

## IS BELIEF IN GOD IRRATIONAL?

### Related exam questions:

- Where the religious arguments are inconclusive, ought we always simply to suspend judgement? (2000/11)
- 'Reasons for a belief must come to an end, at which point a leap of faith is unavoidable.' Can religious belief be justified in this way? (2001/4)
- How might we support the claim that we can know what God can and cannot do? (2002/6)
- If it is reasonable for you to take your religious experience as genuine, ought I to accept it as well? (2004/8)
- 'Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds.' (JAMES) Would this be more than wishful thinking? (2006/9)
- "The debate about the existence of God ought to be conducted in a particular way... It is up to the theist: first, to introduce and to defend his proposed concept of God; and second, to provide sufficient reason for believing that this concept of God does in fact have application." (Anthony Flew) Are these demands appropriate? (2007/1)
- "I will search for you, Lord, by praying to you, and I will pray to you by faith in you; for you have been revealed to us." (Augustine) Is this rational? (2007/11)
- Can understanding religion as a form of life help to meet the challenge that religious belief is irrational? (2007/11)
- Do religious believers base their belief that God exists on the traditional arguments for his existence? If they do not, are these arguments irrelevant to the question whether God exists? (2008/6)
- Can one be rational, justified or warranted in holding a religious belief without evidence? (2009/13)
- 'The existence of God is intrinsically so implausible that any argument for it must be unsound.' Discuss. (2010/2)
- When, if ever, is it legitimate to appeal to mystery in religious matters? (2010/9)
- 'The robust muscular Christian haranguing us from the pulpit of my old school admitted a sneaking regard for atheists. ... What this preacher couldn't stand was agnostics.' (DAWKINS) Discuss. (2012/4)
- Does religious epistemology undermine faith? (2012/8)
- Do religious beliefs require evidence for their justification? (2013/7)
- 'Belief in God can be warranted even if the believer has no evidence at all for the proposition that God exists.' Discuss. (2014/9)
- Does the strongest form of argument from evil manage to make it irrational to believe that God exists? (2014/13)

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“It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

W.K. Clifford: *The Ethics of Belief*

Many people think that belief in God is irrational in the sense that theists commit some sort of intellectual error, offend against some norm of thinking, violate some of their intellectual duties, when they affirm that God exists. Here is, for example, Richard Dawkins voicing such a claim:

“The symptoms of an individual infected with religion may be startlingly reminiscent of those more ordinarily associated with sexual love. This is an extremely potent force in the brain, and it is not surprising that some viruses have evolved to exploit it. [...] The equivalent of the moth’s light-compass reaction is the apparently irrational but useful habit of falling in love with one, and only one, member of the opposite sex. The misfiring by-product – equivalent to flying into the candle flame – is falling in love with Yahweh (or with the Virgin Mary, or with a wafer, or with Allah) and performing irrational acts motivated by such love.” (*The God Delusion*, p.186)

One does not have to be a mad dog atheist to worry that religion is not exactly rational. This point is brought out very vividly in one of William James’s lectures on religion. James quotes from the diary of George Fox, founder of the Quaker denomination, who recounts his visit to Lichfield around 1650:

“As I was walking with several friends, I lifted up my head, and saw three steeple-house spires, and they struck at my life. I asked them what place that was? They said, Lichfield. Immediately the word of the Lord came to me, that I must go thither. Being come to the house we were going to, I wished the friends to walk into the house, saying nothing to them of whither I was to go. As soon as they were gone I stept away, and went by my eye over hedge and ditch till I came within a mile of Lichfield; where, in a great field, shepherds were keeping their sheep. Then was I commanded by the Lord to pull off my shoes. I stood still, for it was winter: but the word of the Lord was like a fire in me. So I put off my shoes, and left them with the shepherds; and the poor shepherds trembled, and were astonished. Then I walked on about a mile, and as soon as I was got within the city, the word of the Lord came to me again, saying: Cry, 'Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield!' So I went up and down the streets, crying with a loud voice, Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield! It being market day, I went into the market-place, and to and fro in the several parts of it, and made stands, crying as before, Wo to the bloody city of Lichfield! And no one laid hands on me. As I went thus crying through the streets, there seemed to me to be a channel of blood running down the streets, and the market-place appeared like a pool of blood. When I had declared what was upon me, and felt myself clear, I went out of the town in peace; and returning to the shepherds gave them some money, and took my shoes of them again. But the fire of the Lord was so on my feet, and all over me, that I did not matter to put on my shoes again, and was at a stand whether I should or no, till I felt

freedom from the Lord so to do: then, after I had washed my feet, I put on my shoes again. After this a deep consideration came upon me, for what reason I should be sent to cry against that city, and call it The bloody city! For though the parliament had the minister one while, and the king another, and much blood had been shed in the town during the wars between them, yet there was no more than had befallen many other places. But afterwards I came to understand, that in the Emperor Diocletian's time a thousand Christians were martyr'd in Lichfield. So I was to go, without my shoes, through the channel of their blood, and into the pool of their blood in the market-place, that I might raise up the memorial of the blood of those martyrs, which had been shed above a thousand years before, and lay cold in their streets. So the sense of this blood was upon me, and I obeyed the word of the Lord."

As James remarks, this is, on the face of it, psychotic behaviour.

The current literature on the rationality of theism is dominated by Alvin Plantinga, who of course argues that theism is rational. He has two subtly different theories.

In Plantinga's early theory (put forth in a series of papers in the early 1980s), the slogan is that **belief in God is properly basic**. A belief is basic iff you hold it without any external support (i.e. without holding it on the basis of some other belief which you think is justified). A belief is *properly* basic iff it is basic and it is proper to hold it, i.e. you are justified in holding it. The basic upshot of this terminology is that belief in God is properly basic iff you don't need any independent evidence for the existence of God in order for your belief in God to be justified and hence rational.

With his theory of proper basicity, Plantinga aims to bring down what he calls "classical foundationalism." This is a form of **evidentialism**. Evidentialism is the view that in order for your beliefs to constitute knowledge, you must have some evidence that they are true. In what Plantinga calls classical foundationalism, the chain of evidence always bottoms out in three types of basic evidence:

- (1) Some things are just self-evident. (E.g.  $2+2 > 1$ .)
- (2) There are things about which you cannot be mistaken (e.g. whether you are in pain, whether you're seeing red etc.). These beliefs are incorrigible and they automatically count as knowledge.
- (3) Some things are "evident to the senses." E.g. one might say that it is evident to my senses that there's a table in front of me. (Some foundationalists, like Descartes, would deny this – they would say that what is evident to me is that I have a certain sensory experience. Whether there really is a table is another matter. Descartes would only recognize type (1) and (2) beliefs as basic.)

In his early phase, Plantinga claimed that classical foundationalism (CF) is false, for two reasons.

(a) CF is self-referentially incoherent, because the claim that only beliefs of type (1)–(3) are properly basic isn't self-evidently true, incorrigibly true, or evident to the senses, or a consequence of such evidence. So belief in CF is unjustified if CF is true.

(b) On classical foundationalism, we are not justified to believe either of the following:

- (4) The world did not come into being in 1981 (complete with false memories etc).
- (5) Other people are not automata devoid of consciousness.

Neither (4) or (5) is self-evidently true, evident to the senses, or part of some incorrigible belief, or a consequence of such evidence. So CF is bankrupt.

Plantinga then went on to claim that there are properly basic beliefs other than (1)–(3), and religious beliefs are among them. Believers are justified to take certain theistic propositions (e.g. “God disapproves of what I’ve done” or [looking at the night sky] “God made all this”) as basic. (So, strictly speaking, it isn’t the belief that God exists which is properly basic, but beliefs which entail that God exists.)

The upshot of the earlier model is that the classical foundationalist typology of basic evidence is wrong and believers have (basic) evidence for the existence of God.

Plantinga’s later theory is propounded in his mammoth book *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), which followed, and builds on, two similarly hefty volumes on general epistemology. The slogan of the late theory is that (assuming that God exists) **Christian belief is warranted because we have a reliable cognitive faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*, which produces belief that God exists.**

The backdrop of the later model is Plantinga’s own definition of knowledge, which, I’m sorry to say, goes like this:

A belief is warranted if it was produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for that kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth. ( *Warranted Chr.B.* 156)

“Warrant” is Plantinga’s special term for what is traditionally called justification. (I.e. he defines knowledge as warranted true belief, in contrast to the traditional definition as justified true belief.) He prefers the term “warrant” because he thinks that “justification” implies certain views of knowledge that he rejects. E.g. it suggests that knowledge is the result of some sort of reasoning or is based on evidence, which Plantinga thinks is not the case.

Using the definition above, Plantinga goes on to claim that we have a special cognitive faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*, a sort of natural predisposition to be aware of the existence of God. *Assuming that God exists*, this faculty, in the case of ordinary theistic belief (terrorists etc. excluded) meets the conditions in the above definition: when it functions properly in the appropriate environment, it makes theistic belief warranted. Therefore belief in God is rational (assuming that God exists).

What about people who don’t find themselves thinking that God exists? Plantinga claims that in them, this special cognitive faculty is corrupted by sin. (Not in the sense that these people did something wrong. The idea is that we are imperfect beings who are prone to egoism, we don’t like to feel subordinated to a higher authority etc., and these sinful tendencies screw up our *sensus divinitatis*.)

Note that this view, unlike the earlier one, is not evidentialist any more. The claim isn't that there's a special class of theistic propositions that you rightfully take to be basic. The claim is that when you come to believe in God, no matter how that happens (extreme cases aside), your belief is justified (warranted), because one of your knowledge-producing cognitive faculties functioned properly.

Now all this only works if God exists. If there is no God, then surely the *sensus divinitatis* is not a knowledge-producing faculty. But this does not worry Plantinga. He thinks that this only shows that theistic belief can only count as irrational if you can prove that God does not exist. And since he thinks that nobody has come close to proving this, nobody has any grounds for calling theistic belief irrational.

If you want to work on this topic, please read:

Alvin Plantinga: "Is belief in God properly basic?" (a summary of his early theory)  
*and*

Philip L. Quinn: "Searching for the foundations of theism" (a difficult but fierce argument against Plantinga's early view)

Optional readings:

Alvin Plantinga: Warranted Christian Belief (excerpts) (on the *sensus divinitatis*)

Jeremy Koons: "Plantinga on properly basic belief in God" (argues that experience always presupposes a background theory [observations are "theory-laden"], so the basic theistic propositions that early Plantinga talks about cannot justify theism, because they presuppose theism. Be aware that this paper confuses early and later Plantinga. It quotes the later theory but it only works against the early one, I think.)