

The Rationality of Religious Belief

PHIL101

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updated: 2/27/13 10:33 AM

Section III: How do I Know?

OUR OVERALL TOPIC: Under what conditions may belief be regarded as rational? This inquiry falls within epistemology, which considers the question, how do I know?

OUR IMMEDIATE FOCUS: Under what conditions may belief in God be regarded as rational?

Conceptual Highlights

- A definition of rational belief: what is it for our beliefs to be rational?
- Classic arguments for the existence of God: what evidence exists for the support of rational belief in God?
- The Problem of Evil: is belief in God rational, given that evil exists in the world?
- Kierkegaard's existentialist account of Faith: failing evidence of God's existence, how can I believe in God?
- Feuerbach: if God is a human invention, is belief still rational?

Introduction

OUR purpose in this section is *not* to determine whether God exists; nor it is to determine what is the correct religious faith, if any. Rather, our purpose is to examine the nature of rational belief by examining a particular class of belief – religious belief. Our primary question, as above, is what constitutes rational belief. This is a question about the nature of belief, knowledge, and rationality. Specifically, in order to *know* something, presumably we must hold a *belief* about that something, and that belief must in some sense be *rational*. For example, to know that I have ten toes, I must of course have the belief that I have ten toes, and, further, it would seem that something must make this belief rational – for instance, my being able to see and count five toes on each of my feet. A key question, then, in the theory of knowledge (i.e., epistemology), is what makes a belief rational. We address this question by investigating the conditions under which belief in God may be counted rational.

Belief in God offers an good vehicle for this study, for several reasons. First, God is a nebulous being, as ordinarily conceived. Unlike rocks and tomatoes, he is not readily apprehended in sense. Second, passions tend to run high where belief in God is concerned, so examination of belief in him will motivate us to be clear about the terms of rational belief. And third, the existence of God is controversial, so our study of rationality will have ready application to ourselves and to the social world around us. I.e., the question whether belief in God is rational is interesting in its own right, in addition to any light it may shed on the nature of rational belief as a whole.

Religious belief brings together some of the most fundamental and important aspects of human being. These include rationality itself, the notion of an ordered universe, morality and the meaning of good and evil, the question of how we should live, and so on. As we examine the rationality of religious belief, we shall have the opportunity to read about and discuss some of the great questions of human experience.

Defining Rational Belief:

In order to consider the rationality of a given belief, we will need a clear idea of what we mean by 'rational belief'. To this end, let us use the following definition.

For some believing agent (person), *a*, and for some belief, *P* (which stands for 'proposition'),

Epistemic Rationality: *a*'s belief that *P* is *epistemically rational* if and only if *a* has (good) evidence for thinking *P* true;

Pragmatic Rationality: *a*'s belief that *P* is *pragmatically rational* if and only if believing *P* is beneficial for *a*;

Rational Belief: *a*'s belief that *P* is *rational* if and only if *a*'s belief that *P* is either epistemically rational or pragmatically rational (or both).

Notice that there are *two* basic forms of rational belief, *epistemic* and *pragmatic*. We have two forms of rationality because in ordinary thought and speech we appear to employ two different criteria in assessing rationality. In one case, the question is whether we have evidence of the *truth* of the proposition in question. Thus, if I have a certain kind of information, such as a sense impression of a number of toes on two feet, we think that I am in a good position to assert the truth of a proposition, such as my having two feet. That is, my belief in my having ten toes is rational if I have good evidence of the truth of that proposition. In this case, we speak of *epistemic* rationality – rationality that concerns evidence for the truth of a proposition.

On the other hand, we sometimes speak of beliefs as rational not as a matter of evidence of the truth of the belief, but as a matter of the value or benefit of holding the belief. We speak, that is, of the rationality of behavior that is good for us and of the irrationality of behavior that causes us harm. It's "rational", we say, to eat when we are hungry, we say. It's irrational to avoid medical treatment when we are injured, other things being equal. The same is true of belief. In some cases, we benefit from holding a belief, while in others we may be harmed. It may be harmful for me to think of myself as a "bad person" and beneficial to think of myself as "good". What other beliefs can you think of that have a *pragmatic* significance – i.e., may be beneficial or harmful to hold?

We call *pragmatically* rational those beliefs that benefit us. If it benefits me to believe that I can succeed in a given task, then I have a *reason* to hold that belief, making the belief rational. This sense of rationality is clearly different from epistemic rationality, where the question concerns our evidence for the truth of the matter. Of course, there may be a close relationship, in some cases, between the epistemic and pragmatic rationality of a belief. My belief in my being a good person may be bolstered by having some evidence to that effect. And evidence contrary to the effect may make it difficult for me to hold that belief. Nevertheless, we can distinguish the two kinds of "reason" for holding a belief, and so we distinguish two forms of rational belief.

A Note on Rational Belief, Faith, and Doubt

As Descartes showed us, what we can now call epistemically rational belief benefits from doubt. Doubt helps us to measure the degree to which we have evidence sufficient to warrant belief.

Doubt prompts us to seek further evidence when our evidence is weak. Where we seek truth, doubt is a virtue.

On the other hand, and in particular where religious belief is concerned, doubt can be perceived as not a virtue but a vice. That is, where pragmatically rational belief is concerned, doubting the truth of one's belief may result in one's being deprived of the benefit of that belief. For instance, if I have significant doubts about my ability to write a good philosophy paper, then I may be hampered in my ability to do so by my constantly second-guessing what I write.

To be sure, the benefit of a given belief may only accrue if the belief is in fact true. If I my belief that I can write well is, as it turns out, false, I may not benefit from a belief that I can; or a short-term benefit, such as my being pleased with my essay-writing efforts, may lead to a longer-term down-fall, such as finding out that my instructor doesn't share my rosy view of my work. So, is doubt a threat to pragmatically rational belief or not? This may vary on a case-by-case basis. In some cases, however, the value of doubt attaches not to the pragmatically rational belief as such, but rather to the epistemically rational matter of whether my belief is, in fact, true.

A special case is that of religious faith. Here, seemingly, doubt is antithetical to the desired outcome, which is simply belief. On the other hand, faith may well require doubt. We will see Kierkegaard take this position, that proper religious faith requires a good measure of doubt as to the truth of one's belief.

The role of doubt in faith is ambiguous. On one view, doubt is inimical to faith: to have faith is to refuse to doubt; to doubt is to lose faith. According to others, however, faith may well require doubt: Kierkegaard, for example, asserts that faith can exist only where there is doubt.

Ask Yourself:

1. What is the difference between epistemically and pragmatically rational belief? Can I say, clearly?
2. What, exactly, is it for a belief to be rational, as explained above?