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Coherence, proper basicality and moral arguments for theism

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Alvin Plantinga has recently and forcefully argued that belief in God is properly basic for some persons. Positively, he claims that a basic belief in God can be “entirely acceptable, desirable, right, proper, and rational” (1983:39). Negatively, he holds that neither classical foundationalism nor coherentism provides the necessary conditions under which a belief is properly basic, and so neither can be used to show that belief in God is not properly basic. On Plantinga’s view, then, a properly basic theist will have nothing to do with coherence. My aim in this paper is to show that coherence is not irrelevant to properly basic beliefs and that a properly basic theist should welcome arguments expressing coherence. There are four sections to the paper: (1) summarizes Plantinga’s account of proper basicality; (2) provides a (partial, limited) account of coherence; (3) discusses some possible roles for coherence with respect to proper basicality; and (4) suggests how moral arguments for theism, much neglected in recent decades, might play some coherentist roles even for those for whom belief in God is properly basic.

I

A basic belief for a person S, Plantinga says, is one not based on other beliefs (or propositions) S holds, and a properly basic belief for S is a belief of S which it is rationally proper, right, etc. for S to hold “in the basic way”. The “basis” relation Plantinga says is quite “familiar but hard to characterize in a revealing and non-
trivial fashion” (1983:46). I find two major accounts of basicality in Plantinga’s writings. They are:

(1) A proposition p is basic for a person S if and only if S believes p but does not believe p on the basis of any other proposition q (or set of propositions q, r, s, etc.) which S believes.

(2) S’s belief that p is basic for S if and only if S believes p and S’s belief that p is not based on any other belief that S has.

Similarly, there are two chief versions of “proper basicity”:

(3) A proposition p is properly basic for S if and only if p is basic for S and “it is entirely right, rational, reasonable and proper” for S to believe p.

(4) S’s belief that p is properly basic for S if and only if S’s belief that p is basic and “it is entirely right, rational, reasonable and proper” for S to believe p.

There are, moreover, some important intricacies to Plantinga’s apparently uncomplicated account of basicality. First, he says that a belief (or proposition) may be basic, or properly basic, without being groundless. The ground of a belief is something, typically an experience of a certain kind, which plays “a crucial role” in the formation and the justification of the belief. To use Plantinga’s example, my currently being-appeared-to-creely (in Chisholm’s jargon) may be the (or a) ground of my current (properly) basic belief that I now see a tree.

Second, Plantinga holds that a belief is properly basic for someone only in certain conditions or circumstances. E.g., the belief that I now see a tree is properly basic for me only in the condition or circumstance that I am being-appeared-creely-to. Plantinga equates these conditions or circumstances with the ground of the justification of the belief and hence (“by extension”) with the ground of the belief itself (e.g., in 1983:80). But since not all circumstances or conditions of a belief do in fact justify that belief, perhaps we might call the (or a) ground of a belief only those circumstances which do justify the belief. (Alternatively, we might say that the [or a] ground is those circumstances which the
believer [justifiably?] takes to justify his belief.)

Third, Plantinga speaks of support and evidence, claiming that they are both in the same (conceptual) “neighborhood”. He says, e.g., that, where A and B are propositions, “if A supports B, then A is evidence for B, or makes B evident; or perhaps B is likely or probable with respect to B” (1983:54). The notion of “evidence” is not further characterized, but one at least of the things that Plantinga wants to deny in speaking of someone’s (properly) basic belief is that S believes p on the evidence of (some other belief or proposition) q. So, apparently, (belief that) p is basic for S only if there is no other proposition q believed by S such that q is (or is believed by S to be?) evidence for (S’s belief that) p.

Fourth, Plantinga goes to some lengths to characterize what it is for a belief to be properly basic: it is to be within one’s rational rights, one is notrationally or intellectually deficient, etc. – all this, however, without characterizing what it is to be rational, or what one’s rational rights are, or what (at least some of) the necessary conditions of being rational are. Indeed, he even suggests near the end of (1983) that theists and non-theists may have “different conceptions of reason,” by disagreeing “as to what are the deliverences of reason”.

Fifth, Plantinga argues extensively (this is the main burden of [1979] and [1981] and of much of [1983]) that the criteria for proper basicality proposed by “classical foundationalism” – i.e., being evident to the senses, self-evident, or incorrigible for S – are radically defective; they are not, individually or collectively, necessary conditions of proper basicality (though each, apparently, may be a sufficient condition). Hence, S’s belief that p may be properly basic in the appropriate circumstances even though p or S’s belief that p may lack any kind of “evidence” which might for example be expressed as “p is (apparently) self-evident for S in C” or “p is (apparently) incorrigible for S in C”.

Putting these notions together, let us say that proper basicality is doubly relative – to a person and to a situation or set of circumstances; hence the standard locution will be:

(S’s belief that) p is properly basic for S in C,
where “C” names the circumstances which constitute S’s grounds, but not his evidence, for (belief that) p.

The crux of the matter, however, is this: What is the “basis” relation? Plantinga does say that it is a one-many relation which is irreflexive and asymmetric in a rational noetic structure (cf. 1983:52–54). But what content can be given to these formal conditions? Various suggestions might be made, e.g.:

(5) p is based on q (for S in C) if and only if:
   (a) S infers p from q (in C); or
   (b) S believes p because S believes q (in C); or
   (c) S believes p only because S believes q (in C); or
   (d) S believes p because (or only because) S believes q and q is evidence (or S’s evidence) for p; or
   (e) S believes p (only) because S believes q and S believes q is (S’s) evidence for p.

Which if any of these or other alternatives Plantinga would prefer is not clear. Occasionally (1979:19) he speaks of a proposition p as properly basic only if it is known immediately, and the stress on immediacy (minus the claim about knowledge) suggests the absence of inference (alternative (a)). Elsewhere (1981:46) he speaks of circumstances as “calling forth” a basic belief, and this suggests that the absence of other beliefs as causal conditions in the production or formation of a basic belief (b–c) is the crucial notion. Still elsewhere (1983:39) he asks, “Why is it not entirely acceptable, desirable, right, proper, and rational to accept belief in God without any argument or evidence whatever?”, and this might suggest that the notion of somehow lacking evidence is crucial to basicality (d–c) (cf. 1984:8, 20). Perhaps Plantinga thinks all of these notions – lack of inference, lack of belief-causality and lack of evidence – are implicated in basicality, and more besides; or perhaps the presence of any one is a sufficient disqualification for basicality. But his position is unclear. Of course, Plantinga has warned us that the notion of basicality is not easy to characterize. But without such characterization it is far from clear that we are indeed dealing with a quite “familiar” notion (1981:41).

In sum: A proposition p (or S’s belief that p) is basic for S when
it is not inferred from other beliefs \( S \) has, or when it is not caused by \( S \)'s believing other propositions, or when it is believed without (or at least not because of) evidence \( S \) has, or could have, for \( p \). A proposition or belief is *properly* basic for \( S \) just when it is proper (rational, reasonable, etc.) for \( S \) to hold or believe it and it is not based on any other of \( S \)'s beliefs or propositions believed. Plantinga argues that neither "classical foundationalism" nor "coherentism" supplies necessary conditions of proper basicity, leaving it open that a person's belief in God which is neither evident to the senses, self-evident nor incorrigible, nor which coheres with other basic beliefs of that person, can nonetheless be properly basic. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that Plantinga's critique of "classical foundationalism" is adequate (while not ruling out other, more moderate and recent forms of foundationalism?), in order to focus my attention on coherentism.

II

In a recent paper, Plantinga states that "most coherentists are decently reticent about the nature of coherence. It is more than logical consistency but less than mutual entailment; beyond this most coherentists maintain a decorous silence." (1984:27) Of course, recent coherentists (e.g., Rescher, Lehrer, Harman) have *not* been at all silent on this matter; perhaps we can best understand Plantinga's remark to mean that he is not aware of any *defensible* or *convincing* account of the nature of coherence. Still, Plantinga thinks that even lacking an adequate analysis of coherence he can show that coherentism fails as an account of proper basicity. Coherence with a person's (other) beliefs, even if these beliefs are basic ones, he holds, is neither necessary nor sufficient to make a belief "warrant nondefective" (1984:35) — i.e., roughly, *properly* basic. A person's belief system or "noetic structure" might be "both thoroughly coherent and throughly, indeed, radically, defective" (ib.). A coherent noetic structure may lack both truth and rationality, so coherence is not sufficient for proper basicity. Nor is coherence necessary, since a belief may be properly basic for \( S \) in \( C \) even though it does not cohere
with (the rest of) S’s noetic structure (1984:39); the defect may lie with the noetic structure, not with the (properly) basic belief.

It may appear, therefore, that Plantinga has shown that coherence plays no role with regard to proper basicality, but this, I think, is mistaken. Rather, what he has shown is that unrestricted coherence — coherence with any or all of a person’s beliefs — is neither necessary nor sufficient for proper basicality. But there are, I think, other possible and desirable roles for coherence to play with regard to proper basicality, and some of these roles may enable moral arguments for theism (among others) to merit attention. Before discussing these roles, I shall venture some claims about the notion of coherence, which seems both as “familiar” and as hard to characterize as the concept of basicality!

There is, in fact, no single concept of coherence, and no single coherence theory, but rather a constellation of coherentist views. To recognize this, one need only recall some of the many different notions used to explicate or analyze coherence — e.g., inference to the best explanation, probability, testing procedure, congruence, non-deductive argument — as well as some of the vastly disparate things which a theory of coherence has been said to be about — e.g., reality, truth, warranted propositions, knowledge, justified beliefs, factual claims, etc. But there is no need here to explore the varieties of coherence or to propound a general theory; for our purposes it is enough to characterize a limited concept of coherence, one which is restricted to basic beliefs.

By “x supports y (for S)” I mean roughly that x is some reason for S to believe y.\(^5\) Where B is the set of S’s basic beliefs, p* and q* are members of B, and B* is the proper subset of B lacking only p* and q*, then the following partial characterization may be tendered:

\[ p^* \text{ coheres with } q^* \text{ only if } (p^* \& B^*) \text{ supports } q^* \text{ and } (q^* \& B^*) \text{ supports } p^*. \]

Coherence on this account has the following features: (a) It is a “holistic” and not a “linear” notion.\(^10\) Coherence is not a relation between two isolated basic propositions or beliefs; a background of other propositions or beliefs is presupposed or supplied, viz. the set of (remaining) basic ones. (b) It is a “subjective,” or
person-relative notion. Just as a proposition or belief is basic or non-basic for (or relative to) some person, so basic propositions or beliefs cohere (or fail to cohere) for a person, viz., the person for whom they are basic. (c) It is a “positive” notion. A “negative” notion might run as follows:

\[ p^* \text{ coheres with } q^* \text{ only if (B}^* \text{ & q}^*) \text{ does not support not-p}^* \text{ and (B}^* \text{ & p}^*) \text{ does not support not-q}^*. \]

Negative coherence is weaker than positive coherence and might seem more plausible, but both notions will be used in the following.\(^{11}\)

III

Now, assuming this analysis of (positive or negative) coherence at least lies in adequacy’s “neighborhood”, we may see some possible and useful roles for coherence with regard to proper basicality. Coherence with other basic beliefs clearly is neither necessary nor sufficient for a proposition or belief to be basic for someone. But coherence may still be relevant to proper basicality, in at least the following ways:

1. Coherence is arguably a necessary condition on pairs of properly basic beliefs: \( p^* \) and \( q^* \) are properly basic for \( S \) only if \( p^* \) coheres with \( q^* \) (for \( S \)). This condition may seem more plausible if one takes the negative sense of coherence, where \( (q^* \text{ & B}^*) \text{ do not support not-p}^* \), than if one takes the positive sense, where \( (q^* \text{ & B}^*) \text{ do support p}^* \), but either version goes beyond what Plantinga seems willing to concede. The point may also be expressed as follows: If two basic beliefs or propositions are incoherent just when they are not coherent (positively or negatively), then incoherence disqualifies them from being properly basic together for a person; they may remain basic for \( S \) but they cannot both be properly basic for \( S \).\(^{12}\) Of course this condition does not indicate which of two incoherent basic beliefs is not properly basic; possibly both are. Moreover, coherence is not the sole condition of proper basicality, for there is, as Plantinga notes, a
difference between a set of coherent basic beliefs and a set of properly basic beliefs; a noetic structure might be coherent but wildly irrational. Perhaps another condition of proper basicality is that (belief that) \( p \) must be grounded in \( C \) for \( S \), or something similar. But whatever the complete list of necessary conditions for proper basicality may be, it seems plausible to think that coherence deserves a place on it.

2. Coherence is arguably a criterion of proper basicality even if it is not a necessary condition of proper basicality, much less a defining condition, a definition, or what makes a belief properly basic.\(^{13}\) Further, if an authorizing criterion is one which “at best provides a rational warrant for the claim of feature-possession”, and a guaranteeing criterion is one where “the criterion is absolutely decisive for the feature”,\(^{14}\) then coherence (positive or negative) will not be a guaranteeing but only an authorizing criterion of proper basicality. If (\( S \)'s belief that) \( p^* \) does cohere with (\( S \)'s belief that) \( q^* \), then one is authorized (at least until further criteria come into play) to regard \( p^* \) and \( q^* \) as properly basic for \( S \); while if \( p^* \) does not cohere with \( q^* \) (for \( S \)), then at least one may be sure (again at least until other criteria are introduced) that not both \( p^* \) and \( q^* \) are properly basic for \( S \), even if this criterion does not help anyone, including \( S \), to determine which of \( p^* \) and \( q^* \) is not properly basic.

3. Coherence may be necessary, though not sufficient, for a proposition or belief being grounded in \( C \). If there is no proposition \( r \) correctly describing conditions or circumstances \( C \) of \( S \)'s belief that \( p^* \) such that \( r \) coheres with \( p^* \), then there will be no ground for (\( S \)'s belief that) \( p^* \) in \( C \). And it is plausible that if there is no ground for (\( S \)'s belief that) \( p^* \) in \( C \) then (\( S \)'s belief that) \( p^* \) in \( C \) cannot be properly basic for \( S \) in \( C \).\(^{15}\)

4. Coherence may be necessary, though not sufficient, for there being evidence for a proposition or belief for \( S \), even when \( S \) does not have or need that evidence; \( q \) is evidence for \( p \) only if \( q \) coheres with \( p \). Proper basicality rules out that the person for whom \( p \) (or belief that \( p \)) is properly basic holds or believes \( p \) on the basis of evidence; it does not rule out that there is evidence for \( S \) for \( p \) (or belief that \( p \)), or even that \( S \) has such evidence (though \( S \) does not believe on the evidence). Moreover, it seems plausible to claim that there must be evidence for \( p \) (where “self-evidence”
counts as evidence) — whether or not S has that evidence, or takes it to be evidence for (S’s belief that) p — if p can be believed “in the basic way.” Otherwise nothing could or would count for or against the truth of a properly basic proposition or belief (even though, for the person for whom it is a properly basic proposition or belief, nothing does in fact so count).

5. Finally, coherence may be a necessary condition on acceptable data for a theory of the conditions of proper basicity. As Plantinga argues, following Chisholm, the criteria for proper basicity are not themselves self-evident or “just obviously true” (1983:75); they must be arrived at inductively:

We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter, and examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously not properly basic in the latter. We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by reference to those examples (1983):76.16

Rather than insisting a priori that any members of the data set for the induction to proper basicity must cohere, we could perhaps include such a belief (or meta-belief) about coherence in our data set.17 On this construal (belief in) the coherence — positive or negative — of properly basic beliefs will itself be properly basic for at least many rational persons. Such persons do not have to be shown that rationality requires coherence, for they base their theory of rationality (in part) on this conviction.18

There are, then, a variety of roles for coherence to play with regard to proper basicity, even granting the heart of Plantinga’s case that coherence is neither necessary nor sufficient for basicity. I turn now to seeing how moral arguments for theism might function in some of these roles.

IV

My working hypotheses for this section are that (at least some) moral arguments for theism can be construed as expressing a rela-
tion between moral and theistic beliefs which, when the beliefs are basic ones, is the relation of coherence; and that this coherence relation is consistent with both (sets of) beliefs being properly basic for some persons. My discussion addresses the following questions: A. Can moral beliefs be properly basic? B. What is a moral argument? C. How can a moral argument express coherence? D. Of what use is a moral argument for theism where theistic belief is properly basic?

A. Can moral beliefs be properly basic? Plantinga argues at great length that belief in God is properly basic, or at least that there is no good reason to think that such belief is not properly basic for some persons. Of course he doesn’t provide a criterion of proper basicity, and lacking such a criterion it is often not easy to say whether a given belief (or proposition) is properly basic for someone. Nevertheless, Plantinga himself seems willing to countenance moral beliefs or propositions as properly basic. E.g., he thinks that the following moral proposition is at least a candidate for being self-evident for some (which status is sufficient, I take it, for being properly basic):

(20) It is wrong to cause unnecessary (and unwanted) pain just for the fun of it (1979:17). 19

This is a quite general proposition, however, and Plantinga is willing to admit that few, if any, general propositions are properly basic. But this admission may be unimportant. In the context of theism, e.g., Plantinga holds that if “there is such a person as God” is “neither properly basic nor taken as basic by those who believe in God,” it may still be self-evidently entailed by propositions which are properly basic – propositions e.g. “detailing some of his [God’s] attributes or actions” (1983:81), and this may be all the properly basic theist needs. Similarly, (20) may not be properly basic, much less self-evident, but may nonetheless be self-evidently entailed by such propositions as the following:

(21) It is wrong for me here and now to cause Jones unnecessary (and unwanted) pain just for the fun of it.
(22) It is wrong for me here and now to torture Smith, who is screaming in agony, although he is innocent.
(23) It is wrong for me here and now to kick that sleeping dog, just in order to hear it howl.

I don’t insist that any or all of propositions (20)–(23) are properly basic for someone. But I do think that: (i) It is plausible that some such moral propositions or beliefs are basic for some persons (perhaps for all those persons we judge legally, or at least morally, competent?). (ii) Objections to such moral propositions or beliefs being properly basic parallel objections to theistic propositions or beliefs having the same status; despite a long tradition of appeals to intuition, both kinds of belief apparently lack the self-evidence or incorrigibility of logical and perceptual properly basic beliefs. (iii) The objections to the proper basicity of moral beliefs can be handled in much the same way that Plantinga overcomes parallel objections to the proper basicity of theistic beliefs. So (iv) there is no good reason not to regard some moral beliefs or propositions as properly basic for some persons. With this conclusion, Plantinga would I think agree.

B. What is a “moral argument”? There are many varieties, and an argument can be “moral” in many ways – in its premises, conclusion, inference-rule, audience, purpose, and degree of certainty. \(^{(20)}\) Having moral premises (at least one) is probably the most distinctive feature of most moral arguments, but there are other, independent routes to the same status. An argument’s conclusion may make a moral claim or a claim about morality – e.g. that S (morally) ought to believe that p, or that p is (morally) permitted. Many moral arguments for theism are of this sort, concluding not that there is such a person as God but that someone is morally permitted or obliged to believe that there is. Further, an argument can be said to be a “moral” one if it is non-deductively valid or sound, regardless of its premises or conclusion. Also, the (intended) audience of an argument may possess certain moral beliefs, values or characters; the argument may thus be “moral” in being aimed at moral beings (where “moral” is not necessarily construed uncontroversially). Additionally, the beliefs, commitments and purposes of the propounder of an argument may be morally tinged. Not every argument is proposed solely to achieve theoretical understanding, or to persuade; an arguer might also seek a moral end or be arguing so as to fulfill a moral duty. Finally,
arguments seek, and find, different levels or degrees of certainty in their audience's embrace of their conclusions, where "certainty" may be interpreted either as a measure of rational warrant or as a measure of psychological tenacity of belief. Believing a conclusion can have "moral certainty" when it is believed in a rationally warranted (though not necessarily self-evident or incorrigible) way, or when acting on the belief is so warranted, or at least when one clings to the belief firmly enough to energize appropriate action, other things being equal.

For present purposes, let us think of a paradigmatic moral argument for theism21 as one in which at least one of its premises concerns morality, its conclusion is (or embeds) a theistic belief, its inference rules are non-deductive but still "good" or rationally acceptable, its intended audience is morally decent, and the degree or level of certainty sought is "moral certainty". A simple, and rather sketchy, moral argument for theism might look like this:

(1) Moral obligations are objectively binding.
(2) Moral obligations are objectively binding only if there is a moral order in the universe.
(3) The best account of there being a moral order in the universe is the existence of a good God who establishes and promotes such an order.
(4) Therefore, probably, a good God exists.

The conclusion might be put more conveniently for our purposes as:

(4') Therefore, probably, if S is rationally warranted in believing (1)–(3), S is also rationally warranted in believing there is a good God.

C. How do moral arguments for theism express coherence? As portrayed, a moral argument for theism is not deductive; the relation of moral premises to (embedded) theistic conclusion is not one of entailment. Still, it is possible for non-deductive arguments to be good ones; there are relations weaker than entailment which can ground (more or less) reliable inference-rules.
A good moral argument, then, will use such a reliable inference-rule to move from moral propositions or beliefs to (the rational warrant of) theistic propositions or beliefs. But good non-deductive arguments support their conclusions, in the sense of “support” I used previously to characterize coherence — i.e., they provide reasons (for those who believe their premises) to believe their conclusions. It might then seem but a short step to concluding that (good) moral arguments for theism express the coherence of their (moral) premises with their (theistic) conclusion. But there are two obstacles to so concluding: (1) The premises and/or conclusion of a moral argument for theism apparently need not be basic beliefs or propositions (not even for the person who propounds the argument). (2) Coherence seems to be a symmetrical relation, while arguments are typically asymmetrical, at least if they employ one-way inference rules.

(1) Clearly not all, or perhaps even many, of the premises — and few of the conclusions — of historical versions of moral arguments have plausibly been basic even for their proponents. But one should not make too much of this point. Some premises and conclusions might well be basic for some persons, or perhaps some arguments could be reconstructed so as to employ only premises and conclusions which are basic for some. And even if the premises or conclusions are not basic, or cannot be reconstructed as basic, they might well be self-evidently entailed by propositions which are basic for some persons. (E.g., Premise (1) of the sample moral argument above might fall into this category.) Surely moral theists have wanted to appeal to their own and others’ deepest moral beliefs or “intuitions”, and these are likely candidates for basicity. Nevertheless, it is not to my purpose to insist that moral arguments for theism always or typically do begin and end with propositions or beliefs that are basic. All I wish to maintain is that where moral p* and theistic q* are both basic for S, a (good) moral argument from p* to q* may obtain (or be [re]constructed) without impairing the basicity of p* and q* for S, and that such an argument does express the coherence of p* and q* for S — a coherence which is, so I have argued, a necessary condition for p* and q* being properly basic together for S.

(2) Coherence is often taken to be a symmetrical dyadic
relation: x coheres with y (necessarily) if and only if y coheres with x. And an argument, at least one employing one-way inference-rules, seems asymmetrical. How, then, can moral arguments express coherence? This puzzle is removed, if not solved, by remembering our previous characterization of (positive) coherence: p* coheres with q* only if (p* & B*) supports q* and (q* & B*) supports p*. The symmetry, such as it is, obtains not between p* and q* simpliciter but between each of them together with the rest of S's basic beliefs (or as many of them as are needed in context). Perhaps one could construe this as a triadic relation (among p*, q* and B*), and so dyadic symmetry need not be a problem. But there is a deep resemblance if not symmetry between the two supporting relations, even if the (other) basic beliefs needed to go from p* to q* differ from those needed to go from q* to p*. I conclude that lack of formal dyadic symmetry is no real bar to calling "coherence" the notion I have (partially) characterized.

Hence it is plausible, I think, to hold that (at least some) moral arguments for theism, if they are good non-deductive arguments, can be said to express the coherence of their moral premises and theistic conclusions, or, more briefly, the coherence between morality and theism. (It might be added that not a few historical examples of moral arguments appear at least to have aimed in this direction.)

D. I turn finally to the question: Of what use are arguments expressing coherence between morality and theism if theistic belief is properly basic for some persons? My central contention is this: If a moral argument is a good one, its inferential link between premises and conclusion holds independently of the epistemic status of the premises and the conclusion — in particular it is independent of the epistemic status of the conclusion's (possibly embedded) theistic propositions. Moral arguments for theism are good or bad ones whether or not S already believes in God in "the properly basic way". For suppose that S's belief that p' ("there is such a person as God") is basic for S in C, and suppose also there is a good moral argument from q' (a moral premise which is also properly basic for S) to r' ("S morally ought to believe that p'"). Surely the proper basicity of (belief that) p' for S is not threatened by its coherence with q' (or, for that matter, with r', if r' is basic or properly basic for S). Indeed, if our earlier contentions
are correct, q' and p' must cohere if both are to be properly basic for S. And if they must cohere, it seems there must be some argument connecting them — an argument such as the one I have schematized — which expresses this coherence, whether or not the person for whom the beliefs are properly basic accepts or is even aware of such coherence or such an argument.

Perhaps I can put these claims more perspicuously as follows: There must be a good moral argument for theism for anyone for whom (i) the relevant moral premises (propositions or beliefs) are properly basic, (ii) the relevant theistic propositions or beliefs (embedded in the conclusion) are also properly basic, and (iii) coherence is a necessary condition of two beliefs being conjointly properly basic. Of course it doesn’t follow that such a person knows or believes this moral argument, or has even considered it. But surely a rational epistemologist interested in the coherence of her own moral and theistic properly basic beliefs will be quite interested in searching for and examining such arguments. We have, then, at least one important role for moral arguments for theism.23

A further role for moral arguments is this: In gathering data for one’s induction to criteria for rationality or criteria for proper basicality, it would be nice to have among one’s samples of apparently or obviously rational or properly basic beliefs not only first-order beliefs about, e.g., God and morality, and also higher-order beliefs about, e.g., the need for properly basic beliefs to cohere, but also some intermediate-level beliefs which instance the higher-order beliefs and enable one to glimpse how the first-order beliefs measure up and fit together. Moral arguments for theism seem to function at this intermediate level. No doubt few if any complete moral arguments will be found among anyone’s basic, much less properly basic, beliefs. Nevertheless, each of the premises, inferences and conclusion of some moral argument(s) may be basic for some theists (or self-evidently entailed by beliefs which are basic for such persons), and if the argument is a good one it can when apprehended provide assurance that the various individual basic beliefs cohere. This assurance would strengthen one’s dual conviction that the relevant beliefs are properly basic and that properly basic beliefs must cohere. Moral arguments are in this way confirmations of the proper basicality
of theistic and moral beliefs, by way of instancing coherence as an authorizing criterion of proper basicality.

Successful moral arguments, if there are such, might also fulfill some of the other roles coherence plays vis-à-vis proper basicality: For example, they might point to (some of) the circumstances of properly basic theistic belief which ground such belief.\textsuperscript{24} Or they might point to where (some of) the evidence for theism might be obtained, even when such evidence is not required to make a theistic belief properly basic.\textsuperscript{25} But there is not space here to explore these and other possible coherential roles which moral arguments for theism might play.

This essay has covered a great deal of ground, and certainly many important questions remain unanswered — not the least of which is whether there are any good moral arguments for theism. But I do hope enough has been said to make it plausible that even if theistic beliefs or propositions are properly basic for some persons there are still important functions to be served by arguments expressing coherence, and hence, if moral arguments do express coherence, there are important roles for (at least some) moral arguments for theism. In short, even for properly basic theists moral arguments for theism deserve further scrutiny.\textsuperscript{26}

Notes


2. This may explain the rather large variety of expressions Plantinga uses in characterizing “basicality”. He speaks, e.g., of one belief being based on another, or of one proposition (which someone believes) being based on another, or of a belief being based on a proposition, of a belief being basic “to” or “for” a person, of someone’s “taking” a proposition (or a belief?) as basic, of someone believing a proposition “on the basis of”
another proposition, or of believing “in the basic way”. This is all quite confusing, and it would be helpful to have at least a standard vocabulary, even if there is no “revealing” analysis of basicality. For further exploration of this problem, see the papers by Marshall Swain and George S. Pappas in George S. Pappas, eds., *Justification and Knowledge: New Studies in Epistemology*. Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy, Vol. 17 (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979).

3. Does “q” range over propositions which S does not even consider, much less believe, as well as those propositions which S (dispositionally as well as currently) does believe? In (1984:52), Plantinga affirms that “S believes both p and q” is a necessary condition of “S believes p on the basis of q”, but he doesn’t say whether the former is also a necessary condition of “S does not believe p on the basis of q”. Also, one could make explicit the way in which basicality is relative to time (“p is basic for S at t”), since the status (basic or non-basic) of one’s beliefs, as well as which beliefs one has, changes (or at least can change) over time.

4. Sometimes Plantinga puts his account in terms of a person’s “noetic structure,” which is a set of propositions that person believes plus “certain epistemic relations that hold among him and these propositions” (1983:48; cf. 1979:19; 1984:9f.). This characterization only preserves the ambiguity between “a belief” as “the proposition believed” and as “the believing of a proposition”.

5. I shall ignore variations or complications such as:

   (4’) S’s belief that p is properly basic for S if and only if (not belief that p but) p is basic and it is “entirely right, etc.” for S to believe that p.

6. I do not accept Plantinga’s apparent equation of “evidence” and “support”; cf. note 8 below.


8. Since explication must end somewhere, I leave “reason for S to believe” undefined, but at the minimum I do not understand it to be the same as “evidence”; there are, I think, non-evidential reasons to believe.

9. Alternatively, one might think of coherence as holding between p* and the set B # (consisting of all S’s basic beliefs except p*):

   \[ \text{p* coheres with B # only if B # supports p*.} \]

   This is (roughly) John Pollock’s characterization of coherence in “A Plethora of Epistemological Theories” in Pappas, ed., *Justification and Knowledge* p. 102. But this version would not display the kind of sym-
metry coherence is typically taken to have: \( p^* \) does not support \( B^# \) at all, or quite so well, or in the same way, as \( B^# \) supports \( p^* \). Cf. Sec. IV.C above.

10. Cf. Pollock, pp. 101ff., for the distinctions in this paragraph, which I have modified somewhat.

11. An even weaker notion of coherence, which we shall not use since it is scarcely distinguishable from consistency, runs as follows:

\[
p^* \text{ coheres with } q^* \text{ only if both } (B^* \& q^*) \text{ does not support either } p^* \text{ or not-}p^* \text{ and } (B^* \& p^*) \text{ does not support either } q^* \text{ or not-}q^*.
\]

12. It might seem that no one is within her rational rights to have any incoherent beliefs or sets of beliefs at all, much less properly basic ones, or that no one is within her rational rights to have any beliefs or sets of beliefs which she (correctly? justifiably?) believes to be inconsistent or incoherent (or would so believe if she considered the matter). But there are difficulties with these more extensive claims; cf. Richard Foley, "Justified Inconsistent Beliefs, American Philosophical Quarterly 16.4 (October 1979), 247–257. I think coherence claims are more plausible with regard to properly basic beliefs than with regard to beliefs simpliciter.


15. Of course, S may not know what this ground is or have any beliefs at all about the r that describes it.

16. Plantinga also suggests adding beliefs and conditions where it is unclear whether the beliefs are properly basic in those conditions, but the proper role for beliefs with an unclear status is itself unclear.


18. What about those for whom coherence is not (or is not clearly) in their data set for the induction to conditions of rationality? Perhaps they think that two beliefs which are not coherent need not be incoherent. Perhaps they think that it is humanly impossible to obtain the kind of considerations needed to stitch together, even probabilistically, various of the vastly different beliefs they hold. Perhaps they think (even believe “in the basic way”?) that the world is somehow fundamentally disjoint and that therefore a coherent noetic structure would betray the truth of things. Or perhaps they have no (meta-)beliefs about coherence at all. I think none of these options are promising, but I don’t have time to explore them here.
19. This example is dropped in (1981) but reappears in (1983:56).
20. For further consideration of these topics, see my “A New Look at Moral Arguments for Theism”. International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 18.2–3 (1985), 51–67.
21. By “theism” I mean not only theistic propositions such as “there is such a person as God,” “God is speaking to me,” and “God is loving,” but also the believing of such propositions by persons, as well as the various moral obligations, permissions, etc. to believe, act on, commit oneself to such beliefs and propositions, plus the associated intentions, attitudes, emotions, behaviors, etc. A conclusion of an argument is a theistic one when it affirms any of these aspects of theism.
23. Not incidentally, since the coherence relation is (in some broad sense) “symmetrical”, if morality coheres with theism, theism must cohere with morality. So for someone for whom moral and theistic beliefs are both properly basic, there must be not merely a good moral argument for theism but also a good theistic argument for morality. Such symmetry would be unwelcome only for antinomians.
24. Could theistic belief be grounded, hence properly basic, in a world which lacked a moral order, or which had an anti-moral order?
25. Could moral “experience” be evidence at all? Could it possibly count for or against theistic belief? The very existence of the probabilistic argument from moral evil (as opposed to non-moral “bads” such as suffering and mutilation) indicates that many people, theists and anti-theists alike, would answer “yes” to such questions.
26. An earlier version of this paper was read at the March 1985 meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, Eastern Division. I am indebted to the commentator, Alvin Plantinga, as well as to Robert Audi, John Elrod and George Mavrodes, for helpful questions and contentions.