
What should I believe?
Only what I have evidence for.

We closed last time by considering an objection to Moore's proof of an external world. The objection was that Moore does not know the premises of his proof, because he cannot prove them.

This objection relies on the following principle:

> **Proof/Knowledge**
> If you cannot prove something, you do not know it.

While intuitively appealing, this principle faces two apparently decisive objections.

Proof/Knowledge
If you cannot prove something, you do not know it.

The first is that the principle seems to imply that knowledge is impossible.

Suppose (for *reductio)* that I know some claim P1. It follows from Proof/Knowledge that I must be able to prove P1; so it follows from Proof/Knowledge that there must be some other claims — call them P2 and P3 — which I know to be true and from which P1 follows.

Let's focus on P2. If I know it, then from Proof/Knowledge it follows that I must be able to prove it. But then there must be some other claims — call them P4 and P5 — which I know to be true and from which P2 follows.

Let's now focus on P4. ….

Actually, let's not. Can you see a pattern here?

Proof/Knowledge
If you cannot prove something, you do not know it.

Proof/Knowledge says that, for every claim I know to be true, I must know some other claims to be true which can be used to prove the first one.

But then one of two things must be true.

First option: this process never comes to an end. To know any claim, I must know infinitely many others. But I don’t know infinitely many things. So, if we take this first option, I don’t know anything.

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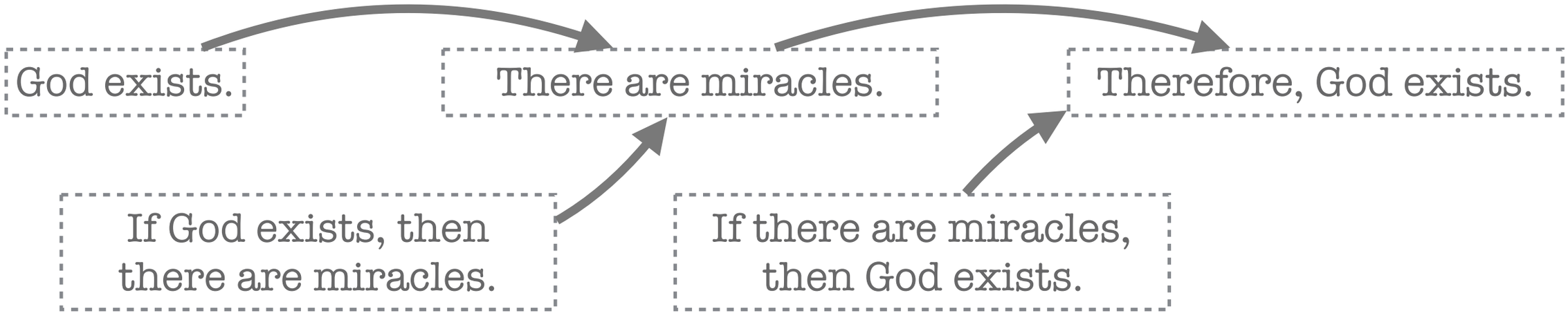
But then one of two things must be true.

Second option: the process goes in a circle, so that (for example) P is used to prove Q, and Q is used to prove R, and R is used to prove P. But it does not seem as though this sort of circular reasoning can yield knowledge.

Imagine, for example, that one argued like this:



Proof/Knowledge
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This might remind you a bit of Aquinas' first cause argument. Just like a chain of causes, every chain of reasoning must either be infinite, circular, or have some unproven premise. But the first two can't explain our knowledge, and, if Proof/Knowledge is true, the last one can't either. So, if Proof/Knowledge is true, then knowledge is impossible.

Proof/Knowledge

If you cannot prove something, you do not know it.

Here is the second problem with using Proof/Knowledge as an argument against Moore (or anyone else). It seems that one can legitimately use this principle in an argument only if one knows it to be true.

And if one knows Proof/Knowledge to be true, then (by Proof/Knowledge itself) one must have a proof of it.

But what could that be?

So it seems as though we can know things that we cannot prove, and (for parallel reasons) that we should sometimes believe things that we cannot prove.

But, you might think, there must be some rules which govern responsible belief formation; one can't reasonably just believe anything.

This point can be brought out by examining one of the world's fastest growing religions: Pastafarianism.

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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.

And this might be so even if we could not come up with any decisive argument against Pastafarianism.

In that case, it seems, we would want to provide some sort of standard for rational belief, and claim that Pastafarianism does not meet that standard.

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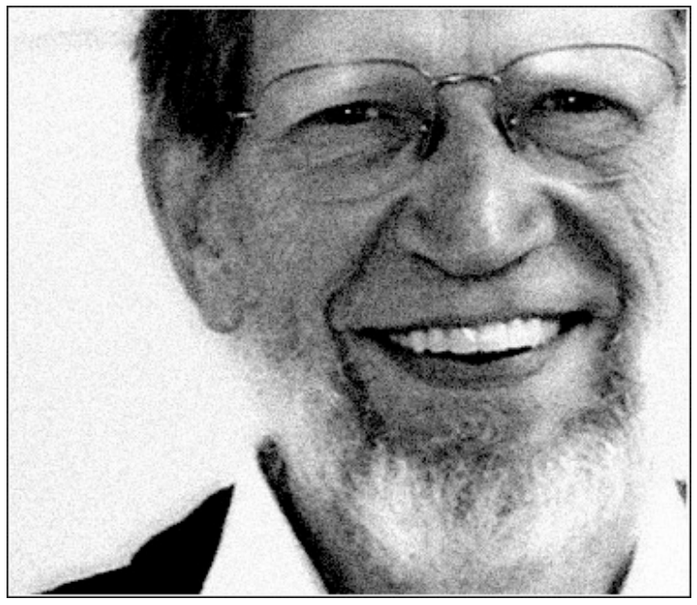
Proof/Knowledge was a failed attempt to provide such a standard; can we do better?

To do so, it seems, we have to allow that it is sometimes rational to believe claims which one cannot prove. But which ones? A historically influential answer singles out two classes: claims which are self-evident, or obvious; and claims which your sense experiences tell you to be true.

This is the view which, in the reading for today, Alvin Plantinga calls foundationalism.



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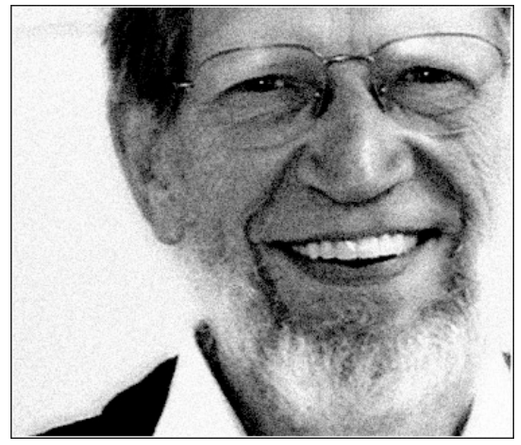
Foundationalism
You do not know a claim unless
(i) you have a good argument for it, or
(ii) your sense experience tells you that it is true, or
(iii) it is self-evident.



Foundationalism looks to be an improvement on Proof/Knowledge. Like that principle, it can also be cast as a claim about what it is rational to believe, or what you ought to believe, rather than as a claim about knowledge.

Foundationalism

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Foundationalism also seems to explain what is wrong with (serious) Pastafarianism. Given that there seem to be no good arguments in favor of the existence of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, we have no sensory evidence of its existence, and its existence is not self-evident, we should not be Pastafarians.

Could Foundationalism also be used as an argument against more standard forms of religious belief?

It can. (This is what Plantinga calls the ‘evidentialist objection’ to religious belief.)

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It can. (This is what Plantinga calls the ‘evidentialist objection’ to religious belief.)

1. Foundationalism is true.
2. We have no good argument for God’s existence.
3. We have no sense experience of God.
4. God’s existence is not self-evident.

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C. We do not know that God exists. (1,2,3,4)

Note that, if we recast Foundationalism as a claim about what it is reasonable or rational to believe, we could give a parallel argument for the conclusion that it is not reasonable or rational to believe in God.

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One might of course reject premise (2) of the evidentialist objection. But Plantinga gives us an argument that, even if (2) turns out to be true, premise (1) — and hence Foundationalism — should be rejected.

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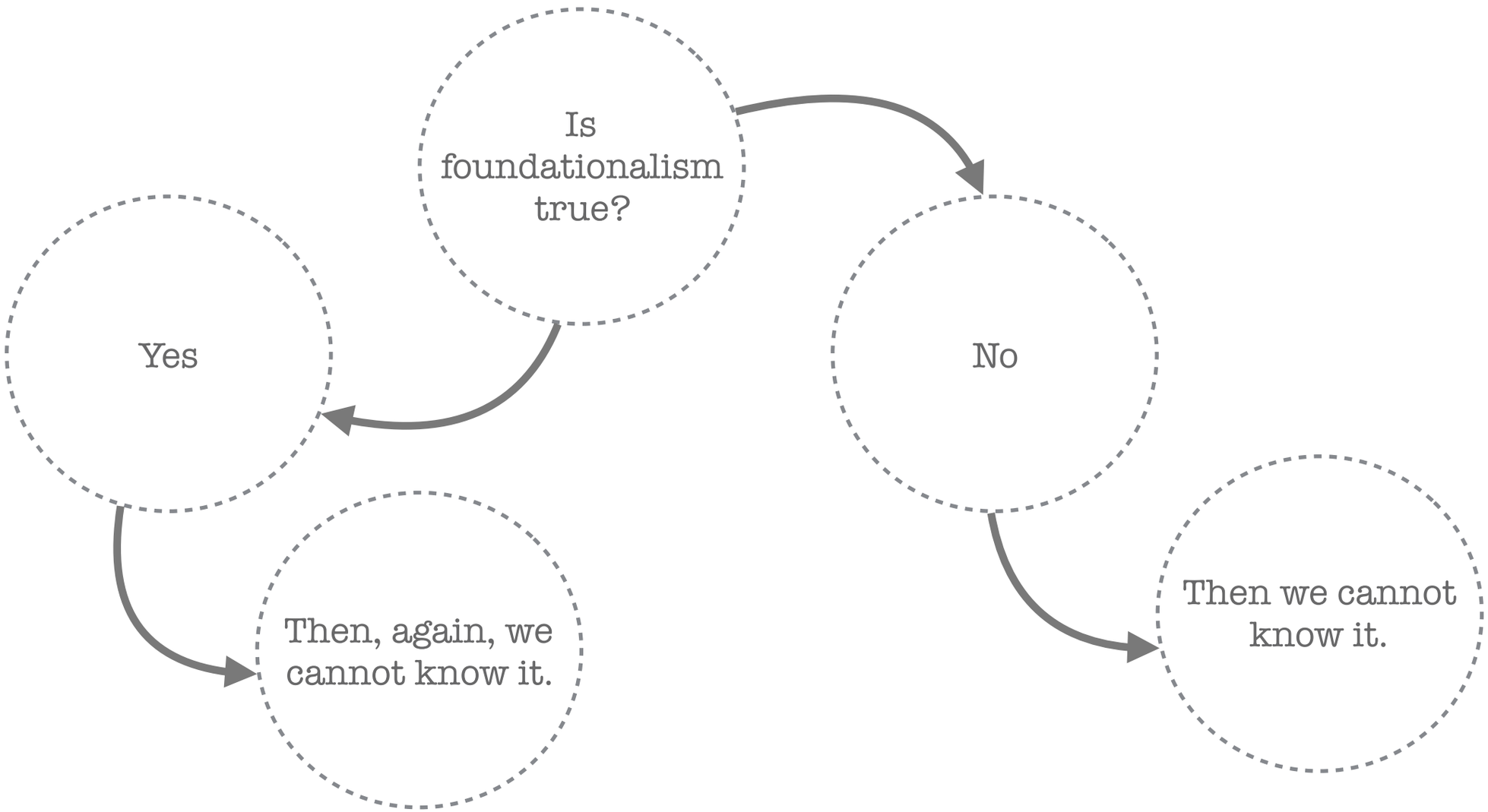
For we can ask: do we know that Foundationalism is true? An argument by dilemma can be given that we cannot.



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So we do not know Foundationalism to be true.

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But that is a premise of the Evidentialist argument. So we do not know premise (1) of that argument to be true. So the argument can be rejected.

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But even if this is an effective rebuttal to the evidentialist objection, it does not tell us whether Foundationalism is true or false. Plantinga's second argument is an attempt to show directly that Foundationalism is false.

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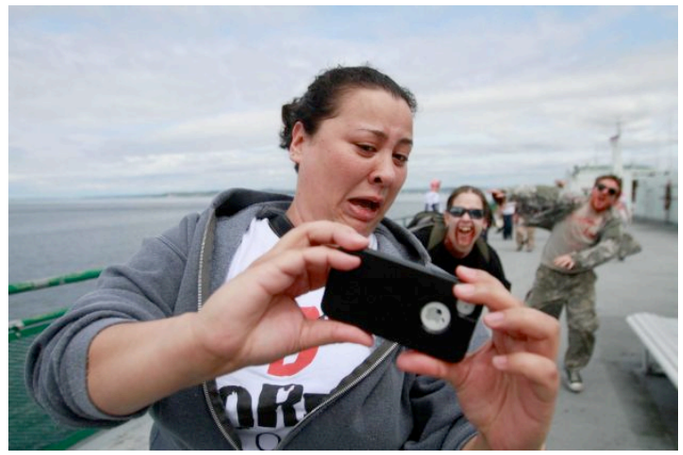
A zombie (in the philosophical sense) is not a bloodthirsty undead monster. A zombie is a creature who is externally indistinguishable from a human being, but lacks consciousness.

We can ask: how do you know that everyone besides you is not a zombie, in this sense? 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-evident that the person is conscious.

So, if Foundationalism is true, it looks like we can know that other people are conscious only if we can give a good argument for the claim that they are conscious. Can we?

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Here is an 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 — which is sometimes called the argument from analogy — sounds plausible. But it faces a serious problem.

An inductive argument is an argument which generalizes from cases. Here is an example of an inductive argument:

1. The sun came up today.
2. The sun came up yesterday.
3. The sun came up the day before yesterday.

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C. The sun will come up tomorrow.

Is this argument valid?

In general, 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 from analogy 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? Compare the following:

> Yesterday, I saw my first sushi roll. It had salmon in it. So, I think that all sushi rolls must have salmon in them.

This is pretty clearly a bad piece of reasoning. But then the question is: why isn't the inductive argument for the conclusion that other people are conscious just as bad?

But it is hard to see how we could argue that other people are conscious, other than on broadly inductive grounds.

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So it seems as though, if Foundationalism is true, we cannot know whether other people are conscious. But that, Plantinga thinks, is very implausible. Hence, he thinks, Foundationalism is false.

This is good news for someone who wants to oppose the evidentialist objection to religious belief. But it leaves us without the thing we wanted: some explanation of why Pastafarianism is irrational.

We have two different claims for which we lack good arguments: the claim that other people are conscious, and the claim that there is a Flying Spaghetti Monster. And yet it is reasonable to believe the first, but not the second. What explains the difference? (And which one, the traditional religious believer might ask, is the belief that God exists more like?)

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. Then our question is what makes some beliefs but not others properly basic.

This is a difficult question to answer. Here is what Plantinga says about it:

> [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 basicality. 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.

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.

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.

In order for us to get anywhere, it has to sometimes be rational to believe a claim without argument. But, as the FSM shows, this is not always rational. The question of when it is rational to believe without argument — when it is rational to take a belief as basic — is an important and difficult one.