

belief without
proof?

belief without
foundations?

what's wrong
with
the FSM?

the challenge
of
disagreement

Does good belief require
arguments?
How should we respond to
disagreement?



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?

the challenge of disagreement



← A ChrisFSMas tree

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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.

Since we have no proof of Pastafarianism, this principle would rule out serious Pastafarianism — which is what we want.

Would it also imply that one should not believe in God?

The question is: is No Proof → No Belief a plausible rule of belief?

While intuitively appealing, this principle faces two serious objections.



No Proof → No Belief

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

The first is that the principle seems to imply that we shouldn't believe anything.

Suppose (for *reductio*) that I should believe some claim P1. It follows from our rule that I must be able to prove P1; so it follows from our rule that there must be some other claims — call them P2 and P3 — which I should believe and from which P1 follows.

Let's focus on P2. If I know it, then from our rule 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 should believe and from which P2 follows.

Let's now focus on P4.

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



No Proof → No Belief

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

No Proof → No Belief says that, for every claim I should believe, there must be some other claims which I should believe 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. For any claim I should believe, there are infinitely many others that I believe and should believe. But I don't believe infinitely many things. So, if we take this first option, I shouldn't believe anything.

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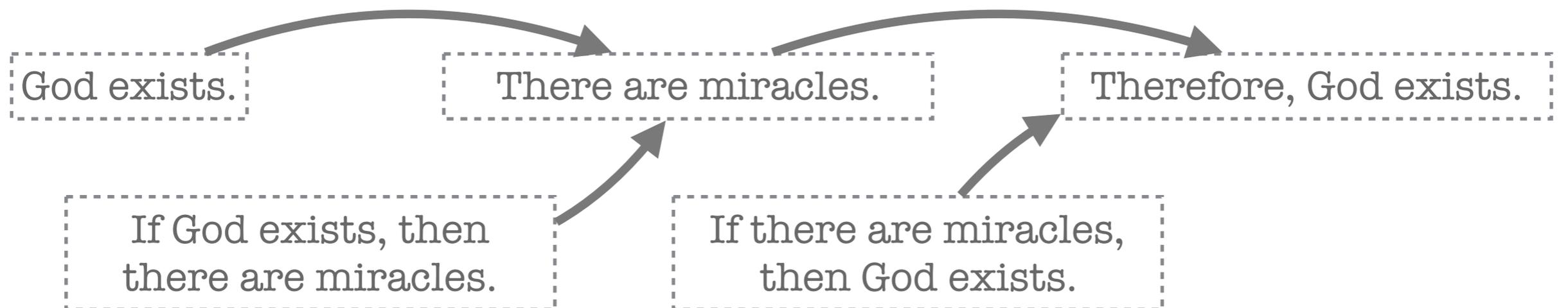
No Proof → No Belief

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

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 be a good reason to form a belief.

Imagine, for example, that one argued like this:





No Proof → No Belief

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

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 why I should believe anything, and, if No Proof → No Belief is true, the last one can't either. So, if No Proof → No Belief is true, I shouldn't believe anything.



No Proof \rightarrow No Belief

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

Here is the second problem with using No Proof \rightarrow No Belief as an argument against the Pastafarian (or anyone else). It seems that one can legitimately use this principle in an argument only if one should believe it.

But if we should believe No Proof \rightarrow No Belief, then (by No Proof \rightarrow No Belief itself) one must have a proof of it.

But we have no proof of it.

So, in a way, No Proof \rightarrow No Belief is a principle which implies that we should not believe it. That is not a good quality for a principle to have!

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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?

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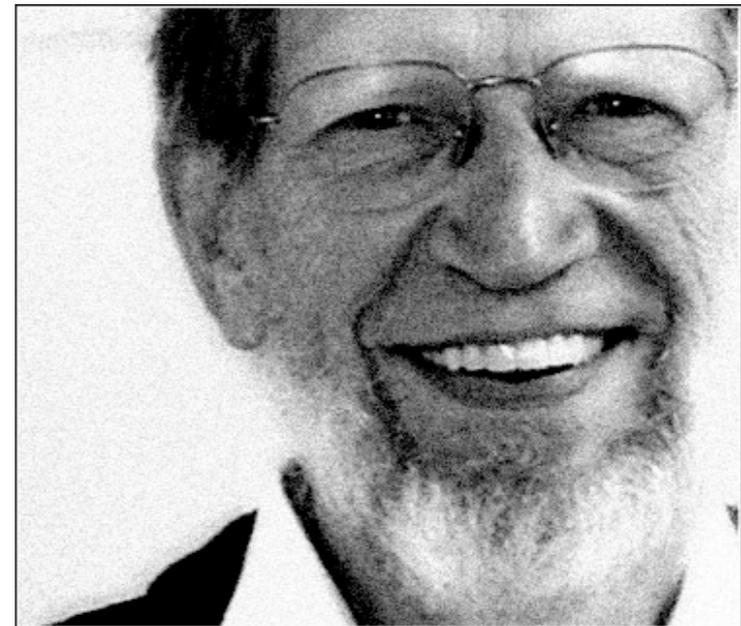
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No Proof → No Belief was a failed attempt to provide such a standard; can we do better?

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.



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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.

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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.

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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?

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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.

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the foundationalist argument against religious belief

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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?

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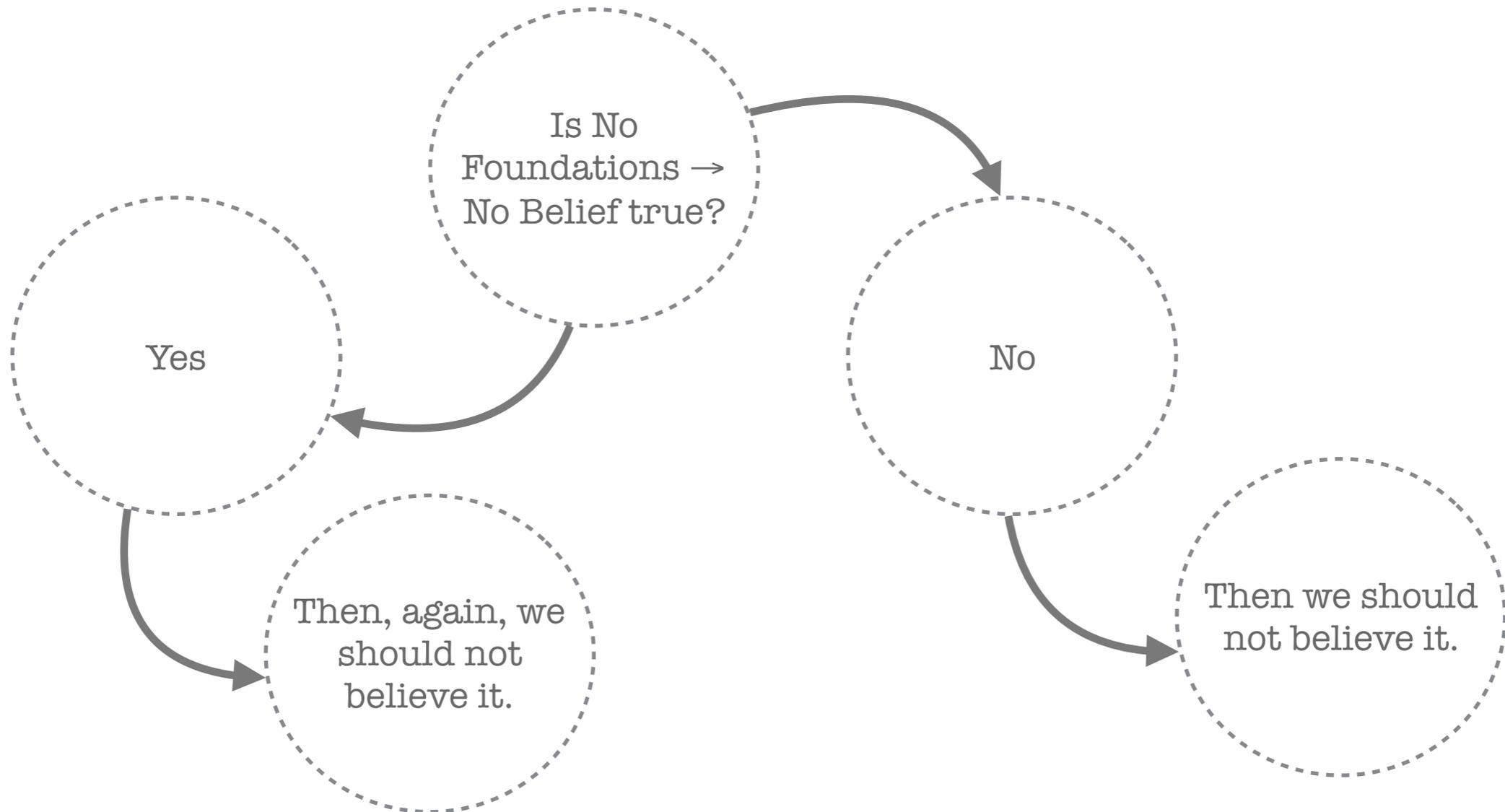
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No Foundations \rightarrow No Belief

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.

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



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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.

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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.



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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?

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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.

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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.

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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?

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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.

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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.

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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)
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No person has ever
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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.)

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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.

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Let's turn to our second main topic of the day: the challenge posed
by **disagreement**.

The horse race

Imagine that you are at a horse track with a friend. Two horses, A and B, are competing for the lead down the stretch. At the finish, it is extremely close, but it looks to you that horse A won. You are highly confident that you are correct.

Your friend then turns to you and says
“I can't believe that B won.”

Should you now be less confident in
your initial judgement?

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Splitting the bill

You are in a restaurant with some friends, and the bill comes. You've agreed to split the bill equally. You think that everyone owes \$19.

Your friend says, "OK, everybody should chip in \$18."

Should you now be less confident that everyone owes \$19?

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These are simple cases of disagreement. Many people have the intuition that, in cases like these, disagreement should lead us to revise our beliefs.

Here is one way to state this view:

The Equal Weight View

In cases of disagreement, you should give equal weight to your own opinion and the opinion of the person with whom you disagree.

There are two (related) ways to understand what exactly this view implies about the above cases.

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The Equal Weight View

In cases of disagreement, you should give equal weight to your own opinion and the opinion of the person with whom you disagree.

Here is the first, and simplest:

The judgement suspension rule

If you believe P, and then come across someone who believes not-P, you should respond by suspending judgement over whether P or not-P is true (and so should they).

This seems to explain our intuitive judgements about the horse race and check splitting cases.

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The Equal Weight View

In cases of disagreement, you should give equal weight to your own opinion and the opinion of the person with whom you disagree.

The judgement suspension rule

If you believe P, and then come across someone who believes not-P, you should respond by suspending judgement over whether P or not-P is true (and so should they).

But this can't handle all of the cases of disagreement we might want to think about. Suppose that you believe P, and you come across someone who has suspended belief in P. What should you do?

The natural answer to this question introduces the fact that, in ordinary life, we don't just believe or disbelieve things; we also take them to have a certain probability of being true. The probability that you take P to have is called your credence in P. Credence can be expressed as a percentage, or as a number between 0 and 1 (1 means that you are sure that P is true, 0 that you are sure that P is false).

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The Equal Weight View

In cases of disagreement, you should give equal weight to your own opinion and the opinion of the person with whom you disagree.

If we take this fact about credence into account, it is natural for the proponent of the Equal Weight View to adopt the 'probability splitting rule.'

Suppose that both you and your friend have credence of 0.9 in your initial views about the winner of the horse race. This rule says that, on learning of your disagreement, you should both adjust your credence to 0.5.

The probability splitting rule

If you assign P credence N, and come across someone who assigns P credence M, then you should assign as P's credence the average of N and M.

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The probability splitting rule

If you assign P credence N , and come across someone who assigns P credence M , then you should assign as P 's credence the average of N and M .

Here is a different case which, many think, the Probability Splitting Rule says just the right thing about.

The poll

I put an argument on the screen, and conduct a poll, asking you to say whether the argument is valid or invalid. You confidently answer "Valid." When the poll results show up, you find to your surprise that you are the only student who answered this way.

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The poll

I put an argument on the screen, and conduct a poll, asking you to say whether the argument is valid or invalid. You confidently answer “Valid.” When the poll results show up, you find to your surprise that you are the only student who answered this way.

What should you say in this case? Why?

We can think of this as a case in which you have many simultaneous disagreements. Supposing for simplicity that everyone initially has credence 1 in her answer, the Probability Splitting Rule would suggest that you should lower your credence in your initial answer to 0.5, then to 0.25, then to 0.125, then to a small number.

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Here's a problem case for the probability splitting rule:

An argument for astrology?

Astrology is the view that we can predict the events in ordinary people's lives by the time of their birth and the relative locations of the stars and planets. I have the view that astrology is completely unscientific; there's just no evidence to show that it works. But 45% of Americans (62% between the ages of 18 and 24!) think that astrology is either "scientific" or "sort of scientific." So, following the advice of The Equal Weight View, I significantly increase my credence in the scientific status of astrology.

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Other, similar examples are easy to come by. 20% of Americans think Obama was born in Kenya; 30% think global warming is a hoax; etc.

Should any of these facts lead me to revise my views on these topics?

A reply: we need to restrict the relevant cases of disagreement to disagreement between **epistemic peers**. This was already implicit in our earlier examples; if your friend is drunk, then you will be unlikely to lose confidence in your judgement about how to split the bill at the restaurant.

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The probability splitting rule

If you assign P credence N, and come across someone who assigns P credence M, then you should assign as P's credence the average of N and M.

Does the probability splitting rule have any practical consequences?

Consider any religious, moral, or political view you have. There would seem to be plenty of people who have the same evidence as you, have thought about the issues as much as you, and are as smart as you, who have a view opposite to yours.

This suggests an argument with massive consequences for what you believe about these domains.

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This suggests an argument with massive consequences for what you believe about these domains.

the disagreement → agnosticism argument

1. For every moral, political, or religious view you have, you have at least roughly as many epistemic peers who disagree with you as you have epistemic peers who agree with you.
 2. The probability-splitting rule.
-
- C. You should not have credence >0.5 about any moral, political, or religious view. (1,2)

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the disagreement → agnosticism argument

1. For every moral, political, or religious view you have, you have at least roughly as many epistemic peers who disagree with you as you have epistemic peers who agree with you.
 2. The probability-splitting rule.
-
- C. You should not have credence >0.5 about any moral, political, or religious view. (1,2)

Is this argument convincing?

It looks hard to deny premise (1), for at least many of our moral, political, and religious views. So it looks like a reply to this argument must involve a rejection of the probability-splitting rule.

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It looks hard to deny premise (1), for at least many of our moral, political, and religious views. So it looks like a reply to this argument must involve a rejection of the probability-splitting rule.

The probability splitting rule

If you assign P credence N , and come across someone who assigns P credence M , then you should assign as P 's credence the average of N and M .

Is this plausible? Let's look at two arguments against this rule of belief.

The first is that the principle is in a certain way self-refuting. There are plenty of people who have thought about disagreement as much as you have who think that the probability-splitting rule is false.

What, given that, does the probability-splitting rule tell you to think about itself?

So there is a sense in which, given actual beliefs of your epistemic peers, this rule of belief is unstable: it recommends against itself.

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The probability splitting rule

If you assign P credence N , and come across someone who assigns P credence M , then you should assign as P 's credence the average of N and M .

The second argument is simpler. The main point is that this rule makes the facts about what we ought to believe oddly hostage to the beliefs of others.

It is for that reason a somewhat conservative rule of belief: it argues in favor of thinking what other people think.

Would this make it impossible to be a self-aware radical and to be rational in your beliefs?

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The Equal Weight View is not the only view you might take.

Here is the opposite view:

The No Weight View

In cases of disagreement, you should give no weight to the opinion of the person with whom you disagree, and should maintain your initial view.

We've already seen the problem for this kind of view: it seems to say very surprising things about the kinds of cases discussed at the outset.

One thing you might want to think about: is there some middle ground between these two rules which would be preferable to both?