

# G-D, RATIONALITY AND MYSTICISM

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PRESS

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of this book will raise questions if not eyebrows, for the terms in the title are often considered incompatible. After all, is not rationality often thought incompatible with G-d on the one hand and mysticism on the other? The burden of this book is to argue that this is not so. Rationality is not incompatible with G-d—it is actually more compatible with G-d than it is with atheism. Furthermore, not only is rationality not an enemy of mysticism—it actually supports and nourishes it. These are large and grandiose themes and an unlikely subject for such a small book. However, I believe the points I have to make do not require long expositions. What they do require is clarity and ideally clarity can be attained in short books as well as long ones. The author has tried to make this book both short and clear. The reader will judge if he has succeeded.

Though the book is written from the perspective of contemporary philosophy and in the course of the book I allude to certain contemporary philosophers or schools of philosophy, nonetheless I will be disappointed if it cannot be understood by the intelligent layman. It contains a minimum of jargon and even when I avail myself of its convenience I try to explain it so that a non-philosopher can understand it. The more technical points in philosophy that I discuss are relegated to the footnotes, which can be skipped without interrupting the flow of the argument.

Of the three terms in the title of this book, by far the most difficult to elucidate clearly is rationality. As far as G-d is concerned, no one can elucidate Him, and throughout the book I assume we all know G-d from our common monotheistic background. What I mean by our “common monotheistic background” is not that I am assuming the reader of this book believes in G-d, but that whether one does or does not accept G-d, what one is accepting or rejecting is the monotheistic G-d of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and not some form of paganism, be it ancient or modern. Mysticism, as I will present it, is taken from the writings of Jewish mystical philosophy as this is expounded in the Zohar, Kabbalah and various Hasidic writ-

ings. Though the basis of my discussion of G-d in this book is taken from Jewish sources, I believe that what I say is applicable to all three monotheistic religions. There is a common philosophical core that Judaism, Christianity and Islam share with one another and it is this core that is the focus of this book.

Rationality on the other hand is the perennial bug-bear of philosophy and though everyone considers himself an expert on the matter (most people identify it with the way *they* think), it is extremely difficult to pin down or define. In the first two chapters, I try to deal with the question of when a belief is rational and just what is rationality. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 argue for the rationality of G-d through a discussion of the traditional arguments. Chapter 3 argues that it is more rational to suppose there is a mind behind the orderliness of the world than that it came about by chance. Chapter 4 argues that it is more rational to think that the necessary, eternal Being that is the origin of all contingent existence is G-d rather than the world itself. Chapter 5 argues that it is more rational to suppose that there is only one such necessary Being that is absolutely infinite, rather than that there is more than one such being. Though some of these arguments are old, going back at least to Aristotle and have been the subject of intense discussion both in medieval and modern times, I think I have something new to say about them, or in any event a new way of looking at them.

None of these arguments for G-d, however, imply that G-d created the world. Creation is an idea that the ancient Hebrews introduced to the world through the Hebrew Bible. It is not found in any religion or mythology before the Bible spread throughout the world under the influence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Plato, Aristotle and almost all ancient philosophers rejected the notion out of hand as irrational. In spite of this, G-d as Creator is the central idea in Judaism as well as in Christianity and Islam and it has been from the notion of G-d as Creator that religion has derived its great power and influence over the minds and hearts of people in every age. Chapter 6 presents what I think is an original argument for Creation.

Creation implies that G-d knowingly created the world for a purpose and that that purpose serves the end of goodness, for G-d Himself is good. None of the previous arguments that G-d is a single, knowing,

necessary and absolutely infinite Being imply that G-d is good. Chapter 7 argues that it is more rational to assume that G-d is good rather than that He is evil. Chapter 8 is a further discussion of the nature of morality and the role that G-d plays in the moral life of man. Chapter 9 is a discussion of the meaning of life, as this is implied by G-d's Creation of the world and His goodness. Chapter 10 is a discussion of the phenomenon known as the near-death experience and the role this plays in understanding the oneness of G-d and His unity with the world. Chapter 11 is an elucidation of the unity and oneness of G-d as expounded in Kabbalah and Chabad Hasidic philosophy. The last five chapters bring into focus the existential implications of G-d as the Creator who is good and who is one with the world. The unity of G-d with the world is the essence of what I call the mystical, and this chapter brings together the various facets of G-d's nature discussed in previous chapters. G-d as a knowing Being is the necessary source of the existence of the contingent world and is at the same time one with the world that He created for the sake of goodness, which is realized in the mystical awareness of the oneness of G-d and the world. All this is not a matter of faith or belief in something seen by a few mystics, but is actually a more rational view of the nature of reality than is atheism.

None of these arguments taken individually are rich enough to be an argument for G-d *per se*, but each one argues for a certain characteristic of G-d that monotheism would consider to be a necessary property of G-d, insofar as G-d can have properties. However, taken cumulatively, they are to my mind a powerful argument for G-d. If it can be shown that it is rational to suppose that there is some Being with a mind that is responsible for the orderliness of the world and is a necessary Being which is single and unique, who created the world for some good purpose and who is at the same time one with that world, then I think one has as good an argument for G-d as could be hoped for.

Finally I would like to say a few words about the peculiar spelling of the word "G-d." There is a Jewish tradition that the name of G-d is ineffable. That is, its true pronunciation is unknown, and even its visible form is not to be spelled out, except in the Torah scroll and holy books. But how can one talk about what is ineffable and invisible?

This is the paradox about G-d that I grapple with in this book. On the one hand there is something about G-d that one can know and on the other, He is essentially unknowable. His inscrutability, however, is not to be accepted on faith alone. One can *know* that He is inscrutable. That is, rationality can lead one to a Being we call “G-d” whose name is a word that does not signify an object, thing or event in the world, nor even the world as a whole, yet the word is pregnant with meaning and its meaning points to something beyond understanding altogether. To know that one does not know is the essence of all understanding and in this consists our understanding of G-d.

The peculiar spelling of “G-d” calls attention to the fact that this word is different from all other words. His name is not a word whose meaning can be pointed to, elucidated, explained, clarified, verified, etc. His name signifies something mysterious that can never be pointed to or verified.<sup>1</sup> Our rational understanding of the world may entice us to look for G-d where He cannot be found, and when we fail to find Him, we conclude He does not exist. Part of my argument is to explain why it is not reasonable to expect to find Him in those places where people often look, even though it may be easier to look there rather than in more hidden places.

This is reminiscent of a justly famous Chelm story. Chelm was a city of silly people who were always doing silly things with the utmost seriousness. One such story goes that a visitor arrived in Chelm one evening and found a group of men crawling on their hands and knees under a street lamp looking for something. Wishing to be helpful, the visitor asked what they were looking for and was told that one of them had lost a valuable diamond ring. The visitor accommodatingly dropped to his knees and began looking for the ring. After a while of fruitless searching, the visitor asked if they were certain that the ring was lost in this spot. They replied, “No, it was lost on the other side of the street, but there it is dark and no one can see anything!”

Looking for G-d in places where He can be proven or verified may be looking in places where we can see, but they are not the places in which G-d can be found. G-d once gave Elijah the prophet a lesson where He could be found. Elijah, fleeing for his life from Queen Jezebel,

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1 Similarly, the word “Creation” is capitalized throughout, as G-d’s Creation of the world is unlike any form of natural or human making.

had escaped miraculously to a cave on Mount Sinai where G-d had once revealed Himself amidst thunder, lightning, and a loud voice. Elijah went there looking for G-d again. First he heard “... a great and strong wind rend the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks, but G-d was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but G-d was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but G-d was not in the fire, and after the fire a still, small voice” (*Kings I*, 19: 11, 12). This still, small voice is the prompting of the human heart in its search for the mysterious reality of G-d that the mind tells us is there. It may be human rationality that indicates that G-d is there, as I argue in the first part of this book, but it is the human heart that finds in the mystery of G-d’s oneness with all things the reality of G-d that transcends the understanding. This vision of the oneness of G-d with all things is the ultimate vision of mysticism, and it is this vision that we pursue in the second Part of this book.

Finally, I would like to add a word about how to read this book. Since, as I have said, the argument is cumulative, I ask the reader to exercise patience in reading it. Many questions or objections one can have might well be dealt with or answered in a later chapter. This certainly applies to the general treatment of rationality in the first two chapters of this book as well as the more specific question of the rationality of belief in G-d. The case for the rationality of belief in G-d is argued for in stages and the full force of this argument does not become clear until one has read the entire first Part.

## PART I: G-D AND RATIONALITY

### I

### RATIONALITY

**W**hat is rationality? This is a very broad question that can be approached from different viewpoints. Let us begin with a simple approach to the question and interpret it as asking when it is rational to think or believe something as opposed to when it is irrational to think or believe something.

The first thing that comes to mind is that a rational belief is one that we believe we have good reasons for holding. If I think it is going to rain because I see dark clouds and hear thunder in the sky, that is rational; but if I think it is going to rain because I flipped a coin and it came out tails, that is irrational. We have good reasons for thinking that dark clouds and thunder signify rain for this is what our past experience teaches us about the weather. Furthermore, science has an explanation why rain clouds are dark and are accompanied by thunder whereas we see no connection at all between flipping a coin and the weather. If it should rain when we flip a coin tails, that is just an accident. The flipping of the coin is not the cause of the rain as are dark clouds, and so the flipping of the coin is not evidence for the rain the way dark clouds are.

Causes and evidence are intimately related. The relation of a cause to its effect and of evidence to its conclusion are similar. It's just that the search for causes is backward looking and the thrust of evidence is towards the future, particularly when the evidence is used to make a prediction. To use dark clouds as evidence for rain is rational for the clouds are the cause of the rain, but to take the flip of a coin as evidence for rain is certainly irrational, for no matter how many times the coin falls tails and it rains, we know the flip of the coin is not the cause of the rain.

These examples of rational and irrational belief are extremes. In between these are cases that are not so clear cut. Is it rational to believe



in UFOs, or that there is life somewhere else in the universe, or that the green-house effect will ultimately destroy life on earth? There are many situations where people say they can't make up their minds—they need more evidence. There is a certain relationship between the evidence and what the evidence indicates whereby when the evidence (E) is strong, belief in the hypothesis (H) is confirmed, and when the evidence is not so strong, the evidence is only circumstantial. It is difficult to say when the thin line of conviction is crossed, but it is certain that the line is there.

Suppose you are a member of a jury trying a case in which Sam is accused of murdering Joe. The case begins with evidence that Sam knew Joe. No jury would convict Sam on that evidence alone. It has very little to do with the question of whether it was Sam who killed Joe. If it were discovered that Sam disliked Joe then the evidence becomes a bit stronger, though again that does not prove that Sam did it. If, however, we find that Sam's gun is the one that fired the bullets that killed Joe and this gun is found in Sam's possession, the case becomes much stronger. There are juries who have convicted men on less evidence than that. Suppose, however, there is one person on the jury who takes his instructions literally that he should not vote for conviction unless the evidence points to guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. There is a possibility, he argues, that someone else might have borrowed Sam's gun, killed Joe and then replaced the gun. That would explain how the evidence is consistent with Sam not having committed the murder. However, is that cause for a reasonable doubt? Has the thin line of conviction been crossed already so that it is no longer reasonable to suppose that Sam is innocent. How does one determine this? There are no hard and fast rules. One knows, however, when the evidence is overwhelming. Suppose, there is a witness that sees Sam enter the apartment where Joe was murdered. The same witness hears a shot and then sees Sam running out of the apartment with the smoking gun in his hand. Would this be overwhelming evidence? It is almost eyewitness testimony though not quite. One might say that this proves it. Anyone, who now believes that Sam is innocent is just not rational. There is, of course, a slight possibility that Sam still didn't do it. It is possible there was another person in the room who actually shot Joe with Sam's gun and then gave it back to Sam,

but in the absence of evidence indicating this, it is too remote to take seriously. However, stranger things have happened!

Rabbinic law specified that no one can be sentenced to death for murder unless there were *two* eye-witnesses to the actual murder itself. Understandably there were very few cases of capital punishment carried out by Rabbinic courts. It was thought that in capital cases it was better to err on the side of leniency. In any event, this is how Rabbinic courts tried to make absolutely certain that no mistakes were made in such cases.<sup>1</sup> The ultimate proof of a fact is that a number of people have actually seen it with their own eyes.

In light of the above let us formulate a definition of rational belief. The definition will not explain what rationality is, and the definition is in fact circular, but I doubt if there is any definition of rationality that is not circular. Nonetheless most people recognize irrationality when they see it, so we define a rational belief as: A belief based on evidence E, such that to accept the truth of E, but to reject the truth of the hypothesis H would be irrational. At what point in the trial of Sam it would be irrational for the jurors to believe Sam's innocence is a matter for conjecture, but surely there is *some* point. Once you cross that point, then to believe that Sam murdered Joe is rational. This notion is identical with the notion of confirmation. To have a rational belief that H, is the same as having evidence that confirms H. E confirms H when the acceptance of E and the rejection of H is irrational. As we said, this definition is circular and really does not explain rationality to anyone who does not already understand it, for it assumes we all know when a belief is irrational which implies that we already know when a belief is rational. What then is the purpose of the definition? It is useful for it sets a recognizable standard on the scale of reasonable belief that determines when we have a 'right' to believe H true. Thus, it might be reasonable or rational to believe that H has a *probability* of being true without believing that H is actually true. On the basis that Sam knew Joe and had a motive for killing him, one might reasonably think there is a probability that Sam might have murdered Joe, but as a juror you could not fulfil your mandate of finding Sam guilty beyond a reasonable doubt on

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1 Even so there are cases recorded in the Talmud of miscarriages of justice. See Tractate *Makkoth* 5b.

this evidence alone. It would not be rational to convict him, because one could accept the truth of E (in this case, the fact that Sam knew Joe and hated Him) and reject H (that Sam murdered Joe) without being called irrational.

Meteorologists have learned the trick of never committing themselves and therefore they can never be proven wrong. This caution may be due to oversensitivity for always having been the butt of criticism for making false predictions. Contemporary probability theory now enables them to take suitable revenge, by predicating the weather without ever making any false predictions! If there is 80% chance of rain, this prediction remains true whether it rains or not. However, if you have to decide whether to take your umbrella, you have to commit yourself. You have to say "I think it will rain, *therefore* I will take my umbrella." Of course, you might say to yourself, "It might rain, *therefore* I will take my umbrella" in which case you can not be charged with holding a false belief if it should not rain, but you will have taken your umbrella for nothing. As far as practical action goes you might *as well* have thought it was going to rain.

Probability statements are applicable in those grey areas when there is not enough evidence to make up one's mind. However, one can take such an analysis to extremes as when the meteorologist says there is 99% or perhaps 100% probability of rain. Such ways of speaking are misleading. In such cases one actually believes it is going to rain, or one would be foolish not to believe it was going to rain. If it doesn't rain you should be surprised, for you certainly should have thought it was going to rain and you certainly had enough evidence to be justified in thinking it was going to rain. Just look at those black clouds rolling in with the thunder and lightning and listen to the meteorologist 'predict' 99% probability of rain! One would have to be a fool not to think it was going to rain.

Actually the so called 'predictions' of the modern meteorologist are not predictions at all. They are a statement about the nature of the evidence at the moment and not a statement about what the weather is going to be in the future. This is why they can not be proven wrong unless of course they misread the evidence. It's not that the predictions are infallible, it is that they are not predictions in the first place! If

you never shoot at the target you can never miss it, but that does not make you a good marksman.

Most of the time we use evidence to form a judgement, and we *do* think it is going to rain, though the meteorologists may still be talking about 80% or 90% probabilities. Most likely they themselves think it is going to rain, because that is what it is rational to think in this situation. When the drops start to fall and it starts raining ‘cats and dogs’ then we *know* it is raining. There is no more speculation.

There was a time when many philosophers<sup>2</sup> thought that our seeing or feeling the rain and getting wet was ‘evidence’ that it was raining. This is clearly a mistaken use of the notion of evidence. Evidence is a collection of facts that lead us to conclude that something is going to happen or that something did happen, but this assumes that we can know when the prediction is fulfilled or when we discover the truth about certain facts indicated by the evidence. If we can never know when it rains, how can we have evidence that it is going to rain? If the rain itself is not confirmation of the predication that it is going to rain, then the prediction is neither confirmable nor unconfirmable. Thus the notion of evidence itself presupposes the possibility of confirmation or disconfirmation, for if there is no way to confirm or disconfirm the evidence, we can never know what the evidence is supposed to be evidence for. The sceptical thrust of this argument is obvious and has been drawn to its ultimate conclusion by Saul Kripke<sup>3</sup> who has applied this kind of argument to the area of mathematics where everything is supposed to be cut and dried. If one can never tell whether one has added correctly, there can be no such thing as adding, and similarly for any other mathematical or even logical functions. Every form of knowledge implies the possibility of knowing when you have it right. When the evidence is confirmed, commitment takes over. One says, “It *is* raining” and if it is not raining, one is mistaken. The rain therefore cannot be evidence that it is raining.

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2 They were called “phenomenalists.”

3 See Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein On Rules and Private Language*, Harvard University Press, 1982, pp. 7-22.

## EVIDENCE FOR G-D

The great majority of contemporary philosophers think that belief in G-d is not rational, for there is no evidence that justifies that belief.<sup>4</sup> Though the philosophers do not express it specifically, the way I interpret this is that there is no evidence such that given that evidence it would be irrational not to believe in G-d. Often people try to refute this view by pointing to ‘miracles’ that have happened to them, or certain spiritual or mystical experiences they have had. However this kind of ‘evidence’ never reaches the level of confirmation.

A woman once told me that her small child was seriously ill and the doctors told her that there was little chance that her child would live. She and her husband went into the quiet room of the hospital and prayed that G-d should spare the life of their child. They were there praying when a doctor came in and told them that the child had miraculously come through the crises and would most likely survive. The couple felt that their prayers had been answered. Perhaps, but then maybe it was just a coincidence? Does G-d *always* answer prayers? If someone else in their family became ill, would G-d answer their prayers also? If the next time they prayed and their prayers were not answered, would this weaken their faith in G-d? No one would deny that faith in G-d is strengthened by such a miracle, but is this the kind of evidence that would confirm belief in G-d such that in the face of such a ‘miracle,’ if one still denied G-d, one would be clearly irrational? This seems hardly the case.

Another good example of such ‘miracles’ are untold numbers of events that intervened in the lives of people who were miraculously saved. Among the most remarkable of these, are stories told by survivors of the Nazi holocaust. Each of these survivors can describe not just one miracle, but numerous miracles whereby their lives were saved. Not all of those survivors, however, came out of the war with their faith in G-d intact. Though their lives were miraculously spared, why were they the only ones in their family to survive? What about their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, uncles, aunts and cousins? Out of an entire family why did they alone survive? What kind of G-d is that?

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<sup>4</sup> See particularly, N. R. Hanson, “What I Don’t Believe,” *Boston Studies in Philosophy of Science*, III ed. Robert S. Cohen and Marx Wartovsky, pp. 467-89.

Perhaps, such ‘miracles’ are indicative not of a kind, merciful G-d, but a cruel, malicious monster? On the other hand, many Jews survived the holocaust with their faith in G-d as firm as ever and in some cases, even stronger than before. How does one explain this anomaly?

The answer to this question is more complex than the simple relationship of evidence to a conclusion and involves questions that go beyond the scope of the relationship of rationality to faith in G-d.

All we want to say here is that ‘miracles’ that save the life of someone may play a role in the strength of one’s faith in G-d, but that does not imply that such facts are evidence that confirms the *truth* of such beliefs. I do not mean to underestimate the value and importance of such experiences for the people that have them, nor do I in any way want to cast doubt on their truth. I simply question their value as evidence for the existence of the Being we call G-d. One might call such facts circumstantial evidence. Certainly they are *consistent* with a belief in G-d, but it certainly does not seem that such experiences constitute confirmatory evidence as we have defined that concept.<sup>5</sup>

There are some philosophers such as N.R. Hanson who argue that as a matter of fact there is at present no such evidence, but there might be at some point in the future. What would such evidence look like? Hanson describes it for us:

The heavens open—the clouds pull apart—revealing an unbelievably immense and radiant Zeus-like figure, towering up above us like a hundred Everests. He frowns darkly as lightning plays across the features of his Michaelangeloid face. He then points down—at *me!*—and exclaims, for every man, woman and child to hear: ‘I have had quite enough of your too clever logic-chopping and word-watching in matters of theology. Be assured, N.R. Hanson, that I most certainly exist’.<sup>6</sup>

The first question one has to ask here is whether Hanson thinks this is evidence for G-d or is this ‘Zeus-like figure’ G-d Himself? If this is G-d Himself, then it cannot be evidence for G-d for the reasons given above. However, if it is G-d Himself, this would deny the basic

<sup>5</sup> In chapter 10, on near-death experiences, I argue that these experiences *do* confirm or tend to confirm the truth of a spiritual realm of existence and are on a different ‘logical’ level from ‘miracles’ that save our lives.

<sup>6</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 472.

thesis of monotheism that G-d is not a finite figure that has a visible form. This is nothing else than idolatry! Let us suppose then that the 'Zeus-like figure' is not G-d Himself but only evidence for G-d. The question is, how does one know that this is evidence for G-d? Keep in mind that you cannot know that E is evidence for H unless you know what it is like for E to confirm H and you can not know this unless you recognize the truth of H when you see it. Thus you cannot know that dark clouds is evidence for rain unless you now know what it is like for it to rain and you can't know what it is like for it to rain if you can not recognize rain when it falls. However, who can recognize G-d? Does He manifest Himself in the form of a 'Zeus like figure'? The Hebrew Bible expressly warns against looking for images or physical forms whereby G-d might manifest Himself.

...a voice of words did you hear, but you did not see a form other than voices...And you shall guard yourselves scrupulously, for you saw no form on the day G-d spoke to you on Horev from the midst of fire. Lest you become corrupt and make for yourself an idol in the form of any image male or female. The form of any animal on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the heavens. The form of any creeping thing on the ground, the form of any fish which is in the waters under the earth. (Deuteronomy 4:12-18).

No one raised in this tradition would ever suppose that a 'Zeus-like figure' could be a manifestation of G-d, much less G-d Himself. An ancient Greek might, but Hanson was not addressing himself to an audience of ancient Greeks. He was speaking to modern man, and this man, be he theist or atheist, if he looked up in the sky and saw Hanson's 'Zeus-like figure' would first of all be frightened out of his wits. Secondly, he might think earth was being invaded by outer-space creatures. If this figure proclaimed that he was G-d, only an imbecile would believe it. If this 'Zeus-like figure' started throwing its weight around and zapping houses, trees or even people, then we could be sure earth was being invaded, and it would be no Orson Welles hoax. Or maybe it *is* a great big hoax being played on us by some evil galactic scientist. Perhaps it is some fantastic Hollywood production or some gigantic hologram. Who knows what miracles modern technology can produce? Any of these scenarios would be consistent with the 'Zeus-like figure'. Probably the *last* thing one would think is that this

is a manifestation of G-d. Why in the world would G-d appear in such an outlandish fashion? Then again, how should G-d manifest Himself? How is anyone supposed to recognize Him if He should want to manifest Himself in some fashion? Let us not talk about prophesy, for we are suppose to be establishing a criterion for a *rational* belief or acceptance of G-d and prophesy is not relevant here. Prophetic visions may indeed be genuine manifestations of G-d and I would not want to deny the truth of prophecy. However, prophetic visions are not evidence for G-d for the simple reason that they are *revelations* of G-d and only the true prophet can know that his prophecy is genuine. However, no prophet ever takes his prophetic vision as *evidence* for G-d. That would be as absurd as taking rain drops as evidence for rain. As for as a rational belief in G-d consisting of evidence that somehow *confirms* G-d's existence, we are arguing that there is no such thing. I would ask anyone who supposes that he can produce such evidence to ask himself how he can know that any event or fact about the world that he takes as evidence for G-d is just that, since he has never confronted G-d or seen G-d 'face to face'. This is similar to a person claiming he has evidence for the existence of UFO's when neither he nor anyone else, so far as we know, has ever seen one or been inside of one, to say nothing of having flown one. Again I am not trying to deny the existence of certain phenomena, photographs etc., that people *claim* is evidence for UFO's. I am saying that one cannot justifiably take these phenomena as evidence for UFO's, using the notion of 'evidence' as this is commonly used in science or in weather reports and common sense knowledge of the world. The only thing that could rationally convince one of the existence of UFO's would be the capture of one that might be put on display. Once we know what one looks like or how it works etc., one might then have evidence for having sighted one, the way one can have evidence for an airplane overhead from the sound that the airplane makes in the sky. However, before the existence of airplanes, such a sound in the sky could never have been evidence for the existence of an airplane. Who knows what someone in the 19th century would have thought if he heard a sound like that in the sky? Even if some imaginative person then would have claimed that he had heard a gigantic bird or perhaps even a machine flying in the air, no one would be justified in thinking that the sound he had



heard was evidence for the truth of such a belief, unless he had seen or heard an airplane before, and even then who knows what he might have seen? In other words, the only person who can properly claim to have evidence for G-d is someone who knows G-d when he sees Him. Furthermore, people who claim that G-d talks to them or that they have visions of Him, must first be able to know that it is G-d speaking or appearing to them and not the Devil.

True prophets are a different story. They *know* that it is G-d, but it is another, very complicated problem how anyone *else* can tell whether they are true or false, particularly in an age when people no longer believe in prophets. One needs to fill in a lot more about who or what we take G-d to be before we can begin to approach the question of what kind of person is likely to be a true prophet. Does this mean that belief in G-d is irrational? I do not think so but to make this point clearer, we must go a bit deeper into the notion of rationality. So far we have been talking about when it is rational to say that you know some fact about the world to be true. This is what many philosophers say rationality consists in and to claim to know something that does not meet this standard of rationality is to misuse the notion of rationality. Empirical knowledge and rationality are synonymous for these philosophers and the only kind of knowledge that is worthy of the name is empirical knowledge of the world of which natural science is the model *par excellence*. I believe the notion of rationality is much broader than the empirical philosophers take it to be. Certainly empirical confirmation is part of what we mean by rationality, but it is not the whole story. In the next chapter we take up the 'rest of the story.'

## THE VALIDITY OF RATIONALITY

In the previous chapter we addressed the question of when it is rational to hold a certain belief. The kinds of beliefs we used as examples were weather reports, questions of who-done-it murder mysteries and possible sightings of UFO's. These are all facts or events that are part of the world or thought to be part of the world. It is no wonder then that G-d does not fit into the 'logic' of facts and events that compose the world, for G-d is not a fact or even a thing in the world as is the force of gravity for instance. G-d cannot be observed, and therefore he is not subject to empirical investigation or confirmation by evidence, as we argued in the previous chapter. This does not mean, however, that belief in G-d is irrational as many philosophers have argued. Not everything rational is subject to such investigation or confirmation. There are certain principles or rules of thought or beliefs about the nature of reality that are fundamental in the sense that all knowledge presupposes them, though these principles themselves are neither demonstrable nor confirmable. They are beliefs that are called *a priori* in philosophical terminology. That is, they are accepted as true or taken for granted and it is not possible or even rational to question them. There have been attempts to question them but such attempts inevitably lead to skepticism of *all* knowledge which is certainly not rational.

The best example of this in the history of philosophy is David Hume's attempt to question the principle of induction. Hume argued, correctly, that our knowledge of the world is garnered from our past experience, meaning by this not just one's own personal experience, but the experience of mankind generally. Science is essentially the sum total of past human experience. No individual or age starts from the very beginning. We have always inherited the results and achievements of former generations unless some cataclysmic event wipes out a culture, as perhaps happened in the dark ages. In any event what we know about the world is the collective experience of humankind and no one really starts from scratch.

Furthermore, a great deal of our knowledge of the world is expressed in terms of our expectations and predictions about the future. Infants quickly discover that things fall and that if you don't watch yourself you can get hurt. We learn to depend on gravity. No one is seriously worried that one might suddenly fly off into outer space together with everything else on earth that's not tied down. People had no such fears long before gravity was 'discovered' by Newton or long before scientists were able to accurately describe this mysterious force. This did not prevent people from dealing with this force successfully. That is, they built stair cases in two-storey houses to go up and down, knowing that they could not fly like birds. Generally speaking, people got along quite well from a practical point of view.

Hume's question was, given that past experience teaches us that gravity is a fact about the world, to which all past human history testifies, how do we know that what we call gravity will continue to be a fact about the world ten minutes from now, or at any time in the future? Hume generalized this into the question of how *anything* that we say we know about the world, will hold true in the future. Since the future is something *no one* has experienced, we are not entitled to claim that we have any knowledge of it whatsoever for all knowledge is derived from our past experience. Some have tried to argue that our future expectations are generally confirmed, not only in our own lives, but in the lives of all people who have lived in the past of which we have any record. Why isn't that evidence for the future? Hume answers, again correctly, that even though the world may have run along certain lines in the past and no one has yet been 'let down' by gravity, the fact remains that we have no guarantee that the world might not radically change at any moment. Our minds have grown accustomed to expect the future to be like the past much as Pavlov's unfortunate dog was trained to think it was going to be fed when it heard a bell ring. The dog had no rational justification for believing this, but expected it nonetheless, and salivated when it heard the bell even though it wasn't fed. Expectations then are not the same thing as rational justification. Hume not only admitted that we do expect the future to be like the past, but that we could not live in the world without that expectation and no one should even try to get along without it. If one tried to do so, the different ways that one might quickly come

to one's end are innumerable, from jumping out the window to get to the ground floor, to eating the fork instead of the egg. Nature has implanted in us the instinct to expect the future to be like the past as it has in all animals, but there is no proof that the belief is true, nor could it possibly be confirmed by any evidence from past experience. Man is no more rational than Pavlov's dog in his expectations.

If one consistently follows Hume's argument to its inevitable conclusion, ludicrous paradoxes result. Let's say you sit down to breakfast, having read Hume the night before. You are determined that you will not be seduced by Mother Nature and that you will do your best not to believe anything about the future. Most likely you will have already given in to this 'un-get-overable' temptation, in order to have walked from your bed to the breakfast table. For instance, you somehow got out of bed, brushed your teeth and performed the complicated tasks of taking a shower and getting dressed to say nothing of walking down the stairs to the kitchen (and why have you gone into the kitchen to satisfy your hunger rather than the basement or the attic?). Forget this for the moment. Let us concentrate on eating breakfast rationally without giving in to the instinctive, non-rational belief that the future will be like the past. You have before you a place-setting with a couple of your favorite fried eggs on the plate with toast and butter just as you like it. Your mouth begins to water as you catch yourself acting just as Pavlov's dog would have. You try to hold back your mouth from salivating—this time you are determined to eat 'rationally'. (There might be a problem of how you know that eating is what is going to assuage your hunger pains, if you can allow yourself the luxury of being able to judge that pains in your stomach *are* hunger pains which you know from experience are relieved by eating wholesome food—but let's ignore this also.) Now you sit down to the plate with the eggs and you are determined to try and put into practice a rational act which is not motivated by the belief that the future will be like the past. The question arises, what shall you eat? From your past experience you know you like eggs and that they are wholesome food, but you cannot count on past experience. Perhaps this time, the eggs will turn into poison. Maybe you should try the fork? Remember now, you have nothing to go on. Your past experience is not evidence to guide your *rational* expectations of the future. Since you have no

idea what to eat and barring past experience, *anything* might as well be wholesome food as anything else. One might as well flip a coin as to whether one should eat the eggs or the fork. This is the conclusion of Hume's argument! The paradox of this conclusion needs no comment. Any normal person would consider such a conclusion to be the epitome of irrationality. Hume must have gone wrong somewhere, but the question is where?

Given Hume's premise, that *all* empirical knowledge is derived from experience and must therefore be confirmed by evidence, it is difficult to see that he has gone wrong at all, for the inductive principle that the future will be like the past cannot be confirmed as Hume has argued. Furthermore, since the principle is not logically necessary, it cannot be admitted as a valid part of human knowledge, as Hume argues at the beginning of Section IV of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that all human knowledge must belong to either logic and mathematics which he calls 'relations of ideas' or to our empirical knowledge of the world which he calls 'matters of fact'. Propositions belonging to the former are necessary truths whose denials are contradictions. Thus  $2+2 = 4$  is necessary and its denial is a contradiction as is the logical inference of *modus ponens* which is that, 1) if p then q, and 2) p, therefore 3) q. However such knowledge gives us no information about the world. It cannot tell us how many marbles are in a bag or when something is going to happen. Knowledge of the world is what Hume calls 'matters of fact' and propositions of this kind are never necessarily true and their denials are never contradictions. Any proposition which claims to be part of human knowledge must fall into one of these two categories. Either it is necessarily true in which case it gives us no knowledge of the world and belongs to the realm of mathematics or logic, or it is an empirical statement about the world whose truth must be able to be confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical evidence. If a proposition belongs to the first category of relations of ideas it is said to be true *a priori*. That is, its truth can be seen independently or prior to any empirical knowledge of the world. If a proposition belongs to the second category of matters of fact, its truth can be ascertained only by or posterior to some observation of the world and it is therefore said to be a proposition whose truth is known *a posteriori*. The principle of induction that the future will be

like the past is not a necessary truth whose denial is a contradiction. Indeed it is conceivable that the world might change any moment in some radical way. Its truth therefore cannot be known *a priori*, according to Hume. In order to be a part of rational knowledge of the world it must be known *a posteriori*, that is, there must be some observation or evidence that the future will be like the past.

However, Hume in Section IV of the *Enquiry*, argues with eloquence and power that there is no such observation or evidence and therefore according to Hume's analysis of human knowledge, the principle of induction should not be admitted into the category of propositions that constitute valid human knowledge. Thus when we sit down to the breakfast table we cannot *know* that it is rational to eat the egg rather than the fork. Of course we *will* as a matter of fact eat the egg rather than the fork, but this is because we are creatures of habit, not because we are rational. Man is definitely not a *rational* animal as Aristotle had supposed. He is simply an animal like other animals who acts and lives by instinct rather than rationality.

It is easy to see that belief in the existence of G-d is equivalent with the principle of induction. Since the existence of G-d is not a necessary truth, it cannot be said to be true *a priori*. That is, one can imagine a G-dless world no matter how frightful or awful one might consider this. On the other hand, as we have argued in Chapter One, and as Hume, Hanson and many philosophers since Hume have argued, there does not seem to be any way of confirming the truth of G-d's existence by observation or by evidence in the ordinary sense. Therefore it would seem that there is no way of empirically determining the truth of His existence and thus a proposition affirming G-d's existence cannot be known to be true either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. Thus G-d and the principle of induction seem to be equally barred from being admitted into the realm of human knowledge.

Members of the philosophical group known as the 'Vienna Circle' and other positivists in the first half of the 20th century utilized a similar argument to ban all 'metaphysical' propositions from being a topic of discussion by scientists, philosophers or anyone concerned with the pursuit of human knowledge, i.e., any serious intellectual. A 'metaphysical' proposition was defined as a proposition that was neither logically necessary (its negation was not a contradiction) nor

empirically verifiable. Under this characterization the principle of induction and statements about G-d could equally be classified as 'metaphysical' propositions.

This modern development of the conception of human knowledge which had its origins in David Hume has been challenged by Ludwig Wittgenstein.<sup>1</sup> He and others made the point that basic principles upon which rational thinking and knowledge of the world depend are presupposed in our thinking and what is rational is not their rejection but their acceptance. As to the question of how one can demonstrate them or prove them, Wittgenstein's position is that they need no proof. What we call rationality or rational thought is tied to them much as the idea of being unmarried is involved in the meaning of the word 'bachelor'. It would be absurd to ask why the word 'bachelor' means 'unmarried man'. The answer is simply, that's what the word means. If someone wanted proof for this, one would point to examples of how this word is used in the English language. The 'proof is in the pudding'.

Similarly, if one wants to act or think rationally in the world, one has to assume the future is going to be like the past. If one wants proof for this, the answer has to be, the 'proof is in the pudding'. That is, if one rejected this principle, what we call rational action would cease. The skeptic demands that everything be doubted until proven true, but as Wittgenstein argued, doubt is only possible in a context where something can be known.<sup>2</sup> If nothing can be known, nothing can be doubted. Certain assumptions or beliefs we have about the nature of reality must be taken as true *before* anything can be known and these beliefs are accepted as true *a priori*. This is a rejection of the fundamental position of Hume and the empirical tradition in philosophy that has developed from him, that all *a priori* propositions must be logically necessary and give us no real knowledge of the world. That the future will resemble the past is not a logical truth whose denial is a contradiction, but it is something we all do take as true *a priori*. Hume called this belief custom or habit and denied that it was rational because it could not be proven or had no 'rational ground'. Those following Wittgenstein would say that the principle of induction is one

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1 See his *On Certainty*, Basil Blackwell, 1969.

2 *Ibid.*, see paragraphs 193-255.

of the 'rules' guiding rational action. This is how we go about acting rationally. It is what everyone calls acting rationally. The question of whether the world might not radically change at any moment is irrelevant. If the world should radically change so that eggs suddenly became poison to the human digestive system and metal suddenly became digestible, it would still be rational to eat the eggs and not the fork until one discovered the change. If everyone began contracting food poisoning from eating fresh eggs and suddenly found metal to be digestible and wholesome for the body, it would no longer be rational to eat the eggs and not the fork. However this would be the new rational course of action, assuming that our past experience is a guide for our future expectations. If things began changing in a sudden and unpredictable fashion, so that our past experience would no longer be a reliable guide for the future, then there would be no such thing as acting rationally. The whole concept of rationality would fall by the boards. Whatever we decided to do, we would just simply have to pray and hope it would turn out, for there would be no criterion of rational choice. Today the egg may nourish, but tomorrow it may suddenly be poison, and the day after tomorrow it may again be wholesome food. The only thing to do when you sit down to breakfast is to pray not for the food, but that whatever you choose to eat will turn out to be food and not poison. It is therefore not possible to doubt the principle of induction and remain rational. One is rational by simply taking for granted the principle of induction *a priori*.

There are other such principles that lie at the very foundation of rational thought and knowledge which cannot be doubted without pain of irrationality and which are neither logically necessary nor empirically confirmable. For example, the principle of sufficient reason proclaims that every event has a cause, or that there are no uncaused events. This principle is not logically necessary as one can imagine uncaused events and the business of the magician is to make it appear as if he were producing them, but neither he nor you think that he is really doing so, for no rational, thinking person believes that something can come from nothing. On the other hand this principle can not be proven by empirical observation for to demonstrate its proof one would have to have observed all events and be able to ascertain that each of them had a cause. It goes without saying that this is



impossible, for to have observed all events one would have to know that one had accounted for *all* events and this is logically impossible for by definition one cannot empirically know that one has observed all events. Nonetheless, if anyone ever entertained the possibility of uncaused events he would be deemed irrational.<sup>3</sup>

The principle of sufficient reason constitutes part of what we mean by rationality and all thinking people accept it *a priori* without question. One could mention numerous other *a priori* beliefs that are accepted because the human mind finds such beliefs irresistible as the continuity of space and time and the validity of human memory generally. In all these examples, we accept without question their truth and they as a matter of fact define or determine what one means by rational thought about the world.<sup>4</sup>

Some philosophers have recently argued that belief in G-d should similarly be treated as an *a priori* belief that needs no proof or empirical verification.<sup>5</sup> The theist need not consider that the onus of proof for G-d lies on him. It is with this belief that he begins and this determines how he thinks about the world. The argument is that the theist has as much justification for his belief in G-d as the scientist does in his acceptance of the principle of induction or the principle of sufficient reason. There is, however, an important distinction between belief in

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3 I am told that in particle physics today some physicists entertain this very possibility due to their inability to explain certain quantum phenomena. This really proves the point. That is, because certain phenomena appear *inexplicable*, the physicist says they appear to be uncaused. As long as the physicist fails to find a cause for such phenomena, they will remain inexplicable. However, any way of explaining these phenomena will immediately be seized upon by these very physicists, for the mind abhors uncaused events as much as nature abhors a vacuum.

4 I really believe that David Hume thought this way, though it does not come through clearly in his *Enquiry*. He is reported to have written to John Stewart in 1754 the following, "But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that anything might arise without a cause*. I only maintained, that our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration, but from another source." What this other source might have been I have no idea. This, however, is what I would call a 'rational intuition'.

5 See Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," *Reason and Religion*, ed. Stuart C. Brown, Cornell University Press, 1977.

G-d and the kinds of fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality that all rational people hold. That is, while it is in some fundamental sense irrational to reject the principle of induction or the principle of sufficient reason, it is not irrational to reject a belief in G-d. Many highly intelligent people claim they do not believe in G-d. These people may be misguided, in error, or perhaps evil, but one cannot say that an atheist is irrational the way one could be said to be irrational if, upon reading Hume, he decided to reject the principle of induction.

The question then becomes: granted that one cannot be said to be irrational if one believes in G-d, for one may choose to accept G-d *a priori* for whatever reason; nonetheless there seems to be no need to accept such a belief in order to *avoid* irrationality as is the case with certain fundamental principles that we have discussed. Why then should one believe in the existence of G-d rather than not? So far as I can see, neither Norman Malcolm whose views I have alluded to in the previous footnote, nor any other philosopher who follows the views of Wittgenstein, have presented any reason for accepting G-d rather than rejecting Him. Though I think Wittgenstein correct in rejecting the Human or empirical conception of human knowledge, it seems to me that no one has stated a convincing case for believing in G-d such that it could be said that belief in G-d is more rational than atheism, though atheism cannot be said to be irrational.<sup>6</sup> I do think that such a case can be made out, and in the next three chapters I will try to state that case.

In these chapters, I discuss respectively the teleological argument, the cosmological argument and another argument which I shall call the argument from unity. These arguments are ordinarily presented by their proponents as proofs for G-d and the criticisms made of these arguments are that they do not constitute proofs for what we ordinarily

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<sup>6</sup> This is not inconsistent with what we said in Chapter 1, pp.17-21, where belief in an empirical fact about the world is rational when the evidence for that fact is such that acceptance of the evidence would render denial of the fact irrational. There we are talking about the confirmation of facts. Here we are talking about what is involved in accepting certain basic principles of reasoning. I am suggesting that while some of these principles cannot be rejected without appearing to be irrational, there are, however, others that might be rejected without that appearance. What we mean by this will be explained in somewhat more detail in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

mean by G-d. I am inclined to think that these criticisms are basically correct but they do not neutralize the force that these arguments really do have which is quite substantial. Taken together, these arguments—while not constituting a proof for G-d—seem to me overwhelming. If you wonder how something could be ‘overwhelming’ without constituting a proof, the answer is that by ‘proof’ philosophers have usually meant that one could show that the existence of G-d is either: 1) logically necessary as a theorem in mathematics or logic, or 2) an empirical fact about the world that is verified by empirical evidence. G-d is neither of these and therefore it is not surprising that there are no ‘proofs’ for Him. However, there are forceful reasons for believing in G-d, such that the rationality of the belief is inescapable. In the next three chapters I try to show why I think it is inescapable.