Module 1-4: Spirituality and Rationality

The ‘New Atheists’ win again?

Atheists like Richard Dawkins, along with other ‘new atheists,’ have achieved high profiles in the media and sold many copies of popular books addressing religion and reason. These atheists have made rationality their overarching currency; and they dismiss any claim (especially by those who hold to a religious view) that there may be ways other than reason to know the world as backward, dishonest, or just plain evil.

In recent years, these writers have worked hard to cultivate the idea that a rational worldview, by definition, excludes the sort of ‘superstitious nonsense’ that makes up religious beliefs. In a lecture given in Edinburgh some years ago, Dawkins declared:

‘Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence . . . Faith is not allowed to justify itself by argument.’

Trends in philosophy

Despite periodic newspaper articles, inspired by these polemics, which report that rationality has finally triumphed over narrow, uninformed and superstitious worldviews, the world of philosophy has seen a very different trend. One of the most active areas of philosophy in recent years has been the philosophy of religion, and in particular, the analysis of the epistemic status of religious truth claims and their rationality and warrant.

The twentieth century saw leading and respected Christian philosophers like Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne, reaffirm that faith is a rational position. There appears to be a growing consensus among philosophers of all persuasions that belief in God is entirely rational.

The limits of reason

Why this apparent paradox? The answer lies in a proper understanding of reason, its uses and limits. Kant and Hume, both leading Enlightenment philosophers, stressed the importance of recognising and respecting the limits of reason, and both were sceptical about the ability of reason to answer metaphysical questions.

The British philosopher Isaiah Berlin pointed out that beliefs can be divided into three types:

- Those that can be established by empirical observation.
- Those that can be established by logical deduction.
- Those that cannot be established by either of the above.
The literary critic Terry Eagleton has said: “We hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain.”

Philosopher Alvin Plantinga draws a parallel between religious belief and the perennial philosophical problem of ‘other minds.’ While we have direct knowledge of our own minds, we cannot prove that other people have them too; yet we all believe that they do because it seems entirely reasonable to do so.

Christopher Hitchens, another ‘new atheist’ claimed (of ‘new atheism’) "our belief is not a belief." Ironically this claim really is an example of blind faith.

**Logical Positivism**

Religious epistemology has changed a lot in the last fifty years. For the first half of the twentieth century, it was stifled and almost extinguished by the rise and acceptance of a theory known as logical positivism.

Positivists believed in the "verification principle." This held that for an informative sentence to be meaningful, it had to be capable of being empirically verified. Because religious statements like: “God exists” or “God loves people” were impossible to verify empirically, they were to be dismissed as meaningless.

Over time, the verification principle was subjected to criticism and modified to a "falsification principle." This held that a meaningful sentence must be capable of being empirically falsified. Religious beliefs did not fare any better under the falsification principle than they did under the verification principle.

**Tony Flew and the Oxford Symposium**

The high noon of positivism versus religious belief was perhaps a 1948 Oxford University symposium on ‘Theology and Falsification.” At it, Tony Flew, a young heavyweight atheist philosopher (who came to believe in his old age that there was a God) borrowed a story that had first been aired a number of years earlier.

The story tells of two explorers who come upon a patch of flowers at a clearing in the jungle. While one explorer believed the sight was a purely natural phenomenon, the other believed that the flowers were looked after by a gardener; and, he was determined to find him.

But after days of strenuous effort, there was no gardener to be found. In order to cling on to his belief, the explorer was forced to modify it to the point where the gardener had become invisible, intangible and undetectable. The analogy is plain: the clearing is the world, and the gardener is God. Everyone can agree that in the story, the explorer’s belief has become untenable, as the theory is modified more and more, until it clearly no longer provides the best explanation for what the explorers are able to observe.
However, Flew went one step further. He insisted the real problem was the fact that anything that would count against an assertion must be part of the meaning of that assertion. And as nothing is allowed to count against the theory of the gardener (i.e. the idea of God) then the theory must be meaningless.

**The collapse of Positivism**

But now safely out of the period where this type of positivist argumentation was seen as all-conquering, it is clear that it was Flew’s theory of meaning that was wrong. The fact that in the story the two explorers disagree about something, and that the audience at the symposium got the end of the story, both go to show that the story, and, therefore, the hypothesis it puts forward, are meaningful. It was the ad-hoc ness of the theory and its inability to offer a compelling explanation for what had been observed, not its meaningfulness, that counted against it.

This type of approach and the verification principle itself eventually ran into heavy weather. Logical positivism proved to be just too restrictive. It ran into two major problems that despite attempts to do so just couldn’t be overcome:

First, philosophers quickly realised that vast amounts of obviously meaningful discourse would have to be declared meaningless, including some scientific statements, which positivism saw itself as the guardian of.

Second, and worse, the theory was self-refuting because neither the verification nor falsification principles themselves could be respectively verified and falsified. These crippling inadequacies led to the theory’s complete collapse in the middle of the 20th century.

**The presumption of atheism**

Another philosophical relic is the ‘presumption of atheism’. This is the view that the starting position for all debate about whether God exists should be that we should believe. He does not. It must then be demonstrated that he does.

However, the assertion “God doesn’t exist,” is just as much a claim to knowledge as the assertion, “God exists.” To say that one does not know either way is better described as agnosticism. So, at best the presumption of atheism, ought to be reitled the presumption of agnosticism.

In fact, those who championed the presumption of atheism fell into two camps. Those who used the word atheism when they really meant agnosticism, an approach that renders the assumption somewhat meaningless; and those who insisted that the presumption was correct, because in the absence of hard evidence for God’s existence, one should hold that He does not exist. However, this argument does not hold up. Its weakness can be summarised in the phrase: “Absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence.”
The main philosophical debate has now moved on from this and focuses instead on the so-called “hiddenness of God.” This is a debate about whether, if there is a God, He has left convincing evidence of his existence or not.

Some atheists assert that, if there is a God, he would have left unequivocal evidence of his existence. But theists have challenged this. The debate is complex, but turns on the fact that Christians believe that God’s primary aim is to relate to man and be worshipped by him; and that in fact he is relatively indifferent with regard to mere belief about whether or not there is a God.

Moreover, Christians argue that, even if God did provide striking evidence of His existence, there is still no reason to suppose people would automatically accept this and believe in Him.

**Religious belief without warrant**

One of the original assumptions behind the so-called presumption of atheism was the position of ‘theological rationalism’ or, as it has come to be known, ‘evidentialism’. This approach holds that for religious belief to be justified it must have supporting evidence. Following Alvin Plantinga, from now on we will refer to epistemic justification as ‘warrant’. Warrant, then, is the property that serves to transform mere true belief into knowledge.

**Pascal’s Wager**

A number of thinkers have argued that one can have pragmatic justification for belief in God, wholly apart from that belief being epistemically justified, or its being knowledge. The most well-known of these arguments is Pascal’s wager. Pascal argued that we are pragmatically justified in belief in God, because if He exists, we have everything to gain and little to lose.

**Warrant for religious belief**

One of the most striking developments in contemporary religious epistemology has been Alvin Plantinga’s critique of the evidentialist construal of rationality. Plantinga distinguishes between what he calls *de facto* and *de jure* objections to Christianity. A *de facto* objection is one aimed at the truth of the Christian faith; whereas a *de jure* objection attempts to undermine Christian belief, even if Christianity is, in fact, true.

Plantinga identifies three types of *de jure* objection; namely that Christian belief is either: unjustified, irrational or unwarranted.

Plantinga’s aim is to show that all three types of *de jure* objection are unsuccessful, and, therefore, any objection to Christianity has to be on the grounds of a *de facto* objection; i.e. that Christianity is false.
Plantinga’s method to achieve this aim is to develop a theory of warranted Christian belief. With regard to this theory, Plantinga claims not that it is true, but that it is epistemically possible.

‘Properly basic’ beliefs and belief in God

Consider the evidentialist’s *de-jure* objection that: even if it is true that God exists, it is irrational to believe it, without supporting evidence. According to the evidentialist, a proposition must either be foundational to knowledge (termed a “properly basic” belief) or be arrived at through reasoning based on foundational knowledge. The evidentialist would add that only beliefs that are self-evident (like “I see a cup of tea in front of me”), or incorrigible (like the “all sides of a square are the same length”), can be properly basic.

Since the proposition God exists is neither self-evident nor incorrigible, then according to the evidentialist it is not properly basic. Plantinga does not deny that self-evident and incorrigible propositions are properly basic, but he does ask the question how we know that these are the only properly basic beliefs.

Self-evident beliefs and circumstances?

Plantinga puts the case that self-evident beliefs depend on the circumstances presented. For a man standing on the edge of Niagara falls, the belief: “There is a huge drop in front of me” is self-evidently true. However, if the man were to fall off the edge and be blown sideways by a huge gust of wind onto a ledge a little way down, the circumstances presented to him during the time that he falls might well result in the self-evident belief that God exists. Plantinga here cites John Calvin’s idea that there is a built-in sense of the divine in all men and women: a *sensus divinitatis*.

Challenges to an evidentialist view of properly basic beliefs

Plantinga further challenges the evidentialist position in advancing two objections to the idea that only self-evident and incorrigible beliefs are properly basic. First, if these were the only properly basic beliefs, then all people must be irrational because all people hold a large number of beliefs that are neither self-evident nor incorrigible. For example, most people would agree with the proposition: ‘the world was not created five minutes ago by a giant alien, who has planted in our brains a series of false memories, such as what we ate for breakfast and all memories of our past’; yet there is no hard evidence that can be advanced to show that it is false. Therefore argues Plantinga, the evidentialist’s criteria for what constitutes a properly basic belief must be flawed.

Second, what about the epistemic status of the evidentialist’s criteria? Is the evidentialist’s proposition that only self-evident or incorrigible beliefs are properly basic itself properly basic? Apparently not, because the proposition is clearly not self-evident or incorrigible. In fact the criteria...
seem to be rather arbitrary, argues Plantinga, and, as a result, the evidentialist cannot exclude the possibility that belief in God is also properly basic.

So, if Plantinga’s model is correct, then a theist can be justified in believing in God, simply because this belief is properly basic - that is he or she is approaching knowledge about God in an epistemically correct way. But, does the theist actually have knowledge? He may be justified in believing in God, but is his belief warranted? It is possible to believe justifiably something that turns out to be wrong.

**Plantinga’s project**

Plantinga’s approach to this problem has been to carry out a highly detailed survey, over a period of some thirty years on all current models of warrant. His method is to construct imaginary cases, where a person has obviously met all the conditions required for warranted belief, by the particular theory he is surveying; but where it is obvious that the person does not really have knowledge.

In the end, he shows that most of these failings are cases where people’s cognitive faculties are not operating in the proper way. Here Plantinga drops a bombshell into the debate by asking the question what it means for cognitive faculties to be operating in the proper way. For a Christian, the answer is: in the way God designed them to operate. Thus, if theism is true, warrant can only be assessed within a theistic framework!

Serious (Christian) philosophers have raised doubts about the extent to which Plantinga has been successful on his project. Most agree that he has been able to show, with certainty, that if Christianity is true, then believing it is warranted; but not more than this.

A number of objections have been raised against Plantinga’s work. Two principal ones are:

First, if a Christian can claim that belief in God is properly basic, then just about anyone could claim that just about any belief was also properly basic. For example, someone who believed that humankind was being controlled by the mind of a huge alien could see justification for this in all kinds of events. The response to this is that in order to be properly basic, a belief must be grounded in the appropriate circumstances; and for most people, the belief that we are all controlled by a giant alien isn’t.

Second, a Muslim could just as easily make the same claim about belief in Allah.

Plantinga has spent more than three decades working these arguments in detail, and it is not possible to work the very considerable detail of them here; but the essential point is this: at root, the question of whether belief in God is warranted requires use of the discipline of metaphysics too; not epistemology alone. That is, the question of whether it is rational, justified and warranted to believe in God cannot be answered on epistemological grounds alone; therefore the claim: ‘you can’t possibly tell’ cannot be sustained.
By any standard, this is an achievement. Philosophical thinking has shifted from the widely held position that the question of belief in God can be dismissed immediately as not worth the effort; because on purely epistemic grounds, it is a meaningless question; to a position where Plantinga is taken seriously as he advances a case that there are no de-jure (epistemic) objections to Christianity that do not also involve de facto (metaphysical and other) objections.
Module 1-4: Assimilation Questions

1. Which of the below best describes the ‘verification principle’ in Logical Positivism?
   A. For an informative sentence to be meaningful, it must be capable of being empirically verified
   B. Any verifiable ‘properly basic belief’ must be supported by evidence
   C. It must meet all of the ‘JTB criteria’
   D. All facts about objects should be verified (or falsified) by scientific principles

2. Which of the following was a main cause of Positivism’s collapse in the middle of the 20th century:
   A. Modernism was being questioned, and it didn’t fit with a Post-Modern worldview
   B. The pendulum of philosophy had swung back towards theism
   C. The assumption of Positivism itself could not be empirically verified
   D. Serious objections had been raised against it by Edmund Gettier

3. Which of the following best sums up theists’ objections to some atheist’s claims that one should begin with a ‘presumption of atheism’?
   A. It goes against Rene Descartes’s maxim of “I think therefore I am”
   B. It can’t be empirically verified
   C. It’s just as much a claim to knowledge as the claim to know that God exists
   D. It was championed by Tony Flew, who was not considered a serious philosopher

4. An Evidentialist’s view of what a foundational, or properly basic belief is that it must be:
   A. Self-evident
   B. Empirically verifiable
   C. Either self-evident or incorrigible
   D. Capable of being demonstrated scientifically

5. In recent years, the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has worked to show that there are no valid de-jure objections to Christianity.
   A. True
   B. False

6. Plantinga’s work is best described as having shown that:
   A. Theism can’t be dismissed on purely epistemic grounds
   B. God exists
   C. A.J. Ayer’s book, Language, Truth and Logic was full of mistakes
   D. While Evidentialism can’t be dismissed on epistemic grounds, Positivism can be.