

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

Does good
belief require
arguments?



When we were discussing the existence of God, I mentioned that there were two main arguments against belief in God. One was the argument from evil. The second one is sometimes called the **evidentialist argument against belief in God**.

This argument comes in different forms, but the basic idea is simple. It says: there is no evidence that God exists, so you should not believe that God exists.

The general form of argument has nothing in particular to do with the existence of God. Suppose that your friend believes in horoscopes. You might criticize their belief by saying: "there's no evidence to support belief in astrology; so you shouldn't believe what your horoscope says!"

belief without proof?

A nice example is brought out by one of the world's fastest growing religions: Pastafarianism.

belief without foundations?

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.

what's wrong with the FSM?



← A ChrisFSMas tree

belief without proof?

belief without foundations?

what's wrong with the FSM?



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 **negative rule of belief**, which would imply that Pastafarianism is a bad belief.



In that case, it seems, we would want to provide some **negative rule of belief**, which would imply that Pastafarianism is a bad belief.



Here's one possibility:

No Proof → No Belief
If you can't prove P, don't believe P.

But last time we found two reasons for doubting that this rule of belief could be correct.

So it looks like, on the one hand, this negative rule of belief should be rejected. But, on the other hand, we surely need some explanation of the fact that sincere Pastafarianism is bad belief.

belief without proof?

belief without foundations?

what's wrong with the FSM?

Doubt \rightarrow No Belief

If you cannot distinguish between a situation in which P and a situation in which not-P, do not believe P.

Proof \rightarrow Belief

If you can prove P, believe P.

No Proof \rightarrow No Belief

If you can't prove P, don't believe P.

Let's take stock. We've now considered three candidate rules of belief.

We've seen that both of our negative rules of belief are open to substantial challenge. But surely, one might think, there must be **some** principle which explains why certain beliefs are bad beliefs.

No Proof \rightarrow No Belief was a failed attempt to provide such a standard; can we do better?

belief without
proof?

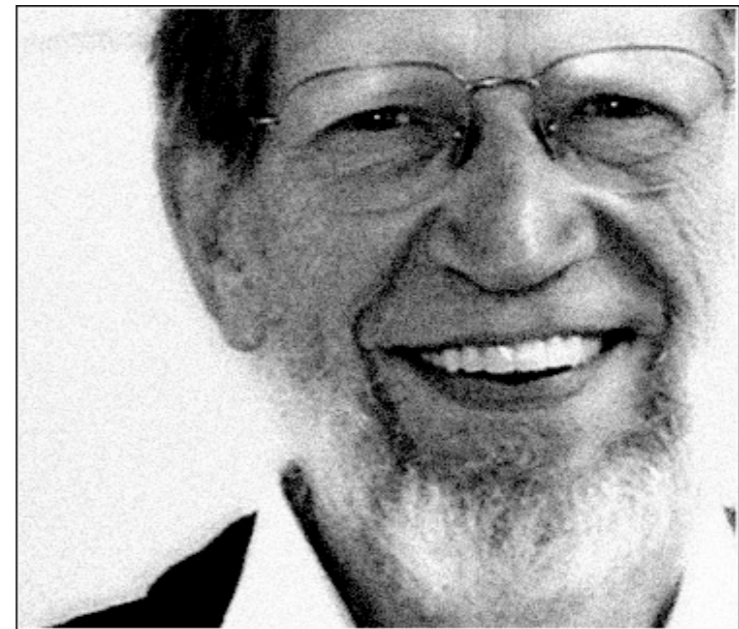
belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

No Proof → No Belief 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 Alvin Plantinga calls
foundationalism.



belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

This is the view which Alvin Plantinga calls
foundationalism.



One way into this view begins with two candidate positive rules of belief:

Experience → Belief

If your sense experience tells you that P, and you have no reason to think that your sense experience is misleading, believe P.

Self-Evident → Belief

If P is self-evident, believe P.

Now recall the other positive rule of belief we discussed:

Proof → Belief

If you can prove P, believe P.

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

Experience \rightarrow Belief

If your sense experience tells you that P, and you have no reason to think that your sense experience is misleading, believe P.

Self-Evident \rightarrow Belief

If P is self-evident, believe P.

Proof \rightarrow Belief

If you can prove P, believe P.

The foundationalist says: these are the **only** cases in which you should form a belief. We can state this thought as follows:

No Foundations \rightarrow No Belief

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, don't believe P.

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

No Foundations → No Belief

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, don't believe P.

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?

belief without proof?

belief without foundations?

what's wrong with the FSM?

No Foundations → No Belief

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, don't believe P.

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

the foundationalist argument against religious belief

1. No Foundations → No Belief.
 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.
-
- C. You shouldn't believe that God exists.
(1,2,3,4)

One might of course reject premise (2) of the foundationalist argument, if you found one of the arguments for the existence of God we discussed in class convincing. And you might reject (3) if you have had certain kinds of mystical experiences.

belief without proof?

belief without foundations?

what's wrong with the FSM?

the foundationalist argument against religious belief

1. No Foundations → No Belief.
 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.
-
- C. You shouldn't believe that God exists.
(1,2,3,4)

One might of course reject premise (2) of the foundationalist objection, if you found one of the arguments for the existence of God we discussed in class convincing. And you might reject (3) if you have had certain kinds of mystical experiences.

But set these aside for now. Our question is what you should do if you are in the position of The Believer — i.e., in a position where you find that you don't have a convincing positive case for some belief that you hold.

The key question is then: is our foundationalist rule of belief true?

belief without proof?

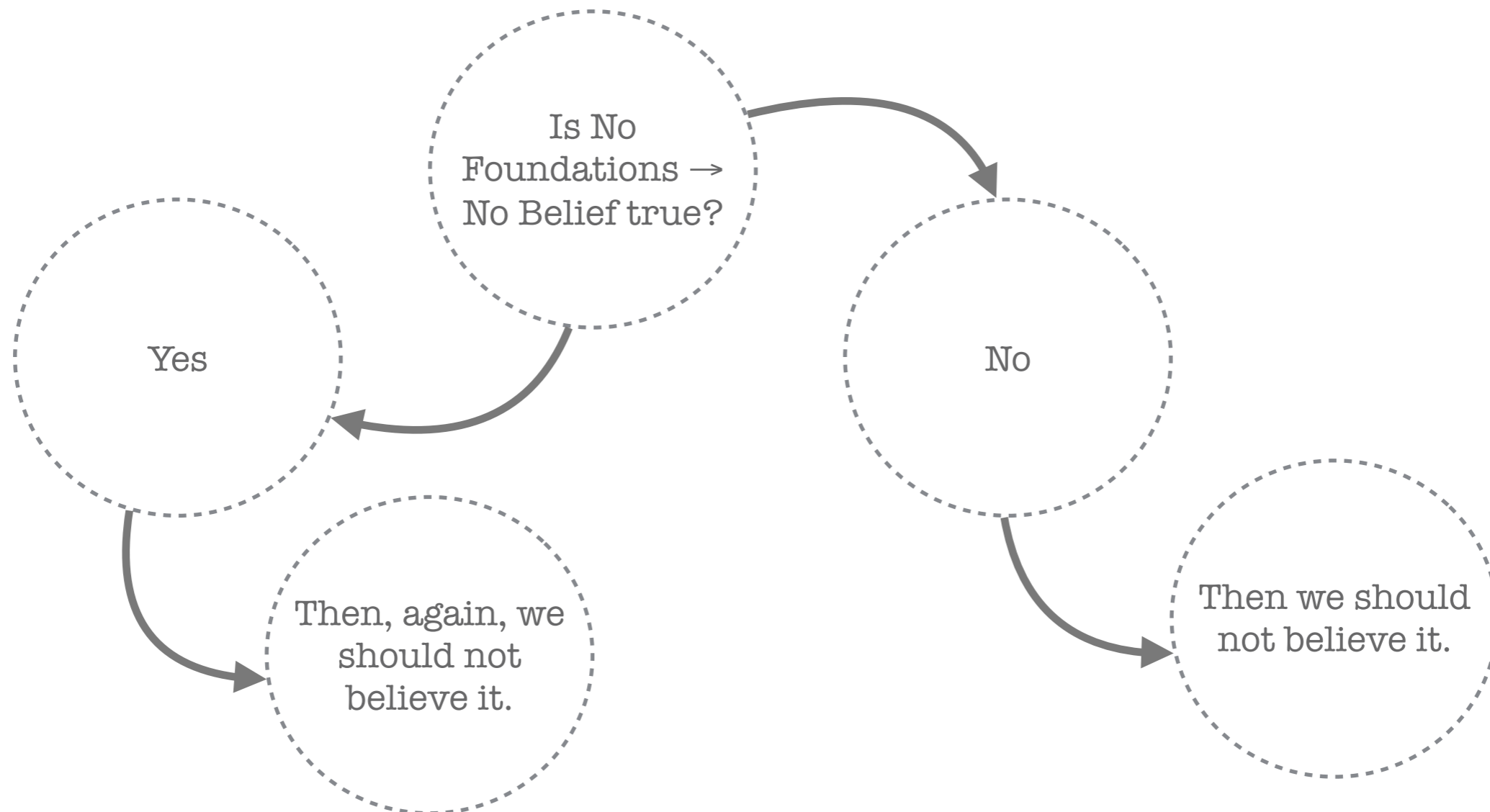
belief without foundations?

what's wrong with the FSM?

No Foundations → No Belief

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, don't believe P.

Here is an argument by dilemma that we should not believe this principle.



belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

No Foundations → No Belief

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, don't believe P.

So we should not believe this principle.

But that principle was a premise of the foundationalist argument against belief in God:

1. No Foundations → No Belief.
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.

C. You shouldn't believe that God exists. (1,2,3,4)

So, Plantinga concludes, the argument should be rejected.

belief without proof?

belief without foundations?

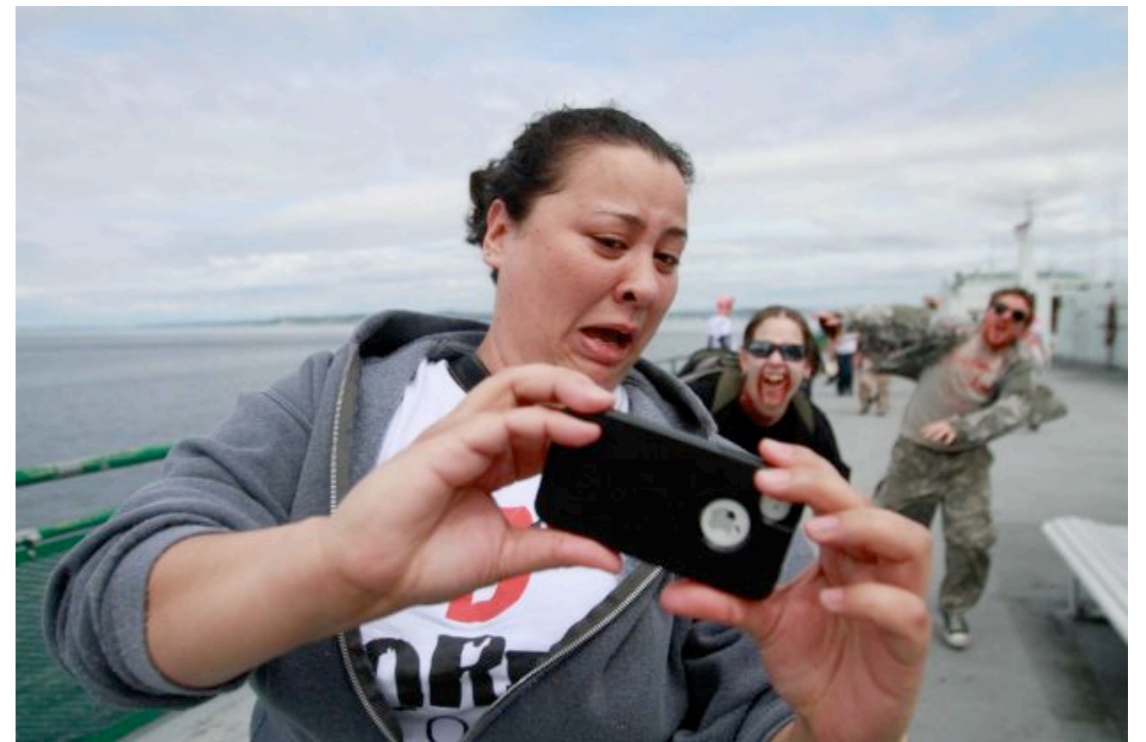
what's wrong with the FSM?

No Foundations → No Belief

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, don't believe P.

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.

This is based on the possibility that everyone besides you is a zombie.



belief without proof?

belief without foundations?

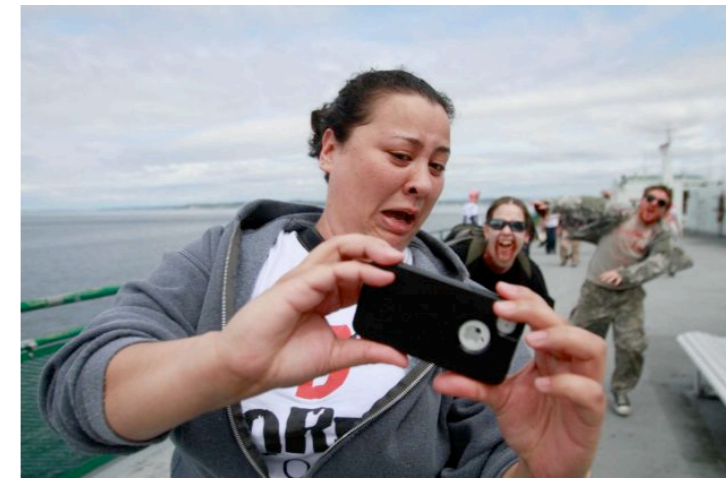
what's wrong with the FSM?

This is based on 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.

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?

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

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?

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.

belief without proof?

belief without foundations?

what's wrong with the FSM?

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.
-
-
-
-
- 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.

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

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?

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

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

No Foundations → No Belief

If P is not self-evident and your senses don't tell you that P and you can't prove P, don't believe P.

So it seems as though, if No Foundations → No Belief is true, we should not believe that other people are conscious. But that, Plantinga thinks, is very implausible. Hence, he thinks, this rule of belief should be rejected.

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

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?)

Here is one thing that you might say about the flying spaghetti monster: the idea that there is such a thing seems to violate the laws of nature. So, to the extent that we take ourselves to have knowledge of the laws of nature, we should take ourselves to have reason to believe that there is no FSM.

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

Here is one thing that you might say about the flying spaghetti monster: the idea that there is such a thing seems to violate the laws of nature. So, to the extent that we take ourselves to have knowledge of the laws of nature, we should take ourselves to have reason to believe that there is no FSM.

What should the Pastafarian say? Presumably something like: the FSM is miraculous; it violates the ordinary laws of nature. After all, don't most religious people also believe in miracles, which violate the laws of nature?

But there are other claims which seem to rule out the FSM. For example, here are two things that I believe:

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 there are other claims which seem to rule out the FSM. For example, here are two things that I believe:

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.

The Pastafarian can of course ask why I believe these things. At some point, I am going to run out of arguments. But that is not a surprise — as we saw in our discussion of No Proof → No Belief, arguments have to start somewhere.

But it is a mistake for the Pastafarian to say for this reason that we can't give any arguments against the FSM — we can. So someone who believes in God but not the FSM can explain her position: she can say that she knows of plenty of convincing arguments against the FSM, but not of any convincing arguments against the existence of God. (Of course, this presumes that she has something to say about the argument from evil.)

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

But it is a mistake for the Pastafarian to say for this reason that we can't give any arguments against the FSM — we can. So someone who believes in God but not the FSM can explain her position: she can say that she knows of plenty of convincing arguments against the FSM, but not of any convincing arguments against the existence of God. (Of course, this presumes that she has something to say about the argument from evil.)

But in one sense this leaves the question posed by Pastafarianism unresolved. Suppose that we came across a sincere Pastafarian who holds that there is an FSM (and so denies the claim that all spaghetti is made by people). She might have an entirely consistent system of belief. It seems quite plausible that she is violating some negative rule of belief. But (if you think that No Foundations → No Belief is false) we have not yet found one.

Indeed, you might think that some of our discussion so far suggests the troubling conclusion that the sincere Pastafarian is not engaging in bad belief after all.

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

But it is a mistake for the Pastafarian to say for this reason that we can't give any arguments against the FSM — we can. So someone who believes in God but not the FSM can explain her position: she can say that she knows of plenty of convincing arguments against the FSM, but not of any convincing arguments against the existence of God. (Of course, this presumes that she has something to say about the argument from evil.)

But in one sense this leaves the question posed by Pastafarianism unresolved. Suppose that we came across a sincere Pastafarian who holds that there is an FSM (and so denies the claim that all spaghetti is made by people). She might have an entirely consistent system of belief. It seems quite plausible that she is violating some negative rule of belief. But (if you think that No Foundations → No Belief is false) we have not yet found one.

Indeed, you might think that some of our discussion so far suggests the troubling conclusion that the sincere Pastafarian is not engaging in bad belief after all.



Indeed, you might think that some of our discussion so far suggests the troubling conclusion that the sincere Pastafarian is not engaging in bad belief after all.

After all, if it really is true that we have no good argument in favor of the claim that other people are conscious, what positive rule of belief explains why we should believe that other people are conscious?

Maybe just the fact that it **seems true** to us that other people are conscious, and we have no argument against that claim. That suggests the following positive rule of belief:

Seems → Belief

If P seems true to you and you know of no good argument against P, you should believe P.

Could this be a rule of belief? And if it is, would that mean that sincere Pastafarians and horoscope-believers are not believing as badly as we might have thought?