgment of rational credibility for a supernatural belief. The supernatural belief is not based on reason or argumentation but is nonetheless credible in the

sense that rational inquiry can lead to the judgment that it would be reasonable to accept the belief if indeed I did accept the belief. The supernatural belief is not the product of rational reflection, but one does not violate one's epistemic responsibilities in believing. I am not suggesting by any means that there is a complete parallel between Plantinga's properly basic beliefs and what a Catholic theologian would call a supernatural belief. The differences are obvious; a supernatural belief is accepted on God's authority, which cannot be said in any straightforward sense of Plantinga's basic beliefs. My point is that parts of the common Christian phenomenon which are recognized by both the Catholic and Reformed traditions are acknowledged by both but mapped in very different conceptual schemes.

After asserting the primacy of supernatural belief in God in the life of the average Christian, the Catholic theologian also claims the possibility of a natural knowledge, thus beginning the task of natural theology. These efforts at *fides quaerens intellectum* are too well known to need rehearsing here. In general, they attempt to show that something which is both known and relatively uncontroversial implies (deductively, inductively, or probabilistically) that God exists. Most commonly, the Catholic philosophical theologian thus assumes that a natural knowledge of God would involve an inference from something (usually in the Thomistic tradition some aspect of the spatiotemporal world, but in the Augustinian tradition possibly also some psychological datum) to the existence of God. The new Calvinist insistence that belief in God is a properly basic belief can also be understood as a challenge to this assumption that natural knowledge of God is necessarily inferential.

This leads to my distinctively epistemological remarks. I should warn my reader that in what follows my efforts to focus the issues sharply have in several places led me to resolve what seem to me to be ambiguities or ambivalences in the new Calvinist epistemology in ways which are consonant with my own broadly Wittgensteinian inclinations. I feel justified in doing this, since my main concern in formulating matters the way I do is to advance the discussion.

Plantinga compares what some Catholic philosophical theologians might call a knowledge of God by natural reason, but which he calls a properly basic belief that God exists, with our knowledge that physical objects exist and that other minds exist. We are now moving into one of the most hotly contested areas of contemporary epistemology, and the seas of passion frequently run very high. I will try to say something clear about the issues, even if what I say is not enough.

Some philosophers (mostly those in the Cartesian, British empirical, logical positivist, and analytic traditions) hold that when I judge that I see a rose or that I see another human person, I am implicitly making

an inference from what I directly see, e.g., a particular set of sense data or what seems to me to be the case, to what I do not directly see, e.g., an object which perdures when I do not perceive it or another mind. Other philosophers (mostly those who have been influenced by Wittgenstein and certain aspects of the Kantian and pragmatic traditions) disagree; they say the first set of philosophers have “bifurcated” nature and that the supposed implicit inference is a myth. According to these latter philosophers, in certain circumstances I am simply justified in making the judgment, for example, that I see a rose or that I see another person, because in those circumstances the criteria for properly making such a judgment are satisfied. I do not make an inference from the circumstances to the content of the judgment; I simply make the judgment without need of any justification. For want of a better term, I will call this latter set of philosophers *criteriologists*, since their reflections are in some kind of continuity with observations Wittgenstein made when discussing the notion of a criterion.<sup>20</sup> I will call the first group of philosophers *evidentialists*, since they believe it is appropriate to ask for the evidence from which we infer the truth of observation statements such as those cited above.

What should be noted is that a criteriologist, although he denies that I make an inference from the observed circumstances to what is affirmed in the judgment, is not a reductionist of either the phenomenalist or behaviorist sort. He does *not* hold that what I refer to as a physical object or as another mind is reducible to some set of observed data or behavior. For my judgment to be true, it must be made *in the proper circumstances*, but what is asserted in the judgment is not the equivalent of the assertion that the proper circumstances are realized.

What I want to suggest is that the new Calvinist epistemology is best understood as proposing a criteriological view of our judgment that God exists. What is being said is that *in certain circumstances*, e.g., in perceiving various parts of the universe (the starry heavens above) or in the context of various human emotions (guilt, gratitude, a sense of danger, etc.), one properly forms beliefs which imply the existence of God. These beliefs (e.g., “God has created this beauty” or “God disapproves of what I have done!”) are not the equivalent of the circumstances in which they

<sup>20</sup> Wittgenstein’s notion of criterion was made much of by Norman Malcolm in his classic review of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which originally appeared in the *Philosophical Review* 63 (1954) 530–59. Discussion of the notion of criterion subsequently became a touchstone for one’s understanding of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Unfortunately, there still does not seem to be complete agreement among commentators either on what Wittgenstein meant by the term (if indeed he had one determinate meaning) or on what precisely should be said about the philosophical issues usually raised in its discussion. At the end of his life Wittgenstein discussed related issues in *On Certainty* under the rubric of “framework propositions.”

are formed, nor are they inferred from the circumstances. They are simply made in the circumstances; they are properly so made, and anyone who claims that I have violated my epistemic responsibilities in making the judgment has the burden of proving his case.

Even if one accepts a criteriological view with regard to belief in physical objects or belief in other minds, one may still object that belief in God is significantly different. All or almost all human beings seem to believe, in roughly the same circumstances, that physical objects or other minds exist. But this does not seem to be the case with belief in God. Some people seem to be quite unmoved, for example, by viewing the starry heavens above. To this the Reformed theologian may reply that it is not at all obvious that the circumstances in which one human being observes the starry heavens are identical or significantly similar to those in which another does so. Important modifications of the subjectivity of the observer may be quite different. From a theological perspective, the Reformed theologian might add, these differences may well include the presence or absence of the effects of sin on the mind of the beholder. At this point, once again the maps of the Catholic and Reformed traditions fail to coincide completely, since the Catholic philosophical theologian, although he certainly admits the effects of sin even in the cognitive area, rarely gives it such a decisive role in resolving a central epistemological issue.

The main thesis of the Reformed epistemology is the claim that belief in God is a properly basic belief. The basic philosophical strategy is to assimilate belief in God to belief in physical objects and other minds, and then to provide what I have called a criteriological (noninferential, nonevidentialist) analysis of the latter beliefs. A central part of the philosophical case for the criteriological approach to physical objects and other minds is the failure of the evidentialists to pay their promissory notes by actually coming up with valid and sound arguments from the evidence they allege to the conclusion that, for example, physical objects and other minds exist. But if, given the evidentialist assumptions, we must then conclude that our belief in physical objects and other minds is irrational, then that is perhaps a good reason for rejecting the evidentialist assumptions. It is from this rejection that the criteriological approach receives its initial plausibility. In extending the criteriological approach to belief in God, a corresponding central issue is the extent to which one is satisfied with the arguments of natural theology. If natural theology pays its promissory notes, it probably has little to fear from the Reformed epistemology. If it does not, a very attractive alternative, which utilizes some of the major trends in contemporary epistemology, is now in the process of being developed.