



Is Faith Rational?



- What is meant by “Reason” here?
 - Opposition to religion?

What is *reason*?

- “an innate power of the human mind that involves understanding, evaluating, and constructing concepts and arguments”
- The authority of reason:
 - Reason is connected to *truth*, having something like the Captain’s relation to the Admiral.
 - Reason, like truth, has epistemic authority. (We have a responsibility to form beliefs in accordance with reason, in order to seek after the truth.)

(Reason and truth are religious concepts?)

- Medieval thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas held that the objective truth is God's perspective, and reason is a "natural light" that God gave humans to enable them to find the truth.
- Rorty seems to agree. He disparages the idea that:
"...Truth is "out there" waiting for human beings to arrive at it. This idea seems to us an unfortunate attempt to carry a religious conception over into a secular culture." ("Science as Solidarity")

Evidentialism

- The view says that religious belief is rational only if it supported by strong arguments, which are based on empirical data and logical truths.
- (E.g. W. K. Clifford, John Locke, Richard Swinburne.)
- Note that, according to many evidentialists, theistic belief is irrational *even if God exists*.

E.g. Bertrand Russell was once asked, supposing that after he died he were to come before God, what he would say to God?

Russell replied, “Not enough evidence God, not enough evidence.”

Bertrand Russell

“We may define ‘faith’ as a firm belief in something for which there is no evidence. Where there is evidence, no one speaks of ‘faith’. We do not speak of faith that two and two are four or that the earth is round. We only speak of faith when we wish to substitute emotion for evidence. The substitution of emotion for evidence is apt to lead to strife, since different groups substitute different emotions.”

(Human Society in Ethics and Politics)

Blaise Pascal - selections on faith

253. Two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only.

270. Saint Augustine. – Reason would never submit, if it did not judge that there are some occasions on which it ought to submit. It is then right for it to submit, when it judges that it ought to submit.

273. If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have no mysterious and supernatural element. If we offend the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous.

278. It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason.

(Pascal, *Pensées*, 1654-1662)

282. We know truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart, and it is in this last way that we know first principles; and reason, which has no part in it, tries in vain to impugn them. The sceptics, who have only this for their object, labour to no purpose. **We know that we do not dream, and, however impossible it is for us to prove it by reason, this inability demonstrates only the weakness of our reason, but not, as they affirm, the uncertainty of all our knowledge. For the knowledge of first principles, as space, time, motion, number, is as sure as any of those which we get from reasoning. And reason must trust these intuitions of the heart, and must base every argument on them.** (We have intuitive knowledge of the tri-dimensional nature of space and of the infinity of number, and reason then shows that there are no two square numbers one of which is double of the other. Principles are intuited, propositions are inferred, all with certainty, though in different ways.) ...

Only *intellectuals* can properly believe in God?

(282 cont^d) ... Therefore, those to whom God has imparted religion by intuition are very fortunate and justly convinced. But to those who do not have it, we can give it only by reasoning, waiting for God to give them spiritual insight, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation.

284. Do not wonder to see simple people believe without reasoning. God imparts to them love of Him and hatred of self. He inclines their heart to believe. Men will never believe with a saving and real faith, unless God inclines their heart ...

Why doubt evidentialism?

1. **Decision theory** says that, with a suitable payoff matrix, faith (or trust) in a claim makes sense even with weak evidence. (Pascal's Wager)
2. **Basic beliefs** have justification in themselves, in addition to any support they have from other beliefs. (E.g. basic logical intuitions, perceptual beliefs, belief in other minds, belief in the external world, innate beliefs needed for science, religious experience) (Plantinga)
3. **Fideism** (fide-ism, faith-ism) says that religious belief is not subject to rational evaluation. (Kierkegaard?)
4. **"Simple believers"** surely believe legitimately, if theism is true, but they can't evaluate complex arguments.

An application of decision theory



“Face it, you’ve changed. The man I married would never subject his family to an annual cost-benefit analysis.”

Pascal's Wager

- In the *Pensées* (thoughts) Pascal thinks the evidence for Christian belief is strong, but not conclusive.
- The prophecies, even the miracles and proofs of our religion, are not of such a nature that they can be said to be absolutely convincing, but they are also such that it cannot be said unreasonable to believe them. So there is evidence and obscurity, to enlighten some and obscure the others. But the evidence is such that it exceeds, or at least equals, the evidence to the contrary, so that it cannot be reason which decides us not to follow it. Therefore it can only be concupiscence and wickedness of heart.

Gambling

- He also says that the question of whether or not to worship God is basically a *wager*, or gamble.
- What is a gamble?
- You do some action, knowing that it will cost you something, in the hope that you will win more later on. (The bet may “pay off”.)

- (BTW Pascal and Fermat developed the mathematical theory of probability, expected values, etc. in order to help a “problem gambler”, the Chevalier de Méré, who was suffering heavy losses in games of dice.)

Is it ever rational to gamble?

- Is there such a thing as a “good” (or rational) bet?
- If there is, then *what makes* a bet rational?

Decision Matrix

	A occurs	B occurs
Bet on A	\$5	-\$2
Bet on B	-\$10	\$4

Should you bet on A, or B, here? Or neither?

It looks as if A is a better bet.

But what if B is much more probable than A?

E.g. what if $\text{Prob}(A) = 0.1$, so $\text{Prob}(B) = 0.9$?

Expected utility

	A occurs (Prob. 0.1)		B occurs (prob. 0.9)	
Bet on A	\$5	(\$0.50)	-\$2	(-\$1.80)
Bet on B	-\$10	(-\$1)	\$4	(\$3.60)

In that case, Pascal said, you should calculate the average (or “expected”) utility of each option, and choose the option with the higher value. (Pascal used different terminology.)

$$\text{EU}(\text{bet on A}) = 5 \times 0.1 - 2 \times 0.9 = \mathbf{-1.3}$$

$$\text{EU}(\text{bet on B}) = -10 \times 0.1 + 4 \times 0.9 = \mathbf{+2.6}$$

Huge potential gains!

	A occurs	B occurs
Bet on A	\$100,000,000	\$0
Bet on B	\$1	\$1

How much evidence for A does there have to be, in order to rationally bet on A?

A has to have a probability of at least 0.00000001

How much certainty do you need for action?



Pascal's Wager

- Pascal, in his wager, treats the question of whether believing in God is rational as a decision problem.
- He uses the decision matrix below.

	God exists	God doesn't exist
Worship God	Eternal life in heaven (∞)	A decent life (50)
Don't worship God	A fun life, then nothing? (70)	A fun life (70)

- To see which action is rational (the right way to bet) we calculate the expected utility of each one.

Let $\text{Prob}(\text{God exists}) = p$, where $p > 0$

$$\text{EU}(\text{bet for God}) = \infty \times p + 50 \times (1-p) = \infty$$

$$\text{EU}(\text{bet against God}) = \mathbf{70}$$

But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. And thus, when one is forced to play, he must renounce reason to preserve his life, rather than risk it for infinite gain, as likely to happen as the loss of nothingness.

- How can a person “bet on God” if they honestly don’t believe?

“I am not released, and am so made that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do?”

Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by **acting as if they believed**, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even **this will naturally make you believe**, and deaden your acuteness.

(Selected) Objections to Pascal's Wager

1. *Many Gods objection.* “An Imam could reason just as well this way” (Diderot)
2. The utility of salvation cannot be infinite, as we are finite beings.
3. Betting on God is morally wrong, as it corrupts us.
4. Mixed strategies also have infinite utility.

Many Gods Objection

- Note that the wager is based on a decision matrix with **only 2 rows** (row = a possible action). More realistically, there is one row for each of the world's religions (at least).

	God exists	God doesn't exist
Practice no religion	A fun life, then nothing? (70)	A fun life (70)
Practice Christianity	Eternal life in heaven (∞)	A decent life (50)
Practice Islam	Eternal life in heaven (∞)	A decent life (40)
Practice Buddhism	Attain nirvana (utility?)	A decent life (30)
Etc.		

Different subjective probabilities

- Is the “many gods” objection avoided if the different “gods” have different *epistemic probabilities*?
 - E.g. Pascal might say that the probability of Christianity is 0.5, whereas the probability of Islam is only 0.1.
- Apparently this won't work, as the expected utility is infinite for both actions.
 - This is because $0.5 \times \infty = 0.1 \times \infty = \infty$.

Paul Bartha's response

- Decision theory has trouble with infinite utilities. Surely a 99.99% chance of paradise is preferable to a 0.001% chance? (But the theory seems to say otherwise.)
- Bartha suggests that, in order to measure the value of an infinite good, we need to measure its value *relative* to some *other* infinite good.
 - Using a finite good as the unit of utility means that all infinite goods end up with the same utility.
- Using Bartha's relative utilities, it is rational to chase after the more epistemically probable paradises.
- (Paul Bartha, "Taking stock of infinite value: Pascal's wager and relative utilities", *Synthese*, 2007)

P. BARTHA

TAKING STOCK OF INFINITE VALUE: PASCAL'S WAGER AND RELATIVE UTILITIES

ABSTRACT. Among recent objections to Pascal's Wager, two are especially compelling. The first is that decision theory, and specifically the requirement of maximizing expected utility, is incompatible with infinite utility values. The second is that even if infinite utility values are admitted, the argument of the Wager is invalid provided that we allow mixed strategies. Furthermore, Hájek (*Philosophical Review* 112, 2003) has shown that reformulations of Pascal's Wager that address these criticisms inevitably lead to arguments that are philosophically unsatisfying and historically unfaithful. Both the objections and Hájek's philosophical worries disappear, however, if we represent our preferences using relative utilities (generalized utility ratios) rather than a one-place utility function. Relative utilities provide a conservative way to make sense of infinite value that preserves the familiar equation of rationality with the maximization of expected utility. They also provide a means of investigating a broader class of problems related to the Wager.

LEMMA 11. (PARTIAL LINEARITY). For all A, B and $0 \leq p \leq 1$, $\mathcal{U}([pA, (1-p)Z], B; Z) = p\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z)$.

Proof: Let $L' = [pA, (1-p)Z]$. We may assume $0 < p < 1$.

If $\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z) = \infty$, the result is entailed by *Case 1*.

If $\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z) = 0$, then from $L' \preceq A$ and (R6), we have $\mathcal{U}(L', B; Z) \leq \mathcal{U}(A, B; Z) = 0$ and both sides of the equality are 0.

If $\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z) = k \leq 1$, then $A \approx_Z [kB, (1-k)Z]$, which implies $L' \approx_Z [pkB, (1-pk)Z]$. Then $\mathcal{U}(L', B; Z) = pk = p\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z)$, as required.

Finally, suppose $\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z) = k > 1$, k finite. We have $B \preceq A$ and $L' \preceq A$. By (R7),

$$\mathcal{U}(L', B; Z) = \mathcal{U}(L', A; Z)\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z) = p\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z).$$

We complete the argument for Case 2 by considering three sub-cases.

Case 2a: Both $\mathcal{U}(A, B; Z)$ and $\mathcal{U}(A', B; Z)$ are zero.

#2. Is infinite utility possible?

- The utility of salvation cannot be infinite, as we are finite beings.
- Thoughts?
- If we are capable of living forever, then in some sense we *are* infinite beings.

#3. Betting corrupts us

- William James:
- “when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table, it is put to its last trumps”. (It is forced to take desperate measures!)
- “if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward”
- Surely, whatever we do should be based on honesty?

#4. Mixed Strategies

- A “mixed strategy” is where you choose your action randomly, based on (e.g.) a coin flip.
 - One mixed strategy is to flip a coin, and believe in God if it lands heads, otherwise live as an atheist.
- The expected utility of such a mixed strategy is also infinite.
 - Bartha shows that, using his relative utility measure, such a mixed strategy has lower expected utility than just believing in God.

Overall verdict?

My thoughts:

- The wager argument (like decision theory generally) shows that it can be rational to **act as if** a particular religion is true, even if the evidence doesn't make this certain.
- However, the epistemic probability of that religion is still highly relevant.

“Critical Rationalism”

- Critical rationalism is a weakened version of evidentialism.
- It says that “religious belief systems can and must be rationally criticized and evaluated, although conclusive proof of such a system is impossible.”
- E.g. Plantinga’s reformed epistemology is an example of this.

Reformed Epistemology

- Reformed epistemology is a version of critical rationalism.
- One of its (alleged) strengths is that it can answer the evidentialist challenge mentioned above:
 - Your religious belief (e.g. Christian belief) may be true, of course. We cannot prove a negative. **But even if it's true, it's still irrational and wrong to hold.** Because *there isn't enough evidence for it.*

Alvin Plantinga on Reformed epistemology

- Are cogent logical arguments for God's existence *needed* for belief in God to be rational?
- Plantinga quotes Herman Bavinck:
“Scripture urges us to behold heaven and earth, birds and flowers and lilies, in order that we may see and recognize God in them. ... It does not make God the conclusion of a syllogism, leaving it to us whether we think the argument holds or not. But it speaks with authority. Both theologically and religiously it proceeds from God as the starting point.”

Bavinck (1854–1921) was a Dutch Calvinist theologian

“We receive the impression that belief in the existence of God is based entirely upon these proofs. But indeed that would be “a wretched faith, which, before it invokes God, must first prove his existence.” The contrary, however, is the truth.... Of the existence of self, of the world round about us, of logical and moral laws, etc., we are so deeply convinced because of the indelible impressions which all these things make upon our consciousness that we need no arguments or demonstration.”

Basic Beliefs

- Most (not all) philosophers accept that there are **basic**, or **foundational**, **beliefs** which require no evidential support (from other beliefs).
 - This view is sometimes called “modest foundationalism”
- E.g. simple, “self-evident” beliefs, e.g. $2+2=4$, “I exist”, and perceptual beliefs like “Here is a hand”.
- What sorts of beliefs are *properly* basic? I.e. what sorts of belief are *truly* justified without any support from other beliefs?

Classical Foundationalism

- Classical foundationalism says that, in a rational epistemic state, all basic beliefs must be *infallible* and *certain*. The only beliefs that meet this strict standard are those that are (logically) self evident, and those that report sensory *experience*, “*I seem to see a hand*”.
- And a justified belief is either basic, or can be logically derived from basic beliefs.
- But is *classical foundationalism* itself a justified belief, according to classical foundationalism?
 - Apparently not! Where is the logical derivation of it?

Examples of uncertain basic beliefs?

- “Nothing will come of nothing”
- Other minds exist
- The external world exists
- Nature obeys simple, uniform laws.
- “God is present” (?)

If theism is true, then it's rational

- “If theism is true it is likely that it has its own intrinsic and basic source of warrant. Something like the *sensus divinitatis* proposed by John Calvin or the natural but confused knowledge of God proposed by Thomas Aquinas”
- This is Plantinga’s answer to the evidentialist challenge (that theistic belief is irrational, even if theism is true).
- The response is that, if theism is true, then the *sensus divinitatus* is almost certainly real and authoritative, and so belief in God is justified.

- Plantinga says that (if theism is true, then) belief in God fundamentally doesn't require evidence, because it is "properly basic".
- Plantinga endorses Calvin's view that, "a rational noetic structure may perfectly well contain belief in God among its foundations ..."

The Great Pumpkin objection

“If belief in God is properly basic, why can’t just any belief be properly basic? Couldn’t we say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as basic?”



“... the fact that [the Reformed epistemologist] rejects the criteria of classical foundationalism does not mean that he is committed to supposing just anything is properly basic.”

- Plantinga admits that he doesn't have a *criterion* of what can be taken as basic, but suggests that “criteria for proper basicity must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented as *obiter dicta*, but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples.” (p. 215)

- “The Reformed epistemologist may concur with Calvin in holding that God has implanted in us a natural tendency to see his hand in the world around us; the same cannot be said with the Great Pumpkin, there being no Great Pumpkin and no natural tendency to accept beliefs about the Great Pumpkin.”
(p. 215)

The bottom line

- *If God does exist*, Plantinga argues, then it's at least probable that he would implant such a natural tendency in us.
- Hence one cannot maintain that belief in God is irrational (due to lack of evidence) even if God turns out to exist.
- To show that belief in God is irrational, one needs to show that God doesn't exist.