

Belief and evidence



I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

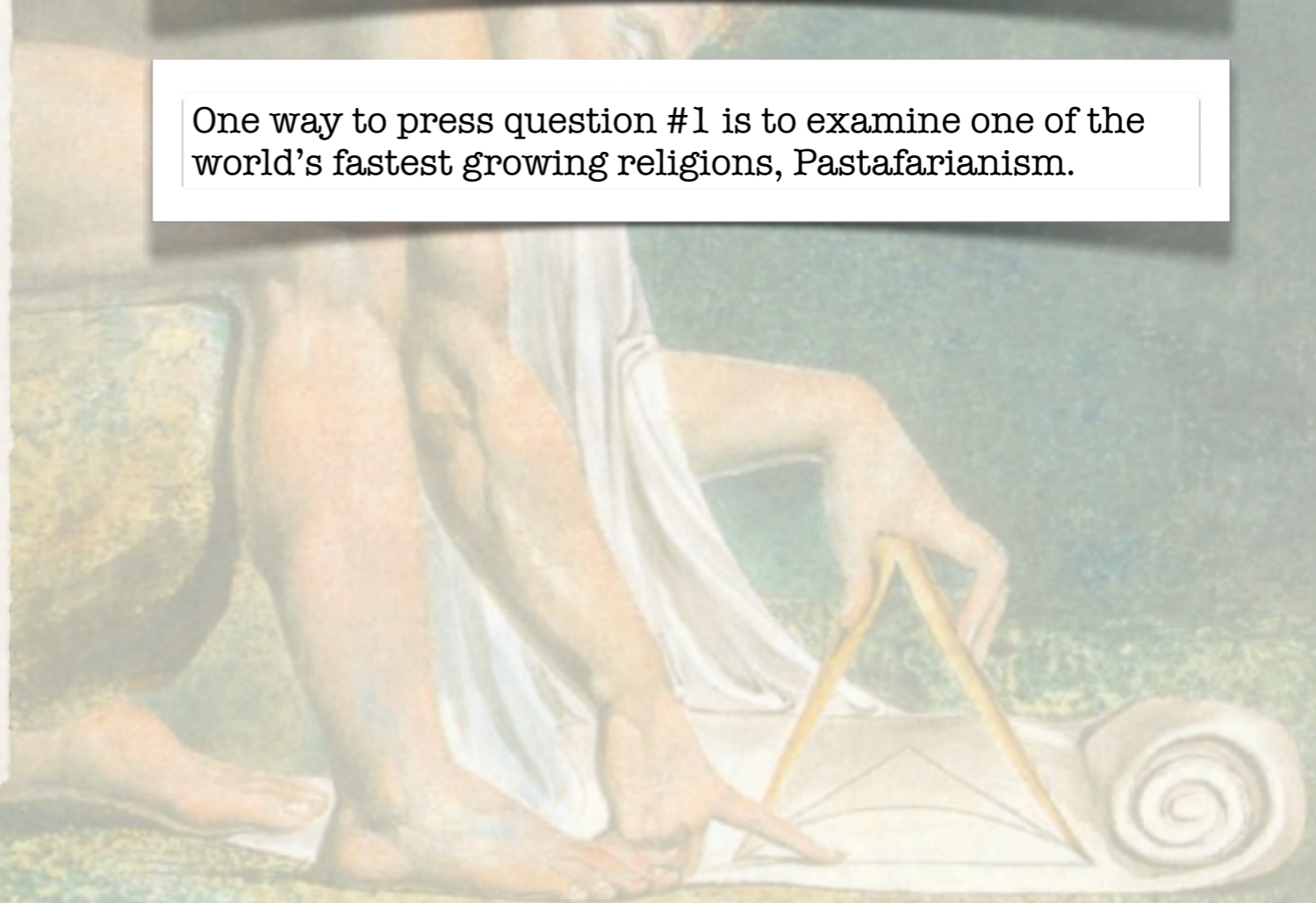
I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

We've now worked our way through the main text of the Creed. For our last few class days, we will return to its very first line, and spend some time on questions about the nature of belief in God.

In our last three class days, we'll address the following three questions:

1. Should we require evidence to believe in God?
2. Is the diversity of religious belief evidence against God's existence?
3. Can we provide any evidence that God exists?

One way to press question #1 is to examine one of the world's fastest growing religions, Pastafarianism.



One way to press question #1 is to examine one of the world's fastest growing religions, Pastafarianism.

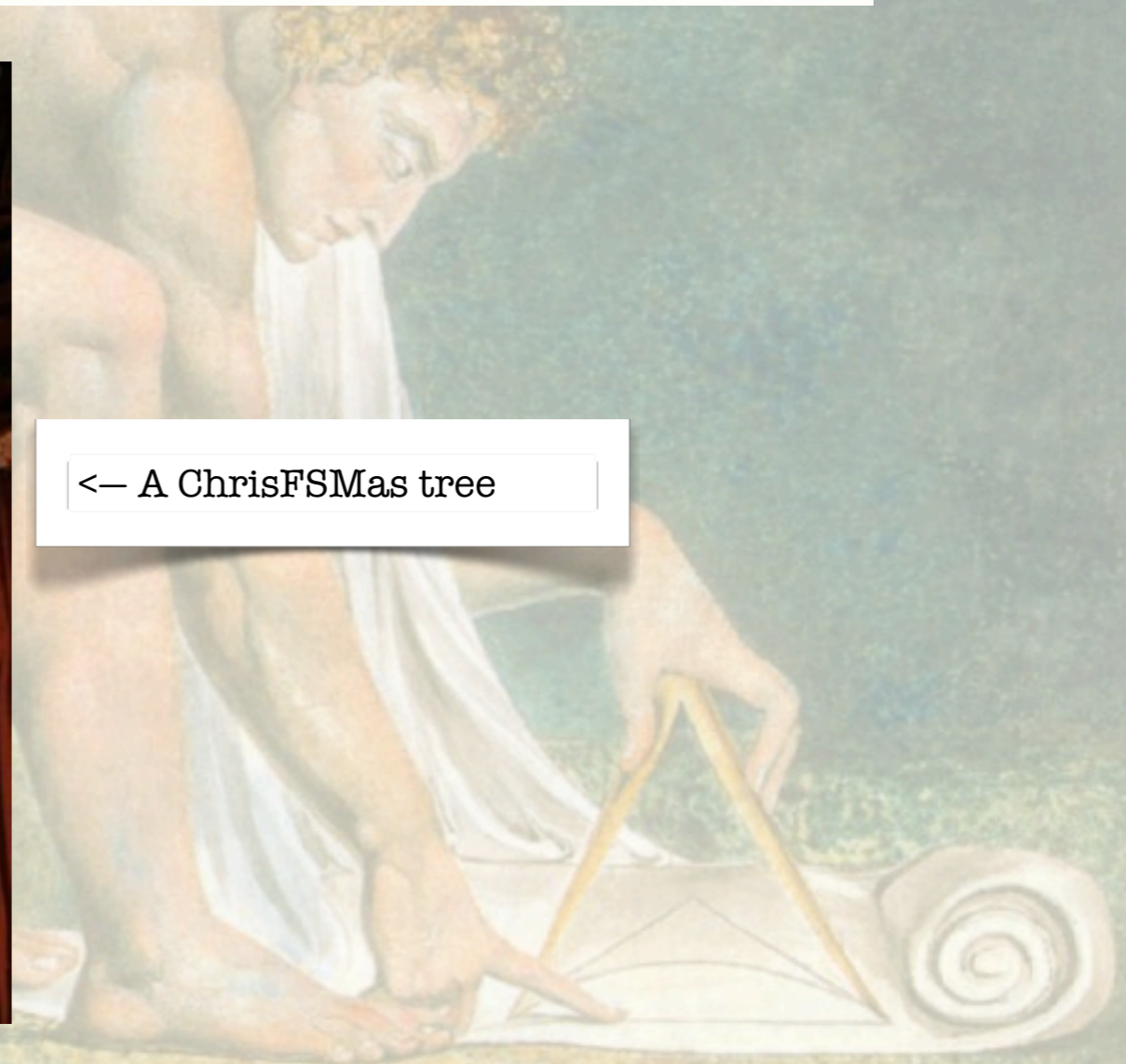
What, you may ask, is Pastafarianism?

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





As you might guess, many Pastafarians take a somewhat less than serious attitude toward the tenets of Pastafarianism (though some apparently do not).

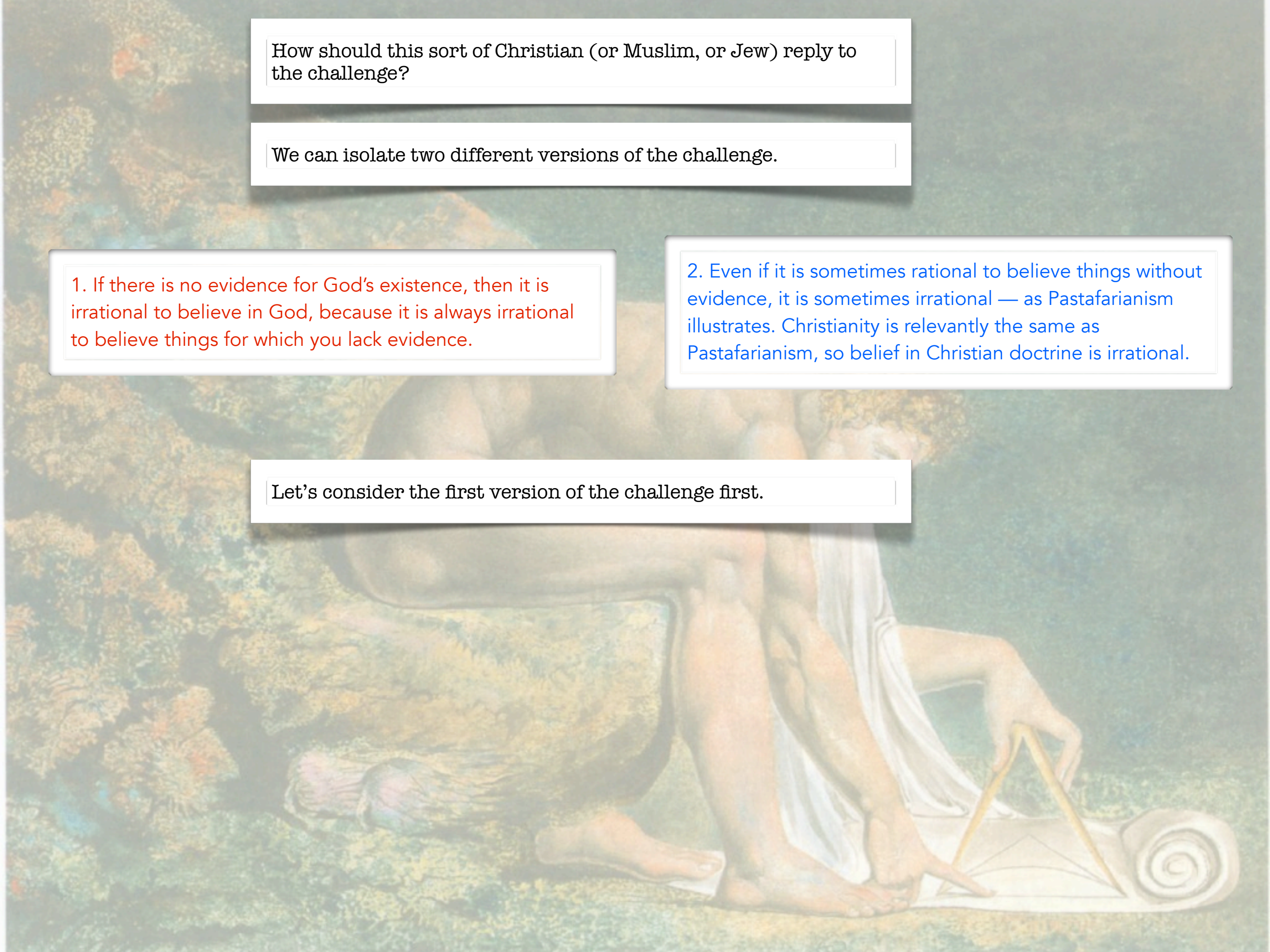
But suppose that someone were a serious Pastafarian. We would, I take it, be inclined to think that there is something irrational about his beliefs.

But once we go this far, it can be turned into a challenge to the rationality of Christian belief: for we can then ask why the belief in Christianity is supposed to be on stronger ground than the belief in Pastafarianism.

One straightforward reply to this challenge is to say that there are **arguments** for God's existence, and for various Christian doctrines, whereas there are no positive arguments for characteristic Pastafarian claims.

We'll consider a reply of this sort in a few days. But not every Christian wants to go for this sort of reply, because not every Christian thinks that there are convincing arguments in favor of the truth of Christian doctrines. (Or, even if there are, such a Christian might not want the rationality of faith to depend upon them.)

How should this sort of Christian (or Muslim, or Jew) reply to the challenge?

A classical painting depicting a man in a white robe kneeling on a green and yellow textured ground. He is holding a scroll with a wooden frame and a quill pen, appearing to be in the process of drawing or writing. The background is a soft, hazy landscape with green and blue tones.

How should this sort of Christian (or Muslim, or Jew) reply to the challenge?

We can isolate two different versions of the challenge.

1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.

2. Even if it is sometimes rational to believe things without evidence, it is sometimes irrational — as Pastafarianism illustrates. Christianity is relevantly the same as Pastafarianism, so belief in Christian doctrine is irrational.

Let's consider the first version of the challenge first.

1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.

The defender of this challenge is saying that there is some standard for rational belief — possession of evidence — which is such that any belief which fails to meet this standard is irrational. But what, exactly, is that standard?

One way of spelling it out would be:

Standard #1

A belief is irrational unless you have a good argument for it.

Presumably, a good argument would be (something like) a valid argument where you are rational to believe the premises.

Problem: if Standard #1 is true, there are no good arguments, and hence no rational beliefs. Can you see why?

For it to be plausible, we need our standard to allow for some beliefs to be rational, even if we lack arguments for them. But which ones?

1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.

Standard #1

A belief is irrational unless you have a good argument for it.

For it to be plausible, we need our standard to allow for some beliefs to be rational, even if we lack arguments for them. But which ones?

A historically influential answer to this question says: even if you lack arguments for them, you can rationally believe the deliverances of sense experience, and self-evident claims. This gives us:

Standard #2

A belief is irrational unless (i) you have a good argument for it or (ii) you sense experience tells you that it is true or (iii) it is self-evident.

Standard #2 looks better than Standard #1; at, least, it allows that some beliefs are rational. And it at least threatens to show that belief in Christian doctrines is irrational, since those doctrines are neither self-evident nor (arguably) the sort of thing for which we have direct sensory evidence.

1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.

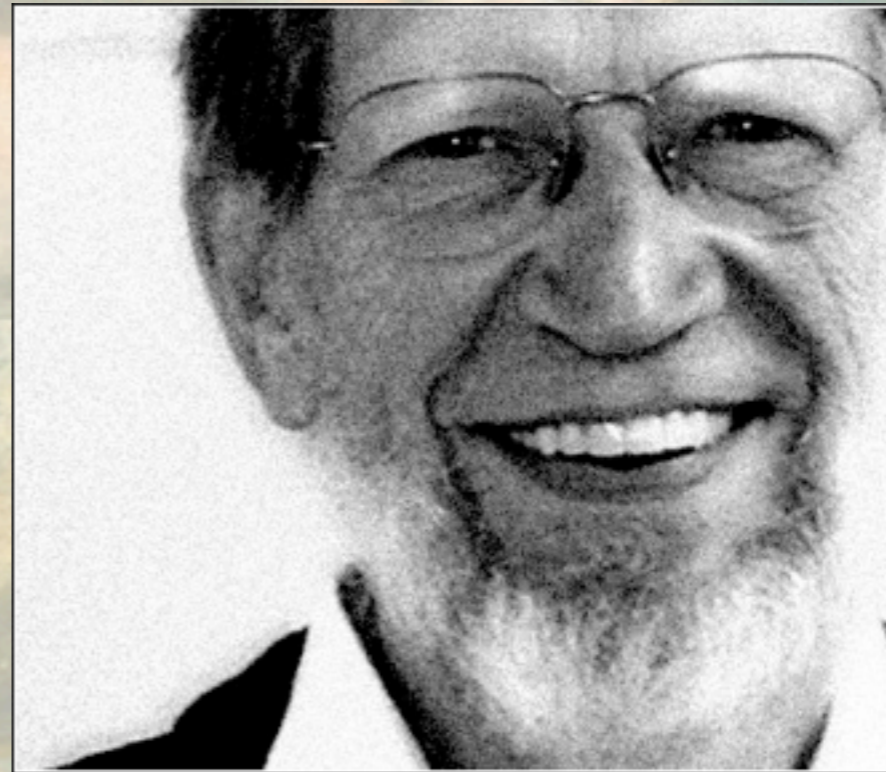
Standard #2

A belief is irrational unless (i) you have a good argument for it or (ii) you sense experience tells you that it is true or (iii) it is self-evident.

Standard #2 looks better than Standard #1; at least, it allows that some beliefs are rational. And it at least threatens to show that belief in Christian doctrines is irrational, since those doctrines are neither self-evident nor (arguably) the sort of thing for which we have direct sensory evidence.

But Alvin Plantinga pointed out a problem for principles like Standard #2. The problem is that such principles are, in a way, self-undermining.

For we can ask: is it rational to believe Standard #2 itself?



1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.



For we can ask: is it rational to believe Standard #2 itself?

Standard #2

A belief is irrational unless (i) you have a good argument for it or (ii) you sense experience tells you that it is true or (iii) it is self-evident.

~~True~~

~~False~~

There are two options to consider: either Standard #2 is true, or it is false.

Obviously, if it is false, then we should not believe it.

So suppose instead that it is true. If Standard #2 is true, then it is not rational to believe Standard #2. For we have no good argument for it, our sense experience does not tell us that it is true, and it is not self-evident.

So either way – whether it is true or false – we can derive the result that it is not rational to believe Standard #2. Hence Standard #2 can't be used in a good argument for the irrationality of religious belief.

1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.

Standard #2

A belief is irrational unless (i) you have a good argument for it or (ii) you sense experience tells you that it is true or (iii) it is self-evident.



As Plantinga also pointed out, principles like Standard #2 also seem to lead to implausible consequences.

One way to bring this out is by considering the possibility that everyone besides you is a zombie.

A zombie (in the philosophical sense) is not a bloodthirsty undead monster. A zombie is a creature who is externally indistinguishable from a human being, but lacks consciousness. How do you know that everyone besides you is not a zombie, in this sense? (The problem of answering this question is sometimes called 'the problem of other minds.')

Your senses don't tell you one way or another whether the person to whom you are talking is conscious. And it is not self-evidence that the person is conscious.



So, if Standard #2 is true, it looks like we can rationally believe that other people are conscious only if we can give a good argument for the claim that they are conscious. Can we?

1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.

Standard #2

A belief is irrational unless (i) you have a good argument for it or (ii) you sense experience tells you that it is true or (iii) it is self-evident.



So, if Standard #2 is true, it looks like we can rationally believe that other people are conscious only if we can give a good argument for the claim that they are conscious. Can we?

Here's one argument you might give: I know that I am conscious, and I observe that in my case there is a correlation between my conscious states and my outward bodily movements. But I also notice that the outward movements of the bodies of other people are similar to my own. So it is reasonable for me to believe that, just as there is a correlation between outward movements and conscious states in my case, so there is such a correlation in the case of other people. Hence it is reasonable for me to believe that they too are conscious.

This argument sounds plausible. But it faces a serious problem.

An inductive argument is an argument which generalizes from cases. An example of an inductive argument is: the sun has risen every morning; so tomorrow morning the sun will rise. Inductive arguments are not valid – but it does seem as though they can give us good reason to believe certain claims which go beyond our sense experience.

The argument we just gave for the conclusion that other people are conscious seems to be an inductive argument: it generalizes from my own case to the case of other people.

But it is a very weird argument of this sort: it is induction **from a single case**. Is this sort of inductive reasoning a good way to reason?

1. If there is no evidence for God's existence, then it is irrational to believe in God, because it is always irrational to believe things for which you lack evidence.

Standard #1

A belief is irrational unless you have a good argument for it.

Standard #2

A belief is irrational unless (i) you have a good argument for it or (ii) you sense experience tells you that it is true or (iii) it is self-evident.

So it looks like if Standard #2 is true, then our belief that other people are conscious – our belief in other minds – is irrational. But that is surely crazy. So Standard #2 should be rejected.

Standard #1 and Standard #2 are not the only possible ways of spelling out what it means for a belief to “lack evidence.” If one want to defend the above argument for the irrationality of religious belief, one has to provide some other standard which avoids the problems which these two standards face. It must both avoid implying that belief in itself is irrational, and must avoid implausible consequences like the one about other minds just discussed. It is not easy to do these two things.

Let's turn now to our second argument for the irrationality of religious belief.

Let's turn now to our second argument for the irrationality of religious belief.

2. Even if it is sometimes rational to believe things without evidence, it is sometimes irrational — as Pastafarianism illustrates. Christianity is relevantly the same as Pastafarianism, so belief in Christian doctrine is irrational.

The question, of course, is whether Christianity really is relevantly the same as Pastafarianism. The defender of Christianity will say that Christian doctrine is, by contrast, more closely analogous to belief in other minds: hard to argue for, but perfectly reasonable nonetheless.

Let's say, borrowing a term from Plantinga, that a belief which is not based on argument is a **basic belief**. We know that some basic beliefs are rational (like belief in other minds) and that other basic beliefs are irrational (Pastafarianism). Let's call a rational basic belief **properly basic**. Our second argument for the irrationality of Christian belief then boils down to the challenge to provide some standard for a belief to be properly basic which counts Christian belief as properly basic and does not count Pastafarian belief as properly basic.



Let's say, borrowing a term from Plantinga, that a belief which is not based on argument is a **basic belief**. We know that some basic beliefs are rational (like belief in other minds) and that other basic beliefs are irrational (Pastafarianism). Let's call a rational basic belief **properly basic**. Our second argument for the irrationality of Christian belief then boils down to the challenge to provide some standard for a belief to be properly basic which counts Christian belief as properly basic and does not count Pastafarian belief as properly basic.

Here's what Plantinga says on this topic:

[one] can properly hold that belief in the Great Pumpkin is not properly basic, even though he holds that belief in God is properly basic and even if he has no full fledged criterion of proper basicity. Of course he is committed to supposing that there is a relevant difference between belief in God and belief in the Great Pumpkin, if he holds that the former but not the latter is properly basic. But this should prove no great embarrassment; there are plenty of candidates. ... [he] may concur with Calvin in holding that God has implanted in us a natural tendency to see his hand in the world around us; 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.

Here Plantinga seems to be suggesting that a belief is properly basic if we have a natural tendency to believe it. This seems to put belief in God — though perhaps not specifically Christian belief — on the side of other minds rather than on the side of Pastafarianism, which is what Plantinga wants.

Here Plantinga seems to be suggesting that a belief is properly basic if we have a natural tendency to believe it. This seems to put belief in God — though perhaps not specifically Christian belief — on the side of other minds rather than on the side of Pastafarianism, which is what Plantinga wants.

But of course this is — as Plantinga recognizes — too simple. After all, we seem to have a natural tendency to believe that the sun moves around the earth — but we can hardly rationally take that on board as a basic belief.

The reason why is obvious: we have a great deal of evidence that this belief is false. Let's call this evidence a **defeater** for the belief that the sun moves around the earth.

Then we might reformulate Plantinga's suggestion as follows: a belief is properly basic if we have a natural tendency to believe it, and it has no defeaters (or, if it does, that those defeaters are outweighed by reasons counting in favor of the belief).

Our question, then, is whether belief in God has defeaters. And one might think that it does: one might think, for example, that the amount and kind of evil we find in the world is a defeater for the belief that there is an omnipotent and all-good being. In this case, we might think that belief in God is properly basic for children and adults who have never thought the problem of evil through, but not properly basic for intellectually sophisticated adults like the students in this class.

The question about whether there are defeaters for belief in God is an important and difficult one. But it's important to be clear about how this connects to the argument we are considering.

Then we might reformulate Plantinga's suggestion as follows: a belief is properly basic if we have a natural tendency to believe it, and it has no defeaters (or, if it does, that those defeaters are outweighed by reasons counting in favor of the belief).

Our question, then, is whether belief in God has defeaters. And one might think that it does: one might think, for example, that the amount and kind of evil we find in the world is a defeater for the belief that there is an omnipotent and all-good being. In this case, we might think that belief in God is properly basic for children and adults who have never thought the problem of evil through, but not properly basic for intellectually sophisticated adults like the students in this class.

The question about whether there are defeaters for belief in God is an important and difficult one. But it's important to be clear about how this connects to the argument we are considering.

2. Even if it is sometimes rational to believe things without evidence, it is sometimes irrational — as Pastafarianism illustrates. Christianity is relevantly the same as Pastafarianism, so belief in Christian doctrine is irrational.

We've now found a candidate criterion to distinguish belief in God — though, again, perhaps not Christian belief — from belief in the flying spaghetti monster. The claim is that we have a natural tendency to believe in God and no defeaters for this belief (or defeaters that are outweighed). One might reject the idea that there are no defeaters for belief in God — but then one is arguing that religious belief is irrational, not because of a lack of evidence, but rather because there are arguments against it.

But we already knew that one could challenge the rationality of religious belief on **that** basis. That's consistent with claiming that there is no special problem for religious belief which follows from a lack of evidence for God's existence.