Some Questions About Proper Basicity* (NOTE: Star in original. Not sure what it means. Flagging for you to decide.)

James G. Hanink
SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT PROPER BASICALITY*

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Alvin Plantinga's account of proper basicality, which suggests a "broad foundationalism," raises nagging questions. A first such question is how a disposition to accept certain beliefs as properly basic could contribute to their being so. A second is whether broad foundationalists can really make headway in identifying the criteria of proper basicality by using, as Plantinga suggests, an inductive approach. A third is whether members of the set of statements that give criteria for proper basicality are (a) themselves properly basic and (b) necessary or only contingent truths. I argue that each of these questions has a satisfactory answer, although at least one inductive approach to determining proper basicality fails.

Alvin Plantinga has used a concept of "proper basicality" in exploring the conditions that a proposition must meet if it is, noninferentially, to be accepted as rational. His account of proper basicality comes within the context of what I call "broad foundationalism." This brand of foundationalism holds that \( S \) is rationally justified in believing \( p \) at \( t \) if and only if either \( p \) is derivable from beliefs that are properly basic for \( S \) or \( p \) is itself properly basic for \( S \). It is distinctively "broad" in that it does not limit proper basicality to beliefs that are either self-evident or incorrigible or even evident to the senses for \( S \) at \( t \). What Plantinga calls "classical foundationalism," on the other hand, makes just this restriction. As an unhappy result, it both excludes from proper basicality some beliefs that intuitively have that status and proves to be self-defeating.

But broad foundationalism surely invites questions about what does constitute proper basicality. Unless they are answered, broad foundationalism might seem to suggest a certain trickery, especially if it has major theological implications. There are three main questions that I want to examine here, though each of them generates others that I cannot altogether put off. Each main question admits of a satisfactory, if not always welcome, answer.

The first question is why, if it does, \( S \)'s strong and natural disposition to believe \( p \) at \( t \) should give any support to \( p \)'s being properly basic for \( S \) at \( t \) (hereafter temporal indices are omitted). Why should a fact about \( S \), when \( p \)
makes no explicit reference to \( S \), affect \( p \)'s epistemic status? The second question is how we should understand, and follow, Plantinga's proposal that the working out of the conditions for proper basicity must be done inductively. Are we, for example, to start with the actual beliefs of different epistemic communities? The last question addresses the status of propositions that state conditions for proper basicity. Are such propositions themselves properly basic? Are they necessary truths? Merely contingent truths?

II

Let us begin with the first question on the agenda. How might the strong and natural disposition to believe \( p \) help render \( p \) properly basic? Plantinga clearly suggests that it does. Suppose someone complains that if, rejecting classical foundationalism, we allow “God exists” to be properly basic, then we must allow “The Great Pumpkin exists” a like status. Plantinga answers that although there is a widespread disposition to recognize God’s presence in the world, “the same cannot be said for the Great Pumpkin, there being no Great Pumpkin and no natural tendency to accept beliefs about the Great Pumpkin.” This theistic disposition is not an argument for God’s existence. But it does satisfy one of the conditions under which theism becomes rational. For one distinctive feature of properly basic beliefs, it seems, is the strong disposition to accept them. It is, apparently, a feature that serves to render such beliefs properly basic.

But an obvious objection remains. Why should one’s disposition to believe that God exists affect the epistemic status of one’s belief? There are, after all, any number of cases in which \( S \)'s disposition to believe that \( p \) scarcely seems to enhance \( p \)'s epistemic status. What are we to say of the common experience of being disposed to hold some belief, for example, that one is the best break-dancer on the block, only to have one’s belief proved resoundingly false?

I will consider, in order of their increasing promise, three possible explanations of why \( S \)'s disposition to believe that \( p \) can positively affect \( p \)'s epistemic status for \( S \). But first a clarification is in order about just how much weight we are to give to natural dispositions. That one has a strong and natural disposition to hold, noninferentially, a given belief could only give a prima facie support to its proper basicity. No one claims, then, that such a disposition is a sufficient condition for proper basicity. Still, it might be a necessary condition, at least for one’s more central basic beliefs. Consider, again, the break-dancing case. The beliefs that lead one to give up a claim to supremacy rest on basic beliefs about one’s sensory apparatus, beliefs that one is strongly and naturally disposed to accept. Thus, if we must often reject beliefs that we are disposed to accept, we reject them because of beliefs that we are still more disposed to accept. Our embarrassments are repeated, but they are also self-limiting.
What, now, of the larger issue? How can a disposition to take $p$ as properly basic support $p$’s having that status? One answer to this query appeals to evolution. Its main lines are plain enough. Yes, we do accept, for the most part, those beliefs to which we are strongly disposed. But if we were often and strongly disposed to accept, and so did accept, beliefs which were rationally defective, our survival chances would be disastrously lessened. And yet here we are. A sign of evolution’s blind favor is that somehow, the biological details of which still elude us, we have become organically structured to be strongly disposed to accept rational beliefs. Let the epistemologist take note of our good fortune!

But why suppose that this good fortune will persist? A chief problem with “the evolutionary answer” is that evolutionary theory, by itself, cannot promise us a continually successful correspondence between what we are disposed to believe and what is rational to believe. Suppose, for example, that we consider the fate of an imaginary species, NAM, during a period of rapid environmental and technological change. At the start of this period, members of this species are strongly disposed to hold certain beliefs. Among them is the belief that highly aggressive behavior solves many social problems. Initially this particular belief is, indeed, plausible. But with the rapid change in environment and technology, such a belief soon enough no longer corresponds to reality. Now what the species is so strongly disposed to believe is, in fact, dysfunctional. Indeed, were its members somehow able to counteract their strong disposition to hold this belief (and perhaps a minority of them can), it would be clear enough that the belief at issue is positively irrational. Sadly, some of the very dispositions that once contributed to the success of the species now threaten it with disaster.

What is the moral of this story? It is that we human beings, given certain possible scripts, are right now in the position of this hypothetical species—and not just with respect to our disposition to believe in the efficacy of aggressive behavior. Many of our beliefs might be irrational despite our disposition to hold them. Hence, it is not clear that our dispositions deserve much respect simply because of their supposed evolutionary pedigree. If we once see that evolution makes no promises, it hardly seems that we are justified in here and now giving our dispositions much epistemic weight, however habituated we might be in doing so. So the evolutionary answer, by itself, is not persuasive.

A second response to the question of how dispositions can support proper basicity turns not on evolutionary optimism but, instead, on a kind of pragmatism. We have an epistemic obligation to increase our stock of true beliefs. But the pursuit of truth, for humans, is not impassionate but passionate. We are often most apt to find out true propositions if we give some assent to them even before we put them to their respective tests. Of course, we need not test a supposed properly basic belief to establish its initial warrant. Still, the testing of such a candidate by—for example—checking its logical consistency with non-
controversially basic beliefs can disqualify it. And if the belief is not even tentatively accepted, it is unlikely that we will trouble to submit it to even this negative test. If we are not disposed to accept a belief and it does not threaten beliefs we do hold, then usually it is of little interest to us. We can call this second answer "the pragmatic answer." It says, in short, that the strong and natural disposition to believe \( p \) counts toward \( p \)'s prima facie proper basicity because it enhances our ability to determine \( p \)'s truth.

There are difficulties, though, with this pragmatic answer. In the first place, sometimes one already knows \( p \) to be true. I know, for example, that

\[ (1) \text{ I am not now dreaming.} \]

But if I am a broad foundationalist, I will quite likely take (1) to be properly basic. And I will, in part, regard it as properly basic just because I am strongly disposed to believe it. But here my strong disposition to believe (1) does not give me an incentive to determine its truth. I already know that (1) is true. The disposition to believe, then, cannot always be given epistemic weight because doing so would make us more keenly pursue the truth.

A second difficulty with the pragmatic answer is its artificial and extrinsic character. Why are dispositions important? Not, it says, because of a natural and intrinsic tie with rationality but because they can prod us to work through the testing processes that are so linked with rationality. Perhaps, of course, no more can be said for human dispositions. Still, one might be pardoned for being less than strongly disposed to believe that the link between the dispositional and the cognitive is so tenuous.

There is, happily, a third account of why the strong and natural disposition to believe \( p \) should give some weight to \( p \)'s being properly basic. This is "the believer's account." It is perhaps a bit less unfashionable now than in recent memory. On this view, the human person is God's doing and in some way reflects God. But God is simple, at least in the sense that God's powers are in perfect unity. And if we are made in God's image, we should expect some, albeit imperfect, convergence of our faculties. In the case at hand, we should perhaps expect that what we are strongly and naturally disposed to believe is, because of our being so disposed, given some epistemic status.

To be sure, the believer's account rests on the rationality of religious belief—which issue is a strong motivation for the interest in proper basicity. But recognizing this connection only underscores the interrelatedness of first questions in philosophy. Still, the non-believer will quickly dismiss the believer's account. But unless some "better" account is given, there may be a price to pay. For suppose, as a nonbeliever, one holds that what one is strongly disposed to believe has a positive bearing on what is rational to believe as basic. Then one is left to accept that link as a brute fact. And if one does not hold that there is such a
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link? Then one is left to sort out hypotheses rather like a chess computer plays chess: in a mechanical and, ironically, a less than rational way.

III

Of course, a strong and natural disposition to believe $p$ is doubtless only one mark of proper basicity. (And, indeed, it might be that some whole groups would have a strong disposition to accept a proposition as basic that others would not. Imagine, for example, a primitive tribe that believed that the ancestors of the ruling family had brought the world into being only a few generations ago.) But if we reject classical foundationalism, how are we to arrive at the other marks of proper basicity? How, especially, are we to do so when different groups, not to mention individuals, might disagree about what these marks are?

Plantinga proposes an inductive strategy. He claims that neither classical foundationalism's restriction on proper basicity "nor any other revealing necessary and sufficient condition for proper basicity follows from clearly acceptable arguments. And hence the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, inductive." His proposal is both modest in goal and resigned about its inductive base. With respect to the first point, he admits that instead of hitting on a single necessary and sufficient condition perhaps "the best we can do here is to give some sufficient conditions of prima facie justification." With respect to the second point, when we cast about for examples of conditions under which beliefs are taken to be properly basic, we should keep in mind that "there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples."

Plantinga does not, however, work through any sustained applications of this inductive proposal. Nor on one important and not implausible interpretation of it is it clear how—as a philosopher—he could. For a first response to it, based on what we might call "the comparative interpretation," might be the following. "Are we, then, to give up philosophy for field work? Should we set out to interview different communities and individuals to see what the marks are, for them, of a belief's being properly basic?" If such a plan were in the offing, the next question would be which communities, say, we are to survey. Suppose the answer is that at least in our initial survey we are to weigh equally all communities. Then it seems that our field work assumes an unacceptable relativism. But what if we poll some communities (participants, say, in world religions and advanced scientific traditions) but not others (cultists and flat-earthers)? In this case it seems that we are already employing a standard of epistemic responsibility. Yet if we assume such a standard, we also abandon an inductive methodology of simply looking to see under what conditions beliefs are taken to be properly basic and then cataloguing these distinctive conditions. Perhaps, though, there is a way out of what we might call "the inductivist's dilemma" that this reading
of Plantinga’s proposal suggests. Perhaps, too, there is a way to salvage the core of his inductivism. We might at least retrace our steps.

There would, of course, be no dilemma if an inductivist approach to proper basicity did not require us to take an empirical turn, to investigate what various groups see as the justifying marks of properly basic beliefs. Must it, then, really require that? Perhaps, too, one could even suggest that such various groups do not exist, unless we consider as our groups the insane, the immature, and the normal. And this broad grouping would eliminate our empirical task. For surely as philosophers we need not examine the noetic structures of the insane and immature. In support of this simplifying maneuver, one might also cite the common sense tradition. Do not Moore, and Reid before him, find it enough to consult the plain man? Lastly, in lieu of any compelling case that human beings are so different that the conditions under which they take a belief to be properly basic fluctuate from group to group, the intertranslatability of languages offers prima facie evidence for shared epistemic starting points.

But we cannot, after all, so easily escape the attractions of an empiricist and comparative approach to the criteria of proper basicity. Plantinga himself distinguishes rather finely among human epistemic communities. Thus he explicitly recognizes the community of Christians, a distinct minority—and the justification (albeit weak) of basic beliefs that its teaching and testimony provides to its members. He recognizes, too, the community of atheists, a still more distinct minority. While we need not attend to differences between square-dancers and break-dancers, we should expect a fairly wide epistemic pluralism. In their own way, for that matter, philosophers of common sense, Reid for example, admit that various intellectual systems easily confuse the plain man and generate intellectual groupings that cannot be ignored. And if there is an appeal to intertranslatability, we should note that it tells us far more about shared vehicles of meaning than about shared beliefs. To this rejoinder, of course no one need add any philosophical argument to show that as a matter of fact basic beliefs are often not shared.

Given this epistemic pluralism, then, we return to the first horn of the dilemma. If we take each epistemic group with equal seriousness at the outset of our polling and if each is truly distinctive, then the result will be contradictory conditions of proper basicity. From this it is a short step to relativism about proper basicity, since the only way to escape the contradictions would be to relativize statements of proper basicity conditions to specific groups. Plantinga, it is true, insists that Christians need not accept the conditions for proper basicity given by atheists. He also holds that just one complete set of conditions for proper basicity is, in the end, correct. “Particularism,” he says, “does not imply subjectivism.” But the question here is whether “comparative” inductivism implies relativism. For on the comparative interpretation of inductivism that we
are exploring, what is properly basic for $S$ seems to be left as a function of $S$'s group membership. Chisholm's particularist, by contrast, asks himself what he knows *hic et nunc*. He does not ask what some series of groups (or individuals) takes to be properly basic. Nor does he only then, inductively fortified, ask what he could claim about proper basicity—always reserving a group-based veto of awkward data in the inductive base!

To be sure, some forms of relativism are benign. There is, for example, a sense in which what is rational for $S$ to believe, even as basic, changes over time. It is ordinarily rational for a three year old, but not for an adolescent, to believe in the Easter Bunny. It is rational for an adolescent to believe that the significance of, say, Confirmation is thus-and-so and rational for an adult to believe that it is quite otherwise. But in using such examples one presupposes a "correct vantage point" of rationality from which one can see the epistemic advance made, respectively, by the adolescent over the child and the adult over the adolescent. An inductivism that would introduce non-negotiable group standards of proper basicity is another matter. It threatens to undermine any claim to an overriding rationality against which we could assess benignly relative measures of rationality. So, if accepting all epistemic groups as at the outset equally legitimate (albeit while reserving a group-based veto over all but one's own group's examples of proper basicity) does not lead directly to an unacceptable relativism, it soon enough gets us there.

This leaves us with the other horn of the inductivist's dilemma, unless someone can slip between its horns. Suppose we poll only groups (or individuals) that are close enough in their marks of proper basicity to generate largely overlapping epistemic inventories. If we do so, we can still speak of a more or less unified rationality. But to insure this result, have we not abandoned our original interpretation of the inductive approach? Instead of taking groups as they come, we pre-establish standards that they must meet if they are to be taken seriously. But is this strategy any better than a return to philosophical dogmatism? And was it not such a dogmatism that motivated classical foundationalism?

The best answer to such worries is, I think, that a chastened dogmatism is not so perilous as an unchecked relativism. The inductivist's dilemma does indeed force a choice between the two. And it looks very much like the right choice means scrapping the comparative interpretation of inductivism with which we began. The legitimate inductivism with which we are left is, it seems, one that restrains inductive analysis to the individual's own epistemic inventory. But such an inductivism closely approaches a chastened dogmatism. Philosophical dogmatism, moreover, need not be such a bugbear. Wrong actions, after all, can have good motives. The wrongness of classical foundationalism should not blind us to the merit of a sober dogmatism. As Chisholm reminds us, we know some particular truths before we can propose tests to determine what we can or
cannot know. How else could we justify such tests? So, too, I think, we just know, when we know, that certain conditions are marks of proper basicity. How else could we know, as we do, that some groups and individuals are epistemically reliable and others are not? Obviously we are sometimes wrong about particular knowledge claims. This fallibility extends to claims that under such-and-such conditions (or only then) $p$ is properly basic for $S$. The classical foundationalists, we now see, were much too restrictive. But when we do know, modestly, a \textit{prima facie} sufficient condition for proper basicity, and clearly $p$'s being incorrigible for $S$ is at least this much, we do not know it because of some polling process or because our "group" takes it to be such.

Perhaps, however, we can save something of the comparative interpretation of inductivism even if the inductivist’s dilemma that it generates has the force that I think it does. For one might propose the following as a plausible negative test of one’s working set of \textit{prima facie} sufficient conditions for proper basicity. If one’s epistemic peers take $p$ as properly basic even though $p$ fails to meet any of one’s conditions for basicity, then one’s set of conditions is incomplete. Such a negative test does appeal to the judgments of others. Still, the “others” are restricted in advance. And doubtless more important negative tests do not appeal to the judgment of others. For example, the conditions for proper basicity that one accepts must not lead one to admit, as properly basic, beliefs that imply other beliefs that are absurd. Nor can these supposed conditions lead one to accept, as basic, beliefs that are contradictory.

At most, though, only an echo of the comparative interpretation remains. Its fundamental spirit should be rejected. But in favor of what? The only alternative I see may be the real core of Plantinga’s own inductivism, although I am not sure that “inductivism” is its most perspicuous rubric.

What, then, is this alternative? It is resorting yet again to the slippery conceptual analysis, as practiced by the reflective person, on which philosophy’s precarious fame has long turned. But what does such an analysis offer us in our present task? How can it help us make headway in identifying the criteria of proper basicity? The answer, I think, is that it is only by the analysis of one’s own noetic structure that one can achieve progress in identifying the criteria of proper basicity. And even then, one can do so only if one has, as a reflective person, the capacity to carry out this analysis carefully and insightfully. Indeed, we must assume that the “reflective person” one strives to be embodies a regulative epistemic ideal. (Otherwise the problem of relativism re-emerges, for the marks of basicity recognized by epistemically imperceptive individuals are no more consistent or interesting than those recognized by epistemically unreliable groups.) But if we have any hope of real success in philosophy, we must make some such assumption of epistemic insight anyway.
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IV

Whatever their method for arriving at the probably modest criteria for proper basicity, broad foundationalists face the further question of how to characterize statements of these criteria. Consider, for example, a statement like

(2) C is a criterion for the proper basicity of p for S.

What general epistemic and logical status might we expect instances of (2) to have?

Suppose S* is the set of truths that are instances of (2). Suppose, too, that the conditions for proper basicity are relative not to this or that group or individual but to the genuinely reflective person—such as one must take oneself to be if one’s philosophizing is to count. A first question about S* is whether its members are properly basic. There appear to be just two ways for a given member, \( m_1 \), of S* to be properly basic. Either \( m_1 \) is properly basic by a kind of self-reference or because it is so determined by some other member, \( m_2 \), of S*.

For an example of self-referential selection, consider

(3) p’s being self-evident is a criterion for its proper basicity for S.

Now (3) seems to be a noncontroversial member of S*. It states a sufficient condition for proper basicity. Is (3) properly basic? It is hard to imagine a basis, apart from self-reference, for taking (3) as basic. But no matter. For it does strike one as self-evident (does it not?) that (3) is properly basic. (Keep in mind that neither “being self-evident” nor “being properly basic” entail “being easy to grasp.”) So here we have a case of a member of S* being properly basic by self-reference.

For another sort of example, we might consider

(4) p’s being incorrigible for S is a criterion for its proper basicity for S.

Again, (4) seems to be a noncontroversial member of S*. It states a sufficient condition for proper basicity. Is (4) properly basic? Since (4) does not report one’s mental state, it is not incorrigible. So here self-reference will not come into play. It does, however, strike one (does it not?) that (4) is self-evident. What follows? (4) is properly basic because it is so determined by another member of S*, namely, (3).

When is it that a member of S* is not itself properly basic? A member of S* is not properly basic when no member, itself included, of S* would so identify it. Could this ever be the case? Without an inventory of S*, I cannot be confident of my answer. But my hunch is that this case does not arise. Were it to arise for some member, \( m_1 \), of S*, we would need to justify \( m_1 \) as a derived belief. Succeeding in doing so would not, of course, be the same as showing that
denying proper basicity to a proposition like, say,

(5) \( p \)'s reporting what \( S \) distinctly perceives is a criterion for its proper basicity for \( S \).

leads to some kind of absurdity. A *reductio* of the denial of (5)’s proper basicity is not a direct proof of (5). On the other hand, were we to accomplish such a *reductio*, we would have no need of such a derivation.

Let us * provisionally* assume, then, that all the members of \( S^* \) are properly basic. Can we, lacking an inventory of \( S^* \), know whether its members are necessary truths? Contingent truths? Might \( S^* \), perhaps, include both?18

One approach to this question is first to determine whether every member of \( S^* \), if only tacitly, refers to “the reflective person.” For since the reflective person has contingent features, propositions referring to the reflective person might well be contingent. But, as I have argued, it does appear that the members of \( S^* \) must, at least tacitly, refer to the reflective person. Proper basicity, after all, is a kind of epistemic justification. But justification is a normative concept that must be understood in terms of what the reflective person believes. Because of this normative element, then, fully articulated propositions stating criteria for proper basicity refer to the reflective person. The criterion of self-evidence, for example, must be keyed to the reflective person, since even self-evident truths can be overlooked in a casual examination. The criteria of incorrigibility and of being evident to the senses, for two more examples, presuppose the reflective capacity to report on one’s mental states and physical environment.

At this stage someone might argue that \( S \)'s “being a reflective person” *entails* that \( S \)'s reliance on self-evidence, incorrigibility, being evident to the senses, and the like, is successful enough to warrant ascribing proper basicity to the propositions that meet these criteria. If this entailment holds, then the members of \( S^* \), since they are necessarily keyed to the reflective person, are necessary truths in virtue of the meaning of “being a reflective person.” Sometimes, perhaps, an appeal to the meaning of “being a reflective person” can be used to show that a member of \( S^* \) is a necessary truth. But not always.

We might first discuss a case of a criterion for proper basicity and its relation to being a reflective person where conceptual appeals do seem decisive. Consider self-evidence. If \( p \) is self-evident, in the root sense of being self-warranting, then \( p \) is properly basic for \( S \)—if \( S \) grasps \( p \)'s self-evidence. Even if \( S \), a reflective person, undergoes some radical epistemic change, \( p \) keeps its logical property of “being self-evident.” If we suppose, then, that \( S \)—whatever the changes suffered—remains a reflective person and as such grasps \( p \)'s self-evidence, then, necessarily, \( p \) is properly basic for \( S \). The point is that \( p \) retains its own logical status that enables it to be properly basic for \( S \) so long as \( S \) can be characterized as a reflective person. The upshot of this, it seems, is that
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(3) *p*'s being self-evident is a criterion for its proper basicality for *S*. Already introduced as a member of *S*, it is itself a necessary truth.

But it is easy enough to find a member of *S* that is not a necessary truth, even given the "essential content" of being a reflective person. Consider again a (very likely) member of *S* that we have already noted.

(5) *p*'s reporting what *S* distinctly perceives is a criterion for its proper basicality for *S*.

Again, *S* in (5) is the reflective person. Suppose, now, that *S* suffers a radical change in perceptual ability while yet remaining a reflective person. (As such *S* still embodies a regulative epistemic ideal, once we allow for newly impaired sensory receptors.) Now *S*’s "distinct perception," while phenomenologically unchanged, might not be successful enough in determining basic beliefs for (5) to remain true. What *S* distinctly perceives might, for example, often prove illusory. Human perception, as we know it, is largely veridical. But it need not be so. "Distinct" does not entail "veridical."

What, then, can we say about whether members of *S* are necessary or contingent truths? Although we have considered only two cases of *S*, we can conclude that the members of *S* are neither exclusively necessary nor exclusively contingent. This variability rests on the point that it is a contingent fact that certain faculties enable the reflective person to pick out properly basic beliefs. Matters could have been quite different.

V

We can, at last, summarize this tentative exploration of proper basicality. Its starting point is that while we should reject classical foundationalism, the embrace of broad foundationalism leaves us with some hard questions. I have addressed three of them here.

The first is just how the strong and natural disposition to accept a belief as properly basic could contribute to its being so. Neither an evolutionary answer nor a pragmatic answer suffices. The believer, however, offers an adequate theological answer. If our dispositional and epistemic structures are God’s doing, the strong and natural disposition to believe *p* as basic will be intrinsically tied with *p*'s proper basicality.

The second question is whether broad foundationalists might make headway in identifying the criteria of proper basicality by using an inductive approach. The answer, it turns out, is that there is one important interpretation of inductivism which they cannot adopt without embracing a disturbing relativism. But such a relativism, for many foundationalists, is too steep a price to pay. Instead, I
argued, we must appeal to “the reflective person” to identify the criteria of proper basicity. Indeed, we should read statements of the criteria for proper basicity as implicitly referring to the reflective person.

The third and final question addresses the status of the members of $S^*$, the set of statements that give us the criteria of proper basicity for a reflective person. Certainly, we saw, some members of $S^*$ are themselves properly basic. Perhaps all of them are. Depending, however, on the proposition, a member of $S^*$ might be a necessary truth or only a contingent truth. The capacities of reflective persons, after all, could be radically different than they are. That they are not is, for a broad foundationalist who is also a Christian, an occasion for prayerful gratitude.

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NOTES

*I thank Philip Devine, Carroll Kearley, Gary Mar, Linda Zagzebski, and especially William P. Alston for very helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.


2. Ibid., pp. 59-63.

3. Plantinga, for example, argues that if given a freer foundationalism “God exists” is properly basic, then we should reconsider the role of constructive natural theology.

4. Ibid., p. 78.


7. I take one’s ability to have “belief dispositions” as, in a general way, a faculty. With respect to the cognitive import of the standard and particular faculty of the sense of touch, Thomas Reid offers a believer’s account that appeals not to God’s simplicity but rather to God’s goodness.

That our sensations of touch indicate something external, extended, figured, hard or soft, is not a deduction of reason, but a natural principle. The belief of it, and the very conception of it, are equally parts of our constitution. If we are deceived in it, we are deceived by him that made us, and there is no remedy.


12. Indeed, Plantinga has indicated in correspondence that the sort of inductivism he has in mind is not that of the anthropologist or pollster. Given this insistence, he might be able to make peace with the substance of my discussion in this section.


17. There are other taxing problems in completely characterizing $S^*$. Consider, for example, the following. “This statement is neither ‘covered by $S^*$’ nor derivable from statements that are.” (Suppose a statement is ‘covered by $S^*$’ when in virtue of some member of $S^*$ it is properly basic.) Let us refer to the above statement at $D$. If $D$ is false, the broad foundationalist is in trouble. How, after all, could the negation of $D$ pass muster? But the trouble isn’t lessened if $D$ is true! The moderate foundationalist probably needs an articulation of his position that uses a hierarchy of languages, thus allowing problems caused by the likes of $D$ to be strategically isolated.

18. I thank Linda Zagzebski for posing this question. For a related discussion of such a question, with quite a different conclusion, see Carl Ginet’s *Knowledge and Mind*, ed. Carl Ginet and Sydney Shoemaker, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 37ff.