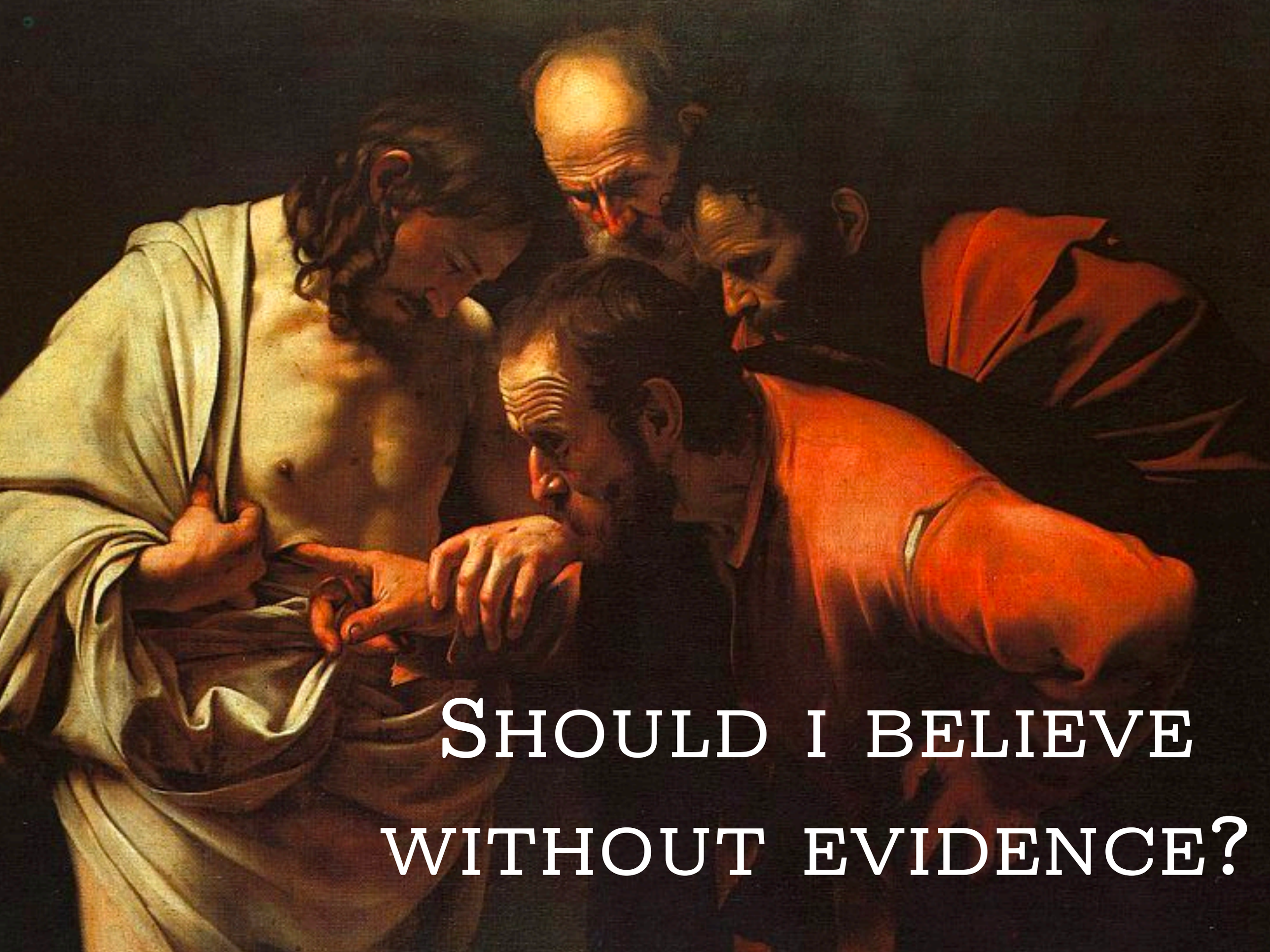

Should I believe without evidence?

Last time we introduced **foundationalism**, which can be stated as the following negative rule of belief:

No Foundations → No Belief
If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't give a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

Last time we introduced the idea of a **basic belief**. Foundationalism is the view that the only basic beliefs you should have are the ones you can be certain of and ones which your senses tell you are true.

No Foundations → No Belief
If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't give a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

We have encountered this idea twice already in this course. One place it came up was in the following argument against the existence of immaterial souls:

THE EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN IMMATERIAL SOULS

1. We have no sensory experience of immaterial souls.
2. You can't be certain that there are immaterial souls.
3. We have no good argument for the existence of immaterial souls.
4. If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you don't have a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

C. You should not believe in the existence of immaterial souls. (1,2,3,4)

No Foundations → No Belief
If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't give a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

THE EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN IMMATERIAL SOULS

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   tell you that P and you don't have a good argument
   for P, you should not believe P.
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C. You should not believe in the existence of
   immaterial souls. (1,2,3,4)
```

The last premise of this argument just is our proposed No Foundations → No Belief rule.

No Foundations → No Belief
If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't give a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

The last premise of this argument just is our proposed No Foundations → No Belief rule.

It also came up earlier in the course. On the second day, I said that there were two main kinds of arguments against belief in God.

The first are the various versions of the argument from evil which we discussed at length.

The second is the argument that you should not believe that God exists because there is no evidence that God exists.

We can now put that second argument in a more precise form.

No Foundations → No Belief
If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't give a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

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THE EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN GOD

```
1. We have no sensory experience of God.
2. You can't be certain that God exists.
3. We have no good argument for the existence of God.
4. If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't
   tell you that P and you don't have a good argument
   for P, you should not believe P.
-------------------------
C. You should not believe in God. (1,2,3,4)
```

THE EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENT AGAINST BELIEF IN GOD

1. We have no sensory experience of God.
2. You can't be certain that God exists.
3. We have no good argument for the existence of God.
4. If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you don't have a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

C. You should not believe in God. (1,2,3,4)

One might of course reject premise (3), if you found one of the arguments for the existence of God we discussed in class convincing. And you might reject (1) if you have had certain kinds of mystical experiences.

But many religious believers have not had mystical experiences, and don't take themselves to be in possession of good arguments for God's existence. For them, the belief that God exists is a **basic belief** despite not fitting into either of the two categories of basic belief allowed by foundationalism.

One way to underline the force of the evidentialist argument is to use the example of one of the world's fastest growing religions: Pastafarianism.

Q: **How do Pastafarians believe our world was created?**
A: We believe the Flying Spaghetti Monster created the world much as it exists today, but for reasons unknown made it appear that the universe is billions of years old (instead of thousands) and that life evolved into its current state (rather than created in its current form). Every time a researcher carries out an experiment that appears to confirm one of these "scientific theories" supporting an old earth and evolution we can be sure that the FSM is there, modifying the data with his Noodly Appendage. We don't know why He does this but we believe He does, that is our Faith.

<— A ChrisFSMas tree

Pastafarianism has its uses. For example, it can be used to get a religious exemption from the rule that one cannot wear a hat in a driver's license photo:

As you might guess, many Pastafarians take a somewhat less than serious attitude toward the tenets of Pastafarianism. But it can be used to make a serious philosophical point.

As you might guess, many Pastafarians take a somewhat less than serious attitude toward the tenets of Pastafarianism. But it can be used to make a serious philosophical point.

Suppose that someone were a serious Pastafarian. We would, I take it, be inclined to think that there is something irrational about their beliefs.

And this might be so even if we could not come up with any decisive argument against Pastafarianism. After all, Pastafarianism is designed so as to avoid arguments against it. When presented with such an argument, the Pastafarian will simply say that the evidence on which the argument is based is misleading, and was planted by the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

So why is the religious believer who believes without arguments any better than the Pastafarian?

Foundationalism would appear to have significant consequences. Let's ask whether it is true. Consider a belief that, I presume, all of us have:

`The sun will come up tomorrow.`

Do my senses tell me that this claim is true?

Remember that a claim you can be **certain** of is one whose falsehood you can rule out, just on the basis of thinking about it. Can I be certain that the sun will come up tomorrow?

It follows that, if Foundationalism is true, I must be able to give a good argument for it. What might the premises of this argument be?

Presumably claims like these:

`Yesterday morning, the sun came up.`

`Two mornings ago, the sun came up.`

`Three mornings ago, the sun came up.`

And so on. Let's have a look at the argument that results.

```
1. Yesterday morning, the sun came up.
2. Two mornings ago, the sun came up.
3. Three mornings ago, the sun came up.
......
N. N days ago, the sun came up.
----------------------------
C. The sun will come up tomorrow. (1-N)
```

Remember that a good argument is a valid argument whose premises you should believe. It is plausible that you should believe each of the premises of this argument. But is it valid?

Can you think of any premise which we can add to the argument which would make the argument valid?

Here's a natural choice:

```
If on every past morning the sun
   came up, then tomorrow morning
   the sun will come up.
```

```
1. Yesterday morning, the sun came up.
2. Two mornings ago, the sun came up.
3. Three mornings ago, the sun came up.
......
N. N days ago, the sun came up.
N+1. If on every past morning the sun came up,
   then tomorrow morning the sun will come up.
-----------------------------
C. The sun will come up tomorrow. (1-N+1)
```

Is this argument valid?

This looks like progress. If we should believe all of the premises of this argument, then it looks like we have an explanation of why we should believe the conclusion.

We already have an explanation of why we should believe premises 1-N. What about premise N+1?

Do my senses tell me that it is true? Can I be certain that it is true?

Then it seems that, if Foundationalism is true, I must have a good argument for it.

N+1. If on every past morning the sun came up, then tomorrow morning the sun will come up.

N+1 is an instance of a more general claim, which is sometimes called the principle of the uniformity of nature:

The Uniformity of Nature
The future will be like the past

It seems as though, if we should believe in the Uniformity of Nature, we should believe N+1. So the basic question is whether we should believe in the Uniformity of Nature. As with N+1, the Principle of the Uniformity of Nature is not a claim we can be certain of, and is not a claim my senses tell me to be true. So we have to ask how we might argue for it.

Well, why do we believe in the Uniformity of Nature? Simply because, in the past, the future has always been like the past. Yesterday the future was like the past. And the same for the day before that. And this suggests an argument for the Uniformity of Nature:

```
1. Yesterday, the future was like the past.
2. The day before yesterday, the future was
   like the past.
3. The day before the day before yesterday,
   the future was like the past.
....
N. N days ago, the future was like the past.
-----------------
C. Today, the future will be like the past.
   (1-N)
```

Is this argument valid?

What extra premise would make the argument valid?

It is hard to see how we could make the argument valid without adding a premise which was just a restatement of the very claim — the Uniformity of Nature — which we were trying to prove.

This appears to be a problem for Foundationalism. It seems to imply that we should not believe the the sun will come up tomorrow. But surely we should believe this!

Let's consider a reply for the Foundationalist. Perhaps we should broaden our conception of what would count as a 'good argument,' to include arguments like our argument that the sun will come up tomorrow.

Scientific theories typically involve certain generalizations. In the simplest case, they will be claims of the form

> All F's are G.

These are not claims which our senses can tell us to be true. But our senses can tell us that claims like this are true:

> This particular thing is an F, and it is G.

Let's call claims which are related in this way to generalizations **instances** of the generalization.

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Then we might say that a generalization is well-supported by the evidence just in case the following two conditions are satisfied:

Our senses tell us that many instances of the generalization are true.

Our senses don't tell us that any instances of the generalization are false.

This fits many of the examples we have discussed very well. Reasoning in which one proceeds from a bunch of instances of a generalization to believing that generalization is often called **inductive reasoning.** So we might state our proposed rule of belief as follows:

Induction → Belief
If you know many true instances of a generalization P, and don't know of any false instances of P, you should believe P.

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Induction → Belief
If you know many true instances of a generalization P, and don't know of any false instances of P, you should believe P.

This looks like a good way to explain the differences between scientific claims we should believe and, e.g., generalizations from astrology.

It is obviously somewhat vague; we have not spelled out what "many" amounts to. We can ignore this issue for now. A plausible thought would be that the more instances you come to know, the more confident you should come to be in the generalization.

Many people think that forming beliefs via a distinctive 'scientific method' is a good way to form beliefs. Forming beliefs on the basis of Induction → Belief would appear to be a reasonable interpretation of at least part of what this method might involve.

Induction → Belief

If you know many true instances of a generalization P, and don't know of any false instances of P, you should believe P.

Let's look at a problem for Induction → Belief called **the paradox of the ravens**.

Consider the following generalization:

```
All ravens are black.
```

Now notice that this generalization is equivalent to this one:

```
All non-black things are non-
ravens.
```

If you think about it for a second, you can see that if one of these is true, the other must be as well.

All ravens are black.

All non-black things are non-ravens.

If you think about it for a second, you can see that if one of these is true, the other must be as well.

So, it seems very plausible that a piece of evidence supports one just in case it supports the other, and to just the same degree.

Let's now consider two investigations that I could undertake. Here's the first:

Investigation #1
I go out looking for ravens. I find 10 of them, and they are all black.

It looks like this provides inductive support for the generalization that all ravens are black (and so also for the other generalization). So, according to Induction → Belief, you should increase your confidence in those generalizations.

All ravens are black.

All non-black things are non-ravens.

Here's a second investigation I could undertake:

Investigation #2
I begin to investigate my immediate environment. I check the first ten non-black things I can find — and it turns out that none of them are ravens.

Here, as in the previous generalization, I have found ten true instances of one of the two generalizations. So it looks as though if Induction → Belief is true, I should substantially increase my confidence in the claim that all ravens are black.

But intuitively, this is bizarre. Surely the fact that a bunch of non-black things in my environment are also non-ravens should do nothing, or almost nothing, to support the generalization that all ravens are black.

All ravens are black.

All non-black things are non-ravens.

This is a serious problem for our rule of Induction → Belief, since it looks like the result of Investigation #2 should **not** be forming the belief that all ravens are black.

It is also, indirectly, a problem for Foundationalism. For if Induction → Belief is not true, we still lack an explanation of why we should believe that the sun will come up tomorrow.

No Foundations → No Belief
If you can't be certain that P and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't give a good argument for P, you should not believe P.

Let's look at a second problem for Foundationalism.

Foundationalism says that you should discard any belief which is neither (i) certain nor (ii) based on sense experience or (iii) a conclusion of a good argument.

Suppose that someone believes that Foundationalism is true. It appears that they should reason as follows: Foundationalism is true; so, I should continue to believe Foundationalism only if it is (i) certain or (ii) based on sense experience or (iii) a conclusion of a good argument; but in fact Foundationalism satisfies none of (i)-(iii); so, I should discard my belief in Foundationalism.

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Foundationalism thus appears to be unstable, in the sense that it recommends that it itself not be believed. It is thus a bit like this sentence:

> No one should believe me.

If this sentence is true, no one should believe it. If it is untrue, of course, no one should believe it. So, no one should believe it.

Parallel reasoning implies that no one should believe Foundationalism. So, no one should be convinced by arguments, like our evidentialist arguments, which use it as a premise.

Parallel reasoning implies that no one should believe Foundationalism. So, no one should be convinced by arguments, like our evidentialist arguments, which use it as a premise.

The same reasoning can be used to object to two other negative rules of belief we have considered.

No Good Argument → No Belief
If you can't give a good argument for P, don't believe P.

Doubt → No Belief
If you cannot rule out a situation which would make P false, you should not believe P.

Indeed, it looks like a general problem for many principles which say "Don't believe P unless your belief satisfies a certain special condition!" For we can always ask whether the principle itself satisfies that special condition. And we have just seen that in many cases, it plausibly won't.

The negative rules of belief we have been discussing are all based on the background idea that beliefs have to earn their keep. They sort of suppose that the default is that you should discard a belief; beliefs have to pass a test in order to deserve to be kept.

A different approach to thinking about what you should believe is takes the opposite approach. On this view, the default is that you should keep believing what you believe. The only time you should discard a belief is when you have a good argument **against** it.

Conservatism
If you already believe P, and know of no good argument against P, you should keep believing P.

Consider our example of the belief that the future will be like the past. We have struggled to see why we should believe this; after all, we have no sense experience of the future, and it is hard to argue for it in a non-circular way. Conservatism has an easy explanation: I already believe that this is true, and I have been given no reason to change my mind.

Conservatism
If you already believe P, and know of no good argument against P, you should keep believing P.

Here is an argument that conservatism can't be quite right as it stands.

Imagine that you believe that tonight the dining hall will feature beef stroganoff. Your reason for believing this is that your friend, who works in the dining hall, told you this.

But now you find out that your friend quit working in the dining hall weeks ago, and just made this up.

What does Conservatism recommend? Well, you already believe that there will be stroganoff tonight. And you don't know of any good argument against this claim. So, Conservatism says, you should stick with your belief.

This seems incorrect. It looks like your reason for holding this belief was **undercut**. Given this, it seems plausible that you should discard the belief, despite having no argument against it.

Conservatism

If you already believe P, and know of no good argument against P, you should keep believing P.

If you agree with the idea that you should discard beliefs when your reason for having the belief is undercut, that suggests that a more plausible conservative thesis would be one restricted to basic beliefs — beliefs that you do not hold on the basis of other beliefs. After all, basic beliefs cannot be undercut in this way.

We might state a more restricted principle as follows:

Restricted Conservatism

If P is a basic belief you already have, and know of no good argument against P, you should keep believing P.

This might still explain why we should believe, e.g., that the future will be like the past, as this is plausibly a basic belief.

Restricted Conservatism

If P is a basic belief you already have, and know of no good argument against P, you should keep believing P.

This might still explain why we should believe, e.g., that the future will be like the past, as this is plausibly a basic belief.

A principle of this kind might also seem to be good news for someone who believes in God, but does not believe themselves to be in possession of a good argument for that belief.

However, this also might make things seem a little **too** easy for the believer in God — I'll return to this in a minute.

Restricted Conservatism

If P is a basic belief you already have, and know of no good argument against P, you should keep believing P.

Recall Descartes' worry that if we don't carefully examine our whole structure of belief, we can allow error to slip in. Surely just sticking with our beliefs is not going to be a foolproof way to escape error! So why is Conservatism not just an irresponsibly lazy way to maintain beliefs?

There are two responses to this. The first is to point out that Restricted Conservatism does not imply that we should not test our beliefs against the evidence. One might believe this principle but be quite ambitious in trying to learn about arguments against one's views.

A second response to this is suggested by the following quote from William James.

A second response to this is suggested by the following quote from William James.

> "There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion ... We must know the truth, and we must avoid error. These are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws."

In this spirit, one might say that Descartes' advice is the best one if we only care about minimizing error. But this is not our only aim: we also want to believe the truth. If we limit ourselves to the beliefs we can be certain of, we will in so doing prevent ourselves from believing many truths.

But even if this point is taken on board, it looks like conservative principles of belief can license truly crazy views. Imagine a serious Pastafarian for whom belief in the FSM is a basic belief. Or imagine a serious believer in astrology for whom astrology is a basic belief. Conservative principles say that these people should stick with these beliefs unless they encounter some good argument against them. Can this be right?

One way to defend conservative principles is to say that this is not such a bad result, because there are in fact plenty of good arguments against theses like Pastafarianism and astrology.

For example, I believe both of the following claims.

> Spaghetti is a human invention. There is no spaghetti (anywhere in the universe) which was not made by a person.

> No person has ever made any magical spaghetti.

But these two claims would seem to rule out the existence of the FSM. By contrast, you might think, there are no such easy arguments against the existence of God (for example).

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No person has ever made any magical spaghetti.

But these two claims would seem to rule out the existence of the FSM. By contrast, you might think, there are no such easy arguments against the existence of God (for example).

This is enough to show that, even if Restricted Conservatism is true, someone who believes the above claims about spaghetti should, on that basis, discard their belief in the FSM.

But what about someone for whom belief in the FSM is basic, and who does not endorse the above claims about spaghetti? Perhaps this person has no beliefs which could be used in an argument against the FSM.

Restricted Conservatism would seem to imply that a person of this sort should maintain their Pastafarian beliefs, and that to give them up would be a mistake. Can this be correct?