

Belief without evidence?

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1. A CRITICISM OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

One common criticism of religious belief is that it is based on faith, not on reason or evidence. We could put this argument very simply as follows:

1. There is no evidence for religious belief.
2. It is always irrational to believe something without adequate evidence.

C. Religious belief is irrational.

Richard Dawkins is a prominent atheist who traces his atheism to his recognition that his religious beliefs were unsupported by evidence.

One way to press this argument is via the example of one of the world's fastest growing religions, Pastafarianism. Here is a quote from the Pastafarian web site:

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.

Presumably there is something irrational about (non-ironic) belief in Pastafarianism. But if there is no evidence for Christianity, what makes it different than Pastafarianism?

2. STANDARDS OF RATIONALITY

Let's return to the simple argument with which we started. The first question to ask about this argument is: what does it take for a belief to be based on adequate evidence? Another way to ask this is: what does it take for a belief to be rational?

Answer 1: For a belief to be rational, one has to have a good argument for that belief

Why might this answer to the question be problematic?

Answer 2: The answer of classical foundationalism

The foundationalist is someone who recognizes that not all beliefs can be based on arguments. Instead, the foundationalist thinks that beliefs fall into two categories: basic beliefs, which are not based on any other beliefs, and non-basic beliefs, which are based on other beliefs.

The key question is: what does it take for a basic belief to be rational? That is, in Plantinga's terms, what does it take for a belief to be 'properly basic'?

The classical foundationalist says: a belief is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses.

What are examples of self-evident beliefs, or beliefs that are evident to the senses?

If classical foundationalism is true, how might that be used to argue against the rationality of belief in God?

Plantinga gives two arguments against classical foundationalism (though not in today's reading).

Argument 1: Either classical foundationalism is false or it is true. If it is false we should not believe it. If it is true we should not believe it. So we should not believe it.

Argument 2: If classical foundationalism is true, then we are not justified in believing that other people are conscious. But we are justified in believing this.

Answer 3: The answer of reformed foundationalism

The 'reformed foundationalist' view Plantinga discusses is a version of foundationalism, but is much more permissive than classical foundationalism in its view of what beliefs are properly basic. In particular, the reformed foundationalist says that belief in God is properly basic.

Objection 1: The Great Pumpkin objection. Plantinga's response:

“[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.”

Objection 2: We have a natural tendency to believe that the sun goes around the earth. But surely it is not rational to believe this.

How should Plantinga reply?

One reply would be that we have *defeaters* for this belief — positive reason to think that it is false. Can the atheist provide any defeaters for our tendency to believe in God?

Martin's objections

In the second reading, Martin gives six objections to Plantinga's view that belief in God is properly basic. Summarizing:

1. Devil worshippers could legitimately take their beliefs to be properly basic.
2. More generally, any community could take any of its basic beliefs to be properly basic.
3. People could have conflicting beliefs, each of which they took to be properly basic.
4. Atheists could take atheism to be properly basic.
5. There is no plausible alternative to belief in other minds, but there are plausible alternatives to belief in God.
6. The conditions that trigger belief in God in some people don't in others.

Concluding question: Dawkins contrasts his faith that the physicists know what they are talking about with the theist's faith that God exists. Is there a real contrast here? What is it?