

The Rationality of Religious Beliefs

Bryan Frances

Think, 14 (2015), 109-117

Abstract:

Many highly educated people think religious belief is irrational and unscientific. If you ask a philosopher, however, you'll likely get two answers: most religious belief is rational in some respects and irrational in other respects. In this essay I explain why they think religious belief is rational. In a sequel essay I explain why they think the very same beliefs are irrational.

The majority of philosophers are happy to admit that there is a fairly robust and common notion of rationality according to which millions of ordinary people have rational religious beliefs and other religious commitments. By 'religious belief' I mean beliefs that make some substantive claim and are part of some religion, such as 'God exists', 'Jesus rose from the dead', 'Heaven exists and is everlasting', etc. By saying that the belief is 'rational' I mean that at the very least, charges such as 'You should know better than to believe that', 'You are being foolish', and 'You aren't living up to your own cognitive standards—ones you do in fact live up to all the time' don't apply to the person in virtue of her having the religious belief. Very briefly, if one grows up in a social-epistemic environment with certain key features (e.g., everyone has just about the same religious beliefs, it's been that way for many years, the society is stable and functions pretty well when it comes to practical matters, etc.), the rationality of theistic belief can be easily had. Furthermore, philosophers are happy to list some of the factors that very often help *make* those religious beliefs rational.

It's silly of me to speak for such a large group of philosophers but I'm going to do it anyway. And my spokesperson methodology is so flawed it's embarrassing to reveal it: instead of doing the responsible thing—consult the philosophical literature of charges of (ir)rational religious belief—all I did was consult *the voices in my head*, the many philosophical points of view that buffet me about when I'm thinking about philosophical issues. Some of the voices want to say that religious belief is rational; others say it's irrational; and I listen to the arguments they defend themselves with. Despite that pathetic methodology, I think the following five epistemic factors are among the most common factors that philosophers admit prop up the rationality of many religious beliefs.

Factor F1: Testimony

Factor F1 is the fact that believers often have strong testimony for the beliefs. Testimony includes oral reports (e.g., from parents, friends, religious authorities, famous people, etc), written statements (biographies, sacred texts), videos (of famous speeches and debates), and other related forms such as the long history and respected status of institutions (e.g., the Catholic Church). For many believers, virtually everyone they respect shares their religious views—and shares it wholeheartedly. This usually starts in childhood, with the child implicitly realizing that everyone they look up to has the religious views that they themselves have come to.

You might complain that this testimony is cancelled out or at least diminished by evidence against religious beliefs—or evidence against the reliability of religious testimony. That's fine; I'll get to those matters in the forthcoming essay on the irrationality of religious belief. All I'm saying here is this: there is an enormous amount of testimony for many religious beliefs. Even if it gets cancelled out in some or even most cases, it's still true that it exists in the first place.

I'm not merely saying that there is enormous amount of testimony; I'm also saying that it is *strong*, which means that the testimony does a lot of work in making the belief reasonable. I will comment on the qualifier 'strong' below.

Factor F2: Plausible Religious Arguments

Second, it is usually understood if not explicitly acknowledged by philosophers that certain well known arguments for specific religious beliefs can be *good enough* to help make many religious beliefs blamelessly rational in the sense described earlier—even if *unbeknownst to those people the arguments in question really have fatal flaws that can't be repaired*. For instance, here are slogans of three popular arguments for God's existence—and it's worth noting that often enough people understand almost nothing beyond the mere slogans.

The Cosmological Argument: Something must have created the universe. It can't just be a big random accident. It got here somehow. Even if the Big Bang theory is wrong and the universe goes back in time infinitely, still there's got to be something that creates or sustains it in existence. It can't create itself, so something separate from the universe did it. That's got to be God.

The Design Argument: Nature has an intricate structure that seems very carefully designed. Nature doesn't consist of just microscopic particles randomly zigzagging through space. There is all this marvelous, incredible order to it all. This order or structure or whatever you want to call it couldn't have come about randomly, without some designer. Something must have designed nature. Only God could do that.

The Social Argument: Throughout history literally billions of people have believed in God. Obviously, some of them did so for little or no good reason, but the idea that *all* of them are wrong—even the large number of great geniuses of science and philosophy who were or are theists—strains credulity.

In addition, throughout history many of these theists have claimed that they have actually *perceived* God, usually through meditation. People get trained in meditation, which often takes years, and eventually learn to experience God. Sure, some people who say they have experienced God are delusional (e.g., some preachers on television), but it seems highly unlikely that *all* of them, including so many gifted ones, could be so completely wrong.

Even theistic philosophers (that is, philosophers who believe in God) know that virtually all common versions of these arguments have fatal flaws in them (this does not require them to think that *all* versions fail!).

Factor F3: Extraordinary Experiences

Third, some not uncommon intensely emotional experiences can be extraordinary enough that when combined with supporting testimony and a lack of imagination, culture, and knowledge of psychology, they can help make religious belief rational. A person has an extraordinary experience, or sequence of experiences, that she knows is very commonly thought to be spiritual and as far as she knows it ‘fits’ in with her version of theism nicely. (There is much more on these experiences in the essay on the irrationality of religious belief.) Given that she has no other explanation available for that experience (that is the lack of imagination, culture, or knowledge of psychology) and no other reason to distrust it, it’s no wonder she takes the experience to be somehow coming from or connected to or indicative of God.

Factor F4: Ignorance of Challenges

The fourth factor that helps make many religious beliefs rational is the fact that believers are often unaware of any significant challenge to their religious beliefs or the basis of those beliefs. They haven’t encountered the reasons to doubt their religious beliefs or the quality of the evidence for those beliefs—or, if they have, they have not fully digested them. Here are some (but certainly not all!) of the standard challenges:

1. There are scientific and philosophical reasons for thinking that the universe need not have had any starting cause at all, which challenges the relatively commonly known argument that we know God exists because we know something must have caused the universe of contingent things to come into being and only God could do that.
2. There is good reason to think some suffering has no outweighing benefit and God, as traditionally understood, would not permit such suffering.
3. There are good scientific and philosophical reasons for thinking the intricate structure of nature need not have been designed.

4. There are good philosophical and psychological reasons for thinking that so-called religious experiences don't indicate any connection with God.
5. There are good epistemic reasons for thinking facts about religious disagreement (that many people are aware of) provide (to some people) significant evidence against some important religious beliefs.

Philosophers typically become aware of some of these challenges as teenagers or young adults, but a great many people are culturally sheltered and are unaware of them (for one thing, they have much more pressing things to attend to with their time). For instance, when it comes to the common yet clearly flawed arguments for God's existence, all of the following hold of many typical theists:

- a. The flaws are hidden to the believer.
- b. The premises of the argument look perfectly correct to the believer.
- c. She is unable see any significant flaws in the arguments without extensive assistance (that she has not received).
- d. She has impressive testimony that the arguments are quite good and the criticisms of them are nitpicky or mistaken (as that's what people say to her, especially the people she most trusts on intellectual matters).

If (a)-(d) are true of someone, then the theistic arguments can help make her religious beliefs rational. The big four-part 'if' statement is true for many theists. Hence, even if in some objective sense the arguments for her religious views are no good (because of the fatal flaws they supply no real evidence for those religious views), they can be *good enough* to help secure her rationality in having those views—a notion of rationality tied to praise and blame.¹

I am not saying that those challenges to theism show that religious belief is irrational in any sense. All I'm saying is this: even if those challenges provide good evidence against important religious beliefs (or against the reasons why people hold those beliefs), many people are utterly unaware of the challenges, have no reason to be aware of them, and are almost completely cut off from the communities of people who are aware of them. Hence, they escape the threats, if any, posed by those challenges.

Factor F5: Defensive Testimony

Even when theists are vaguely aware of some challenges to their beliefs (such as the five (1)-(5) mentioned above), a new factor comes to the rescue, thereby diminishing the force of those challenges: they often have strong (written, oral, video) testimony that the challenges aren't serious. All the people they look up to confidently convince them that the problem of apparently gratuitous suffering (that was

¹ Of course, there are other theistic arguments (e.g., regarding alleged miracles).

challenge 2 in the previous subsection) has a theistic solution, that scientists don't know what they are talking about when they say there is no reason to posit God, that atheists and agnostics just haven't had any personal experiences of God, etc. They thereby acquire strong testimonial evidence that the challenges to theism are defective.

A significant percentage of theists almost never hear, or at least appreciate, anything like 'But there are a great many sane, sincere, honest, highly intelligent, informed folk who hold that those challenges are extremely strong'. If they did, then it would be harder for them to just trust the people who say the challenges aren't serious. It's also rare that they encounter any really powerful, detailed, expert anti-theistic argument in the first place, thereby requiring really strong testimony that rebuts that anti-theistic argument.

Note that the testimony in F1 (the testimony that says theistic beliefs are true) and F5 (the testimony that says the challenges to theistic beliefs are no good) are good enough to make theistic beliefs rational *independently of the testimony's origin*, where the origin might be someone who directly perceived God (for F1) or is a true expert regarding theistic arguments and experiences (for F5)—those are the good cases—but also might be someone who was insane and deluded (for F1) or who is a blowhard who knows next to nothing regarding the challenges to theism (for F5)—those are the bad cases. Consider an analogy: even if the whole idea of electrons and protons is a stunningly successful and long-running gag perpetrated by generations of twisted physicists and chemists, it remains true that in ordinary senses of 'testimony' and 'intellectually reasonable' we non-scientists have excellent testimony for our shared belief that atoms contain electrons and protons—testimony good enough to make our belief reasonable in an intellectually robust manner. At the very least, we are completely blameless in holding those beliefs even if we are the victims of deception and delusion. Similarly, even if the people who say they have experienced God are frauds or deluded, if we know none of those unhappy facts and they are otherwise trustworthy, then we are blameless in accepting their testimony. That's why I said the F1 and F5 testimony is often 'strong'.

By saying that those five factors often help secure the rationality of much religious belief I don't want to give anyone the wrong impression. There are many fascinating and difficult philosophical questions to ask about the type of rationality in play and how the testimony (F1 and F5), arguments (F2), ignorance (F4), and experiences (F3) help to secure that type of rationality. For instance, you might wonder whether 'testimonial evidence' is the right term if the alleged testimony is false (e.g., when some religious authorities say that the existence of apparently pointless suffering gives us no good reason whatsoever to doubt the existence of a perfect God) or improperly originated (starting from people who are deluded or otherwise irrational). I am not going to delve into those intriguing questions here, as they are not relevant to my limited purposes.

What I just did was list five factors that help make religious beliefs rational, in one interesting and important sense of 'rational' tied to praise and blame: we can't blame people for adopting those religious beliefs (even if they are false!) and we have to admit that they did as well as can be expected of intelligent yet somewhat sheltered people. So we can see from these five factors that a *great many*

religious beliefs are rational in a substantive, non-trivial manner, assuming that people generally have loads of *non-theistic* beliefs that are rational in that manner. We can learn this just by reflecting on the common cases of religious belief all around us plus the five factors above.

This list of rationality-securing factors is not intended to be exhaustive! You might be chomping at the bit to point out other factors that cause people to rationally adopt religious beliefs. For instance, maybe you think that a great many ordinary people often actually experience or perceive God in a vivid, life-altering manner; and it's because of those perceptive experiences that they rationally believe in God. So you are saying that a portion of F3 can be perfectly legitimate and even confer genuine reflective knowledge of God. That's fine: I'm absolutely not suggesting that that doesn't happen. All I'm trying to do here is list some *relatively uncontroversial factors* that cause *ordinary* people to have reasonable religious beliefs—factors that *even atheistic philosophers* will admit exist and do work in propping up the epistemic reasonability of many religious beliefs.

In part 2 of this work, 'The Irrationality of Religious Belief', I will attempt to express what philosophers tend to think when they say, or are tempted to say, that much religious belief is 'irrational'.