God and Other Theoretical Entities*

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In his now-classic *God and Other Minds*, Alvin Plantinga embarked on the project that we have since come to know as Reformed epistemology.[1] Plantinga used the following strategy to defend the epistemic rationality of theistic belief. The best arguments for other minds and for theism are, according to the book, the argument from analogy and the argument from design, respectively. But both arguments suffer from the same "crippling defect,"[2] and so both enjoy the same lowly status: neither argument provides an epistemically good reason for holding the belief in question. Thus, if, as nearly all of us do, we grant that belief in other minds is, or can be, rational, we ought also to grant that belief in God is, or can be, rational. For Plantinga, neither belief requires evidence, or epistemically good reasons, in order to be rationally held.

Even its critics credited Plantinga's book with offering "an ingenious argument for the conclusion that belief in God is perfectly justified in the absence of any good reason whatever."[3] This striking conclusion is remarkably similar to the claim for which Plantinga argues some sixteen years later, a claim which has earned the right to be called the very "thesis of Reformed epistemology":[4]

> (RE) It is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all.[5]

Plantinga no doubt means to provoke his evidentialist opponents here by piling on the epistemic praise, but he notoriously stands by every laudatory word of (RE).

In the years since *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga and other Reformed epistemologists have abandoned the particular strategy of that book, in favor of a more general attack on evidentialism and what they call "classical (Cartesian and Lockean) foundationalism."[6] But their goal remains the same: to show that belief in God can be "properly basic," i.e. rationally tenable, epistemically justified, and the like, in the absence of any evidence for it. Indeed, twenty-three years after the publication of *God and Other Minds* Plantinga declared, "I remain unrepentant about the main epistemological conclusions of the book."[7]

I contend in this paper that (RE) is false, and for reasons that seem to have been overlooked in the debate between evidentialists and their Reformed opponents. My argument rests on the common intuition that belief in God differs from, say, belief in ordinary material objects for the simple reason that we can *observe* ordinary material objects. My task, then, is to formulate an independently plausible epistemic principle that captures the truth in this intuition. Like most philosophers, Plantinga holds that we can observe ordinary material objects and that our belief in them is paradigmatically non-theoretical and rational. I differ with him over whether belief in God belongs in the same epistemic category.

In my view, the orthodox conception of God's nature makes properly basic theism, as I understand that notion, impossible. I will consider rebuttals suggested by defenders of a *sensus divinitatis* and by William Alston's related, "experientialist" account of religious belief, and I'll conclude that they fail to rescue Reformed epistemology. I'll explain, briefly, why theism counts as a theory in two important and connected senses and, thus, why we should find it unsurprising that properly basic theism is just not available to orthodox believers.

1. Orthodox faith and an unobservable God

Plantinga's most sustained defense of Reformed epistemology is nicely explicit about two important points. First, he makes it clear that he adopts a conception of epistemic rationality a necessary component of which is the fulfillment of epistemic duties. He thus embraces

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a conception of rationality at least partly "deontological," to use the label that Alston has made famous.[8] For Plantinga, moreover, what holds for epistemic rationality apparently also holds for the closely related notion of epistemic justification. On the deontological conception of those notions, S's belief of p is rationally held, epistemically justified, and so on, only if S violates no applicable epistemic duties in believing that p, only if S is epistemically permitted to believe that p. As Plantinga puts it,

> a belief is *justified* for a person at a time if (a) he is violating no epistemic duties and is within his epistemic rights in accepting it then and (b) his noetic structure is not defective by virtue of his then accepting it.[9]

Condition (a) represents the deontological component of Plantinga's conception of justification, a component he has consistently reasserted in his more recent epistemological work.[10] I won't address the details of deontological justification – for example, any distinction that may hold between epistemic rationality and epistemic justification or between "fulfilling" epistemic duties and merely "not violating" them. Instead, I'll just accept Plantinga's more or less clear conditions for epistemic justification, and I'll argue that, unless supported by evidence, belief in God fails to satisfy the deontological condition he sets up.

Second, and just as important, Plantinga is admirably clear about the orthodox sort of monotheism for which Reformed epistemologists claim properly basic status. For Plantinga, theism, or belief in (the existence of) God, is

> the belief, first, that there exists a *person* of a certain sort – a being who acts, holds beliefs, and has aims and purposes. This person, secondly, is immaterial, exists *a se*, is perfect in goodness, knowledge, and power, and is such that the world depends on him for its existence.[11]

From here on, I'll assume that this passage contains an adequate summary of the relevant tenets of traditional theism.

I want to focus on the immateriality ascribed to God in those tenets. According to the orthodox view, God is necessarily an immaterial, spiritual or mental, being. As such, God would seem to be, in principle, unobservable by any of the five physical senses. Those senses take as their objects physical entities, sensed by the transfer of matter-energy between the entities and our sense-organs. At least that is the view of naturalistically informed direct realism, the theory of ordinary perception that Reformed epistemologists seem to prefer.[12] On that theory, then, God's essential immateriality makes him necessarily unobservable by the five senses. Unlike, say, the structure of DNA, God lies beyond sensory observation no matter how much technology may enhance it.[13] This fact, although it bears crucially on the epistemology of theism, shouldn't surprise anyone familiar with the traditional theistic conception of God.[14]

2. The sufficiency of unobservability

My main argument relies on a familiar distinction between observable and unobservable entities. More precisely, it relies on the distinction between entities that are in principle, or "strictly," observable and those that are not; and I will be using "unobservable" throughout in this particular sense of the term. In a context independent of theology, Grover Maxwell gives a brief but useful gloss on the notion of entities "which are *in principle* impossible to observe":

> What kind of impossibility is meant here? . . . I shall assume what seems to be granted by most philosophers who talk of entities which are unobservable in principle, i.e., that the theory . . . itself (coupled with a physiological theory of perception, I might add) entails that such entities are unobservable.[15]

Maxwell identifies a commonplace in the philosophy of science. Put a bit differently,

> (U) An entity is strictly unobservable if the very theory which posits it entails that the entity is (in the tenseless sense of "is") imperceptible by any of the five ordinary senses, especially sight.[16]

I will take (U) to state an uncontroversially sufficient condition for strict unobservability. This notion of unobservability cuts across familiar lines, including, for example, the line dividing empiricists and realists on the role of unobservables in scientific theories. Philosophers differ widely about the import of strict unobservability, but they routinely agree that some such notion can be articulated along the lines suggested by Maxwell. On that shared notion, then, God counts as strictly unobservable: "the theory itself" (orthodox theism), "coupled with a physiological theory of perception" (naturalistic direct realism), entails that God is unobservable by us.

I recognize that Maxwell and other realists question the ends for which the notion of unobservability has been invoked, especially by logical positivists. Maxwell insists, for example, that the notion "has no ontological significance whatever."[17] But I am arguing here not that it has any ontological significance but that it has the following particular epistemological significance: no belief which presupposes the existence of an unobservable entity can be properly basic. Logical positivists typically have held that we can have no scientific knowledge of unobservables; some have even held that our theories cannot meaningfully ascribe *existence* to unobservables.[18] I claim no such thing here. Instead, I claim that orthodox theism, insofar as it presupposes the existence of an unobservable God, cannot count as properly basic, i.e. as rationally believable in the absence of evidence.

Reformed epistemology holds that belief in the existance of God can be perfectly rational even if such belief is based on no evidence at all. As the literature on this topic testifies, however, it's not always easy to tell what Reformed epistemologists mean by the phrase "based on no evidence at all." Fortunately, much of the debate over interpreting this phrase is, I think, irrelevant here. For present purposes, we can find the required interpretive clues in Plantinga's long article "Reason and Belief in God." There Plantinga challenges the theory of justified belief he calls "classical foundationalism," according to which

> belief in God is rationally acceptable only if there is evidence for it – only if, that is, it is probable with respect to some body of propositions that constitutes the evidence.[19]

For present purposes, we can accept Plantinga's description of classical foundationalism. All versions of foundationalism, classical or not, distinguish basic beliefs from non-basic, or derived, beliefs. Non-basic beliefs are rational only if properly supported by basic beliefs; by contrast, basic beliefs can be rational, or properly basic, without any such support from other beliefs.

On Plantinga's reading of classical foundationalism, "A proposition p is properly basic for a person S if and only if p is either self-evident to S or incorrigible for S or evident to the senses for S."[20] Plantinga rejects classical foundationalism because it allows too few kinds of beliefs to count as properly basic, and he adopts instead a more generous epistemology. As one commentator observes,

> Where [Plantinga's] foundationalism departs from classical foundationalism is in his specification of properly basic beliefs. . . . Plantinga's foundationalism is much less parsimonious in its specification of properly basic beliefs. He also includes memory beliefs, beliefs about the external world, acceptance of testimony, and belief in God, among others.[21]

It is, of course, the last of those belief-types, belief in God, whose proper basicality is at issue here. Foundationalists must admit, says Plantinga, that "*some* propositions can properly be believed . . . without evidence. Well, why not belief in God?"[22] Plantinga and other Reformed epistemologists are, thus, not anti-foundationalists but neo-foundationalists; they accept the foundationalist tenet that non-basic beliefs require the evidential support of other beliefs in order to count as rational.[23] My dispute with them, as I've said, concerns their classification of orthodox theism as an object of properly basic belief.

I hold, on the contrary, that theism is a "theoretical belief," a type of belief which by its very nature can be rational only if it is non-basic, only if it is supported by other beliefs. My use of "theoretical" has its origin in positivism's distinction between theoretical and non-theoretical entities, a distinction which, in turn, "depends on the criterion of observability: terms on the theoretical list are supposed to refer to unobservables, those on the non-theoretical list to observables."[24] Again, though, I won't be using the distinction for any of the illicit purposes associated with positivist philosophy of science. I won't, for example, argue that theoretical terms don't really refer, or that we can have no knowledge of their referents. I'll stress, instead, what I assume is a less contentious point: theoretical beliefs are either non-basic or else irrational; their rationality depends on the evidential support of other beliefs.[25] In aid of making that point, I propose the following epistemic principle, the Sufficiency of Unobservability:

> (SU) If S's belief of p presupposes – i.e., if p self-evidently entails – the existence of an entity which is strictly unobservable, then S's belief of p is theoretical.

No theoretical beliefs, in turn, are properly basic beliefs: on the foundationalist account that Plantinga himself accepts, they are rational beliefs only if they have the support of ulterior, propositional evidence.

Principle (SU) relies on a notion of self-evident entailment that crops up in Plantinga's own work on Reformed epistemology. In "Reason and Belief in God" and elsewhere, Plantinga defends the rationality of

belief in certain propositions "each of which self-evidently entails that God exists," including these propositions:

(8) God is speaking to me,
(9) God has created all this,
(10) God disapproves of what I have done,
(11) God forgives me,

and

(12) God is to be thanked and praised.[26]

According to (SU) a belief of p presupposes a proposition q if and only if p self-evidently entails q. For example, the belief of (11) presupposes the proposition that

(G) God exists

if and only if (11) self-evidently entails G. But, surely, (11) does self-evidently entail G. So a belief of (11) presupposes G, or, alternatively, a belief of (11) presupposes the existence of God. All this leaves (SU) tailor-made for the evaluation of theistic beliefs, but, as I'll suggest, it applies to other contexts as well.

Taking the presupposition relation to require self-evident entailment avoids a problem that would afflict a broader criterion for presupposition, such as entailment *simpliciter*. One can claim quite plausibly that proposition G is necessarily true if true at all. That is, the standard description of God is such that if it is instantiated at all then it is instantiated by necessity.[27] If so, then if proposition G is true it is necessarily true and therefore entailed by any proposition p whatever. If, as I maintain, God is strictly unobservable, then on (SU) any belief at all would qualify as theoretical: any belief of p would presuppose, in virtue of p's entailing, proposition G. Even my belief of

(C) Chairs exist

would so qualify, and that's just the sort of belief that no plausible account can classify as theoretical. Thus, the plausibility of (SU) would depend on G's being contingent or else, if G is noncontingent, on G's being false, and it is no part of my project to pronounce on either the modal status or the truth-value of theism.

Requiring not only entailment but self-evident entailment avoids this problem. Even if G is necessarily true and therefore entailed by C, G is surely not self-evidently entailed by C. I won't give a philosophical analysis of self-evident entailment, since the notion strikes me as already clear enough for Plantinga's purposes and my own. While (11) self-evidently entails G, and C self-evidently entails the proposition that something exists, the same relation does not hold between propositions C and G themselves.

On the criterion of presupposition presented in (SU), plenty of other theoretical propositions are also not presupposed by an arbitrary non-theoretical belief of p. Consider, again, my non-theoretical belief that chairs exist. Suppose that the fundamental constituents of all material objects are some strictly unobservable entities such as quarks (if indeed quarks are strictly unobservable). Suppose, in other words, that chairs are composed – even necessarily composed[28] – of unobservable quarks. Still, my belief that chairs exist does not come out as theoretical, for even if chairs are necessarily composed of unobservable quarks, proposition C nonetheless does not self-evidently entail that there are quarks. This is just the difference between (11) and G, on the one hand, and C and G, on the other. Again, I won't try to get more specific than that about the nature of self-evident entailment, a notion I have simply borrowed from Plantinga for my own purposes; the rough grasp we already have of it seems to me adequate to the task of critiquing Reformed epistemology.

Let me indicate four additional features of (SU). First, (SU) specifies only a sufficient condition and not also a necessary one; it is not the function of (SU) to give the essence of theoretical beliefs. Second, I am using "theoretical" as an epistemological label and not an ontological one. As David Lewis observes, "Theoretical entities need not be invisible, intangible, etc. . . . Theoretical entities are not entities of a special category, but entities we know of . . . in a special way."[29] Again, principle (SU) says nothing about what theoretical entities *must* be. Rather, it specifies a property which, in the case of beliefs, suffices to make them theoretical. Moreover, my use of the term "theoretical" underscores Lewis's point about the special epistemic significance of theoretical entities.

Third, in order for S's belief of p to count as theoretical, S need not *take* his belief to presuppose anything. I construe self-evident entailment objectively; in believing that p, S can, in principle, miss the self-evident entailments of p entirely. Fourth, in believing that p, S need not *take* as unobservable the entities whose existence p entails. In sum, S's belief of p can presuppose the existence of an unobservable entity

even if S overlooks (or even denies) both the presupposition and the unobservable nature of the presupposed entity.

Finally, I should emphasize that (SU) readily accommodates Plantinga's distinction between high- and low-level theistic beliefs. In "Reason and Belief in God," Plantinga says that "It is not the relatively high-level and general proposition *God exists* that is properly basic, but instead propositions detailing some of his attributes or actions," for example, proposition (11) listed earlier.[30] Substituting "beliefs" for "propositions" (Plantinga uses the terms interchangeably), we see that both beliefs are theoretical. The high-level belief of G presupposes the existence of an unobservable entity, since G self-evidently entails G; so, too, the low-level belief of (11), for (11) also self-evidently entails G.

Another example should illustrate the plausibility of (SU). Because the alternative "worlds" of David Lewis's distinctive ontology so clearly satisfy condition (U) for unobservability, I'll take them as my paradigmatic theoretical entities. According to Lewis, alternative worlds "are of a kind with this world of ours" and exist just as robustly as ours does.[31] He regards our own world as a concrete individual, on some standard reading of that term; in fact, he thinks of our world as "a big physical object."[32] Alternative worlds, then, are also concrete individuals. But, on Lewis's theory, no alternative worlds relate causally or spatiotemporally to our world or to each other. Like our world, lots of alternative worlds are also big physical objects. Nevertheless, their causal and spatiotemporal isolation makes other worlds unobservable in any plausible sense of the term, including the strong sense required by (SU).

In order to be faithful to Lewis's account, I should note that many alternative worlds are supposed to be observable to the inhabitants of *those* worlds. In this respect, many alternative worlds resemble our world, the actual world. Nevertheless, alternative worlds are strictly impossible for *us* to observe. Someone wanting to take account of this detail would simply specify that alternative worlds are unobservable for us, the inhabitants of the actual world. Alternative worlds would still retain their epistemic significance as theoretical entities – theoretical for us, at least. And since, like Plantinga, I believe that the constituents of the actual world are the only things there are, I would hold that alternative worlds are unobservable, full stop.

On (SU), then, alternative worlds are theoretical entities. Hence, I claim, Lewis's belief that they exist qualifies as a theoretical belief, a belief whose rationality thus depends on the support of ulterior, propositional evidence. This claim seems as undeniable as it is unsurprising. Can we imagine even Lewis insisting that his belief in other worlds was entirely rational in the absence of ulterior, propositional evidence for it – i.e. that his belief was properly basic? On the contrary, Lewis rightly devotes much of his book *On the Plurality of Worlds* to providing evidence for his controversial view. No doubt he recognizes that theoretical beliefs bear special evidential burdens. Such beliefs cannot be properly basic.

If one remains unconvinced of that claim, I doubt I can do much more than to appeal to intuitions. But perhaps I can underscore the evidential burdens of theoretical beliefs a bit more fully. Recall that, on Plantinga's conception of epistemic rationality, S has a rational belief of p only if, in believing that p, S is within her epistemic rights, violating no relevant epistemic duties, doing nothing "noetically below par," and so on. Now suppose that S forms a belief in the existence of Lewisian alternative worlds but has nothing by way of evidence to ground the belief. She simply has among her basic beliefs the belief that there exist other concrete, physical universes that we are strictly unable to observe. Whatever we include among the plausible epistemic rights and duties of S, I submit that we would not count S's unsupported belief in Lewisian worlds as rational in Plantinga's deontological sense of the term. S's belief, though basic, would not qualify as properly basic.

One might object that S's basic belief in alternative worlds need not violate an all-things-considered epistemic duty, especially if, say, S is non-culpably naïve. Suppose, for example, that a non-culpably naïve S bases her belief in alternative worlds exclusively on testimony, even on the simple say-so of Lewis himself. In that event is it so clear that S's belief violates any of her epistemic duties?

We might reply that any belief based on testimony is already a based, and not a basic, belief. As Plantinga himself remarks, testimony does often count as genuine evidence in support of a belief.[33] If Reformed epistemologists nevertheless insist on classifying at least some testimonial beliefs as basic beliefs,[34] we can reply that, where testimony about unobservables lacks evidence, it will not be "entirely right, reasonable, rational, and proper," in Plantinga's deontological sense, to accept such testimony, a verdict that applies equally to belief

in unobservable Lewisian worlds and to belief in an unobservable God.

This last reply will strike some readers as unduly harsh. Suppose Jones believes in God on the basis of nothing we would count as evidence for the belief. Can't Jones's five-year-old daughter simply accept Jones's testimony and, without thereby violating any of her epistemic duties, form a basic belief that God exists? To understand why she cannot, we need to distinguish epistemic justification and moral justification, two very different properties that this example may tempt us to conflate. My claim is that even a five-year-old needs evidence, perhaps testimonial evidence, in order to be deontologically unimpeachable in her belief that God exists. Granted, most five-year-old theists lack even testimonial evidence for their theism, and we seldom if ever blame them morally for lacking it. But it does not follow from our reluctance to blame them morally that we concede the entire *epistemic* propriety of their beliefs. Growing up consists partly in trading epistemically unjustified beliefs for epistemically justified ones, and our rarely blaming five-year-olds when their beliefs lack epistemic justification doesn't mean that those beliefs then *possess* epistemic justification. It just means that we often, and rightly, let children off the hook for failing to fulfill their epistemic duties, while we're typically harder on teens and adults who fail to fulfill them. Once we distinguish moral from epistemic blame, we should find it far less tempting to apply the epistemic honorific "properly basic" to the theistic beliefs of Jones's five-year-old daughter, since by hypothesis those beliefs lack the support of evidence.

Principle (SU) no doubt derives much of its plausibility from its weakness. (SU) is so weak, in fact, that a counterexample to it would have to consist of an entity that was strictly unobservable yet (clearly enough) not theoretical: in other words, an entity, unobservable in principle, belief in whose existence could nonetheless be properly basic. In section IV, I'll address the claim that God is not, after all, unobservable in principle. But of course that claim, even if true, would not falsify (SU).

3. Theism as theoretical

The preceding two sections advanced two principal claims: (1) the God of orthodox theism is strictly unobservable, and (2) any belief presupposing the existence of an unobservable entity is, necessarily, a theoretical belief. Together, these claims entail that orthodox theism is a theoretical belief, one of a class of beliefs whose rationality requires the support of ulterior, propositional evidence.

At this stage, it's worthwhile recalling the argumentative strategy of *God and Other Minds*, the first sustained defense of the Reformed approach. According to Plantinga, belief in the existence of other minds is rational in the absence of (what I've been calling) ulterior, propositional evidence for that belief. How do my conclusions so far affect his claim about other minds?

Suppose that, like Plantinga, I reject behaviorist accounts of mind and also the mind-brain identity thesis: I reject (a) the equivalence of psychological descriptions and descriptions of behavior and (b) the identification of mental states with brain states. Then, on the view advanced here, if I still believe in other minds my belief *is* theoretical: in that case, my belief in some other mind is a belief in some unobservable entity.

Whether one's belief in other minds is theoretical or whether, instead, it can be properly basic depends on what one means by "other minds." If one rejects both behaviorism and the identity thesis in favor of some strictly unobservable form of mind, then I don't find it at all implausible to classify one's belief in other minds as theoretical. The same even goes, I suspect, for at least some conceptions of one's *own* mind. Surely, on some conceptions of the self, including Humean conceptions that regard the self as strictly unobservable, the self properly counts as a theoretical entity and, thus, as the object of theoretical beliefs. In sum, if commonsense belief in one's own or other minds really does presuppose the unobservable, then it is a theoretical belief, with all the evidential burdens attaching to such beliefs.

The point is worth repeating: whether one's belief in the existence of other minds (or other persons, or God) is a theoretical belief depends on what one means by "minds" (or "persons," or "God"). The relevant theory determines the reference of a theoretical term. Thus, if by "minds" I intend, say, some unobservable ghost in the machine, then my belief in other minds is theo-retical. On the other hand, if by "God" I mean nothing other than the Venus de Milo, then principle (SU) would not classify my belief in (the existence of) God as theoretical. Needless to say, though, that usage of "God" departs radically from orthodox theism.

One might insist, however, that on my analysis belief

in other minds will emerge as theoretical whether or not we reject behaviorism and mind-brain identity. For, according to (SU), one's belief in other minds counts as theoretical if it amounts to a belief in the existence of strictly unobservable entities. If one identifies minds with functioning brains or with dispositions to behavior, one's belief in other minds still emerges as theoretical or, at any rate, as non-basic: one lacks the kind of direct access to other functioning brains and other persons' behavioral dispositions that a properly basic belief in the existence of those things would require. Thus, belief in other minds will come out as theoretical, whatever one's position on behaviorism and mind-brain identity. If such non-basic belief is to be epistemically justified, then, it must have the support of evidence. But doesn't commonsense belief in other minds, as Plantinga insists, lack sufficient evidence? Must I not then regard such belief as unjustified? Doesn't (SU) commit me to this unduly harsh conclusion?

I doubt that it does, because I doubt that the kinds of commonsense beliefs about other minds that we routinely hold (for instance, the belief that someone is in pain) presuppose the existence of strictly unobservable entities: I doubt seriously that the content of such commonsense beliefs is always so rich with entailments. Recall that by "presuppose" I mean "self-evidently entail," and so it seems to me that the burden of proof rests on anyone who claims that my commonsense belief that Sue is in pain presupposes the existence of strictly unobservable things called "pains." I doubt that any entailment at all, let alone a self-evident one, holds between "Sue is in pain" and "There are pains" – any more than expressions like "by dint of" and "for the sake of" self-evidently commit us to the existence of dints and sakes. The threshold that (SU) sets up for the presupposition of unobservables is so high that very few commonsense beliefs are likely to meet it.

But even if, in spite of my doubts, we end up counting commonsense belief in other minds as non-basic, we may nevertheless have evidence sufficient to justify such belief. So seems to be the view of some of Plantinga's early commentators, including Michael Slote, who rejects Plantinga's claim that no good evidence exists for other minds.[35] Slote cites his own version of the analogical argument, which he regards as both better than Plantinga's version and also potentially sufficient to justify non-basic belief in other minds. Plantinga himself concedes that his analysis of the evidence for other minds does not "consider every alternative that has been proposed," and he cites, without discussing at length, the suggestion that each person's belief in other minds is, for that person, "part of a well-confirmed scientific hypothesis."[36] In sum, it's far from obvious that, even if belief in other minds is non-basic, belief in other minds must be unjustified.

Returning, then, to the discussion of theoretical belief, it seems clear that, in many cases of standard usage, the referent of a theoretical term – such as "photon," "quark," or Lewisian alternative "world" – is adequately defined by the associated theory.[37] Often, however, no single theory owns a particular term. Or perhaps the relevant theory leaves the referent of the term poorly defined, as with some commonsense psychological terms such as "mind," "pain," and "person." If so, then it will be impossible to apply (SU) to beliefs presupposing the existence of minds, pains, or persons until we nail down the reference of those terms. This fact explains why (SU) gives no determinate, general answer as to whether one's belief that one is in pain or one's belief that other persons exist are theoretical beliefs. Even supposing that the first of those beliefs presupposes the existence of entities called "pains," the referents of the folk-psychological terms "pain" and "person" are, I suspect, too poorly defined for (SU) to classify either of the associated beliefs as theoretical. In short, (SU) may leave many types of belief with no clear classification.

Fortunately, however, this problem does not arise in the case of orthodox belief in God, since orthodox theism answers all the crucial questions about the reference of "God." The God of orthodox theism is immaterial and, for at least that reason, unobservable by ordinary sensation. Moreover, if orthodox theism also includes the claim, originated by medieval theologians, that God is immutable, atemporal and absolutely simple, then the relevant kind of observation looks even less feasible. William Mann seems to recognize this fact, even as he defends the claim that Moses could have heard the voice of an atemporal God. "In 'speaking' to Moses," he writes, "God *brought it about that Moses heard certain statements.* Moses' hearing the statements is a temporal process . . . but it does not follow from that fact that God's bringing it about is a temporal process."[38] Mann's description is deliberately guarded, for he recognizes that a stronger claim about Moses' auditory access to God might run afoul of the very doctrine, divine eternality, that he wants to defend. In

any event, I doubt that even this sort of indirect, temporal "audition" of an temporal God will constitute *observation* of God, in the sense relevant to (SU), any more than an indirect, temporal "sighting" of an atemporal cardinal number would.

Granted, the doctrines of divine immutability, eternality, and simplicity are not uncontroversially part of orthodox theism. But even without them, we have seen, God must be regarded as an unobservable, hence theoretical, entity. Now, God may exist for all that, and we may have good evidence for his existence: there may be effects of God's existence, for example, and even records of his communication with human beings. But so long as God is strictly unobservable, the belief *that* he exists is a theoretical belief – a belief which, foundationalists like Plantinga must concede, cannot be properly basic.

4. Experientialism and the *sensus divinitatis*

In well-known articles and in a recent book,[39] William Alston argues that a variety of religious experiences can provide "direct, perceptual awareness of God." While such "religious perception" is extrasensory rather than physical, he argues that it can, and in many cases does, give epistemic support to traditional theism. I will use "experientialism" to denote Alston's defense of the epistemic value of religious experiences.

Others have argued, similarly, that human beings have an innate, nonphysical faculty for direct awareness of the divine. In discussing evidentialism of roughly the sort I defend here, Stephen Wykstra writes:

> To be sure, such evidentialism is sensible about things like electrons. But this is because we have no non-inferential access to electrons (we cannot just perceive them); electron belief hence needs inferential support from things we can perceive. But why should we suppose that humans have no non-inferential access to God? The traditional theistic religions teach, after all, that God made us with a faculty – what Calvin calls a *Sensus Divinitatis* – by which we can, under suitable conditions, "sense" God's presence, character, and activity in our lives. To rule out such non-inferential access to God thus presupposes that God (as traditionally presented) does not exist.[40]

Wykstra's case of "electron belief" does not exactly parallel my case of belief in Lewisian worlds, since the latter entities are absolutely and uncontroversially unobservable, a property which may not apply to electrons. Nevertheless, he makes an important point: ruling out the *sensus divinitatis* begs the question against the sort of traditional theism that he describes. By the same token, however, presuming the existence of such a God-given faculty begs the question in favor of traditional theism. So we seem to have arrived at a standoff. But Wykstra doesn't appreciate the other side of the coin in his proposed resolution of the standoff. Here is his grudging concession to evidentialism:

> One might think evidence is essential because one sees religious experience as riddled with problems of ostensible epistemic parity. . . . [I]nsofar as such parity problems are pervasive, there is reason to regard experiential religious belief as needing evidence of (at least) the *discriminational* kind.[41]

Wykstra's parenthetical insertion of "at least" is welcome, since without it he would leave the evidentialist to inquire only about the consistency of putative revelations and about the problems raised by religious pluralism, and then only if such problems were sufficiently pervasive. She would not have leave to question the very mechanism by which revelations are purportedly received. That would hardly be a fair resolution of the standoff, for the evidentialist would be required to swallow the *sensus divinitatis* whole. It's fortunate, then, that Wykstra's account does not actually restrict relevant evidence to the "discriminational kind."

In short, the nature and epistemic import of religious perception are open to debate. Let us consider, then, the account offered by Alston, the most prominent contemporary writer on religious perception, and explore its impact on the issue of properly basic theism.

Alston is, again, concerned to defend a sort of "direct perception of God" that is avowedly extrasensory, i.e. nonphysical, in character: perception "in which no awareness of sensory qualia is involved, no colors, shapes, sounds, smells, and the like."[42] The crucial question is whether Alstonian religious perception, or perhaps the *sensus divinitatis*, can make God observable so as to evade application of the independently plausible thesis (SU) to theism. If so, then (SU) can't be used to falsify the thesis of Reformed epistemology. If not, however, then (SU) would seem to apply, leaving belief in God an unpromising candidate for properly basic status.

The crucial question must, I think, be answered in the negative. Alston frequently writes of ordinary sense-perception and religious perception as engendering two different "epistemic practices." He takes "basic" epistemic practices, such as the one arising from sense-

perception, to be (at best) weakly justified, that is, not demonstrably unreliable.[43] Nevertheless, as his commentators have emphasized, on Alston's account the reliability of a non-basic epistemic practice can be tested by reference to a more basic epistemic practice.[44] For example, we can check the reliability of wine-tasting by reference to less esoteric deliverances of sense-perception. By the same token, if religious perception is less basic than sense-perception, then the reliability of the former can be tested, in part, against the latter.

Alston's remarks, moreover, suggest that the former *is* less basic than the latter: religious perception, he writes, is less widely shared, less easily mastered, and usually less vivid, clear, detailed, persistent, and irresistibly convincing than sense-perception; and unlike "the presently dominant" epistemic practice engendered by sense-perception, religious perception admits of viable alternatives.[45] These remarks suggest that Alstonian religious perception does not constitute *observation* of God of a kind relevant to (SU). But even better evidence for this claim crops up elsewhere in Alston's recent book.

4.1. *An Alstonian argument for unobservability*

Notwithstanding its defense of the epistemic value of religious perception, Alston's *Perceiving God* may contain the germ of an argument for the unobservability of God. At any rate, remarks near the beginning of the book can readily be used in an *ad hominem* argument for my claim that Alstonian religious perception does not constitute observation of God. He writes:

> If God appears to one, non-sensorily, as loving, powerful, or good, the appearance, so far as it goes, could correspond fairly closely with the way God is in Himself. While if we experience God as looking or sounding a certain way, that can't be the way He is, not even approximately.[46]

Of course, Alston does not mean, in the second sentence, that if I experience God as looking powerful or as sounding wise, then God can't be powerful or wise, "not even approximately." That interpretation would put his account, as well as the outputs, of religious perception into direct conflict with much of traditional Christian theology, a result he would abhor. Instead, Alston probably means that no *sensory qualia* even approximately characterize God as God really is. This interpretation comports with Alston's focus on non-sensory types of religious experience, and it avoids any direct conflict with traditional theology. In fact, the conclusion that no description of God in terms of sensory qualia can be literally accurate seems not only compatible with, but required by, traditional theology.

Unlike observable entities, then, God isn't even approximately solid, opaque, bigger than a breadbox, spatiotemporally localized, or anything of the sort. On the direct-realist theory of perception that Alston and many others accept, sensory qualia, such as opacity, often correspond to real properties of observable objects, but such sensory qualia, according to Alston, cannot correspond to any of God's real properties, not even approximately. Of course, Alston's use of "approximately" may need some spelling out, but for present purposes I think its sense is sufficiently clear.

These considerations have the structure of an argument for the unobservability of God:

(1) X is observable only if it is possible, in principle, to observe X; otherwise, X is unobservable.
(2) It is possible to observe X only if it is possible, by sensory means, to experience X at least approximately as X is in itself.
(3) God's essential properties, especially his immateriality and atemporality, are such that it is *not* possible, by sensory means, to experience God as he is in himself, "not even approximately." (To borrow a theological phrase, God's nature is too "wholly other" for there to be veridical sensory experience of God.)
(4) Therefore, God is unobservable.

Premise (1) is a virtually analytic definition of "observable." Premise (2) comes from the remarks of Alston that I just quoted; it seems an entirely plausible element of the concept of observation, one suggested by Alston's own preference for a direct-realist theory of perception. Observing X does seem to require experiencing some sensory qualia that characterize X, at least approximately, as X really is; anything less could not count as observation of X. While (2) serves as a constraint on anything plausibly thought of as observation, it is a relatively weak constraint, weak enough to let in both observation of elephants and observation of electrons. Premise (3), as well, comes straight out of Alston; as I've said, it fits nicely with Alston's respect for both direct realism and the doctrines of traditional theology. The conclusion, (4), follows straightforwardly from the premises.

Again, we haven't achieved an exact fix on "approximately," the sort of term whose very nature makes an exact fix difficult. But we don't need an exact fix in order to press this argument against Alston, for it is he who introduced the term. The argument shows that anyone committed to Alston's claims about the inability of sensory qualia even to approximate God's real properties must also accept God's being beyond sensory observation, the type of observation presupposed by (SU).

But the argument has, I believe, more than *ad hominem* force. I find its premises highly plausible in their own right. Granted, premise (2) has had illustrious opponents, chief among them Kant, but contemporary epistemology has sided with realism against Kantian phenomenalism, rightly, in my view. Moreover, Alston's use of the Kantian phrase "in itself" does not betray any temptation on his part to side with Kant; the phrase may be Kantian, but Alston's epistemological views are those of an anti-Kantian direct realist. Premise (3) has the backing of traditional philosophical theology, not to mention its independent plausibility as a constraint on the perception of God.

Why have I spent so much time pressing the claim of God's unobservability against Alston in particular? One might suppose that Alston, in focusing on the epistemic value of non-sensory religious perception rather than observation, has no stake in claiming that God can be observed.[47] But that would be a mistake, I think. He points out that the most common alternative to his perceptual account of religious experience asserts that

> mystical experience is a purely subjective mode of consciousness that the subject typically interprets as being due to a transcendent cause. . . . This means that the subject must have sufficient *reasons* for this [causal hypothesis] if it is to be justified. Whereas on the perceptual construal there is at least the possibility of a direct knowledge of God, not based on reasons. . . .[48]

By Alston's own lights, then, his view of religious perception commits him to something rather like (RE), the thesis of Reformed epistemology, since on his account "there is at least the possibility of a direct knowledge of God, not based on reasons." I understand him to be asserting the possibility of a knowledge of God not based on ulterior, propositional evidence – in other words, a basic knowledge of, and thus a properly basic belief in, God. But I have, of course, been concerned to refute (RE). Thus, if (RE) is indeed a consequence of Alston's account, and if I am right that God's unobservability is sufficient to refute that consequence, then there goes Alston's account of religious perception. He would, thus, seem to have a substantial stake in claiming that God is observable after all.

One might defend Alston by suggesting that a belief presupposing the existence of a strictly unobservable entity need not be a theoretical belief, provided the entity in question is perceptible by some other means than observation. This defense of Alston amounts to nothing short of a denial of principle (SU), for (SU) says that belief in a strictly unobservable entity is always theoretical, whether or not we can perceive the entity in "some other" way. I have done my best, in the space allotted me here, to defend principle (SU), chiefly by means of examples. The Alstonian attack on that principle is too sophisticated for the kind of rebuttal I could give here,[49] but I would point out that Plantinga's defense of Reformed epistemology, the defense on which this paper focuses, does not clearly rely on Alstonian claims about direct perceptual awareness of God anyway. Of (8)–(12), the five "properly basic" theistic propositions of Plantinga's that I quoted earlier, only (8) looks like a belief that might have been formed as a result of direct perception of God, and even there Plantinga's explanation of its context makes it look other than perceptual: "Upon reading the Bible," he explains, "one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him."[50] In sum, it seems unlikely that Plantinga wants to reserve proper basicality only for perceptual beliefs about God, and so even if Alston is right about the properly basic status of theistic beliefs formed as a result of direct perception, Reformed epistemologists will want to claim that status for some non-perceptual theistic beliefs as well, and at that point I think (SU) will stand in their way.

5. Conclusion

I want to conclude by noting an unsurprising connection between the technical, epistemic sense of the term "theoretical" on which I have thus far focused and the more familiar sense of "theoretical" which identifies theories with certain kinds of explanation. I have argued that theism counts as theoretical in the epistemic sense, the sense in which no theoretical belief can count as properly basic. But theism strikes many people as at least as clearly theoretical in the more familiar sense: theism offers a rich explanation of a great many impor-

tant and fundamental facts about our world. I would add that theism does so by positing the existence of an essentially unobservable – and, hence, epistemically theoretical – entity, God.

Thus, the connection between these two senses of "theory" applies straightforwardly to theism. The essentially theoretical nature of theistic belief and the evidential requirements for its rationality are nicely captured by some remarks of Richard Swinburne:

> The structure of a cumulative case for theism [is] . . . the same as the structure of a cumulative case for any unobservable entity, such as a quark or a neutrino. Our grounds for believing in its existence are that it is an entity of a simple kind with simple modes of behavior which leads us to expect the more complex phenomena which we find.[51]

In calling theism "essentially theoretical," I am not endorsing the implausible claim that theism is *merely* a theory. On the contrary, theism plays a practical role in the lives of theists that extends well beyond the role played by most other theories in the lives of their adherents. Theism isn't merely a theory, but that fact is compatible with theism's being essentially a theory. Being essentially X doesn't entail being merely X, as Thomas Morris points out: according to traditional Christianity, Jesus Christ had two natures and so was essentially human without being merely human.[52]

It shouldn't surprise us that theism emerges as theoretical in both of the senses I've suggested, since in philosophy and the sciences alike, postulated unobservables have an intrinsic explanatory function. An intimate relation holds between a theory's unobservable posits and the explanations the theory provides. Why else would one postulate, or even accept, the existence of a strictly unobservable entity unless doing so helped to explain the nature of observable things? Swinburne's remarks underscore the view that principles (U) and (SU) apply to theism. Those principles, in turn, show that theistic belief, far from being properly basic, must meet the evidential standards appropriate to theoretical belief in order to be rational.

Notes

* I thank Bill Alston, Paul Draper, Carl Ginet, Jon Jarrett, and Norman Kretzmann for many helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

[1] Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1967; paperback edition, 1990.

[2] Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, p. 268.

[3] James E. Tomberlin, 'Is belief in God justified?', *Journal of Philosophy* **67**, 1970, 31–38; 31.

[4] So-called by Norman Kretzmann, 'Evidence against anti-evidentialism', in *Our Knowledge of God*, ed. Kelly James Clark, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 1992, pp. 17–38; p. 17.

[5] Alvin Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1983, pp. 16–93; p. 17.

[6] See Plantinga's 'Preface to the 1990 paperback edition' of *God and Other Minds*, p. xi.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See, for example, 'The deontological conception of epistemic justification', in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1989, pp. 115–152.

[9] Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', p. 79 (endnote omitted).

[10] Plantinga's most recent work appears to reaffirm his acceptance of an at least partly deontological conception of epistemic justification, although he defends a non-deontological conception of the related (but distinct) epistemic property he calls "warrant." See Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1993, pp. 86–87, 126–128.

[11] Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', p. 20.

[12] Plantinga's preference for the direct realist theory of perception is, I think, nowhere explicit, but it seems at least implicit in the chapter of *Warrant and Proper Function* devoted to perception (Chapter 5). On the other hand, William Alston, whom I discuss further below, explicitly embraces direct realism in several of his works; see, for example, the essays in his collection *Epistemic Justification*, and his 'Christian experience and Christian belief', *Faith and Rationality*, pp. 103–134.

[13] On this point, see also C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1959, p. 68. The inability of technology to provide observation of God may be one lesson of the Tower of Babel story (see Genesis 11: 4–9).

[14] This orthodox theological view of God doesn't stand alone and unsupported by actual religious traditions. Scripture central to Christianity (at least) suggests that God, in his spiritual essence, is unobservable to us and that God's unobservability gives theistic faith its distinctive character: for example, John 1:18 and 4:24; Hebrews 11:1 and 11:6; and Romans 8:24–25. I won't analyze those verses and argue that they establish God's unobservability. I'll simply cite them and suggest that the traditional conception of God as unobservable comports nicely with some scriptural claims about the nature of God and the nature of faith in God. The believer's faith in the existence of an unseen God may well form a crucial part of a good relationship with his or her Creator; compare John 20:28: '[B]lessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.'

[15] Grover Maxwell, 'The ontological status of theoretical entities', in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. III, ed. Herbert Feigl and Grover Maxwell, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1962, pp. 3–27; p. 9.

[16] The tenseless sense of "is" ensures that (U) does not classify as unobservable past events and objects that were at one time or other observable.

[17] Ibid., p. 15.

[18] Although I agree that positivist philosophers of science have overstated the ontological significance of unobservability, I do think that their recognition of its epistemological significance is an important insight, maybe the only important insight provided by their reflection on this issue.

[19] Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', pp. 47–48.

[20] Ibid., p. 59.

[21] Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990, p. 141.

[22] Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', p. 39.

[23] Clark, *Return to Reason*, classifies both Plantinga and (it appears) Nicholas Wolterstorff, another leading Reformed epistemologist, as Reidian foundationalists, and both have been strongly critical of coherentism, the major rival to foundationalism among theories of justified belief. Their ally William Alston explicitly adopts and defends a version of foundationalism about justification.

[24] Peter Achinstein, *Concepts of Science*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1968, pp. 158–159.

[25] Tomberlin, 'Is belief in God justified?', uses the phrase "independent adequate evidence" to denote the kind of support required by rational non-basic beliefs, while Kretzmann, 'Evidence against anti-evidentialism', calls it "ulterior, propositional evidence." I'll be using the latter designation.

[26] Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', p. 81. The numbering of these propositions is Plantinga's.

[27] For Plantinga's defense of this view, see his *Nature of Necessity*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1974, ch. X.

[28] I add this phrase to accommodate those essentialists who maintain that objects have whatever microphysical composition they have as a matter of metaphysical necessity.

[29] David Lewis, 'How to define theoretical terms', *Journal of Philosophy* **67** (1970), 427–446; 428.

[30] Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', p. 81.

[31] David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 2.

[32] Ibid., p. 1. Actually, Lewis hesitates to label our world (and alternative worlds) as "concrete" entities, but only because he feels we have no solid grasp of "concreteness." Still, he emphatically resists giving alternative worlds an ontological status different from that of our world. See pp. 81f.

[33] See Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, pp. 86–88.

[34] See ibid., pp. 79–80.

[35] Michael A. Slote, Review of *God and Other Minds*, *Journal of Philosophy* **67** (1970), pp. 39–45.

[36] Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, p. 245, n. 1; and p. 269, n. 16, citing Paul Ziff, 'The simplicity of other minds', *Journal of Philosophy* **62** (1965), 575–585. For an excellent review of the literature concerning evidence for other minds, see Carl Ginet, 'Plantinga and the philosophy of mind', in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. James Tomberlin and Peter Van Inwagen, Reidel, Dordrecht, 1985, pp. 199–223.

[37] Recall, too, that (SU) supplies only a sufficient condition and not also a necessary one. While any belief presupposing the existence of a strictly unobservable entity is a theoretical belief, I have not argued for the converse claim. Likewise, not every theoretical term need refer to an unobservable entity.

[38] William E. Mann, 'Simplicity and immutability in God', in *The Concept of God*, ed. Thomas V. Morris, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987, pp. 253–267; p. 260, emphasis added.

[39] An early article is Alston, 'Christian experience and Christian belief'. The book is Alston's *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1991.

[40] Stephen J. Wykstra, 'Toward a sensible evidentialism: on the notion of "needing evidence" ', in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 2d ed., 1989, pp. 426–437; p. 434.

[41] Ibid., pp. 436–437. Discriminational evidence, says Wykstra, is what allows us rationally to arbitrate between incompatible outputs both within and between basic cognitive faculties; ibid., p. 435.

[42] Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 16–17; compare Alston, 'Christian experience and Christian belief', p. 104. In an analysis sympathetic to religious experiences, Gary Gutting also emphasizes their extrasensory character: "[R]eligious experiences of the sort we are concerned with" are not "claims to have literally seen saints, angels, or the like. Rather, they are experiences that are both *perceptual* . . . and *nonsensory* (not of some object of the special senses)." *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1982, pp. 144–145.

[43] See Alston, *Perceiving God*, Chapter 3; compare Alston, 'Christian experience and Christian belief', pp. 117, 119.

[44] See, for example, J. Wesley Robbins, 'Does belief in God need proof?', *Faith and Philosophy* **2**, 1985, 272–286.

[45] See Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 36–37, and 207f.; compare Alston, 'Christian experience and Christian belief', pp. 123, 128, and 132.

[46] Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 20.

[47] In correspondence Alston has expressed exactly this sentiment: 'I have no stake in claiming that God can be *observed*. . . . [N]othing in [my] book hangs on the possibility of observing God.'

[48] Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 66.

[49] Alston's theory of religious perception, particularly as articulated in *Perceiving God*, has spawned a minor industry devoted to its analysis and critique. In my review of Alston's book (see the *Philosophical Review* **102**(3) [July 1993], 430–432), I mention a couple of early critiques, but no doubt many others have seen their way into print since then. I thank Paul Draper for suggesting this Alstonian objection to principle (SU) and also for suggesting a way to respond to it.

[50] Plantinga, 'Reason and belief in God', p. 80.

[51] Richard Swinburne, 'Mackie, induction, and God', *Religious Studies* **19** (1983), quoted in Keith M. Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof: Plantinga, Swinburne, and the Analytic Defense of Theism*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, 1989, p. 81.

[52] See Thomas V. Morris, 'Rationality and the Christian revelation', in *Anselmian Explorations*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1987, pp. 213–241.

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