

Faith, Evidence, and Belief

Paul Mayer

1 Introduction

Faith is believing something you
know ain't true.

-Mark Twain

You may come across an idea that goes like this: “Theists do not have evidence for the existence of God, so they must rely on *faith*, which is belief without evidence.” Of course theists *do* offer arguments for their belief in God, including cosmological arguments based on mathematics [7, 5] and entropy [13], arguments from design [12], arguments from morality [2], and even ontological arguments from modal logic [16], so if any of these are offer any *evidential support* for the proposition “God exists,” then by definition there is evidence for the existence of God [11]¹ However in this paper, we are going to talk about some ideas by analytic philosopher Alvin Plantinga, who claims that belief in God can be reasonable even if one *has no arguments or evidence*. What?! Stay tuned.

2 Epistemology and Evidentialism

I will look at any additonal
evidence to confirm the opinion
to which I have already come

-Lord Molson

Epistemology is a word meaning “the study of knowledge,” and the field of epistemology asks questions about what it means to *know* something. One of the key questions epistemology asks is what separates knowledge from mere belief (think about it: we can *believe* things that are false, but is it possible *know* falsehoods?). During the 17th and 18th centuries, the European Enlightenment was fascinated by the work of physicist and mathematician Issac Newton [14]

¹An atheist or agnostic can grant that there are some features of the world that are best explained by the existence of God while still disbelieving in God. They may argue there is some evidence for God's existence, but, all things considered, the evidence against God's existence outweighs the evidence for.

and the scientific method described by Francis Bacon [1]. Impressed by progress in the natural sciences, many thought this way of thinking should be used outside the sciences as well. There was a call to ask what the evidence was for *all* beliefs, not just scientific ones. This included religious beliefs as well.

A new standard of belief arose, which said “to be rational, a belief must be supported by sufficient evidence.” We will call this view *evidentialism*, because it says a view is rational based on the evidence for it. This was perhaps most famously put by Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, who wrote “a wise man apportions his beliefs to the evidence [10].” There is a lot to like about evidentialism, but you may be surprised to learn that by itself it renders all our beliefs irrational.

3 The Problem with Evidentialism

Does Evidence Need Evidence?

-Mitch Stokes [21]

Now is a good time to ask what we mean by evidence – after all, if we need evidence for our beliefs to be rational (as the evidentialists claim), it helps to know what evidence actually is. What first comes to mind is probably something like physical evidence: evidence that Colonel Mustard stabbed Mr. Brown with the kitchen knife would be the actual knife with his fingerprints on it. This is true, but notice how this is presented in the *context* of an argument:

- P1: If Colonel Mustard’s fingerprints are on the murder weapon, he is likely the killer
- P2: Colonel Mustard’s fingerprints are on the murder weapon (here it is)
- C: Therefore, Colonel Mustard is likely the killer.

Outside of an argument or goal (such as trying to show Colonel Mustard is guilty) a knife with fingerprints on it is just a *thing*, not evidence. As a result, what we mean by evidence is a reason, (reason as a noun such as “a compelling reason to believe,” not as a verb like “I reasoned my way to the answer”). And Hume himself wrote “If I ask why you believe any particular matter of fact...you must tell me **some reason** [10].”

Of course, reasons like this (and what we mean by evidence more generally) can be more abstract: a proof in mathematics counts as evidence for a certain conclusion. So can arguments where the conclusion logically follows from the premises, such as *modus tollens*. The problem is that arguments themselves rest on premises which themselves are assumed to be true. We end up with a regress problem because we keep moving the goalposts back: asking what argument or evidence there is for *x*, which then itself needs evidence, and so on without end. For a real head-stumper, think about what reason do we have to trust reason itself.

Philosopher and engineer Mitch Stokes points out that arguments are often like functions, where you put in propositions and a new conclusion comes out [21]. For an analogy, consider a row of dominos where a domino will only fall if it is in the path of another falling domino. In this analogy, propositions are the dominos and a valid argument is like placing the “conclusion” domino in the path of the “premise” dominos. If the premise dominos fall (i.e. the premises are true), then the conclusion domino will fall. Evidentialism makes the claim that *all* conclusions must be justified on the basis of other arguments. The problem with evidentialism is it cannot justify any starting point. How can we establish the rationality of the “first” link in the chain of reasoning? In other words, how do we knock over the first domino so the rest of them fall?

Some evidentialists try to argue beliefs are justified by the *coherence* of views in question in an attempt to avoid the regress problem; this is called coherentism. However as Plantinga argues [18], this amounts to arguing that circular reasoning is fine as long as the “circles” are large enough. Imagine a sequence of dominos arranged in a circle: the fact that they are placed in a circle does not explain why any of them fall in the first place. Coherentism can be rational and has its contemporary defenders, but for an evidentialist, appealing to coherence does little to justify any of their views because it lacks the necessary starting point demanded by evidentialism.

However the biggest problem with evidentialism is that it is self-referentially incoherent. This is a fancy way of saying it cannot meet its *own* standard for rationality. To see this, consider the evidentialist’s claim again: “to be rational, a belief must be supported by sufficient evidence.” A consistent evidentialist should be able to provide sufficient evidence for *this* claim. What evidence could, in theory, establish that things should only be believed if they have enough evidence? Well, whatever reason the evidentialist provides will be an argument which itself rests on unproven or questionable premises – all before establishing the rationality of evidentialism. If evidentialism is true, than all of our beliefs are left unjustified, including belief in evidentialism itself. Thus, evidentialism cannot meet its *own* standard for rationality.

One thing to note is that objections to evidentialism are not necessarily arguing we should believe things without evidence or believe *anything* regardless of the evidence. And in general, Hume’s maxim of having a stronger belief in things that have more evidence is a wise principle – in fact, this idea is the foundation of the justice system. Objections to evidentialism are simply targeting the extreme and self-defeating nature of evidentialism, not questioning the value of evidence in general ². Evidentialists, critics argue, simply take it way too far - far enough to commit intellectual suicide.

²There is a difference between saying “it is generally good to have solid reasons for your beliefs” and “beliefs are justified if and only if they have sufficient evidence.”

4 Enter Foundationalism

Explanations come to an end
somewhere

-Wittgenstein [24]

An alternative to evidentialism is a view called *foundationalism*, which argues some beliefs which are “properly basic:” these form a *foundation* to derive our other beliefs. Unlike evidentialists, foundationalists believe some things can be rationally believed *without* any evidence, with these non-evidential beliefs being called *foundational* or *properly basic* beliefs. Foundationalists think of knowledge like a building: there are floors which stand on other floors, but each can eventually be traced back to the foundation which is (hopefully) true. Similarly, we may have knowledge in things that are based on other things, but these are only justified if the things they are based on are justified, which eventually can be traced back to the foundation. In the domino analogy, some dominos (basic dominos) can fall without being hit by other dominos.

Philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes³ wanted to find something he could be *absolutely certain* of so he could build a tower of knowledge:

I shall ever follow in this road until I have met with something which is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing else, until I have learned for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain. [9]

Descartes famously uttered “cogito, ergo sum” - I think therefore I am. His idea was he could be absolutely certain that he was a thinking thing; i.e. that he had a conscious experience. He realized that if he was not a thinking thing, he would not be able to ponder this question in the first place. He landed on the idea of *self-evident beliefs* – beliefs which are obviously true by their nature. Another example is knowing one is in pain: one does not make an argument from their experience of pain that they are likely in pain – they simply know it by virtue of what pain is.

There are other beliefs that are good candidates for being properly basic. Reason is one example: to question reason is to use it, something philosopher Thomas Reid realized in the 19th century [20]. Our senses like vision and hearing are good candidates too, even if they sometimes mess up. Descartes famously came up with the analogy that he could be deceived by some evil demon into having sense experiences that were not real (famously explored in the 1999 film *The Matrix*). Modern day examples of this idea are explored in philosophy and science fiction arguing we could be living in a simulation [3], or our brain is actually in a vat being poked and prodded by alien scientists causing us to hallucinate the world around us [4]. Still, we have no knockdown arguments against these things, so are we justified believing we live in the “real world”?

³He is also the guy who came up with Cartesian coordinates; (they are named after him). Many of the great scientists and mathematicians of this era were also well studied in theology and philosophy, including Leibniz and Pascal.

According to Plantinga, we are justified trusting reason and our senses – as long as there aren’t any serious *defeaters*, or reasons to think our experiences are false. Plantinga develops an idea in epistemology called “warrant,” which says a belief is rational if it is formed or held in a way conducive to that type of belief’s being true [18]⁴. As long as our mind (and senses) are operating in an environment designed to produce accurate views of the world, we are justified trusting their conclusions. Furthermore, these conclusions are “innocent until proven guilty:” just as there are cases where we think we see something and later decide it isn’t there, we are justified believe things at face value unless we have an argument that refutes this belief.

5 Faith

Faith is a response to evidence,
not a rejoicing in the absence of
evidence

-John Lennox

At this point, a skeptic may concede that there are problems with evidentialism and accept a more nuanced view of warrant, while still thinking there is a huge difference between trusting reason and belief in God. “After all,” the skeptic may say, “isn’t science based on evidence, while belief in God is based on *faith*?”

This is a fair point, and now we must turn our attention to the word “faith.” The first thing to note is that faith is not exclusively a religious term: one can have faith in one’s friends, faith in science, and faith in reason. As a result, we want our definition of faith to be included under these uses as well. Of course, some people want faith to be an exclusively religious term, which is fine as long as we aren’t playing word games around how these are defined ⁵. I am going to suggest we use the following definition of faith, and I will explain why in a bit:

Faith is believing something on the basis of testimony [21].

Let’s look at faith in these other contexts before returning to faith in God. When I say I have faith in science, what I am saying is I believe results on the basis of the testimony of scientists and the scientific method, when performed properly. As a result, I generally believe the results of scientific journals, and the testimony of scientists who say they have performed some experiment. Of course, they could be lying (and I have yet to perform the exact experiments myself), but I *trust* that they are telling me the truth, at least until I see evidence otherwise. When I hear of a scientist falsifying data, it may shake my trust in

⁴Put another way, “A rational belief is one formed by a properly functioning cognitive faculty operating in the appropriate environment [21, 18].”

⁵It is difficult for me to see where this distinction is; it often presupposes some sort of demarcation criteria between the secular and religious, between faith in God and faith in reason.

the institution of science, but it does not destroy my trust in the methodology of science nor the results of the scientific method when practiced *properly* (note the appeal to proper function – science needs to be performed in a truth seeking environment to have warrant [17]).

Similarly, when I say I have faith in reason, I am trusting what I logically deduce from my own faculties of reason. There are times I have been wrong and reasoned my way to a false conclusion, however this doesn't do much to undermine my trust in the overall faculty of reason itself. Note that my mistakes in reasoning are not due to "reason itself" being wrong, but rather due to me using reason improperly (such as arguing for a conclusion from a premise I later learn is false). The fact that I have been wrong before teaches me to be cautious, but I still retain faith in my mind's ability to reason its way to correct conclusions when functioning properly.

Finally, when I say I have faith in my friends, I am trusting that they are not lying or manipulating me; that they will be there for me. This testimony I base my trust in them on may be explicit ("I'll be there for you when you need me") or it may be implicit in their actions, but notice that my faith in them is not a *blind* faith – it is a response to evidence. Now, here is where Hume's maxim comes in: I will likely have less faith in a stranger or new friend than a lifelong friend. A lifelong friend has (hopefully) continuously demonstrated their trustworthiness, providing *evidence* that my trust in them is warranted. It seems reasonable to have more faith in those who have been trustworthy or honest in the past than those we have not interacted with much.

6 Faith in God

There is enough light for those
who want to believe and enough
shadows to blind those who don't

-Pascal

Here is where faith in God comes in: when a Christian says they have faith in God, they are claiming they believe things on the basis of God's *testimony*. What does this mean? Well, many Christians believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God. So Christians who believe things based on what the Bible says are simply appealing to the testimony of God.

There are two big challenges to idea that need to be addressed. The first is the existence of *defeaters*, or reasons to distrust that the Bible could be the Word of God in the first place. For instance, many skeptics will argue that there are contradictions or other issues with the Bible that *defeats* our reason for thinking it is the Word of God. We will come back to these in a bit. The other challenge asks how we come to know that the Bible is the Word of God. It seems we need to rely on faith not just in God, but on others who say that the Bible *is* the Word of God. This is a good point, however notice that this is not unique to whether the Bible is authored by God. Thomas Reid once wrote,

The wise author of nature hath planted in the human mind a propensity to rely upon human testimony before we can give a reason for doing so. This indeed puts our judgment almost entirely in the power of those who are about us in the first period of life; but this is necessary both to our preservation and to our improvement. If children were so framed as to pay no regard to testimony or authority, they must, in the literal sense, perish for lack of knowledge [20].

Still, is it possible to have *justified knowledge* that the Bible is the Word of God?

According to Plantinga, it is. Basing his view on the works of John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas, Plantinga argues that God provides an *epistemic pathway* through the testimony of the Holy Spirit [19]. This is a fancy way of saying God “speaks” directly to us, and this is how we come to know certain theological truths about Sin, the need for reconciliation with God, and Jesus. Just as one can “know” they are in pain by experiencing it directly (no arguments needed), Plantinga argues the Holy Spirit provides a way we can come to knowledge about certain theological truths that do not need to be supported by argument. What about the Bible? Plantinga suggests that part of the witness of the Holy Spirit involves knowing that the Bible is the Word of God. He also suggests that the Holy Spirit works in us when we read the Bible to authenticate its truth.

According to Plantinga, the Holy Spirit can also work outside of the Bible. Consider, for instance, when people talk about being “convicted,” which includes the feeling that one has sinned against God, or simply just “knowing” that God loves them. In the New Testament, Paul writes, “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God [Romans 8:15-16].” Plantinga and Stokes further argue that our moral beliefs function in a similar way, allowing them to be justified through our conscience [22] (c.f. Romans 2:14-15).

The distinction between arguments and knowledge is key to Plantinga’s point: as analytic philosopher William Lane Craig argues, there is a difference between “*knowing* Christianity to be true and *showing* Christianity to be true. [6].” According to Craig (and Plantinga), we can *know* Christianity is true through the self-authenticating witness of the Holy Spirit, however we *show* this is true to others by use of argument to explain our experience. Thus, even if arguments exist for certain theological doctrines, we do not come to *knowledge* of them only by way of argument. Of course arguments are still important: a Christian may need to provide an argument to convince someone that a certain doctrine is consistent or in accord with reason; in these cases a direct appeal to the Holy Spirit will probably look like circularity to a nonbeliever who has not experienced the witness Craig and Plantinga talk about. Still, it is worth repeating that Plantinga’s point in all of this is not to argue *for* the existence of God, but rather demonstrate how belief in God could be reasonable or “rationally warranted”

7 The Implications of Reformed Epistemology

You really can't sensibly claim
theistic belief is irrational without
showing it isn't true

-Alvin Plantinga

The view that religious belief can be rational without any argument or evidence is called *Reformed Epistemology*⁶. If Plantinga's argument is successful than it almost impossible to argue that belief in God is irrational. Why? For an atheist to claim belief in God is irrational, they first have to show God does not exist. This is because if God does exist, it is possible (or even plausible) that he would provide some way we could know this to be true that doesn't depend on argument. In other words, to Plantinga, it seems reasonable that if God exists, he would set up the world in such a way where one wouldn't need any knowledge of philosophy or reason to "know" God directly: to have the kind of "personal" (as opposed to propositional) relationship that Christians often talk about. Plantinga compares what John Calvin called a "sensitus divinitatus" (literally, the "sense of a deity" or natural capacity of human beings to perceive God) to other senses we have, like vision or hearing. Just like someone's vision can be damaged, by either not working at all or not working properly (hallucinations, blind spots, etc), Plantinga argues the "sensitus divinitatus" can be damaged or work improperly (he suggests by sin or from The Fall).

Consider the claim made by some atheists that belief in God is a "delusion" or some sort of cognitive malfunction [8]. According to these atheists, one's cognitive faculties are not functioning properly when they believe God exists. Those following Plantinga's model sometimes make a similar argument in the other direction: it is the *atheist's* cognitive faculties who are malfunctioning when they cannot "see" that God exists. Just as we would consider the vision of a person who could not see things directly in front of them to be "malfunctioning," reformed epistemologists sometimes argue atheism results from an improper functioning of one's sensitus divinitatus⁷. The key here is the "right cognitive environment:" someone may fail to see an object right in front of them in a dark room, not because they are stupid or did anything wrong, but simply because they are in an environment not conducive to seeing what is right in front of them (perhaps for no fault of their own). Some even argue that cultural conditions, such as post-enlightenment modernity and post-modernity, make the existence of God appear less plausible than it would in a more ap-

⁶Plantinga said he regrets using the word "reformed" because it can make it sound exclusively Protestant.

⁷One needs to be very careful about these kinds of accusations – claiming someone is "irrational" or "deluded" often sounds like ridicule. For a Christian trying to evangelize, such an accusation would likely be counter-productive. When hearing discussion of these arguments between philosophical theists and atheists, remember they often have a mutual respect for one-anther and the word "cognitive malfunction" is not meant to be derogatory or manipulative.

appropriate cognitive environment [23, 15]. In summary, Plantinga’s model argues that an atheist who thinks belief in God is irrational, without showing (or arguing) that God does not exist, is begging the question against God’s existence by presupposing God would not provide a way for us to come to knowledge of God outside of argument (which, to Plantinga, is only a reasonable assumption under atheism).

Still, Plantinga’s model of epistemology is subject to criticism in the form of *defeaters*, objections that undermine the rationality of certain religious doctrines. The three main ones he points out and attempts to respond to are the problem of evil, historical biblical criticism (as discussed previously), and religious pluralism [19]. Consider the challenges and responses you wrote about earlier in the semester, and reflect on whether these challenges are defeaters for a view rooted in Reformed Epistemology. Some fare better than others: for instance reformed epistemology provides an explanation for divine hiddenness that I believe is much more compelling than the response provided by evidentialist Christians.

One final note: some philosophers point out that Reformed Epistemology strikes a balance between two extremes: on one extreme you have the evidentialist Christians, who think religious belief must be supported by evidence to be rational (and that it *is* supported by these reasons). On the other extreme you have the fideists, who believe that religious belief is not rational (but that there are non-epistemic reasons for belief). Reformed Epistemology is a sort of middle path: it argues that religious belief *can be* rational, but not for the reasons demanded by evidentialists, and ends up avoiding the “apologetic positivism” Philosopher Myron Penner criticises [15]⁸. Regardless, Plantinga’s view has become popular among many Christians, especially Christian philosophers, because of it’s ability to avoid both the self-defeating nature of evidentialism *and* the claim Christianity must be taken on “blind faith,” both of which many Christians find objectionable. Regardless of whether you agree with it or not, I believe it is an interesting way to explore the relationship between our beliefs, how these beliefs are justified, and what is true. Now it is up to you to decide what you believe and why.

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⁸Penner uses this term to refer to the idea that Christian doctrines must be supported by reason or evidence to be reasonably believed.

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