

TXR-2911: 20th Century Philosophy of Religion

If we cannot prove the claims of religious belief, is it nevertheless reasonable to believe these claims?

Introduction

At the heart of this essay are the concepts of what it means to have a belief, what it means to be rational and under what conditions it is warranted to hold a specifically religious belief. Historically, it has been the discipline of *epistemology* that has endeavoured to provide a paradigm that allows beliefs to be tested for 'rationality' so that the individual and a civilisation may be protected against the dangers of irrationality. This essay examines how a "classical foundationalist"¹ epistemology has been critiqued in a variety of ways to address the charge that religious belief can only be considered irrational and the responses to the critique. In conclusion, it considers whether the charge of irrationality can be sustained.

The epistemological system deriving from the Enlightenment and particularly the philosophy of Descartes and Locke is known as *foundationalism*.

Foundationalism defines some beliefs as "basic" which are those beliefs that are held *a priori* and not reached by a process of reasoning or induction from other beliefs, '...a starting point for thought...I believe the proposition

¹ Plantinga, Alvin, 'Reformed Epistemology', *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Quinn, P.L. & Taliaferro, C. (Eds), 1997, p384.

6+1=7...I don't reason or argue to it from propositions I believe' and subsequently non-basic beliefs are those reached in an *a posteriori*, 'I believe the proposition 341 x 269...on the basis of other propositions.'²

Foundationalism holds that it must be necessary for there to be these starting points to facilitate rationality, '...If we try and justify all our beliefs in terms of other beliefs, the justification generates an infinite regress or vicious circularity'³. Additionally, basic beliefs can be those that are self-evident and incorrigible. They are beliefs that are concerned with normal cognitive function; it is not possible that the rational person could *believe* something known to be false:

“...the only propositions I can justifiably accept in the basic way are propositions that are certain for me...‘it seems to me’...self-evident...one can't understand them without seeing they are true.”⁴

Thus, there is the important concept of “evidence” within foundationalism. Incorrigible statements are those ‘evident to the senses’⁵ and may be held to be propositions universally testable and accessible to one's ‘epistemological peers’⁶. So, consider belief in God. It is neither self-evident, nor incorrigible and not about my own mental life, so they can not be considered as basic beliefs. It needs rational justification on the basis of objective, empirical

² Plantinga, *op.cit.*, p384.

³ Martin, M., ‘A Critique of Plantinga's Religious Epistemology’, *Philosophy of Religion*, Pojman, L.P. (Ed), 2003, p429.

⁴ Plantinga, ‘Reformed Epistemology’, p385.

⁵ Martin, *op.cit.*, p429.

⁶ Martin, *op.cit.*, p434.

evidence or on evidence from the assessment of philosophical arguments for God's existence such as the ontological, teleological and moral:

“...rational acceptability of belief in God centred on the question whether there was adequate evidence...if there is...then belief in God is rationally acceptable....the viable alternatives being atheism and agnosticism.”⁷

As these naturalistic arguments for God's existence have all failed⁸ under philosophical scrutiny, the evidence is then derived from the religious experiences of the fragmented community itself and it can but be concluded on assessment that such beliefs are internally inconsistent and thus irrational:

“...in general, beliefs without foundations lead to an early grave or to an accumulation of superstitions, which are usually troublesome and *always* false beliefs [but] may not faith...give us access to some new domain of truth? It is certainly possible...[but] one can hardly accept the reports of those with faith...on the ground they might be right...the difficulty for the religious community is to show that its agreement is not simply agreement about a shared mistake...it is clear that particular religious beliefs are mistaken, since religious groups do not...agree and they can not all be right...”⁹

The force of the argument for irrationality is based on the non-availability empirical evidence from the natural sciences that is considered of the ultimate quality in determining the rationality of belief:

‘the success of this system of [scientific] knowledge shows up every day...the only...support is to examine independently testable consequences...the proper alternative, when there is no evidence, is not a mere suspension of belief...it is disbelief...atheism is obligatory [MM - rational] in the absence of any evidence for God's existence.’¹⁰

⁷ Plantinga, ‘Reformed Epistemology’, p383.

⁸ This may be too strong a term as the scope of what these arguments could accomplish or were designed to accomplish may have a cumulative weight that requires them to have admitted some support for theistic belief.

⁹ Scriven, ‘The Presumption of Atheism’, *Philosophy of Religion*, Pojman, L.P. (Ed), 2003, p345-346.

¹⁰ Scriven, op.cit., pp346-348.

However, this extreme confidence in sense evidence and data from the natural sciences and the confidence in foundationalism is where the irrationality claim has been possible to challenge. For a modern foundationalist, the classical position requires substantial modification as it is clearly possible to initially believe something to be true and later to be shown that in fact, because of the accumulation of evidence from non-basic sources, that it was false. A case in point may be Newton's Universal Law of Gravitation that was proposed to be theoretically incorrect by Einstein's Theory of Relativity and later shown to be inconsistent with the empirical data when predicting the eclipse of Jupiter. Newton clearly believed he was behaving in a rational way and even now few would argue that he was not, even though he believed something that was false. The revised position of a 'modern' foundationalist is outlined by Martin:

"[Modern foundationalism] allow[s] that a Person P's statement could be shown to be false if it conflicted with many of the well supported basic statements...some have argued that deductive and inductive principles of inference must be supplemented with other principles of derivation...statements that are evident to the senses are either *initially credible* or *self-warranted*."¹¹

The key terms have been italicised by the author and this is clearly a major revision of classical foundationalism. It reflects what Plantinga calls the 'internal inconsistency' of the foundationalist position:

"...there is no good (non-circular) argument for the existence of material objects from propositions that are properly basic by classical foundationalist standards."¹²

¹¹ Martin, op.cit., p430. Italics mine.

¹² Plantinga, 'Reformed Epistemology', p386.

This circularity problem with foundationalism is admitted by Martin himself by referring to the work of Boyour on the problems of foundationalism, despite the fact he relies on his own modified foundationalism throughout his paper. You are required to break the epistemic rules of self-evidency when assuming incorrigibility. Martin metaphorically falls on his own sword but believes this also will cause Plantinga's approach to fail, '...Boyour's argument tends to show whatever criterion Plantinga might offer, there will be a problem for foundationalism.'¹³

However, Plantinga also goes to task with the notion of evidence and modifies the concept of warrant in more subjective terms, establishing a link with the way ethical beliefs are formed. This latter point will be examined in more detail later in the essay but it is first necessary to examine the concept of evidence. The 19th century philosopher Clifford was the most aggressive exponent of what would commonly be called 'evidence based beliefs' and is quoted by Plantinga:

"...it is wicked, immoral, monstrous...to accept a belief for what one does not have sufficient evidence...it is sinful."¹⁴

Clifford was not concerned even with the veracity of the belief, whether or not it may be proved right. Without evidence, it was *never* permissible to believe. Thus Clifford, as typical of his time and even of those today whom have a fundamentalist belief in the ability of the natural sciences not just to describe

¹³ Martin, op.cit., p435.

¹⁴ Plantinga, A., 'Religious Belief without evidence', *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, 2003, p415.

the world but to explain it¹⁵, the “evidence” in mind is empirical evidence alone. Scriven approvingly concurs, it is ‘the increasing success of naturalistic sciences’¹⁶ that provide the epistemic barometer of belief.

However, Plantinga challenges this narrow concept of evidence:

“...he doesn’t tell us how *much* evidence is sufficient. More important, the notion of evidence is about as difficult as that of rationality. What is evidence? How do you know when you have some? How do you know when you have sufficient or enough?...A person can have sufficient evidence for a false proposition P. Is he then irrational in believing P?”¹⁷

In fairness, it is possible to say that modern atheists have responded how much evidence would be required and that it would be of the type publicly testable by one’s epistemic peers:

‘it is right to demand a stronger case to overthrow a strong case and to demand very strong evidence to demonstrate unprecedented power...we need not have a proof that God does not exist in order to justify atheism’¹⁸

One of the objections both Martin and Scriven make of Plantinga is that his ‘common criteria’ that may allow the belief to be judged by your epistemic peers is elusive because of the diversity and fragmentation and lack of agreement within the religious community:

¹⁵ This is sometimes called ‘scientism’ and many would see Richard Dawkins fully express this idea in his current book *The God Delusion*. Dawkins may rapidly be seen as spending any intellectual capital in this book which has moved from any pretence of evidence based argument to a polemical and hysterical attack on religion of any form. A scholarly response is presented by fellow Oxford don McGrath in the aptly named *The Dawkins Delusion*. It is notable and remarkable how much support McGrath, a Christian theologian, has received from the thinking atheist community in his response to Dawkins. See the bibliography.

¹⁶ Scriven, op.cit., p352.

¹⁷ Plantinga, A., *Religious Belief Without Evidence*, p416.

¹⁸ Scriven, op.cit., pp348, 346.

“...there is no grounds for claiming that belief in God is properly basic since the conditions that trigger it yield widespread disagreement among epistemological peers...Plantinga’s foundationalism is radically relativistic and puts any belief beyond rational appraisal once it is declared basic.”¹⁹

However, Scriven and Martin are then obviously then demanding an evidential evaluation process that is unquestionably subjective, putting a confidence in science that extends beyond what might be its proper boundaries, “scientific theories can not be said to ‘explain the world’ – only to explain the phenomenon which are observed within the world”²⁰.

John Hick makes a simple comment on the basis of evidence that a believer may consider to be valid but that a logical positivist or strict empiricist would not admit, ‘religious individuals base their belief on certain evidence that comes through religious experience that non-religious individuals do not have as part of their data’²¹. Similarly, Plantinga describes how ethical beliefs are not arrived at on an *a priori* basis and emphasises there is a psychological component in belief formation:

“To be completely rational...is...to do the right thing with respect to one’s believings...To draw the ethical analogy, the irrational is the impermissible, the rational is the permissible...This notion must be relativised.”²²

The foundationalist claim for ‘self-evidency’ is a necessarily relativistic concept. The ‘rich interior spiritual life’²³ is self-evident to the believer that has

¹⁹ Martin, op.cit., pp434-435.

²⁰ McGrath, A., *The Dawkins Delusion*, London:2006, p16.

²¹ Hick, J., ‘Rational Theistic Belief Without Proof’, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, Pojman, 2003, p409.

²² Plantinga, A., *Religious Belief Without Evidence*, pp418-419.

²³ Plantinga, A., *Reformed Epistemology*, p387.

experienced the communion of Jesus Christ and may even be valid evidence for the Buddhist searching for the 'Truth' but it is beyond the reach of the unbeliever. A community may thus be seen to be properly declaring some beliefs as basic. This, of course, opens up Plantinga to the criticism that 'it would seem to allow any belief at all to become basic from the point of view of some community'²⁴ but Plantinga does consider this objection with the 'Great Pumpkin' analogy that some could perhaps hold that it could be argued by Pumpkinites that it is a basic belief that the Great Pumpkin appears at Halloween. Plantinga argues that he is not in fact advocating the position that any belief could always be viewed as basic but that the notion of 'self-evidency' is circumstantial and the rational mind will assess whether or not the circumstances permit it being considered as a basic belief:

"...the Reformed epistemologist 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 can not be said for the Great Pumpkin."²⁵

The logical implication is that the religious believer could never assemble evidence of a type demanded by a non-believer but this in no way invalidates the evidence. Within the community of believers, this evidence satisfies all epistemic demands. This position is expressed by Lewis:

"...Our opponents, then, have a perfect right to dispute with us about the grounds of our original assent. But they must not accuse us of sheer insanity if, after the assent has been given, our adherence to it is no longer proportional to every fluctuation of the apparent evidence...[we are moved] from the logic of speculative thought into what might perhaps be called the logic of personal relations."²⁶

²⁴ Martin, M., op.cit., p432.

²⁵ Plantinga, A., *Religious Belief Without Evidence*, pp427-428.

²⁶ Lewis, C.S., 'On Obstinacy in Belief', *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, Pojman, 2003, p358.

This last phrase the 'logic of personal relations' is Lewis' abstraction of the proposition that there is a powerful non-propositional component in belief formation. In the language of modern neuroscience this has been expressed by McGrath in this way:

“the compelling nature of religious faith almost certainly relates to processing by what psychologists...refer to as the 'implicational' subsystem rather than the 'propositional' subsystem...personal religion is not taking place at this level at all, but at an intuitive level that is not easily amenable to description in propositional terms.”²⁷

Freud described religion as the 'most complex phenomenon in civilisation'²⁸ and psychologist Vergote asserts 'the validity of religious belief can neither be substantiated nor refuted by scientific reasoning'²⁹. These commentators are emphasising the need to consider religious belief beyond the narrow epistemic boundaries of foundationalism in both its classical and modern forms. Atheists have seen this move beyond empiricism to mean 'an alternative to reason'³⁰ and breaking of all epistemic rules. Of course, it is not an "alternative" to reason but is said to be defining reason using different criteria that is admitting the moral, psychological and sociological as valid faculties within belief formation that are notoriously difficult to frame in purely propositional and hence, testable, terms:

“...Belief, in this case, seems...to be assent to a proposition which we think so overwhelmingly probable that there is a psychological exclusion of doubt, though not a logical exclusion of dispute...the absence of logical certainty does not induce in us the least shade of doubt.”³¹

²⁷ McGrath, A., op.cit., p37.

²⁸ Cited by McGrath, op.cit., p39.

²⁹ Vergote, A., 'What the psychology of religion is and what it is not', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, vol.3 (1993), pp73-76.

³⁰ Scriven, op.cit., p344.

³¹ Lewis, op.cit., p353.

The idea that religious claims are completely at odds with the natural sciences is certainly not warranted if an examination of the scientific community both past and present is conducted. For religious belief to be irrational and inconsistent once the individual is scientifically literate seems to be untenable both on a theoretical and practical basis:

“...they will admit that men, otherwise apparently rational, have been deceived by the arguments of religion...as a general explanation of religious assent it seems to me quite useless.”³²

Such an interpretation would demand a common cognitive dysfunction or pathological belief amongst the religious scientists. Extreme atheists have indeed alleged this³³ and have point blank refused to admit that such belief is compatible with rationality. However, such claims are quickly shown³⁴ to be at best untried hypotheses and at worst polemical rhetoric. A much more reasonable approach to evidence is reflected by Lewis again, ‘there is evidence both for and against the Christian propositions which fully rational minds, working honestly, can assess differently.’³⁵

Lewis seeks to demonstrate that the scientific method is not the only route to belief. Particularly in the realm of interpersonal relationships, it would be quite improper to only act on an evidential basis:

“...to love involves trusting the beloved beyond the evidence, even against much evidence. No man is our friend who believes in our good intentions only when they are proved. Such confidence, between one man and another, is in fact almost universally praised as a moral beauty; not blamed

³² Lewis, op.cit., p354

³³ Most famously, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*.

³⁴ See McGrath, A. in the bibliography.

³⁵ Lewis, op.cit., p354.

as a logical error...the suspicious is blamed for a meanness of character, not admired for the excellence of his logic.”³⁶

It is this self-evident nature of such observations that provides the weight to this line of argumentation. It is indeed arguable that the man whom risks to love may end up experiencing negative emotions that perhaps he could have avoided by submitting to his potential mate a detailed questionnaire or pre-nuptial agreement. However, his rationality may mean he stays single or hastens to divorce court. He does not understand the concept of love and its correlates. Even if his initial proposition was eventually proved faulty, most men would choose the joy of loving rather than to have not loved at all:

“...You...may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge...It is like a general, informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of a battle forever than to risk a single wound...a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than excessive nervousness.”³⁷

It is being proposed that logic, induction and deduction are only components of belief, ‘...pure insight and logic, whatever they may do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.’³⁸ The argument is sometimes presented as a ‘prudential’ argument³⁹ being a specific form of Pascal’s wager. It is thus vulnerable to criticism in the sense that his general thrust of argumentation, an appeal to what James’ called ‘live’ hypotheses and the ‘open propositional’ nature of justifiable beliefs, could in fact be inverted and used to show that it would be more reasonable not to believe, ‘...the atheist

³⁶ Lewis, op.cit., p357.

³⁷ James, W., ‘The Will to Believe’, *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, Pojman, 2003, p372.

³⁸ Ibid., p371.

³⁹ Everitt, N., *The Non-Existence of God*, Oxford:2004, pp198-204.

can appeal to his passional nature to justify his acceptance of atheism...for other people, it [is] disbelief [that makes their life better].⁴⁰

Conclusion

Plantinga effectively demonstrated that classical foundationalism has problems and this too seems to have been acknowledged by Martins as an atheist. Martins approach to critiquing Plantinga seems strange as he employs a modified foundationalism, defends the aims of foundationalism only to jettison it at the final hurdle to announce Plantinga needs to answer Boyour's criticisms of foundationalism. He may be seen as missing the point here, as Plantinga is only demanding the principle of an epistemic right that religious knowledge is as valid as any other type of knowledge. There is no universal jettisoning of the value of empirical data, only the requirement to admit other data.

This validity of other types of knowledge or non-empirical evidence was also demonstrated to have been rooted in the processes and experiences of everyday life by considering the work of James and Lewis. They present a strong case for the validity of non-propositional classes of knowledge for belief formation. Although the specific forms of such arguments (particularly James') have technical vulnerabilities to inversion, the principle of validity of other forms of knowledge seems to be well established.

⁴⁰ Everitt, op.cit., p204.

Thus, in final conclusion, it can be said that religious belief is rational if you accept that the definition of rationality is not just governed by a strict empiricism. To leave the final word to James:

'...If we had an infallible intellect with its objective attitudes..if we are empiricists, if we believe no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is within our grasp, ...it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell...we ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom.'⁴¹

Word count: 3016.

⁴¹ James, W., op.cit., p376.

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