

“In Defense of Classical Foundationalism: A Critical Evaluation of  
Plantinga’s Argument that Classical Foundationalism is Self-Refuting”  
by John M. DePoe, University of Iowa

*ABSTRACT:* In numerous works Alvin Plantinga has argued that classical foundationalism is a failed theory of knowledge due to its self-referential incoherence. Plantinga’s argument, however, falls short of demonstrating that classical foundationalism is self-refuting. To bring this to light, I will review the form of Plantinga’s argument in comparison with other examples of self-refutation. Upon closer inspection, it will be clear that classical foundationalism is not self-refuting as Plantinga claims. Furthermore, I will expose another flaw in Plantinga’s argument against classical foundationalism, which shows at best that Plantinga’s argument cannot be reconstructed to show that classical foundationalism is improbable. While Plantinga’s argument may highlight a challenge for classical foundationalism, his argument does not establish the falsity of classical foundationalism, nor does it offer any other overriding reason to reject it. Thus, Plantinga’s criticisms of classical foundationalism are not sufficient by themselves to rule out the theory’s viability.

In a number of his works in epistemology, Alvin Plantinga has argued that Classical Foundationalism (CF) is self-refuting.<sup>1</sup> CF is a theory of knowledge that adheres to some form of internalism regarding justification as well as strong access requirements (e.g., infallibility, indubitability, or incorrigibility) to basic beliefs.<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Plantinga has made this case against CF in a number of his writings on epistemology. See “Reason and Belief in God,” reprinted in *The Analytic Theist*, ed. James Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), especially 135-38; *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 84-86; *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 182-83; *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 82-85, 94-97. The differences in Plantinga’s presentation of the argument are very slight, and the same idea seems to be present in each of his representations of the argument. Thus, I will treat Plantinga’s argument against CF as a unified, singular argument, rather than numerous different arguments against CF.

<sup>2</sup> CF has enjoyed a small resurgence in contemporary epistemology. See, for example, Timothy J. McGrew and Lydia McGrew, *Internalism and Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Laurence Bonjour, “A Version of Internalist Strong Foundationalism,” in *Epistemic Justification* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003); Timothy J. McGrew, “A Defense of Strong Foundationalism,” in *The Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Louis Pojman, 3d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 194-296; Michael DePaul, ed. *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield,

distinguishing theoretical features of CF that Plantinga believes leads to its self-referential incoherence are:

- (1) A belief is acceptable for a person if and only if it is either (i) basic (i.e., self-evident or incorrigible), or (ii) believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and that support it deductively, inductively, or abductively.

Since CF accepts (1), Plantinga maintains that CF is self-refuting. How does self-refutation follow from (1)? Plantinga explains:

But this proposition [(1)] itself is not properly basic by this criterion: it is neither self-evident nor appropriately about someone's immediate experience, and (subject to the indeterminateness of what is to count as support here) it is certainly hard to see that it is appropriately supported by propositions that do meet that criterion.<sup>3</sup>

Plantinga's argument can be reconstructed this way:

- (2) CF's criterion for accepting a belief, (1), does not count as basic (i.e., it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible)
  - (3) CF's criterion for accepting a belief, (1), is not to be believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and that support it deductively, inductively, or abductively
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- (4) Therefore, by its own standard (stated in (1)), CF does not meet its own criterion to be an acceptable belief.

For now I will grant the truth of the premises that logically entail the conclusion.

(I will have more to say about the veracity of (3) later.) First, we should ask in what sense, if any, is this argument a proof that CF is self-refuting or self-referentially incoherent? Unlike assertions such as

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2000); Evan Fales, *A Defense of the Given* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); Timothy J. McGrew, *The Foundations of Knowledge* (Lanham, MD: Littlefield Adams, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 85. Cf. *Warranted Christian Belief*, 95-97; *Warrant and Proper Function*, 182; "Reason and Belief in God," 135-38.

(5) There are no true statements,

or

(6) No sentence in the English language has more than three words,

(1) is not made false upon being asserted. Since when someone asserts (5) she is implicitly claiming that her assertion is true, it is self-refuting. Likewise, when one asserts (6), his own claim contradicts itself since his claim has more than three words. Plantinga's argument does not show that asserting (1) is self-refuting in the same way that (5) and (6) are self-refuting.

Perhaps the sense in which Plantinga intends to show that CF is self-refuting is more akin to the way that Logical Positivism (LP) is rendered meaningless by its own standard. LP's criterion for statements qualifying as meaningful famously claimed:

(7) *P* is meaningful if and only if *P* is either (i) analytic (i.e., the meaning can be determined by the definition of the terms) or (ii) empirically verifiable.

Advocates of LP maintained that any statement that failed to meet the standard stated in (7) would be meaningless and therefore possess no truth-value. LP is widely regarded as self-defeating because its criterion (as stated in (7)) cannot *in principle* be made meaningful by its own standard. Formally, (7) fails to meet LP's standard for meaningfulness from these premises:

(8) LP's criterion, (7), cannot in principle be meaningful analytically

and

(9) LP's criterion, (7), cannot in principle be empirically verified

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(10) Therefore, (7) by its own standard cannot in principle be meaningful.

Notice that what does the work in demonstrating the meaningfulness of LP is the observation in (8) and (9) that (7) cannot in principle meet its own standard for being a

meaningful statement. In other words, it is not possible that (7) could be meaningful by its own standard. It is obvious that (7) cannot be meaningful by understanding the meaning of its terms, so (8) is true. Likewise, (7) cannot be empirically verified because (7) is not an empirical fact, so (9) also is true. Given (7), (8), and (9), the conclusion (10) follows deductively, which demonstrates that by its own standard necessarily LP is meaningless because it fails *in principle* to meet its own criterion.

If Plantinga intends CF to be self-refuting in the same way as LP, then his argument (as characterized in (1)-(4)) requires some modification. Compare (1)-(4) with (7)-(10). In (8) and (9), the statements are modal—they *cannot* be true; whereas (2) and (3) do not have a modal claim. Consequently, (10) infers that (7) *cannot* be meaningful by its own standard, while (4) infers that (1) does not meet its own standard as an acceptable belief. These differences are not minor. As a result of (7)-(10), LP *cannot* be true. As a result of (1)-(4), however, CF is contingently false—leaving open the possibility that CF *could* be true. Thus, in order to demonstrate CF is self-refuting in the same way that LP is self-refuting, the form of Plantinga’s argument against CF needs to be revised in this way:

(2\*) CF’s criterion for accepting a belief, (1), *cannot in principle* count as basic (i.e., it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible)

(3\*) CF’s criterion for accepting a belief, (1), *cannot in principle* be believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and that support it deductively, inductively, or abductively

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(4\*) Therefore, by its own standard (stated in (1)), CF *cannot in principle* meet its own criterion to be an acceptable belief.

Given (1), (2\*), and (3\*), the conclusion (4\*) would follow and would show that CF is self-defeating in the same way as LP. Given the understanding of a basic belief

according to CF and the meaning of CF, (2\*) seems plausible, and I suspect no defender of CF would contest this modified premise.<sup>4</sup> The crucial premise, then, is (3\*).

Interestingly, Plantinga himself never argues for a claim as strong as (3\*). Moreover, there is no reason to believe that (1) could not in principle be accepted on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable to the advocate of CF and that support it deductively, inductively, or abductively. At best, the inability to infer (1) using principles compatible with CF is a contingent matter. So, (3\*) is indefensible, if not plainly false. Using premises (1), (2\*), and (3), one cannot infer (4\*). Thus, CF is not self-defeating in the same way as LP.

Besides similar instances of self-defeat illustrated in (5), (6), and LP, it is not clear in what sense Plantinga takes CF to be self-defeating. Unlike (5) and (6), CF is not made false upon its assertion. Unlike LP, CF could in principle be shown to be true by its own criterion. So, it seems that the form of Plantinga's argument against CF is not sufficient to demonstrate that CF is self-refuting or self-defeating.

Perhaps Plantinga's argument against CF is not intended to demonstrate that CF is necessarily false. Despite Plantinga's strong language to the contrary—such as “[CF] is self-referentially incoherent,”<sup>5</sup> “[CF] is bankrupt,”<sup>6</sup> “[CF] is self-referentially incoherent; it does not meet the conditions for justification that it lays down”<sup>7</sup>—it may be desirable to interpret Plantinga's strong language to indicate that CF is false by a very strong inductive argument. In other words, from (1), (2\*), and (3), one is supposed to infer:

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<sup>4</sup> Plantinga's reasons given in *Warranted Christian Belief*, 94, seem sufficient to affirm (2\*).

<sup>5</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 97; *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 85.

<sup>6</sup> “Reason and Belief in God,” 138.

<sup>7</sup> *Warrant and Proper Function*, 182.

(4\*\*) Therefore, by its own standard (stated in (1)), CF probably does not meet its own criterion to be an acceptable belief.

This interpretation may be too charitable since Plantinga takes his argument to be grounds to dismiss the plausibility of CF altogether. Moreover, some advocates of Plantinga's epistemic theory (so-called "Reformed Epistemology") take Plantinga's argument to be a demonstration of the falsehood of CF.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, it will be instructive to examine the strength of Plantinga's argument against CF as an inductive argument. As a refresher, here are the premises that are intended to demonstrate (4\*\*):

(1) A belief is acceptable for a person if and only if it is either (i) basic (i.e., self-evident or incorrigible), or (ii) believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and that support it deductively, inductively, or abductively

(2\*) CF's criterion for accepting a belief, (1), *cannot in principle* count as basic (i.e., it is neither self-evident nor incorrigible)

and

(3) CF's criterion for accepting a belief, (1), is not to be believed on the evidential basis of propositions that are acceptable and that support it deductively, inductively, or abductively.

Since the supporter of CF will most likely concede the truth of premises (1) and (2\*), the crux of the argument rests on the strength of (3). What reasons does Plantinga bring to support (3)? The following passages indicate Plantinga's reasons for thinking that (3) is true:

...it is certainly hard to see that [CF] is appropriately supported by propositions that do meet that condition [stated in (1)].<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For example, W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 89; Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137-38.

<sup>9</sup> *Warrant: The Current Debate*, 85. Cf. *Warrant and Proper Function*, 182.

Now presumably if *F* knows of some support for [(1)] from propositions that are self-evident or evident to the sense or incorrigible, he will be able to provide an argument—deductive, inductive, probabilistic, or whatever—whose premises are self-evident or evident to the sense or incorrigible and whose conclusion is [(1)]. So far as I know, no foundationalist has provided such an argument.<sup>10</sup>

As far as I know, there aren't any such arguments [for CF]. As far as I know, no classical foundationalist has produced any such arguments or proposed some properly basic propositions that support [CF].<sup>11</sup>

This line of reasoning could be formally captured this way:

(11) Plantinga is not aware of a good argument for CF.

(12) Therefore, probably there are no good arguments for CF.

Even though Plantinga is very knowledgeable about epistemology and truly one of the most brilliant philosophers of our time, the inference from (11) to (12) is certainly dubious and it hardly presents any reasons for someone (perhaps, besides Plantinga himself) to conclude (12). To see this general point, consider the following argument:

(13) Plantinga is an authority in epistemology.

(14) Therefore, Plantinga's opinions concerning epistemology are a reliable source for true beliefs in that field.

Certainly (13) is correct, and I do not intend to cast any doubt on that proposition.

But there is a sense in which philosophers should reject (14). When it comes to having accurate knowledge concerning the published opinions in epistemology, philosophers should not be doubtful of the inference from (13) to (14). Yet, regarding the viability of specific theories in epistemology, philosophers typically do not decide these matters only on the word of an expert. If for no other reason, this is due to the fact that there are experts that could be lined up to vouch for almost any side of any issue in contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> "Reason and Belief in God," 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 95.

epistemology.<sup>12</sup> If the only reason being put forward to support (3) is that an expert thinks it is true, then the defender of CF has no good reason to believe that CF is a hopeless project or even that it is a very likely that CF is false. If all philosophy were restricted by the opinions of experts, very little philosophy could be done.

So, the proponent of CF has no reason to suspect that his project is misguided, fundamentally flawed, or bound to fail on the grounds of (11). The defender of CF only needs to maintain:

(15) It is possible that there are arguments that support CF.

Of course, (15) is perfectly defensible. Even Plantinga himself acknowledges that (15) is true.<sup>13</sup> Unless Plantinga's opinions about epistemological matters is taken to be authoritative by itself, it is difficult to see how Plantinga's lack of knowledge concerning good arguments for CF is supposed to give one good reasons to think (12) is true. Moreover, since there are important arguments that defend the plausibility of CF in accordance with the principles of CF,<sup>14</sup> determining whether there are good arguments for CF cannot be dismissed only because of (11). There are viable suggestions that attempt to defend CF, and these arguments need to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, Plantinga's argument against CF cannot plausibly be reconstructed as a good inductive argument for demonstrating the implausibility of CF.

This critical analysis of Plantinga's argument against CF has demonstrated at least a couple of significant points. First, it vindicates CF from the charge of being self-

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<sup>12</sup> This would include experts who would maintain that CF is correct, such as those listed in note 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Warranted Christian Belief*, 95: "It is of course possible that there *are* such arguments, even if so far no one has produced them...."

<sup>14</sup> For example, see sources cited in note 2.

referentially incoherent. Second, it brings to light the question of reconsidering CF as a viable theory in epistemology. If Plantinga's argument against CF is the primary reason for rejecting CF, then it is time to reassess the arguments for CF, especially due to the renewed interest in CF in contemporary epistemology. Since Plantinga's argument does not establish the self-referential incoherence or the implausibility of CF, it remains an open question whether CF has what it takes to succeed as a theory of knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This paper was considerably strengthened by comments I received at the 2007 Midwest Evangelical Philosophical Society's regional meeting as well as comments I received from Ian MacMillan.

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