

THE NON-EXISTENCE OF GOD

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1



Reasoning about God

I find every sect, as far as reason will help them, makes use of it gladly; and where it fails them, they cry out, 'It is a matter of faith and above reason'.

(Locke 1964 vol. 2: 281)

The central role of the existence of God

Our principal concern will be with the question of whether God exists. The reason for making this the primary focus is not that the existence of God is the only interesting philosophical issue raised by religion. All religions which accept the existence of God consist of much more than a bare assertion of his existence. They consist as well of a set of doctrines about what kind of being he is and what significance his existence has for human life. Some religions, such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, defend historical claims about the life histories of various individuals, such as Moses, Jesus or Mohammed; some put forward metaphysical claims (such as the doctrine of reincarnation or of life after death, or the possibility of intercessionary prayer, or Christianity's doctrine of the Incarnation). Beyond the area of doctrine, most religions also involve an ethical and a ritual system. They aim to provide a set of rules or recipes by reference to which individuals can lead the good life, and sometimes by reference to which forms of social organisation can be judged. It is in this area that claims are sometimes made that religion can supply a meaning or purpose for human existence – or, more strongly, that *only* religion can do this. So most religions commit themselves to a good deal more than the bare assertion of God's existence.

But there is nonetheless good reason for making the primary focus of a text such as this the existence of God. For a belief in God is not only essential to most religions (arguably to all, depending on the definition of 'religion' one favours); it is also what gives the point to the other parts of a religion. There would be no point in debating detailed issues about the ritual appropriate to a religion, unless one accepted the existence of the God on

whom the religion was supposedly based. There would be no point in following a set of edicts because they had a supposedly divine origin, unless one accepted the existence of the God from whom they were supposed to originate.

Furthermore, it is to discussions of God's existence that a number of able thinkers have devoted themselves, in a tradition running from early Christian thinkers such as Anselm; through Aquinas and other medieval scholastics; on through Descartes, Locke and Leibniz in the seventeenth century, Hume and Kant in the eighteenth, Mill in the nineteenth, Russell and Mackie in the twentieth, Swinburne, Plantinga and others in the twenty-first. The last few decades in particular have seen a philosophical resurgence of interest in the claims of theism. Contemporary thinkers about God have been able to draw on a wide variety of new ideas, from logic, from the philosophy of science, from probability theory, from epistemology, and from the philosophy of mind. What adds to the philosophical interest of this tradition of debate is that the participants in it have made wildly contradictory claims. At one extreme, Descartes claims that the existence of God can be known with greater assurance than I can know any claim about the physical world (such as for example that I have two hands), and also with greater assurance than any mathematical truth (such as for example that $2 + 2 = 4$). At the other extreme is the conclusion which Hume reaches at the end of his *Natural History of Religion*: 'The whole is a riddle, an aenigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspence of judgement appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny, concerning this subject' (Hume 1976: 95).

The need to appeal to reason

Our central topic, then, is the existence of God. Since it is neither obviously true that he exists, nor obviously true that he does not, we need to examine what *reasons* there are to think that he exists, what *reasons* there are to think that he does not, to weigh them against each other, and thereby come to *the most reasonable view* we can.

So much seems obvious. But already, according to some thinkers, we have gone wrong. Some thinkers believe that this appeal to reasons for and against a belief in God is entirely inappropriate. We can distinguish between three different ways in which the appeal to reason has been thought inappropriate. One group of thinkers has claimed that it is somehow impious or even blasphemous or at least superfluous to reason about God's existence. A second group, while not holding that it is impious, maintains that it is pointless because there are no reasons to be given. A third group allows that there are reasons to be given, but claims that all such reasons are inconclusive, and hence incapable of settling the issue anyway. Let us look in more detail at these three kinds of reservation about a search for reasons.

The claim that it is wrong to appeal to reason

According to thinkers in the first group, even if it is sensible to look for supporting evidence for some (perhaps most) of the beliefs we form, we stray from the path of righteousness in using this approach to the question of God's existence. Human reason, they claim, is a feeble tool, whose use should be confined to mundane matters and not extended to holy mysteries. An early statement of the feebleness of human reason can be found in the famous (or should one say infamous?) remarks by Tertullian (c. 160 to c. 220 AD) in connection with the Incarnation that 'just *because* it is absurd, it is to be believed . . . it is certain *because* it is impossible' (quoted by B. Williams in Flew and MacIntyre 1963: 187).¹ Later medieval writers who reiterated this mistrust of reason included St Peter Damian (1007–72), Manegold of Lautenbach (d. 1103), and Walter of St Victor (d. 1180). Commenting on Peter Damian, for example, Copleston notes that he believed that:

God in his omnipotence could undo the past. Thus though it happens to be true today that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, God could in principle make the statement false tomorrow, by cancelling out the past. If this idea was at variance with the demands of reason, so much the worse for reason.

(Copleston 1972: 67)

This medieval hostility to reason persisted in some Catholic writings of the sixteenth century. St Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, wrote:

That we may be altogether of the same mind and in conformity with the Church herself, if she shall have defined anything to be black which to our eyes appears to be white, we ought in the like manner to pronounce it to be black.

(quoted in Hollis 1973: 12 fn.)

A rather more vigorous expression of the misleadingness of reason is found in Luther's remark that 'We know that reason is the Devil's harlot, and can do nothing but slander and harm all that God says and does . . . Therefore keep to revelation and do not try to understand' (quoted in *ibid.*).

Could it be a virtue to believe something not on the basis of supporting reasons, but on faith? That will depend on how we interpret the term 'faith'. Some people draw a distinction between having faith *in* something, and having faith *that* something is the case, and claim that the relevant sense in a religious context is the former. But it seems quite clear that you cannot have faith in something unless you think that it exists. In this respect, having 'faith in' is like trusting, or revering or loving or admiring. I can sincerely urge you to put your trust in the Citizens Savings Bank – but not if I think that no such bank exists, nor if I have no idea whether there is any such bank. You can admire (say) the architect of the Parthenon – but not if you

think that there was no architect. Again, you can revere (say) David Hume – but not if you think that there never was such a man. So even if having faith in God is a central religious ideal, it *presupposes* having a belief that God exists, having a faith *that* God exists.

So what is it to believe something ‘on faith’? Some people use the term ‘faith’ in such a way that to believe something on faith is to believe it without any supporting reasons, or even (bizarrely) when the evidence one has goes against one’s belief – see, for example, Tertullian quoted above. What should we make of the claim that we may, or even should, form our beliefs ‘by faith’ in this sense of the word? Let us note first of all that in this sense of the word ‘faith’, the common phrase ‘to believe something *on the basis of faith*’ is a logical solecism. It suggests that there are two possible bases for a belief: either you can believe something on the basis of reasons, or you can believe it on the basis of faith. But ‘faith’ in this sense denotes the *absence* of a basis – and the absence of a basis is not an alternative kind of basis. To believe something ‘on the basis of faith’ would be more clearly expressed as believing something when you have no reason to think that your belief is true, when you have no justification for your belief, when you have no supporting evidence. It is not to have supporting evidence of a special (perhaps supernatural) kind. If there is any supernatural evidence, and it does indeed support a certain conclusion, then it is rational to use it in forming your beliefs and irrational to ignore it. So someone who believes that there is such evidence is wrong to denigrate the claims of reason – such a person wants to use reason themselves. The claim that a belief that God exists (or does not exist) needs supporting evidence does not imply that such evidence must be of any particular kind (such as ‘scientific’ or ‘naturalistic’). If (and it is a big ‘if’) there are kinds of evidence which are non-scientific and non-naturalistic, which are supernatural, and they are genuinely *evidence* (i.e. they really do make it more likely that the belief is true) then it would be irrational to ignore such non-standard evidence.

Further, it is unclear that even those like Luther who regard reason as ‘the Devil’s harlot’ can entirely dispense with it. Luther urges us to ‘keep to revelation’. But which revelation? Presumably people can be mistaken in thinking that God has revealed himself to them. Moses claimed that God had spoken to him – but so too did the Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe. Sutcliffe claimed to have received instructions from God, and there is no reason to doubt that his claim was sincere. On the basis of those instructions, he murdered nine young women (Cross 1995: 242). His grisly case raises sharply for us the question of how true revelations can be sorted out from false ones. Anyone who appeals to revelation as an alternative to reason, as Luther does, will surely nevertheless want to follow ‘the Devil’s harlot’ and claim that there are *good reasons* for thinking that Sutcliffe’s ‘revelation’ was a false one; and further (perhaps) that there are *good reasons* for thinking that Moses’ was a true one. The only alternative seems to be that there are

no grounds at all for thinking that God did reveal himself to Moses and not to Peter Sutcliffe – and that looks like a very unattractive option.

In fairness to theism, it should be noted that many theists, when they speak of faith, do not have in mind the irrational belief apparently endorsed by Luther. What they have in mind is a form of belief which is rational, in the sense that it is supported by the available evidence, but which isn't accompanied by a deep understanding of what it is that is believed. An example will make this clear. If a mathematician tells me that Gödel's Theorem (which says that it is impossible to formulate an axiomatisation of arithmetic which is both complete and consistent) is true, I may well believe her, because she is an expert and in a position to know, and she has no reason to deceive me. I have a belief, and it is a rational belief for me to hold, since I have good supporting evidence. But the grounds of my belief are so very different from and inferior to the grounds that the mathematician herself has, that it would be natural to give them different labels, to say that I believe Gödel's Theorem as a matter of faith, whereas the expert sees exactly how and why the theorem *must* be true. In a similar way, a theist might well argue that a person who grows up in a religious community where all the recognised experts accept the existence of God, has good grounds for himself accepting the existence of God. But when he reaches intellectual maturity, he might well then seek to understand for himself what the evidence is for the existence of God, evidence that is to say which does not simply consist in the fact that many able people believe in his existence. Such a person would display, to use Anselm's phrase, 'faith seeking understanding'.

We could represent diagrammatically the difference between these two meanings for the term 'faith'. The first conception is portrayed in Figure 1.1 and the second in Figure 1.2 (overleaf).

In the second sense of faith, it is of course rational to accept things as a matter of faith. But in this second sense, when someone tells us that she accepts something on faith, we can at once ask what reason she has for what she accepts. Accepting something on faith commits her to having a reason

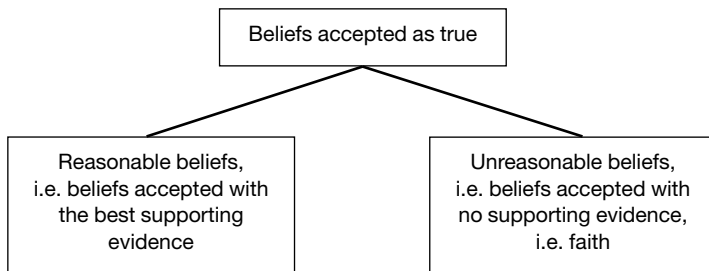


Figure 1.1

REASONING ABOUT GOD

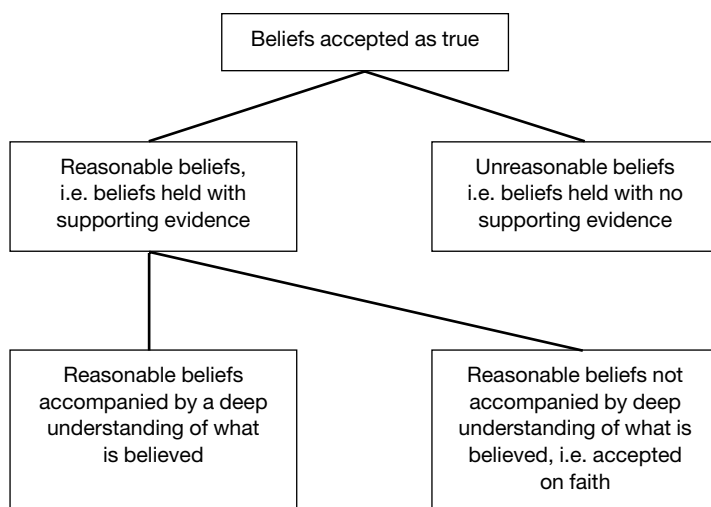


Figure 1.2

for what she believes; and we can then raise the question whether the reason is indeed a good one. It is this sense of faith that Locke was evidently using when he said: *‘faith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind: which, if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything but upon good reason’* (Locke 1964 vol. 2: 281, second italics added).

A different sort of consideration has persuaded some modern philosophers (who are sometimes called Reformed Epistemologists) that there is no need to provide substantive reasons for God’s existence. Plantinga, for example, has argued that the demand for reasons is a product of a certain conception of (what he calls) warranted belief, and that that conception has been shown to be false. According to Reformed Epistemology, a believer can be fully warranted in believing a number of claims about God even if she cannot produce any argument in favour of such a belief, and even if she has no evidence or reason which can support the belief, or show it to be true or even probably true.

This sounds like a thorough-going rejection of the role of reason in the justification of beliefs about God, of the kind expressed by Luther. And certainly Plantinga himself wants to connect his views about religious belief with those of Reformation theologians like Calvin (hence the label *Reformed Epistemology*). We will look at Plantinga’s position more closely in the next chapter, but here we can note that in fact it is a good deal less hostile to reason than it sounds. In the first place, Plantinga distinguishes between reasons and warrant, and although he says that a warranted believer does not need reasons for her central beliefs about God, she does need warrant –

although she does not need to know what her warrant consists in. Second, although the believer does not need reasons for her own belief to be justified, Plantinga never denies that there are reasons, both for and against beliefs about God. The warranted believer may be called upon to put forward and defend the pro-belief reasons, and to criticise the anti-belief reasons – in other words, to engage in reasoning about the existence and nature of God, in just the way that I am now urging both the believer and the sceptic to do.

It is an interesting philosophical question whether any of our beliefs have to be held without any supporting reasons. That is to ask whether we can give reasons for our reasons, and reasons for our reasons for our reasons, and so on indefinitely, or whether there are some things which we are justified in accepting without supporting reasons or grounds. But if there are any such things, a belief in God is *prima facie* not one of them. If reasons for and against a belief are available (and we shall shortly assert that they are available in the case of God's existence), then we should use them to the best of our ability, not resolutely shut our eyes to them. A juror in a criminal case who pronounces on the guilt of the accused while making sure that her judgement is based on no supporting reasons would rightly be thought outrageously irresponsible; and the same condemnation should attach to those who think that such an approach is appropriate when deciding about the existence of God.

The claim that there are no relevant reasons

We ought, then, so far as we can, to base our beliefs about the existence of God on whatever reasons are available. But *are* there any relevant reasons which will enable us to decide the question? The very existence of such reasons is what is called into question by the second group whom we described above as sceptics. Such anti-rationalists, whether they are for or against a belief in God, think of religious belief as essentially a non-rational option, a 'leap of faith' (or 'a leap for scepticism') because they think that whether a belief or disbelief in God *should* be supported, it *cannot* be supported; and it cannot be supported because there are no reasons available either way. Kierkegaard, for example, tells us that even if God exists, it would be 'folly' to try to prove that he does: either we would have presupposed in our argument the very thing which we were trying to establish; or else, at the end of the argument we would still need to make a non-rational 'leap' beyond the conclusion of the argument. Either way, it is futile to engage in reasoning about the existence of God (S. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, quoted in Hick 1964: 211). A twentieth-century stance which is in the same tradition can be found in the writings of Wittgenstein. These remarks are notoriously difficult to interpret; but, speaking of controversies

about religious doctrines, he remarks: ‘These controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive. *The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business*’ (Wittgenstein 1978: 56, italics added).²

The crucial thought here is not just that there are no reasons, but more strongly that it is essential to religious belief being the sort of thing that it is that there should not be any reasons. If one’s beliefs were reasonable, *ipso facto* they would no longer be religious.

It is easy to refute this second sort of anti-rationalism. All that is necessary is to point out that if one actually consults the relevant literature, it is *full* of arguments for and against the existence of God, advanced by both believers and non-believers. There are, to mention only a few examples of such arguments, Aquinas’s ‘Five Ways’; the traditional triumvirate of the ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments (all of which come in several versions); the argument from miracles; the argument from religious experience; and so on. The whole domain is dense with arguments. One suspects that many of those who proclaim, as if it were an obvious truth, that ‘you cannot prove or disprove the existence of God’ are simply unacquainted with the huge literature of arguments which attempt to do precisely that.

The claim that reasons are inconclusive

Of course, establishing that there are arguments is not by itself to say that any of the arguments is any good, or is sufficient to prove (or disprove) God’s existence. And it is this fact which is seized upon by the third kind of sceptic whom we distinguished above. They are willing to allow that we are entitled to reason about God’s existence, and they are not so rash as to allege that there are no arguments to be considered. Rather, they assert that at the end of the exercise, we still will be unable to discover good grounds either for asserting or for denying that God exists. Freud for example tells us that

all of them [i.e. religious doctrines] are . . . insusceptible of proof. No one can be compelled to think them true, to believe in them . . . just as they cannot be proved, so they cannot be refuted. We still know too little to make a critical approach to them.³

(op. cit. p. 31)

But against this third sort of sceptic, we need to make three points. First, it would be impossible to establish whether any of the traditional arguments for and against the existence of God is any good without looking at each of them in detail. So the third sort of scepticism, far from making rational scrutiny of the arguments unnecessary, actually requires it.

Second, although it is certainly a possibility that *none* of the arguments in this area has *any* force at all, that would on the face of it be a rather surprising conclusion. The arguments, after all, have been produced by some of the most powerful intellects of (predominantly Western) civilisation; and although this does not of course prove that they are good ones, it does create a *prima facie* assumption that *some* of them will have at least *some* force. As we will notice shortly, even though the arguments taken singly may well fall short of being conclusive, they may nonetheless have sufficient weight, especially if taken collectively, to make it rational to come down on one side or the other.

Third, we must admit that it is also a possibility that the arguments for God's existence have some weight, and the arguments against his existence have some weight; and that the two weights *exactly* balance. If this were so, then it would be true that reason did not favour one side rather than the other. But aside from the fact that such an exact balance of argumentative force is very unlikely, the force of this concession is undermined by the fact that such an equality between the conflicting arguments could be established only by a detailed study of the arguments themselves. So again, contrary to the claim of the third set of irrationalists, we must allow ourselves to be seduced by 'the Devil's harlot' reason.

I suggested above that non-believers as well as believers can be guilty of ignoring the need to defend their position by an appeal to reasons. Equally, we need to notice that many believers in God, as well as non-believers, have fully recognised the importance of adducing reasons in support of their position. The long tradition of debate mentioned above about the existence and nature of God contains mostly believers in God insisting that his existence and at least some of his attributes can be known by reason. In his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas draws a distinction between some truths about God which (he thinks) surpass 'all the ability of human reason', and 'truths which the natural reason is . . . able to reach'. As an example of the first, he mentions the doctrine of the Trinity. As examples of the second, he mentions the truths 'that God exists, that He is one, and the like', and he continues: 'In fact, such truths about God have been proved demonstratively by the philosophers, guided by the light of the natural reason' (Aquinas 1975, Book 1: 63).

When Descartes asserts that it is absolutely certain that God exists, this is not because he feels a burning conviction within his breast, even less because he has made a 'leap of faith'. It is because he believes that he has found an absolutely watertight argument which *proves* that God exists. The same would have been true of Leibniz, of Cudworth and of Samuel Clarke in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Locke, Berkeley, Butler and the careful natural theologians of the eighteenth century such as Ray, Derham and Paley, in producing their arguments, perhaps would not have called them 'watertight', but would certainly have thought that they made it highly reas-

onable to believe in God. In our own day, the writings of Richard Swinburne provide an excellent statement of the general assumptions underlying such a position. He writes that

The present book [i.e. *The Existence of God*] assumes that the claim that there is a God is not demonstrably incoherent (i.e. self-contradictory), and hence that it is proper to look around us for evidence of its truth or falsity . . . The book is written in deep conviction of the possibility of reaching fairly well justified conclusions by rational argument on this issue . . . It is a conviction which was explicitly acknowledged by the vast majority of Christian (and non-Christian) philosophers from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries; and, I believe, shared, although acknowledged less explicitly, by many Christian and non-Christian philosophers from the first to the twelfth century.

(Swinburne 1979: 1–2)

There is, then, a long and distinguished tradition of rational enquiry into the existence and nature of God, a tradition to which both believers and non-believers have contributed their opposing arguments. This text aligns itself firmly with this tradition, and against the various forms of irrationalism noted above.

Whether someone has good reasons v. whether there are good reasons

One other point about the role of reasons in our investigation requires comment. We need to distinguish between a *biographical* or *sociological* enquiry into why some people have believed or disbelieved in God; and an *epistemological* enquiry into whether there are any good reasons for either belief or disbelief. It may well be that when we look at the intellectual biographies of certain believers and disbelievers, we find that they held their beliefs for poor or inadequate reasons or perhaps for no reasons at all. Perhaps Ms Theist believed in God merely because she had an unconscious need to believe in a father figure; while Mr Sceptic believed that God did not exist merely because he was brought up in an atheistic household. These facts would be of interest to the biographers of Ms Theist and Mr Sceptic respectively; but they are of no interest at all to us. We are interested in the question of what *good reasons* there are for or against God's existence, and no light is thrown on that question by discovering people who hold their beliefs without having good reasons for them. Even if it turns out that all believers (or all non-believers) are irrational, in that they have no good grounds for what they maintain (or deny), that leaves entirely open whether there are any good reasons for what they maintain (or deny). Of course it is

sensible to look in the first place to believers for arguments in support of beliefs in God's existence and nature, and to disbelievers for arguments against such beliefs. But this is a purely pragmatic policy: there may well be cogent arguments which believers and disbelievers alike have overlooked.

This is why non-rational explanations of the existence of religious belief, of the kind offered by e.g. Marx and Freud, are largely irrelevant to our enquiry. Suppose for example that 'religion is the opium of the people' as Marx famously claimed in his 'Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*' (see Marx 1971: 116). Suppose that Marx is right in thinking that religion is part of a set of beliefs and attitudes whose effect is to reconcile the exploited members of society to their lot, and to convince them that revolution would inevitably be futile or even impious. Suppose furthermore that it is *because* religion has this effect that it is promulgated by 'the ruling class'. Suppose even that widespread religious belief is impossible in a fully just society, as Marx seems to have thought. None of this is sufficient to show that the doctrines of religion are false. It does not even show that there are any good reasons for thinking that those doctrines are false, or that there are no good reasons for thinking that they are true.

In a similar way, we can suppose with Freud that 'Psychoanalysis has made us familiar with the intimate connection between the father-complex and belief in God; it has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father' (Freud 1973 vol. xi: 'Leonardo da Vinci': 34).

But this has no direct bearing on the question we are going to consider. Even if many people's (or even everyone's) belief in God was a kind of wishful thinking, that would do nothing to show that the belief was not true, nor that there are no reasons for thinking that it is true.

It is worth emphasising this point, because some commentators have claimed the opposite. Gaskin, for example, claims that

the sort of thing Freud has to say is very damaging to the truth claims of religion . . . It is clearly a very powerful way of shedding doubt upon the rational integrity of a belief if I can both explain the causes of the belief and show how these involve wanting or needing to believe what is in fact believed.

(Gaskin 1984: 34)

Gaskin is a little misleading here. First, he says that Freud's remarks threaten the *truth* of religion. But you cannot threaten the truth of a claim merely by showing that those who accept the claim have engaged in wishful thinking. It is perfectly possible for beliefs arrived at by wishful thinking to be true; and as the familiar joke reminds us, the fact that someone is paranoid does not show that she is not in fact persecuted. Second, if someone does arrive at their beliefs by wishful thinking, they have by definition not arrived at those beliefs by good reasoning. But that does not show that there is no process of good reasoning which could have been used to support the belief. Perhaps

beliefs which have in fact been arrived at by wishful thinking could have been arrived at (and subsequently defended) by cogent reasoning. Since we are concerned not with the biographical question of whether this or that particular person used good reasons in arriving at their beliefs, but with the impersonal question of whether there are any good reasons for or against their beliefs, it is a mistake to think that critiques like Freud's (or Marx's) have much relevance. Third, however, it *is* true that *some* of Freud's claims do threaten both the truth and the rationality of religious belief. I quoted earlier the passage where he says that some religious beliefs are 'incompatible with everything we have laboriously discovered about the reality of the world'. But the point here is that this is a claim which cannot possibly be established by Freud's investigations into the nature of the human mind. Investigating the human mind will not tell you for example whether the universe was created by an omnipotent and caring being. That kind of claim can be established only by a (rational) comparison of the religious beliefs in question with what we have discovered about the universe, and trying to decide (rationally) if there really are any incompatibilities.

It is of course possible for a theorist to go further than saying that religious views have a socially repressive role to play, or are motivated by deep-seated psychological needs. It would be possible to claim that religion and its doctrines are 'nothing but' a means of achieving class subordination; or that a belief in God is 'nothing but' a hankering after a father figure. It is not entirely clear what a phrase like 'nothing but' means in such contexts; but if it is meant to imply that the beliefs are false, then such a claim would indeed be centrally relevant to our concerns. But again we need to be clear that claims like this cannot be established by Marxist social, political and economic analysis; nor by Freudian psychological investigations. They can be established only by a painstaking analysis of all the traditional arguments for and against the truth of the beliefs in question – in other words, by engaging in the philosophy of religion.

I said above that these socio-economic and psychoanalytic explanations for the prevalence of religious belief do not have 'much' relevance. For there is one situation in which reference to them might be useful. Suppose that we decide that there are no good grounds for believing in the existence of God. The question might then be raised 'Why in that case are so many people believers?'. Marxist, Freudian and other similar theories could then explain why the belief was held in the absence of good reasons, by invoking various social or psychological mechanisms which maintained the belief in the absence of supporting reasons. The implication of this is that an appeal to these social or psychological mechanisms can have a role to play only after the relevant philosophical work has been done. It cannot be a substitute for that work.

The variety of reasons

So far, we have argued that it is proper and necessary to look for good reasons to support the beliefs we form about God's existence and nature. But we should not approach this search for reasons with unrealistically high expectations. We need to recognise that reasons can vary in strength. At one extreme, there will be those which provide absolutely conclusive support for (or against) a position. At the other extreme, will be reasons which raise (or lower) by only a minute amount the probability that our conclusion is true. In between, there will be reasons which can be ranged along a spectrum of strength. In ordinary life, we recognise the existence of this spectrum by deploying such locutions as:

- A proves B beyond all doubt
- A is overwhelming evidence for B
- A is very strong evidence for B
- A is strong evidence for B
- A makes B more likely than not
- A is good evidence for B
- A is fairly good evidence for B
- A makes B a real possibility
- A suggests that B
- A is some evidence for B
- A is weak evidence for B
- A marginally increases the likelihood that B.

The reason for emphasising this spectrum is in order to remind ourselves that in the philosophy of religion, as elsewhere in daily life, being guided by reason does not mean demanding 'proof' before we accept anything as true. The term 'proof' can of course be interpreted in many ways, but we rightly (i.e. reasonably or rationally) believe many things which we cannot prove. For example, I believe that my car will start when I next turn on the ignition and starter switch. This is a rationally defensible belief (the car has been very reliable in the past, it is regularly serviced, it is kept in a locked garage so is very unlikely to be interfered with, etc.). But the evidence that I have, good though it is, cannot be said to *prove* that the car will start next time. Nor would I be being rational or reasonable if I said 'I cannot prove the matter either way, therefore I cannot form any defensible view of the matter'.

In a similar way, being guided by reason in debates about God does not consist in refusing to accept anything until it can be proved. It is adjusting one's beliefs in the light of the evidence which is available. If this evidence is conclusive, well and good. But we should be prepared for it to fall in a murky area where it seems to have some force but not very much. Two factors make the situation even more difficult. First, since there are many arguments for the existence of God, one is required to *combine* a number of

arguments which individually may be weak but which collectively may be much stronger, and it is often very unclear how to arrive at such a judgement of collective strength. Second, since there are also a number of arguments *against* the existence of God, the same combining exercise has to be carried out for them, and then the force of those two conflicting sets of considerations balanced against one another.

Theism (and its more specific varieties), atheism, agnosticism

I have said that the primary focus is on the existence and nature of God. This means that our topic will be narrower than Christianity in one way and wider in another. It will be narrower in that many doctrines central to Christianity, or to certain streams within it, such as the Incarnation, or the Trinity, or life after death, will be ignored altogether. But it is wider in that it will be addressing a belief held by all those who believe in God, by whatever name. It will thus probably cover most forms of Judaism and most forms of Islam. It will also cover those, perhaps numerous, individuals who do not identify with any organised or named religion, but nevertheless declare a belief in God. But it will not cover religions (such as Hinduism, or Buddhism, or Jainism) which are not monotheistic. As a convenient name for such a belief in God, I shall use the term 'theism', and call those who accept theism 'theists'. Following my remarks above about proof not being the relevant concept here, I shall not require that a theist believes that the existence of God can be proved, but only that she thinks at least that the existence of God is more likely than not. In a similar way, I shall use the term 'atheist' to mean not someone who thinks that God's existence can be disproved, or who is absolutely certain that God does not exist, but someone who thinks it at least more likely than not that God does not exist. And I shall use the term 'agnostic' to mean someone who thinks that God's existence and his non-existence are equally probable.

In what follows, the examples used and the authors quoted will be drawn almost wholly from the context of debates about Christianity. The reason is that this is the only context with which I have any familiarity. But we need to remember that the real topic is theism, not Christianity. We must not therefore credit (or burden) the theist with doctrines peculiar to Christianity, to which her theism does not commit her.

How the term 'God' is to be understood

Our next task is to consider how we are to understand the term 'God'. (Following normal philosophical convention, when I am referring to the

word, I enclose it in quotes, thus: ‘God’; when I wish to talk about what the word supposedly refers to, I use no quotes, thus: God. So ‘God’ refers (supposedly) to God.) The first question we need to decide is whether we should interpret the term ‘God’ as a proper name, like ‘George Washington’ or ‘Shakespeare’ or ‘Julius Caesar’; or as a description like ‘the President of the USA’, ‘the author of such plays as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*’ or ‘the Roman general who defeated Pompey and was assassinated by Brutus’. This might seem a curious and unimportant point to raise, and indeed according to some accounts there is no significant difference between proper names and descriptions (see e.g. Quine 1961: 7). But there are some good reasons for thinking that the logical behaviour of names and of descriptions is different (see e.g. Kripke 1980, Lecture 1) and if that is so, the cogency of some objections to at least one classical argument for God’s existence (the ontological argument) will depend on how we interpret the term ‘God’.

Certainly, the word ‘God’ appears to casual inspection to be a proper name. It takes a capital letter, as names do; it is not normally preceded by either the definite article ‘the’ or the indefinite article ‘a’; it does not naturally take a plural form. (It is true that we speak of ‘gods’ with a small ‘g’ – but we do not speak of Gods, or Allahs or Yahwehs in the plural.) In all these respects, ‘God’ appears to be a proper name. But if ‘God’ is a proper name, then it seems that we cannot meaningfully ask what ‘God’ means, or ask for a definition of ‘God’. If I tell you that Brutus assassinated Caesar, you might ask me what ‘assassinated’ means, or how I would define it; but you could not ask me what ‘Brutus’ or ‘Caesar’ means. These are words that certainly refer to people, but they do so without themselves having a definition.

Nonetheless, it is also common in debates about God to ask for and to give various definitions of ‘God’, and this suggests that perhaps ‘God’ is more like a description, perhaps equivalent to something like ‘the supreme Being’. And the phrase ‘the Lord’ or ‘the Lord God’ is not linguistically odd, again suggesting that the term ‘God’ is more like a description than a name. At all events, I shall take it that ‘God’ is a description, or (more accurately) shorthand for one. But then for which description in particular is it a shorthand? Will ‘the supreme being’ do? It is, I think, certainly on the right lines in capturing what many theists have had in mind. But even for a provisional definition, we need more detail. I propose then provisionally to adopt the following understanding of the term ‘God’: he is the creator and preserver of everything, a being who is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfect. He is in some sense a conscious or minded being, in that he is the subject of various psychological predicates (he knows everything, he cares for humankind, he has plans, he has wishes (e.g. about how we should behave), etc.). He is eternal, and omnipresent; and he is without bodily parts. Finally, he is an appropriate object of worship.

Some of these characteristics are perhaps implied by others. Perhaps God’s omniscience and his moral perfection imply that he is the subject of

psychological predicates; perhaps his moral perfection implies that he cares for humankind; perhaps his moral perfection and his concern for humankind imply that he is a fit object of worship. These are questions which we do not need to settle here. All we need is a working definition which can allow the debate to begin. In due course, we can return to parts of this definition/description and examine more carefully the problems which they throw up.

Why should anyone accept this definition, and what should be said to objectors who say ‘That’s just your definition of God. Who is to say that yours is the right one? I have my own different definition’. The short answer to these questions is that the definition is not ‘just my’ definition: it is a definition which can claim historical and linguistic accuracy. A huge tradition of people over the last two millennia who have declared a belief in God have understood ‘God’ in substantially the sense defined – or, if they have not been sufficiently intellectually reflective to put it in these terms, they have belonged to churches and other institutions whose official theorists articulated the beliefs of the church in these terms. A review of writings by theists, from the third century AD to the twenty-first century, from orthodox Catholics to committed Calvinists, reveals a very wide consensus about the properties which God has, and which are taken to be essential to his nature. It is true that the agreement is not universal, and it is true that two people who agree, for example, that God is eternal may attach different senses to eternity. But there is sufficient overlap to justify the assumption that they are all talking about the same topic. To say this is not to say that any individual cannot define the term ‘God’ differently. Anyone is free to be a linguistic deviant. But they should not then assume that they are participating in the debate about the existence of God to which the great thinkers of the past have contributed.

Further reading

Flew (1966, Chapters 1, 2 and 9) is an eloquent insistence on the need for a rational approach to the philosophy of religion, as is Gaskin (1984, Chapter 2). Stephen Davis (1997, Chapter 1) has an excellent discussion of the nature and point of proofs about theism. McLellan (1987) provides a useful discussion of the attitude of Marx and Engels, and of later Marxists, to religion, and contains a helpful bibliography. Freud’s view of religion can be found scattered in his writings, but important texts are ‘The Future of an Illusion’, ‘Leonardo Da Vinci’, ‘Totem and Taboo’ and ‘Moses and Monotheism’. Plantinga’s position is succinctly stated in his contribution ‘Reformed Epistemology’ in Quinn and Taliaferro (1997), and a more extended version can be found in Plantinga and Wolterstorff (1983: 16–93), or in Plantinga (2000). Jonathan Barnes (1972: 66–70) has a sensitive discussion of whether ‘God’ is a proper name or a description, an issue that is interestingly followed up by Gellman (1997: 20–36).

2



Reformed Epistemology

I believe that there are a large number (at least a couple of dozen) good arguments for the existence of God.

(Plantinga 2000: 170)

it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all.

(Plantinga 1983: 17)

Introduction

According to the picture which we have presented in Chapter 1, the right way for the open-minded enquirer to approach the question of God's existence is to look for grounds or reasons or evidence for thinking that God does exist, then to do the same for thinking that he does not exist, and finally to perform a metaphorical subtraction of one from the other. This will then yield the net grounds, or the grounds all-things-considered, for believing that God does or does not exist.

We were considering thinkers who rejected this approach either on the grounds that reason was a corrupting or inappropriate faculty, or because there are no relevant reasons, or because the reasons are all inconclusive. In this chapter, I will consider the claims of so-called Reformed Epistemology (RE for short), which offers a more cautious and more qualified rejection of some of the claims about the role of reason that were advanced in the first chapter.

The term 'Reformed Epistemology' and the related expression of 'the Reformed objection to natural theology' spring from the fact that thinkers in this tradition see themselves as heirs to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, and to the work of Calvin in particular. The movement has come to particular prominence in the epistemology of religious belief in the last few decades with the work of Plantinga, Wolterstorff, Alston and

others; but it will be convenient to take Plantinga as the main exponent of this line of thought.

Plantinga's opposition to the position recommended in Chapter 1 is clear and stark. In the words which form the motto for this chapter: 'it is entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all' (Plantinga 1983: 17).

But how can such a position be defended? Plantinga approaches this question indirectly by first trying to show how those who reject his position are relying on a particular epistemology, classical foundationalism. He claims that it is classical foundationalism which supplies the rationale for an acceptance of what he calls evidentialism, the thesis that a belief in God can be justified, right, rational, etc. only if it is supported by evidence or reasons. He seeks therefore to show that classical foundationalism is deeply flawed, and hence that there is no good reason to accept evidentialism. This then clears the ground for his positive account of how theistic belief can be 'proper' even if it is not based on any evidence or argument. We need first, then, to see what classical foundationalism is, and how it is supposed to support evidentialism.

Classical foundationalism

Many of the things which we believe, and rightly believe, we accept on the basis of other things that we believe. I believe that Mary is a better swimmer than Fred because I also believe that when they have competed against each other Mary has been able to swim further and faster than Fred, and I have inferred the first belief from the second. I may believe that good weather is likely tomorrow because I believe that there is a red sky this evening, and again I have used the second belief to support the first. In such cases, if the first belief is to be justified it must not just be caused by the second, it must be genuinely supported by the second, although how this relation of support is to be understood is something that has divided foundationalists.

Sometimes, there are more than just two beliefs connected by these justificatory links. I might hold one belief A on the basis of another belief B; hold B on the basis of belief C; and so on. For example, if I am working my way through a geometrical proof, I may accept the conclusion because I can see that it is supported by the penultimate step; and I accept the penultimate step because I can see that it is supported by the prepenultimate step; and so on.

Given this still very sketchy picture of what the structure of our set of justified beliefs looks like, it is natural to think that it needs supplementing in one respect in particular. I may be able to justify A by appealing to B, and justify B by appealing to C, and justify C by appealing to D. But how far back does this regress of justification go? Does it go back infinitely? Does it eventually go around in a big circle, so that I end up appealing to my start-

ing point, belief A, in order to justify my belief Z? Or does it eventually stop at some basic beliefs that do not need to be supported by any further beliefs? Given the finitude of human beings, the first option has generally been thought to be untenable. A number of philosophers (so-called coherentists) have argued in favour of the second option, but they have faced the obvious objection that arguing in a circle cannot provide real justification. If your justification for belief A is belief B, it must not also be the case that your justification for B is A; and on the face of it, the same would be true if we had a larger circle with n beliefs (for any value of n) rather than a very small circle with just two beliefs. Accordingly, most philosophers have opted for the third alternative and accepted that there must be some basic beliefs which do not need to be supported by any further beliefs. In other words, they have accepted a version of foundationalism.

Foundationalism thus complicates the simple picture of justification sketched above by distinguishing between two classes of beliefs. The first kind have been called basic, or foundational, beliefs, and the second kind have been called derived or inferred beliefs. The picture now is that if I am to be a rational or a reasonable person, then I must be entitled to all my basic beliefs, and all my non-basic or derived beliefs must be supported by my basic beliefs, or by beliefs which in turn are supported by my basic beliefs.

That leaves the foundationalist with the question ‘What entitles you to accept any beliefs as basic? What entitles you to accept them even though they are not supported by any of your other beliefs? In other words, what makes a basic belief *properly* basic, where a properly basic belief is defined as a belief which I am justified in accepting, even though my justification does not lie in the fact that I have derived it from any of my other beliefs?’ To answer this question, different foundationalists have given different answers. But classical foundationalists have wanted to include at least and at most two kinds of belief within the category ‘basic belief’. First, they have claimed that some propositions are self-evidently true. The implication of calling a proposition *self-evidently* true is that in order to see that it is true, you do not have to look beyond the proposition itself: you can ‘see’ (in a non-visual sense) that it is true, just by considering it. For example, $1 + 1 = 2$ does not need any proof: we can just see straight off that it is true. If someone really doubted whether it was true, we could make sense of her doubt only by assuming that she did not really understand what addition was – or perhaps what meaning attaches to ‘1’ or ‘2’ or ‘=’. Other examples of self-evident propositions would plausibly include the following: if A is identical to B, and B is identical to C, then A is identical to C; if a proposition p is true, and p entails q , then q is true; and whatever entails a falsehood is itself false. No doubt there are also many others of the same kind.

The second kind of belief that classical foundationalists have been willing to admit as properly basic is those that (to put it loosely) describe one’s current conscious state. Thus if I believe ‘I am now thinking of my dinner’, then

foundationalists maintain both that I am justified in holding this belief, and also that my justification does not lie in the fact that I hold some other belief which supports this belief. My belief ‘I am now thinking of my dinner’ is properly basic. One’s knowledge of one’s own sensations has in a similar way generally been thought to be properly basic. If I believe that I am in pain, then my belief is justified, but not by virtue of being supported by any of my other beliefs. Beliefs about the input of one’s senses has usually been treated in the same way. Thus beliefs such as ‘I have the impression of a red patch in my visual field’ have been treated as properly basic. Some foundationalists have allowed that beliefs about the physical world, if they simply report what one can see, hear, taste, etc., could also count as basic (because although they are justified, they are not supported by other beliefs). But most foundationalists have restricted properly basic beliefs about sensory input to beliefs about sense impressions, sense data, etc. Further, most foundationalists have thought that basic beliefs were not merely ones which it was epistemically right or proper or permissible for you to hold, but further that they were true, and had some kind of especial security – they were indubitable, or incorrigible, or even infallible, or absolutely certain.

Where does a belief in God fit into this picture of the structure of our justified beliefs? Very few theists have wanted to say that ‘God exists’ is self-evident, in the way in which beliefs in mathematics and logic can be. But equally ‘God exists’ does not simply report one’s current conscious state, either one’s thoughts or one’s sensory awareness. It follows that if classical foundationalism is true, ‘God exists’ cannot be a basic belief. If it is to be justifiably believed at all, it must be a derived belief: the only way in which it can be justified is by showing that it can be supported by some other beliefs that one has, perhaps in some complicated chain of reasoning. Theists have risen to this challenge, and tried to produce arguments (e.g. the ontological and cosmological argument, the argument to design, the argument from miracles, etc.) to show that a belief in God is indeed a rational derived belief.

This, then, is the underlying epistemology of classical foundationalism which, Plantinga maintains, supplies the rationale for the claim that if a belief in God is to be reasonable or rational or proper, it must be defended by and supported by reasons or evidence. Plantinga now undertakes to show that classical foundationalism is untenable, and that we therefore have no good reason to require theism to be based on evidence. Ultimately he intends to show that theism can be a properly basic belief.

Plantinga’s attack on classical foundationalism

The attack begins by pointing out that classical foundationalism commits us to widespread scepticism. Many of the beliefs which, according to common

sense, we rightly hold do not fit within the category of basic beliefs, nor can they be derived from our basic beliefs. Accordingly, they cannot be justified at all. As an example, take my belief that I remember having toast for breakfast this morning. This is not self-evident. One cannot see that it is true simply by inspecting the proposition itself as one can with $1 + 1 = 2$. But nor does it simply report my current conscious state: even if we think that my remembering something requires that I should be in a certain conscious state, it clearly requires more than this. It also requires that something should have happened in the past, namely that I ate toast for breakfast. It therefore cannot be considered a basic belief. But nor can I derive it from any of my basic beliefs. I somehow know ‘straight off’ that I remember having toast for breakfast, without having any grounds or evidence for that belief. Even if when challenged I can produce evidence for other people that my claim is true, I can know without needing to produce any such evidence, and even if there is no evidence. Yet people are sometimes justified in believing that they remember having toast for breakfast, so it follows that classical foundationalism must be false.

But, Plantinga urges, worse is to follow for classical foundationalism. Not only would it commit us to widespread scepticism, it also suffers the crippling defect of being (in a large sense of the term) self-refuting. To see why this is so, let us spell out explicitly what the classical foundationalist is saying about justified beliefs. She is claiming:

(A) A belief that p is justified only if p is properly basic (i.e. self-evident or a report of one’s current conscious state) or is derivable from properly basic beliefs.

But what is the status of (A) according to classical foundationalism? Would a classical foundationalist be justified in believing (A) to be true? According to (A), she would be justified in believing (A) only if (A) is properly basic, or is derivable from beliefs which are properly basic. In fact, Plantinga points out, classical foundationalists have not produced any argument to show that (A) can be derived from other beliefs which are properly basic. So they must believe that (A) is properly basic. But since (A) is not self-evident, nor is it a report of one’s current conscious state, it cannot be properly basic. So either (A) is false, or if it is true, no rational person could believe it. Either way, no rational person could accept (A). So classical foundationalism is ‘bankrupt’, and with its failure disappears any rationale for thinking that theism needs to meet the evidentialist requirement. By implication, the way is open to classify ‘God exists’ as a properly basic belief, and hence as a belief which can be justifiably held in the absence of any supporting reasons or evidence – contra the claims of Chapter 1.

The alternative view proposed by Reformed Epistemology

If classical foundationalism turns out to be a bankrupt epistemology, what alternative does RE offer? Perhaps surprisingly, the replacement has some close parallels to what it replaces: it offers what we might call Reformed foundationalism. It accepts that our justified beliefs can all be divided into the two great classes, basic and derived; that our derived beliefs are justified only if they are supported by our properly basic beliefs, directly or indirectly; and that all the beliefs described by classical foundationalism as properly basic are indeed properly basic. Its central difference from classical foundationalism is that it insists that the class of properly basic beliefs, those which we are entitled to hold without having any reasons or evidence to back them up, is very much wider than classical foundationalism allows. For as we have just seen, Reformed foundationalism classifies both memory beliefs and a belief in God as properly basic. From this basic difference flow a number of other differences. First, RE does not require that our properly basic beliefs should be indubitable or incorrigible or infallible – it does not even require that they should be true. It says only that it must be permissible to hold such beliefs even when you have no supporting reasons or evidence. Second, it allows that there can be good arguments against any given person's properly basic belief; and that when a person comes to know of these objections to what she believes, she is entitled to continue with this belief only if she can show where the objection goes wrong. For example, suppose I remember (as it seems to me) that last week there was a forest fire in the local woods. RE allows that memory beliefs can be properly basic, so I am fully entitled to believe that I remember there was a forest fire, even though I do not have any reasons for this belief. Suppose someone then produces good evidence that my belief is false – perhaps eyewitness reports of people who were in the local woods but who deny that there was a fire. I am then no longer entitled to hold on to my memory belief. If I retain it as a basic belief, it will not be *properly* basic for me. But then suppose that I investigate the matter further, and discover that all the eyewitness reports relate to the day before the day on which I remember the fire occurring. I then have evidence to undermine the initial reports which seem to disprove my initial memory belief, and I can revert to my original memory belief as a properly basic belief. In a terminology which has been increasingly common, the eyewitness reports are a *defeater* for my original memory belief; and my discovery of the discrepancy in dates is a defeater of that defeater. So, although there is a defeater to my original memory belief, I have a defeater for that defeater, and for this reason I can retain the original belief not merely as basic, but as properly basic.

However this still leaves some loose ends. The most obvious of these is the justification for putting a belief in God in the category of properly basic

beliefs. Can *any* arbitrarily chosen belief count as properly basic, according to Reformed Epistemology? If not, what are the criteria for being properly basic, and what grounds are there for saying that theism meets these criteria?

In addressing these questions, Plantinga denies that just any belief, no matter how crazy, could count as properly basic. He gives the example of someone believing that the Great Pumpkin returns every Hallowe'en. Such a crazy belief might be held as basic by a given person, that is to say they do not *in fact* support that belief by inferring it from any other beliefs that they hold. But they would be open to epistemic criticism for holding the belief – it would not be a *properly* basic belief. What, then, distinguishes a belief in God and a belief in the Great Pumpkin? Why is one but not the other properly basic? Plantinga admits that he cannot produce a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity; and while admitting that this is a gap in his overall position, he denies that it is a serious objection. He makes the point that we can often know that something is *not* a such-and-such even though we cannot produce criteria for something being a such-and-such. In particular, the fact that we cannot produce such criteria does not commit us to saying that just anything counts as a such-and-such. Confronted by a mouse-like creature, I might know that it was not an elephant, without being able to supply a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being an elephant.

Given that the lack of such criteria is indeed a gap in the account provided by RE, how then can we proceed to fill the gap? Plantinga's suggestion is that we must proceed inductively. We must gather a wide variety of examples of beliefs which on serious reflection we take to be properly basic, and a similar sample of those which we take not to be properly basic. We must then try to extract from such examples a provisional set of necessary and sufficient conditions for proper basicity, a set which we can then test against further examples. There is of course no reason to suppose that everyone will agree initially on what beliefs are properly basic. Some theists will think that a belief in God is not properly basic because they think that it needs to be supported by evidence; most atheists will think that a belief in God is not properly basic, nor properly derived, because they will think that it is not a defensible belief at all. Other theists will think that a belief in God is properly basic, and they will take the claim that a belief in theism has that status as a datum which any putative set of criteria for proper basicity must accommodate.

The dispute between RE and its opponents thus reaches an impasse: they cannot agree on a starting point. However, Plantinga does add a few more details to try to make RE more acceptable. First, he implies that the impasse does not reveal a defect in RE. It is not that there is a small set of beliefs which can be correctly identified as properly basic, and the REist is being irrational and obstinate in insisting on enlarging it to include theism. To think that *that* is the position would already be to prejudge the case against

RE. For from the RE perspective, precisely the same is true of the opponent of RE. From the point of view of RE, it would be just as true to say that the REist has identified a correct set of properly basic beliefs, including theism, and her opponent irrationally refuses to acknowledge them. The fact is that there is no neutral starting point. There can be no bipartisan agreement on what the data are which our epistemological theories need to accommodate. The consequence is that the sceptic will think that the REist has put forward a question-begging defence of theism, and the REist will think that the sceptic has mounted a question-begging attack. But, Plantinga in effect is saying, although the REist may feel sad that the sceptic cannot see the weakness of her (the sceptic's) attack, she (the REist) should not think that she has no adequate reply to the attack. She has what is (by her own lights) a good reply, and that is all that she needs.

Second, Plantinga points out that although properly basic beliefs are not based on *reasons*, they can have *grounds*. The crucial distinction is that reasons for a belief B have to take the form of further *beliefs* from which one reasons to B as a conclusion. By contrast, the grounds of a belief are never further beliefs from which one reasons but simply *experiences*; and one does not *reason* from the experience to the belief, it is the mere occurrence of the experience which supplies at least prima facie justification for the belief. For example: if, being in pain, I come to believe that I am in pain, I do not have to reason my way to this belief from other beliefs. It is the mere occurrence of the pain itself which grounds and hence justifies my belief that I am in pain. Similarly, if I believe that I see a pink wall in front of me, then although normally I will not have reasoned my way to this belief, it will be grounded in the occurrence of a certain kind of visual experience.

In an analogous way, Plantinga claims, beliefs about God can be grounded, even though they are properly basic. He provides the following examples: reading the Bible, I come to believe that God is speaking to me; having done something wrong, I feel guilty, and spontaneously believe 'God disapproves of what I have done'; finding life 'sweet and satisfying', I have a spontaneous belief that God is to be praised and thanked; being in danger, I have a spontaneous belief 'God will help me if I ask'. Strictly, of course none of these beliefs is theism itself, i.e. the belief that God exists, so they do not show that theism per se is a properly basic belief. But the main aims of RE would clearly be secured if beliefs about God, of the kind just described, were all properly basic. For the sake of convenience I will continue to follow the RE tradition of speaking as if what is in question is the proper basicity of the belief 'God exists' rather than of these more specific beliefs.

Before we go on to assess this position, let us note further four points of clarification. First, RE is not saying that *every* person's belief in the existence of God is properly basic, or that one person's belief in the existence of God will be properly basic at *every* time in their lives. There are two main ways in which a belief in God might fail to be properly basic:

- (a) It might not be basic at all. A particular believer might reason their way to the existence of God, in which case their belief would be derived, not basic, and hence not properly basic.
- (b) It might be basic but not properly basic. I might begin by holding a belief in God as a properly basic belief, then I come across some strong atheist arguments to which I have no answer. But I still hold to my belief in God. Here my belief is still basic (I do not derive it by reasoning from any of my other beliefs), but it is no longer properly basic. I am not entitled to hold a belief to which I think that there are telling objections. If at a later time I find that I can answer those atheist objections, then my basic belief in God can become properly basic again.

Second, RE is not saying that a belief in God is indubitable, or incorrigible or unrevisable or not open to criticism or objection. It will allow that theism is as open to criticism as the great majority of our beliefs, and if the theist wishes to continue to hold on to her belief as properly basic, RE will say that it is incumbent on her to meet these criticisms when she comes across them. She does need to show that the reasons for thinking that theism is irrational or false or in some other way deficient all fail. What she does not need to do is to find positive reasons for thinking that it is true.

Third, RE is not saying that there are no positive reasons for thinking that theism is true, no arguments by which it *can* be supported. In fact, Plantinga has produced a number of such reasons. The claim is only that the theist does not *need* to appeal to any such arguments in order to defend her belief in God: the belief in God can be fully justified even if the believer knows nothing of any supporting arguments, and even if it should turn out that none of the pro-theist arguments succeeds.

Finally, RE is not defending a *general* hostility to reason in relation to theism, of the kind that a number of authors from Chapter 1 displayed. It maintains that critics of theism need to produce reasons for thinking that theism is either false or irrational, and that theists need to produce reasons to argue against these atheist objections. The absence of good argument from either of these domains would be a proper object of epistemic criticism. So it is allowing that there can be good arguments in favour of theism; there can be non-foolish objections to these arguments; there can be (in principle at least) good arguments against theism; and there can be non-foolish objections to these arguments. The only limitation which RE imposes on reason is that it maintains that a belief in theism *can* be fully justified (not that it always is), in the absence of any good supporting arguments.

Assessment

I will argue that Plantinga is wrong to think that theism can be a properly basic belief, but that even if he is right, the consequences for the role of reason in religion will be relatively small.

To see why it is implausible to think of theism as properly basic, we need to look again at what Plantinga says about the ‘grounding’ of other properly basic beliefs. In each case, he invokes some kind of experience as being what grounds the belief in question. Thus, the belief that I am in pain is grounded in my feeling of pain; the belief that I am perceiving a tree is grounded in my sensory awareness of a tree; my belief that someone else is in pain is grounded in my perception of her pain behaviour; my memory belief about having breakfast this morning is grounded in my having ‘a certain past-tensed experience that is familiar to all but hard to describe’ (Plantinga in Sennett 1998: 153). In each case, Plantinga says that the belief is properly basic and that the ‘experience is what justifies me in holding it; [the experience] is the ground of my justification, and by extension, the ground of the belief itself’ (ibid. p. 152).

Whether or not we accept this general picture of the relationship between belief and experience, we can see a certain plausibility in it. There is, we could say, a certain correspondence between the content of the experience and the content of the belief. It is not that the experience triggers in me a belief about something completely unrelated. It is my feeling of pain that grounds the belief that I am in pain, not, for example, the belief that there is no highest prime number or that $E = mc^2$, or that all life on Earth descends from a single source.

But now let us see what grounding Plantinga says there is for theistic beliefs. He claims that Mary’s belief that God is speaking to her is grounded in her experience of reading the Bible; her belief that God disapproves of what she has done is grounded in a feeling of guilt; her belief that God can help is grounded in a feeling of danger; her belief that God is to be thanked and praised is grounded in a feeling that life is sweet and satisfying.

It is clear from these examples that the relationship between properly basic non-theistic beliefs and their grounds is very different from the relationship between properly basic theistic beliefs and their grounds. The relationship is very much closer in the former case than in the latter, and makes it intelligible why Plantinga should claim that grounding is a form of justification. But in the theistic case, there is simply a huge gap between the belief and what is supposed to ground it. Take the case where I feel guilty about something. How can a feeling of this kind, ground and hence justify a belief in the existence of, for example, a being who created the universe from nothing? Or of a being who is eternal? Or of a being who is non-physical? Of course some theists have argued that there is some indirect and unobvious connection between the existence of morality and the existence

of God. They have thought that a good argument could be constructed to show that anyone who recognised moral constraints as genuinely binding was logically committed to the existence of God; and we will be looking at their position in Chapter 7. But that is not what Plantinga is saying. For he is claiming that the theistic belief is properly basic, and hence although it is justified, it does not need any supporting argument. Intuitions will vary on such a case, but it looks as if someone in whom feelings of guilt trigger the belief ‘God disapproves of what I have done’ is suffering from a cognitive malfunction. Whether or not there are any good arguments for the existence of God, or for thinking that he disapproves of what I have done, feelings of guilt are simply the wrong sort of thing to supply a justification.

Consider again the experience of reading the Bible. What belief ought this to ground as a properly basic belief? Given that the experience of pain grounds the belief ‘I am in pain’ as properly basic, and the experience of seeing a red patch grounds the belief ‘I am seeing a red patch’ as properly basic, one might have thought that if the experience of reading the Bible grounds any belief as properly basic, it would be the belief ‘I am reading the Bible’. But the belief which Plantinga says is grounded by this experience (the belief that God is speaking to me) is at a huge epistemic distance from the experience. The belief involves a hypothesis about the source of the text I am reading, a cosmological speculation about the dependency of all reality on some single principle, an assumption that that principle has some very specific qualities, and so on. Even if all of these hypotheses are true, and even if it is possible to justify a belief that they are true, the mere experience of reading the Bible is simply the wrong sort of thing to provide such justification.

We will return in Chapter 8 to the issue of religious experience, but for the moment we can simply say that given the kind of hypothesis that theism is (i.e. a large-scale cosmological hypothesis, postulating the existence of an entity with a variety of unique, unobservable properties), it would be very surprising if the occurrence of an experience could by itself (i.e. without any surrounding reasoning) justify a theistic belief. It therefore seems unlikely that theism could be a properly basic belief.

However, let us suppose for the sake of argument that this line of criticism is wrong, and that theism can be properly basic. From what has already been said, we can see that this does not mean that everyone, everywhere, at every time is right, rational etc. to believe in God without evidence or argument, but only that it is *possible* in specific contexts for a particular believer’s belief to be right, etc. in the absence of argument. But now we need to notice an ambiguity, or at least a duality, in some of the concepts of epistemic approval (‘justified’, ‘entitled’) which Plantinga uses. Following (as he believes) the classical foundationalists themselves, he gives these terms a deontological or quasi-ethical twist. He connects them with the concepts of epistemic praise and blame; rights, duties, and negligence. Let us call this

the ‘duty’ sense. Given this construal of the terms, when the believer asks herself ‘Is my belief in God epistemically permissible?’ she is asking herself ‘Am I entitled to hold this belief? Do I violate any of my epistemic duties in holding this belief? Have I been careless or negligent in forming it? Am I open to epistemic reproach? Have I been, for example, gullible, overhasty, or biased?’. RE maintains that some believers can honestly answer these questions in a way that shows that belief to be beyond epistemic reproach, and hence to be justified, legitimate, etc., even though it has not been arrived at by reasoning or argument.

But there is a second and quite different sense which we could give to this cluster of terms, which I will call the ‘truth-indicator’ sense. In this sense, the question ‘Is my belief justified?’ is not asking about me and my epistemic procedures, it is asking whether there are any pointers to the truth of what I believe. Whereas the duty sense is focused on *my believing* what I believe, the truth-indicator sense is focused on *what I believe*. There can of course be a connection between them. If my epistemic procedures have all been properly followed, then that fact could be a good indicator that the belief that I end up with is true. But in principle, these are two different kinds of assessment, directed at two different objects, the believing and the proposition believed. We are familiar with the idea that two people who hold the same belief might not be equally rational in holding it: in arriving at the belief, one has fulfilled her epistemic duties, and the other has not. But this is quite separate from asking impersonally whether there is any reason to think that what they both believe is true.

We can now see that even if Plantinga is right in thinking that a believer can be ‘entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all’ (op. cit. p. 103), this is beside the point. That conclusion can indeed be a comfort to the believer, in assuring her that she is free from reproach in holding on to her theism even though she cannot offer any supporting argument or evidence. But it is beside the point, because many believers will quite properly want to ask themselves the further question ‘Given that I do not violate any epistemic duties in holding this belief, what reasons are there for thinking that the belief is true?’. In other words, they want to focus not on the degree of conscientiousness of this or that believer, but on the truth of the matter about God’s existence.

This is connected with a further point. Plantinga approaches the matter from the point of a believer. This is of course entirely reasonable since he is a theist. But it means that his starting point is that of someone who already holds a belief in God who asks herself the question ‘Am I rational or reasonable or entitled to hold what I believe?’. But there is an alternative starting point, which is perhaps in current Western society at least as common. It is the starting point of someone who does not antecedently think that theism is true, nor that it is false, but who is enquiring in an open-minded way what reasons there are for accepting either theism or atheism. It seems that

in relation to such a person, RE can only say ‘Well, if you accept theism, you could be justified (in the duty sense), because your belief might be a properly basic one’. But that is not the question which the enquirer wants answered. She is asking what reasons there are for thinking that theism is true, not about the epistemic propriety of those who accept it.

There is one final query to raise. Suppose we grant that the category of properly basic beliefs is not intrinsically problematic. We grant that some beliefs are straightforwardly properly basic. Perhaps we think of beliefs such as ‘ $1 + 1 = 2$ ’, and ‘I am in pain’ as uncontroversially in this category, and perhaps some memory beliefs too. But what in the domain of religion is a Reformed Epistemologist asking us to include as properly basic? As we noted above, strictly speaking it is not theism itself (i.e. the thesis that God exists) which Plantinga says is properly basic but a series of beliefs from which theism follows obviously and uncontroversially. They were claims like ‘God disapproves of what I have done’, ‘God will help me if I ask’ and so on. But now the Great Pumpkin objection must return. How many beliefs about God can be counted as properly basic? How many kinds of beliefs can the theist claim that she is justified in holding even though she has no evidence to think that they are true? As we will see in Chapter 9, it may be that proper basicity is meant to cover some very specific beliefs about God’s intentions, for example, the belief that God has created humans with a set of cognitive faculties which will yield mainly true beliefs when those faculties are properly used in the environment for which they were intended. So what other beliefs can count as properly basic? Can I have properly basic beliefs about Vishnu or Zoroaster or Zeus? If I am a Protagorean, can ‘Man is the measure of all things’ be properly basic for me? Plantinga’s concession that he cannot produce a set of necessary and sufficient conditions begins to look more damaging for theism. Equally, the way forward which he recommends (gathering a wide range of examples of what we agree to be basic and non-basic beliefs) does not look promising, because there is no reason to think that Reformed Epistemologists and their opponents will be able to agree about the status of theistic beliefs.

The consequence is that although it seems at first as if RE is a major challenge to the need for argument and reason defended in Chapter 1, closer examination shows that this is not the case. First, there are good reasons for rejecting the claim that theism is properly basic. Second, even if theism is properly basic, the challenge RE presents is of restricted scope. It is restricted because RE allows full scope for reason in the presentation of anti-theist arguments, and in attempts by the theist to undermine these objections. It also allows that there are some cogent pro-theist arguments, and some serious objections to those arguments. Third, the challenge of RE is anyway not one which the non-theist needs to meet, because it is one which the theist cannot raise without begging the question.

Further reading

The locus classicus for Reformed Epistemology is the collection of papers edited by Plantinga and Wolterstorff (1983) – see in particular the papers by Plantinga ‘Reason and Belief in God’, reprinted in Sennett (1998), and by Wolterstorff. For later developments of these ideas see the two papers by Plantinga and Wolterstorff respectively in Quinn and Taliaferro (1997), and Plantinga (2000). Criticisms of RE from within theism can be found in Quinn (1985 and 1993). Plantinga replies to the first of these papers in Plantinga (1986). An overview of the debate can be found in Hasker (1998). *Philosophical Books* (vol. 43, April 2002) published a symposium on Plantinga (2000), with articles by Sudduth, Wykstra, and Zagzebski, and a reply by Plantinga. Alston’s version of RE can be found in Alston (1991), with a critique in Sudduth (1995).