

6 Reformed Epistemology, Clairvoyance, and the Role of Evidence

Andrew Moon

Introduction

Good afternoon! It is good to be here at Lincoln University to share ideas and discuss philosophy with you all. I am thankful to Bruce Ballard for inviting me here, and I am also thankful to Dr. Jeffrey Freelin for taking the time to read my work and give me feedback. I also look forward to the interaction we will have together in this room during the question and answer period.

The subject of my paper is the rationality of belief in God, and I aim to both explain and defend an approach to this topic, an approach that is sometimes called *reformed epistemology*; this approach defends the rationality of belief in God apart from its being based on any argument or evidence. In this paper, I will defend two claims:

RE1: Belief in God *can* be rational even if it's not based on any argument or evidence.

RE2: There is no good argument that many people's belief in God is *not* rational apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists.

My paper will be split into two parts. In Part I, I defend RE1 and RE2. Second, I will briefly present an objection to RE2 that has to do with clairvoyance, present my response to that objection, and end with some notes about the role that I think evidence can play for the rationality of theistic belief.

Part I

Cases

I will start with a little bit of autobiography. When I was in eighth grade, I was at a little summer church retreat. During one of the evening services, as the preacher preached, I started to feel a

pull from something, from someone. Inside of me, I had this sense that God wanted me to follow him with my life. I think that's one of religious experience. the first times I can say that I had something like a

Consider the story of C.S. Lewis:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Or consider Alvin Plantinga:

There has been only one other occasion on which I felt the presence of God with as much immediacy and strength. That was when I once foolishly went hiking alone off-trail in really rugged country south of Mt. Shuksan in the North Cascades, getting lost when rain, snow and fog obscured all the peaks and landmarks. That night, while shivering under a stunted tree in a cold mixture of rain and snow, I felt as close to God as I ever have, before or since. I wasn't clear as to his intentions for me, and I wasn't sure I approved of what I thought his intentions might be... but I felt very close to him; his presence was enormously palpable.

(52)

These are instances where people report a *sense of the divine*, a sense that God is calling them or helping them or is simply with them. Reports of *experiences of God* are not uncommon. In his defense of the view that religious experience can be evidence for God's existence in the book *Perceiving God*, William Alston presents and analyzes a number of different religious experiences, citing a study that 75% of Christians take themselves to have had a religious

experience at some point in their lives. And in these circumstances, people find themselves with the deep conviction and belief that God exists.

Proper Basicity

This is all good, but what should we say about the *rationality* or *reasonability* of these beliefs? Should we shake them off as we would do when any other stray hunch or idea comes into our mind? After all, these beliefs are not based on solid scientific reasoning or careful philosophical argument. And if we have no good argument for the truth of these beliefs, then should we not reject them?

Let us look at these questions more carefully. One might say the following:

- i) If a belief is not based on a good argument (scientific or philosophical), then it is irrational and should be rejected.
- ii) Belief in God in the above cases is not based on good argument (scientific or philosophical).
- iii) Therefore, belief in God in the above cases is irrational and should be rejected.

This argument has one good thing about it; it has what logicians call *validity*, meaning that if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true. The question, then, is whether the premises are true. I will not dispute premise ii; I do not think that belief in God, in the above cases, is formed on the basis of any argument, either scientific or philosophical. So the premise I will question is premise i. What should we say about it?

I have two criticisms of it. First, if (i) is true, then one can have a rational belief only if the belief is held on the basis of an argument. But, clearly, one must believe the premises of this argument *rationally* if the conclusion is to be believed rationally. By (i), a premise can be believed rationally only if *it* is based on a further argument. But how can we rationally believe

the premises of *that* argument? Well, we'd need further arguments for them. We obviously cannot do this forever. It seems that there must be some things that we can rationally believe, even if we do not believe them on the basis of a further argument. Following Alvin Plantinga, call a *basic* belief any belief that is not held on the basis of other beliefs, and a *properly basic* belief any belief that is both basic and rational. It seems that some beliefs must be properly basic.

Moreover, it seems that there are obvious candidates for such beliefs. Take the belief that *I exist*; each of you believe this for yourselves. Yet, you do not believe this on the *basis* of any argument. Here's another example: when each of you walked into this room, you believed that there were chairs in the room. You did not *reason* to this conclusion; you just believed it. Or consider the fact that you all probably believe that the person sitting nearest to you has a mind: thoughts, feelings and so forth. Again, you did not believe this on the basis of a scientific argument; you just found yourself with this rational belief. Many beliefs are properly basic; hence, we should conclude that premise 1 is false.

And here is where Plantinga asked the startling question: "Why can't belief in God be properly basic?" Perhaps the beliefs in the above cases I mentioned are properly basic. And given the failure of the above argument, RE1 seems plausible to me:

RE1: Belief in God *can* be rational even if it's not based on any argument or evidence. Nothing in principle rules out belief in God from being rational even if it is not based on argument or evidence.

Rationality

So, beliefs, including the belief in God, *can* be rational even if they are not based on an argument. But *are* theistic beliefs rational? Are they, in some cases, properly basic? Sure, we

have seen that a belief's not being based on an argument does not automatically deem it to be irrational, but there are many basic beliefs that are irrational.

Consider the following cases of irrational belief:

A man suddenly finds himself believing that the speaker at the conference he is attending is in fact a mass murderer. He just has this intuition that this is true. He has no solid evidence for this claim; his belief is in fact produced in him by his schizophrenia.

An Elvis-lover suddenly finds herself with the strong sense and conviction that Elvis is still alive. She deeply adores Elvis and longs to see him again. Unfortunately, she has no solid evidence for this claim; her belief is in fact produced in her by a self-defense mechanism that is aimed at protecting her from the pain of never seeing Elvis again.

There are basic beliefs – the beliefs that *I exist, there are chairs around me, other people have minds, thoughts, and feelings* – that seem proper and rational to hold, and there are other basic beliefs – the belief that *the speaker is a mass murderer* and *Elvis is alive* – that seem improper and irrational. Which category do theistic beliefs belong to?

To answer this, it would be helpful to have a theory of rationality. In 1993, Alvin Plantinga defended his *proper function* theory of rationality. It contains two key conditions, a *proper function* condition and a *truth-aim* condition. Plantinga thinks,

A belief is rational only if it is produced by cognitive mechanisms that 1) are properly functioning and 2) are truth-aimed.⁴

The belief that *that man is a mass murderer* is not produced by properly functioning cognitive mechanisms but by disordered ones, those that have been marred by schizophrenia.

The Elvis-lover's belief *might* be produced by a properly functioning defense mechanism, but it

⁴ Two brief notes: first, Plantinga is actually concerned about warrant, and second, he thinks more conditions than the two I just mentioned are necessary for warrant. For this undergraduate presentation, I can overlook these two points.

would be a mechanism aimed at giving her belief that contributes to her relief from pain, not a belief that is true. In contrast, my belief that *there are chairs in this room* is produced by properly functioning, truth-aimed perceptual mechanisms. My eyes, occipital lobes, and the various cognitive mechanisms in my brain, which are responsible for my belief that *there is a chair*, are all formed by faculties designed to give me accurate beliefs about the world. Plantinga defended his proper function theory in 1993 and in this 1996 volume, *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology*, where he defends or responds to comments and objections from twelve prominent contemporary epistemologists.

How does this apply to belief in God in the above scenarios? Is belief in God produced by properly functioning, truth-aimed cognitive mechanisms? In 2000, Plantinga published his book *Warranted Christian Belief* where he defends the following two claims:

- 1) If God exists, then belief in God is probably rational.
- 2) If God does not exist, then the belief in God is probably not rational.

In defense of (2), suppose God does not exist. Then we should think of the faculties producing those theistic beliefs as purely the result of some naturalistic, evolutionary process. The aim of the faculties producing theistic belief might be aimed merely at producing beliefs that will help us cope with life and get through the day; they would not be aimed at producing true beliefs. So, such beliefs would not be rational; they'd be like the woman's belief that *Elvis is alive*.

In defense of (1), suppose God does exist. If so, then God is the ultimate designer and creator of human beings. God could have done this in a number of ways; he might have used evolutionary processes or some other processes; the point is that *if* God exists, then it seems unlikely that the theistic beliefs that are so prominent among human beings would not have been part of God's design plan.

What follows from this? Let us return to one of the main theses I wish to defend:

RE2: There is no good argument that many people's belief in God is *not* rational apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists.

Some would like to say that belief in God is just a result of wishful thinking or a spandrel of evolution or so on. Many prominent atheists make this charge. But we can now see that all of these claims hinge on the assumption that God does not exist. For if God *does* exist, then God is probably the ultimate designer and source of these cognitive faculties. If so, then belief in God is rational. So, I think that we have good reason to accept RE2.

I will end Part II by dealing with an objection. Some have said that reformed epistemology makes theists close-minded to objections to theism. But note the importance of the clause, "apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists". In other words, the theist cannot rationally believe that God exists if she has what epistemologists call a *defeater* for her theistic belief. Suppose a theist is confronted with the problem of evil; she finds herself now with a reason to not believe in God. If she thereby gains a defeater for her belief in God, then she also gains reason to think that the antecedent of (2) is met. This in turn gives her reason to think that belief in God is irrational. This is why reformed epistemologists like Plantinga and Alston have spent so much time responding to the problem of evil. My point here is simply to note that embracing reformed epistemology does not make one closed off to objections to theism. Negative evidence, in the form of defeaters, should be and are taken very seriously by reformed epistemologists.

Part II

Argument Against RE2

I now present an argument against RE2. First, consider the following famous example by Laurence Bonjour:

Norman, under conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant... He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact, the belief is true, and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

Consider things from Norman's perspective. Since he has no idea that his belief that *the president is in New York* is formed by a reliable clairvoyant faculty, its formation should seem to him as random and out-of-the-blue as the suddenly formed belief that *a star just went nova a million miles away* or that *there are an even number of ducks*. It seems that such beliefs, including the one formed by Norman's reliable clairvoyance, are irrational. Furthermore, Bonjour specifically intends for his case to be one where Norman has no defeater for his belief that the president is in New York.

We can use Bonjour's example but substitute Plantinga's conditions:

Adult Theism: Sally is an adult whom God has designed with a *sensus divinitatus*, a faculty designed to form beliefs about God. One day, her faculty activates and triggers the formation of the belief that *there is a God who loves me*, though she has no evidence for or against this belief.

Sally's belief was formed by properly functioning, truth-aimed faculties; she thereby meets Plantinga's conditions for rationality. And here is a potential problem for Plantinga. In the same way that Norman's belief is irrational, Sally's belief also seems irrational. The formation of the belief that *there is a God who loves me* should seem as random and out-of-the-

blue as Norman's belief that the president is in New York. This gives us reason to think that Plantinga's theory of rationality is false and that more is required for rational theistic belief. I will formulate the argument as follows:

- 1) Norman's situation is analogous in all relevant ways to Sally's situation.
- 2) Norman's belief is irrational.
- 3) If (1) and (2), then Sally's belief is irrational.
- 4) Therefore, Sally's belief is irrational.
- 5) If (4), then RE2 is false.
- 6) Therefore, RE2 is false.

Response to Argument Against RE2

I will dispute either (1) or (5) (or both).

First, I will say why I think that Norman's belief is irrational. Any ordinary human, upon suddenly believing that the president is in New York, should reason in something like the following way.

Monologue 1: "The president is in New York? I don't have the ability to know *that*.

There are some things that I and other human beings have the power to know, and this isn't one of them."

Upon reasoning in this way, that Norman has a defeater for his belief that the president is in New York. So, it seems to me that the reason that Norman's belief is irrational is because he has a defeater for his belief.

Does Sally also have a defeater like Norman does? Is it the case that Sally should reason in the way of Monologue1? Should she reason as follows?

Monologue2: “There is a God who loves me? I don’t have the ability to know *that*.

There are some things that I and other human beings have the power to know, and this isn’t one of them.”

Whether Sally should reason in this way depends on what Sally rationally believes about the powers of human beings. I see two options (and a spectrum of options in between).

Suppose that Sally grew up in a society where many people reported experiences of God or times when they sensed that God was near them. If that is the case, then Sally would have evidence for the existence of something like a *sensus divinitatus*. And then she shouldn’t reason in accord with Monologue2. So, it seems to me that premise (1) is false. The scenarios are not relevantly analogous.

On the other hand, suppose that Sally grew up in a society where nobody ever reported an experience of God. Then, if Sally were to find herself believing in God, I think that she should reason as in Monologue2. I think that she would have a defeater. And in that case, Sally’s belief would be irrational.

But now, I would question whether (5) is true. It is true that Sally’s belief would be irrational in such a case, but that would be a case in which she has a defeater. And then we can see that this does not count against RE; RE allows that defeaters could make theistic belief irrational. So, regardless of how we interpret Sally’s case, the argument fails to count against RE.

Now, as a final note, it is interesting to ask what the actual state of affairs is regarding the existence of religious experiences or the existence of a *sensus divinitatus*. That there are religious experiences all throughout the world is obvious. But it is also worth noting that, in the last decade or so, cognitive scientists of religion have amassed very interesting data pointing to

an innate tendency in human beings to believe in God. For example, Justin Barrett, in his excellent 2004 book, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, amasses data from his own scientific work and others in order to argue that there is a natural disposition in human beings to believe in God. From what I can gather, this is a general consensus among cognitive scientists of religion, both theists and atheists. So, scientifically informed folk will not have the sort of defeater that Sally has. So, we have reason to think that the state of most scientifically informed adults today will not be like that of Norman the clairvoyant.

Evidence

I'll make a final remark on the role that evidence can play in the theist's life. First, I already mentioned above how defeaters can make it irrational to believe in God; theists should take potential defeaters seriously. Second, it is worth remembering that one could come to rationally believe in God on the basis of arguments. Those who do not find themselves with a basic belief in God (via a religious experience) will find this valuable. This was the case for Antony Flew, who came to believe in God on the basis of a design argument toward the end of his life. These arguments could also provide extra support for those who already do believe in God in a basic way. Lastly, positive arguments could help counterbalance the arguments against God's existence; they could nullify the effect of potential defeaters. So, I hope it is clear that reformed epistemologists like myself can and do take evidence seriously.

7 Comments on Andrew Moon's *Reformed Epistemology, Clairvoyance, and the Role of Evidence*

Katy Hawkins

Thanks to Andrew Moon for his excellent presentation. I would like to consider briefly Dr. Moon's two central claims, RE1 and RE2. First, RE1 proposes the following: "Belief in God can be rational even if it's not based on any argument or evidence." In support of this claim, Dr. Moon presents several cases (from his own life, and from the lives of C.S. Lewis and Alvin Plantinga) to show that an experience of God's presence or calling in a person's life can produce a belief that God exists – a belief that is rational or reasonable – even if it is not based on any evidence.

First, one might wonder exactly how we are to understand the terms *rationality* and *reasonability* when evidence, reasons, and arguments are not essential parts of the definition. Dr. Moon presents Alvin Plantinga's theory of rationality. According to Plantinga's criteria, a belief is rational if produced by cognitive mechanisms that are (1) properly functioning and (2) truth-aimed. However, as Dr. Moon has used these terms, it is not clear to me that this definition of rationality clearly avoids a dependence upon evidence and reasons (nor is it clear why it would be desirable for the definition of these terms to avoid dependence upon evidence). In considering (1) and (2), it seems the first thing we would want to know is how to determine whether cognitive mechanisms *are* functioning properly. This seems impossible apart from evaluating the way those who possess the cognitive mechanisms in question handle evidence they encounter. In fact, this seems to be exactly the kind of evaluation Dr. Moon gives when he contrasts cases of rational and irrational basic beliefs. In the case of the man who believes the conference speaker is a mass murderer, we see that the man's schizophrenia is preventing him

from considering the evidence properly. Likewise, we see that the Elvis-lover fails to consider the evidence carefully because of her overriding desire to believe that Elvis is alive. Dr. Moon contrasts these two examples of irrational belief with the belief that *there are chairs in the room*. So, why is this belief rational? What makes it different? According to Dr. Moon, it is rational because “my eyes, occipital lobes, and the various cognitive mechanisms in my brain, which are responsible for my belief that there is a chair, are all formed by faculties designed to give me accurate beliefs about the world.” But why think this is true? To support this claim, one might offer reasons to think that these mechanisms *are* designed to produce accurate beliefs about the world. It seems, then, that Plantinga’s two conditions of rational belief—that the belief is produced by faculties that are functioning properly and aimed at truth—both seem dependent upon evidence and reasons.

This leads to a second question: What counts as an argument? What counts as evidence? Precise definitions of these terms might help to clarify the claim of RE1: “Belief in God can be rational even if it’s not based on any argument or evidence.” Suppose someone contends that religious experience may function as a type of evidence. Would this change the claim of RE1? That is, could an awareness of the presence of God or a sense of the divine be taken as a kind of evidence—even if of a personal or incommunicable sort? Granted, this type of evidence may not be as strong as other types of evidence that might be readily accessible to anyone. However, those who consider an experience of God’s presence to be of *potential* evidential value might argue that if God exists and what the Bible says to represent God’s nature is true, then it seems that we have reason to expect God to reveal himself to his children in various ways – not excluding by means of an experience of his presence.

I also want to raise a question regarding the second central claim, RE2. RE2 states, “There is no good argument that many people’s belief in God is not rational apart from their having a reason to not believe that God exists.” My concern is that, according to this claim, a belief X is rational as long as one does not have a defeater (a reason to think that belief X is false). This seems strange. Consider any case of two competing, mutually exclusive conclusions (call them X and Y). If Tom has no evidence one way or another, would Tom be rational to believe X and reject Y? Would it not be more responsible to suspend judgment in the absence of a reason to favor one conclusion over another? This seems especially clear in the case of Norman the clairvoyant. Dr. Moon argues that Norman’s belief is irrational because he has a defeater for his belief. According to Moon, the defeater is that Norman thinks humans do not have the mysterious power to know things like “The president is in New York.” But perhaps we would be more accurate to say that Norman’s belief is irrational because he has *no evidence* of any kind in support of the conclusion. In the absence of reason to endorse one conclusion over another, Norman should suspend judgment. Thus, on this interpretation, the fact that he had a defeater for his belief is *an additional reason* to think his belief is irrational.

Finally, I would agree that the case of Sally is different from the case of Norman. Sally *is* rational; however, contrary to Dr. Moon, I would argue that Sally’s belief that “there is a God who loves me” is rational *because of* her evidence. As Dr. Moon notes, Sally grew up in a society where many people reported experiences of God or times when they sensed that God was near. Regardless of whether these cases were in fact legitimate, it seems that Sally does have evidence from her experience for the existence of something like a sense of the divine that would count in favor of her belief.