

RATIONAL RELIGIOUS BELIEF WITHOUT ARGUMENTS

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There have been many different attempts, by philosophers and others, to show that religious belief of various kinds is irrational. And there have been at least as many attempts by religious people to defend the rationality of their beliefs. Perhaps the most common religious belief to be attacked and defended in this way is belief in God—an omniscient, omnipotent, immaterial, eternal, perfectly good, wholly loving person on whom everything else depends. It will be convenient to focus our attention on belief in God, though much of our discussion will be relevant to other religious beliefs as well. Believers in God (theists) have for centuries now offered a variety of arguments for God's existence: they've argued that there must be a first cause (an uncaused cause) of the existence of things; they've argued that there must be a designer to account for the apparent design found in the natural world; they've argued that we can't make sense of morality without appealing to the existence of God; they've even argued that simply by reflecting on the concept of God we can see that God exists because such reflection reveals that God is the sort of being that *must* exist. The goal of these arguments is, at least in part, to show that belief in God is rational. Reliance on these sorts of arguments is supposed by many to be what *makes* belief in God rational. In fact, it is commonly thought that belief in God *couldn't* be rational unless it is held on the basis of such arguments. But is that last thought right? Could a person's belief in God be rational even if it is not held on the basis of any of these alleged theistic proofs? Could there be rational religious belief without arguments?

For the past few decades, a prominent position within the philosophy of religion literature is that belief in God *can* be rational even if it isn't based on any arguments. This position is

often called ‘Reformed Epistemology’ to signify its roots in the writings of John Calvin (1509-64), the great Protestant theologian and the main source of the Reformed tradition within Christendom. But one can find developments of the same idea in the writings of earlier figures such as Aquinas, Augustine, and even the apostle Paul. The central thesis of Reformed Epistemology is simply that religious belief, including belief in God, can be rational (sensible, reasonable, justified) even if it is not inferred from any other beliefs—even if it is not held on the basis of any argument at all. In what follows, I will explain this view in greater detail and then consider and respond to a number of objections to it.

I. Understanding Reformed Epistemology

A. A Little Background in Epistemology

In order to understand Reformed Epistemology, it will be helpful to begin with a little background in epistemology, which is the study of knowledge and rational belief.

Epistemologists typically aren’t concerned with religious belief in particular. Their concern is more general. They are trying to understand the nature of knowledge and rationality as these concepts apply to any belief whatsoever, regardless of the belief’s topic or the means by which it was produced.

Let’s begin by highlighting two distinctions. The first, which we’ve already been employing, is the distinction between rational and irrational beliefs. This is an *evaluative* distinction insofar as rational beliefs are, by definition, epistemically *better* than irrational beliefs. The second distinction is between basic beliefs and nonbasic beliefs. A basic belief is a

belief that is not based on or inferred from another belief. A nonbasic belief is a belief that *is* based on or inferred from another belief. This is a *psychological* distinction, not an evaluative one. It has to do with how the beliefs are formed. Let's consider some examples of basic and nonbasic beliefs. Suppose you're visiting your doctor after being in a minor car accident and she is trying to determine the extent of your injuries. She gently presses on various parts of your back and neck, asking if it hurts when she does so. At one point you feel a very sharp pain and you tell her that it hurts. You tell her that because you *believe* that it hurts. That belief isn't inferred from other beliefs you have. (You don't first believe that you flinched when she pressed that spot and then infer that, because you flinch only when you're in pain, you must be in pain now.) Instead, that belief is an automatic noninferential response to the feeling of pain you experience; it is based on that experience, even though it isn't based on another belief. Because it is not based on another belief of yours, it is a basic (or noninferential) belief. Nonbasic (or inferential) beliefs are different. Suppose you want to figure out in your head what 9×53 equals. To do this, you typically will come first to believe that $9 \times 50 = 450$, that $9 \times 3 = 27$, and that $450 + 27 = 477$. Then you infer from those beliefs the further belief that $9 \times 53 = 477$. Since that last belief is inferred from other beliefs, it is a nonbasic belief.

An important question that has been of interest to philosophers as early as Aristotle (384-322 BCE) is whether any basic beliefs are rational. It's natural to think that for a belief to be rational, you must have a reason for holding it, where your reason is another belief of yours. But to hold a belief for a reason is to base it on or infer it from that other belief that is your reason. These considerations might incline a person to endorse *Inferentialism*, the view that a belief can be rational only if it's inferred from another belief. But there is a powerful and influential objection to Inferentialism, first proposed by Aristotle (*Posterior Analytics*, Book I, Chapters 2-

3). This objection starts by noting that it's implausible to think that a belief can be rational in virtue of being inferred from an *irrational* belief. Hence, Inferentialism implies that a belief is rational only if it's inferred from another *rational* belief. But according to Inferentialism, for that second belief to be rational, it too must be inferred from another belief—which also must be rational. And so on. Thus, Inferentialism implies that in order for a belief to be rational, you must either base it on an infinite chain of reasoning or else reason in a circle. But it's obvious that reasoning in a circle cannot make a belief rational. And none of us is able to carry out an infinite chain of reasoning. (And even if we could, an infinite chain of reasoning cannot, by itself, make a belief rational without some original rationality to be transferred along the chain.) The upshot is that if Inferentialism is true, then it's impossible to have rational beliefs. Given that most philosophers think that it isn't impossible to have rational beliefs, it's widely believed that Inferentialism is false: basic beliefs can be, and often are, rational. These rational basic beliefs are often called 'properly basic beliefs'.

Not just any basic belief is *properly* basic (i.e., both rational and noninferential). The reckless gambler who is having a run of terrible luck in the casino and who believes on a whim, not on the basis of any other beliefs, that his luck is about to improve, is thereby forming an irrational basic belief. Unlike your basic belief that you're in pain (when the doctor presses on your neck), the gambler's basic belief is not *properly* basic. So although some basic beliefs are properly basic, not all of them are. Which of our basic beliefs *are* properly basic? The answer to this question has to do with which belief-forming abilities we have. We humans have the ability to tell, without inference, that we're in pain. But we don't have the ability to tell, without inference, that our gambling luck is about to improve. We also have the ability to tell, without inference, what our own thoughts are. But we don't have the ability to tell, without inference,

what others are thinking. Likewise, we have the ability to tell just by looking, without inference from other beliefs, that there's a book on the table in front of us. But we don't have the ability to tell in complete darkness, without inference, that there's a pillar six feet in front of us (though if we had the echolocation abilities that bats have, we could reasonably form such basic beliefs in the darkness). So which beliefs can be properly basic for us depends on which noninferential belief-forming abilities we have.

Which noninferential belief-forming abilities do we have? Which of our basic beliefs can be rational? There is wide agreement that we can tell noninferentially via introspection what we're thinking and feeling. In addition, there's wide agreement that we can tell noninferentially via rational intuition that one thing is logically implied by another, though this ability is limited for most people to very simple logical implications. (For example, we can tell noninferentially via rational intuition that if Jack and Jill are at the party then it logically follows that Jack is at the party.) Suppose that those were the only sorts of properly basic beliefs we had and that the only way for us to have rational beliefs in addition to beliefs of those kinds would be to draw inferences from them. The famous philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) began with only those sorts of basic belief—i.e., those formed via introspection and rational intuition—and tried from there to see what he could learn by inference. He thought that in that way, starting from those meager foundations, he could prove that God exists and that there is a physical world surrounding us. Most philosophers think that he failed in this attempt and that the problem had a lot to do with the fact that he allowed so few beliefs to count as properly basic. Today, most epistemologists think that in addition to the ability to form noninferential beliefs via introspection and rational intuition, we also have the ability to form noninferential beliefs via perception and memory. When, upon glancing at a nearby basketball, I believe there's a ball in

front of me, I don't do this via inference: I don't first notice that it visually appears to me as if there's a ball there and that such appearances are good indicators that there is a ball there and from this infer that there's a ball in front of me. I can just tell noninferentially via perception that there's a ball in front of me. Likewise, I can tell noninferentially via memory that I had orange juice at breakfast. I don't infer this from the fact that there's a glass on the kitchen counter that looks as if it contained orange juice a few hours ago and that no one else in the house likes orange juice. Thus, it's very common for epistemologists to think we have the ability to form noninferential beliefs via perception, memory, introspection, and rational intuition. Because we have these abilities, the beliefs so produced are properly basic (i.e., noninferentially rational). And from these starting points, we can make inferences via good reasoning to the many other beliefs we hold; these other beliefs are then inferentially rational.

It's important to emphasize that although these properly basic beliefs aren't inferred from other beliefs, it doesn't follow that they are groundless or that we hold them without any evidence. Take for example the belief that you are in pain. It's true you don't infer that from other beliefs. But it's not groundless. Instead, it's based on your experience of pain. It's that experience, not another belief, which is the ground of your belief that you're in pain—that experience is your evidence for that belief. Other introspective beliefs are also based on experiences (such as the belief that you're happy or sad, which is based on your experience of feeling happy or sad).¹ Likewise, although perceptual beliefs aren't inferred from other beliefs, they aren't lacking in grounds or evidence. My belief that there's a ball in front of me is based on my visual experience at the moment (not on the belief that I'm having such a visual experience—I typically don't form such beliefs about my visual experience). That visual

¹ What about your introspective beliefs about what you're thinking? What are they based on? They're based on your experience of having those thoughts. They aren't inferred from other beliefs of yours.

experience is my evidence—it is the ground of that visual belief. In the case of beliefs formed via memory or rational intuition, it's more difficult to say what they are based on. According to one common way of thinking about memory beliefs, they are based on memory seemings. It seems to me—in a remembering sort of way—that I had orange juice for breakfast. On the basis of that seeming (that memory seeming) I hold the memory belief that I had orange juice for breakfast. Similarly, beliefs in simple logical truths, formed via rational intuition are based on rational intuitions. I can just *see* (intellectually) that one thing logically follows from another. This “seeing” is a sort of insight, a rational intuition; it's an experience of something's seeming to me a certain way—it's an experience of its seeming obvious to me that this thing logically follows from that thing. And my belief that the one thing follows from the other is based on this rational intuition. Both the memory seeming and the rational intuition are experiences. They aren't themselves beliefs. So beliefs based on them still count as basic.

The resulting picture, widely endorsed by contemporary epistemologists, is the following. Some beliefs are rational and some are not. Those that are rational are either basic or not. The rational beliefs that aren't basic are inferred from other rational beliefs. These inference chains are ultimately traced back to properly basic beliefs—i.e., rational beliefs that aren't based on any other beliefs. What makes a basic belief rational has to do with which noninferential belief-forming abilities we have. At the very least, we humans seem to have the ability to form beliefs via perception, memory, rational intuition, and introspection. And the beliefs produced by these noninferential belief-forming abilities are based not on other beliefs but on experiences of various kinds—perceptual experiences, memory seemings, rational intuitions, and introspectable experiences such as pain, pleasure, happiness, sadness, etc.

There is one further “background epistemology” question that often gets discussed by philosophers and which will be relevant to our discussion of religious belief. The question is this: can a belief be properly basic for a person who has never thought at all about the epistemology of such beliefs in anything like the way we just have? For example, can a sad child be rational in remembering that his mother left the room a moment ago even if the child has no idea that that belief is based on a memory seeming? The answer, it seems, is ‘yes’. One can be rational in forming noninferential beliefs via memory even if one has never thought about how memory works or what memory beliefs are based on or whether memory beliefs are basic or nonbasic.

However, given that rationality seems to rule out haphazard or careless belief formation, some might be tempted by a contrary view that we can call ‘Confirmationalism,’ which requires for a belief’s rationality that we confirm that it was produced in the right way:

Confirmationalism: In order for a belief to be rational, the person holding it needs a further belief that the first belief has an adequate basis.

So, for example, Confirmationalism would say that I can’t be rational in my memory belief that I was in Florida last year unless I have an additional belief that that memory belief of mine has an adequate basis. Of course that second belief—required to confirm the adequacy of the first belief’s basis—must itself be rational. But according to Confirmationalism, that second belief (like any other belief) is rational only if the person holding it has yet another belief that the second belief has an adequate basis. And that third belief must be rational too, which will require a fourth belief confirming the adequacy of its basis. And so on. Thus, Confirmationalism implies that in order for a simple belief—such as the belief that *there is a ball in front of me*—to be rational, I need to have an infinite number of other beliefs, each of which is about the previous belief having an adequate basis. (Because each belief is about the previous

belief, this chain of beliefs will not circle back on itself.) But people aren't able to have an infinite number of extra beliefs for each of the simple beliefs they hold. Given Confirmationism, this implies that people aren't able to have any rational beliefs. For this reason, most epistemologists reject Confirmationism.²

B. Reformed Epistemology

Let us turn now to the task of trying to gain a better understanding of Reformed Epistemology, the view that belief in God can be rational even if it is not inferred from any other beliefs. Our background reflections in epistemology will benefit us as our discussion proceeds.

A helpful way to begin our more careful examination of Reformed Epistemology is to consider the context in which it was introduced into the contemporary philosophy of religion literature. A prominent twentieth century objection to the rationality of belief in God runs as follows:

The Evidentialist Objection

1. *The Evidentialist Thesis*: Belief in God is rational only if it is inferred from other rational beliefs via good arguments.
2. But there aren't any good arguments for God's existence.
3. Therefore, belief in God is irrational.

The reason this objection is called 'The Evidentialist Objection' is that it relies on the Evidentialist Thesis as its first premise.³ According to that premise, theistic belief is rational only if it is based on good evidence in the form of good theistic arguments. The proponent of this objection to theism will, of course, endorse the Evidentialist Thesis but will not believe in God. Let's call such a proponent a 'Nontheistic Evidentialist'. For most of the twentieth

² Confirmationism is similar to Inferentialism; in fact, it seems to be one version of Inferentialism.

³ Notice, by the way, that the Evidentialist Thesis is different from Inferentialism. The latter says that *no* belief can be rational unless it is inferred from other rational beliefs; the former says merely that *belief in God* cannot be rational unless it is inferred from other rational beliefs.

century, the most common response to this argument, by those who wanted to defend theistic belief, was the response given by Theistic Evidentialists. Like Nontheistic Evidentialists, they accept the first premise, the Evidentialist Thesis. But they reject the second premise. They think there *are* good arguments for God's existence. And they spend a lot of time devising such arguments and defending those arguments against objections. It was in just this context of disagreement (between Theistic Evidentialists and Nontheistic Evidentialists over whether there are good theistic arguments) that a second theistic response to the Evidentialist Objection was offered, this time by Reformed Epistemologists. They turned their sights on the first premise, the Evidentialist Thesis itself. Their claim was that belief in God—like the belief that I had orange juice for breakfast or the belief that there's a ball in front of me—can be properly basic. (As for the second premise, some Reformed Epistemologists join Nontheistic Evidentialists in accepting it; others join Theistic Evidentialists in rejecting it. But all Reformed Epistemologists reject the first premise; and that is what they tend to focus on in responding to the Evidentialist Objection.)

Given that Reformed Epistemologists think belief in God is properly basic (and in light of our background excursion into epistemology in the previous section), you would expect Reformed Epistemologists to also think that we have a noninferential belief-forming ability enabling us to tell, without inference, that God exists. And that's just what we find in their writings. Alvin Plantinga, perhaps the most prominent of contemporary Reformed Epistemologists, suggests that we have a "sense of divinity" enabling us to form properly basic beliefs about God. And just as noninferential beliefs formed via perception and memory are not groundless but instead based on experience, so also properly basic beliefs about God are, according to the Reformed Epistemologist, not groundless but based on experience. Plantinga

gives some examples of the sort of experiential grounds on which noninferential beliefs about God are based:

[T]here is in us a disposition to believe propositions of the sort *this flower was created by God* or *this vast and intricate universe was created by God* when we contemplate the flower or behold the starry heavens or think about the vast reaches of the universe. ... Upon reading the Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I've done*. Upon confession and repentance, I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgives me for what I've done*. A person in grave danger may turn to God asking for his protection and help; and of course he or she then forms the belief that God is indeed able to hear and help if he sees fit. When life is sweet and satisfying, a spontaneous sense of gratitude may well up within the soul; someone in this condition may thank and praise the Lord for his goodness, and will of course form the accompanying belief that indeed the Lord is to be thanked and praised.⁴

The proposal here is that experiences of awe, guilt, forgiveness, fear, and gratitude can operate as grounds for beliefs about God. The beliefs so formed aren't usually of the form "God exists". They're more often of the form "God does this" or "God has done that" or "God is able to do such and such". In this way, they're like our more ordinary beliefs about the world around us. We typically don't form beliefs like "that lake exists". Instead, we think "that lake is cold" or "that lake is beautiful" or some such thing. But it's a short step from the belief about the lake (or God) to the further belief that the lake (or God) exists.⁵

It's important to emphasize (because it's so common for people to mistakenly think otherwise) that Reformed Epistemologists hold that ordinary unsophisticated religious believers who know nothing of the epistemological views discussed in this paper can have properly basic belief in God. As I already noted, most epistemologists (whether religious or not) think that a child's memory-produced belief that his mother left the room a few moments ago is rational even if the child can give no account of what that memory belief is based on or why it is rational. What matters for the rationality of that memory belief is that the child *has* the ability to form

⁴ Plantinga (1983: 80).

⁵ For this reason, Plantinga suggests (1983: 81-82) that it is beliefs about what God does or is like, not the belief that God exists, that are properly basic. But for simplicity's sake, I'll speak as if he and others think belief in God is properly basic.

beliefs using his memory, not whether the child can give an account of the epistemology of memory beliefs. Likewise, Reformed Epistemologists say that what matters for properly basic belief in God is that the believer *has* the ability to form beliefs via the sense of divinity, not that the person can give an account of the epistemology of noninferential theistic beliefs. So a belief in God can be rational even if the person holding it doesn't have the further belief that her belief in God has an adequate basis via the sense of divinity. Some objectors will insist that your belief via this alleged sense of divinity won't be rational without a further belief, based on good reasons, that the experiences on which you base your belief in God provide an adequate basis for such a belief. In response, the Reformed Epistemologist will point out that this complaint seems to rely on an appeal to Confirmationism discussed above—a principle which most philosophers reject, and for good reason.

Here is a simple way to think of the Reformed Epistemologist's position: *belief in God is more like belief in other people than it is like belief in electrons*. We are able to form properly basic beliefs that there are people around us because, by using our vision, we can tell noninferentially that there are people nearby. But we aren't able to tell noninferentially, just by looking, that there are electrons nearby. We don't have that sort of ability. Instead, humans arrived at the belief in electrons via inference: we inferred their existence because it provided the best explanation of all the experimental evidence collected by scientists. According to the Evidentialist Thesis, belief in God—like belief in electrons—is rational only if we infer it as the best explanation of the available evidence (in the case of belief in God, the evidence in question is what gets cited in the premises of theistic arguments). But according to the Reformed Epistemologist, belief in God is more like belief in other people. We don't first notice that it visually appears to us as if there are other people and then conclude that the best explanation of

these visual appearances is that there really are other people that are the causes of these visual appearances. Rather, we just have the visual experiences and believe on the basis of them, without inference, that there are people around us. Likewise, the Reformed Epistemologist thinks that for many people, belief in God is not an inferred explanatory hypothesis but a noninferential response to experience. It's worth noting that it wouldn't be surprising for a loving God who wants all people to believe in him to give us the ability to believe in him noninferentially through a sense of divinity. That way of believing in God seems to be easier and less affected by differences in intelligence than inferential belief-formation, which requires an expertise (that isn't widely shared) in formulating and evaluating arguments.

As I signaled at the beginning of this essay, the Reformed Epistemologist's views don't apply only to the belief that God exists. Other religious beliefs as well can be rational in a similar way—beliefs in specific doctrines of this or that religion. There are a number of accounts of how these other religious beliefs are formed.⁶ But ultimately it comes down to something very much like the views described above concerning properly basic belief in God.

II. Objections to Reformed Epistemology

Let's turn now to some objections to Reformed Epistemology and consider what sorts of response are available.

Objection 1: Religious Interpretation of Experiential Evidence Needs Defense. The Reformed Epistemologist says that beliefs about God are based on experiences such as feeling forgiven after confession and repentance. On the basis of such an experience a person believes "God forgives me for what I've done." But this is to *interpret* the experience within a particular theological framework—it's to impose one interpretation among many possible ones on a raw experience consisting of a feeling of being forgiven replacing a feeling of guilt. In order for the belief about God's forgiveness to be rational, one needs some reason for favoring that particular theological interpretation over some other nontheistic interpretation of that same raw experience.

⁶ See Plantinga (2000) for one prominent example.

Consider a parallel complaint lodged against perceptual beliefs: “When you believe, on the basis of visual experience, that there is a chair and a desk nearby, you are imposing one interpretation among many possible interpretations on the raw experience consisting of a visual appearance that seems to be of a chair and desk nearby. You’ve adopted the “standard” interpretation according to which there really is a chair and a desk nearby causing you to have that visual appearance. But perhaps you are dreaming. Or perhaps you are the victim of an experiment in which computers are connected to your brain causing you to have that visual appearance. You aren’t rational in believing there really is a chair and desk nearby unless you first have a reason for favoring the standard interpretation over the dreaming interpretation and the computer-simulation interpretation.”

How have epistemologists responded to this parallel complaint about perception? One common response is to note the following things. First, if this complaint were legitimate, then most people wouldn’t be rational in their beliefs about the world around them since most people simply don’t have any reasons they could produce for favoring the standard interpretation of perceptual experience. Second, epistemologists have worked very hard for centuries trying to come up with good reasons for preferring the standard interpretation of perceptual experience to its rivals and have yet to come up with an argument acknowledged to be convincing. Because of this failure, it is widely believed that there is no good argument for preferring the standard interpretation of perceptual experience that doesn’t itself rely on perceptual experience to tell us about the world around us.⁷ Third, it seems that, in looking around us and forming visual beliefs about our environment, we don’t first have a visual experience and then consider various ways to interpret it, ultimately selecting the standard interpretation. Instead, the world seems to present

⁷ See Alston (1993) where this point is defended at length.

itself to us in visual experience as if the standard interpretation is true—the standard interpretation comes along unbidden with the visual experience. In light of all this, many epistemologists conclude that our perceptual beliefs are rational not because we've got a good reason for preferring the standard interpretation of our perceptual experience but because the rational response to having such experiences is to form beliefs, without inference, in accord with the standard interpretation.

The Reformed Epistemologist will say similar things about belief in God based on things such as an experience of feeling forgiven.⁸ Many who believe, on the basis of such an experience, that God has forgiven them don't have any arguments available for favoring a theistic interpretation of that experience over a nontheistic one. Moreover, in many cases, they don't first have the experience and then consider various ways of interpreting it, ultimately selecting the theistic interpretation. Instead, that theistic interpretation comes along unbidden with that experience of feeling forgiven. And just as the rational response to perceptual experience is to form noninferential beliefs in the objects one takes oneself to see nearby, so also (says the Reformed Epistemologist) the rational response to the experience of feeling forgiven is to believe, without inference, that God is as one takes God to be on the basis of that experience.

Objection 2: The Great Pumpkin Objection. The Reformed Epistemologist's strategy for defending the rationality of religious belief is seriously problematic because the same strategy could be used to defend any bizarre belief you like, including Linus's belief (in the Charlie Brown comics) that the gift-delivering Great Pumpkin rises each Halloween over the most sincere pumpkin patch. When challenged to give reasons for their belief, Great Pumpkinites could simply point out that their belief is properly basic so they don't need to give any arguments for it. The fact that this strategy can be used to defend such a bizarre view reveals the bankruptcy of the strategy. But it seems that the Reformed Epistemologist, in endorsing this sort of strategy for defending the rationality of her belief in God, cannot offer any principled objection to this same strategy used by others in defense of silly views like belief in the Great Pumpkin.

Here too we can consider a parallel complaint, this time against those who think introspective beliefs are rational. Suppose you tell me that you're feeling a little hungry and I ask you what

⁸ See, for example, Alston (1983).

your argument is for that claim. You tell me that you don't need an argument in order to be rational in believing that claim; you have the ability to tell, just by thinking about it, what sorts of feelings you are having. In response I say "Oh really? Well, with that sort of reasoning, you could have no objection to a person who claimed to be a mind-reader with the special ability to tell, just by thinking about it, what those around her are thinking and feeling." Notice what I would be suggesting by that response. I'd be suggesting that because you claim to be able to tell *one* thing without argument (namely, what sorts of feelings you're having), you can have no objection to a person who claims to be able to tell *another* thing without argument (namely, what those around her are thinking and feeling). But that suggestion of mine would be silly. It's perfectly sensible to say there are some things people can tell without argument and other things they can't tell without argument.

Reformed Epistemologists respond to the Great Pumpkin Objection in a similar manner. They think there are some things people can tell without argument and other things people can't tell without argument. They think people can tell without argument that God exists but they can't tell without argument that the Great Pumpkin exists. There is nothing remarkable about the suggestion that people have abilities to tell some things, but not others, without inference. We already know that people can tell, just by looking and without inference, that there are people around them; but they can't tell just by looking and without inference that there are electrons. People can also tell, just by thinking about it and without inference, what thoughts they are having; but they can't in the same way tell, without inference, what thoughts others are having. They can, without inference, remember what happened in the recent past; but they can't in the same way tell, without inference, what is going to happen in the future. The Reformed Epistemologist's claim—that we have the ability to tell noninferentially that God exists but we

don't have any such ability with respect to the Great Pumpkin—is just another claim of this sort. The “strategy” of claiming to have an ability to know something noninferentially can be employed in defending the rationality of a belief even by those who think there are many things we don't have the ability to know noninferentially. So Reformed Epistemologists aren't committed to approving of others who use the same sort of strategy to defend all sorts of silly views.

Objection 3: Why Doesn't Everyone Believe in God? The previous two responses have compared basic belief in God to properly basic perceptual beliefs or properly basic introspective beliefs. But this ignores a very important difference between basic belief in God, on the one hand, and basic perceptual and introspective beliefs, on the other: pretty much everybody forms basic beliefs about their surroundings via perception and basic beliefs about their thoughts and feelings via introspection; but there are many people who don't believe in God at all. That's an important difference. If we have the ability to tell, without inference, that God exists, why are there so many people who don't believe in God?

The first thing to note here is that belief in some sort of deity is very widespread throughout human history, across many different cultures. This of course doesn't prove that it's true. But it's important to keep in mind that it's not as if only a small minority of the world's population believes in God. Nevertheless, there are many people who don't seem to have any belief in God, and this is strikingly different from what we see when we compare basic belief in God with basic perceptual belief in the world around us or introspective belief in our mental states. What does the Reformed Epistemologist have to say about this?

The natural thing to say is that the *sense of divinity* isn't working equally well in all people. It is either damaged or hindered in its operation in many people and this has been so for a long time. It would be as if all humans had their vision damaged or otherwise hindered from normal operation and this condition of humanity lasted for many centuries. If that were to happen, some humans wouldn't be able to see at all and others would have only distorted or unclear vision. It might then happen that some who could see better than others would believe that the moon existed, but those who were blind or couldn't see as well, might not believe that

the moon existed. Of course this analogy breaks down after a while.⁹ But the main point of it, according to Reformed Epistemologists, is just that the sense of divinity is more damaged in some people than it is in others, and this explains why some people don't have properly basic belief in God whereas others do.¹⁰

Objection 4: Sinfulness doesn't explain atheism. In responding to the last objection, Reformed Epistemologists say that the sense of divinity is more damaged in some people than in others. But what is it that causes this damage? A common suggestion by some Reformed Epistemologists is that "sinfulness" is the cause of this damage. But that's both insulting and implausible. It's easy to give examples of nontheists and theists where the nontheists are, morally speaking, much better behaved than the theists.

It's true that many in the Reformed tradition say that operational deficiencies in the sense of divinity are caused by sinfulness. And it's also clear that some morally well-behaved people are nontheists and that some theists behave terribly (the Bible itself points to fallen angels as well as to many humans in giving examples of badly behaved theists). So how can anyone take seriously the suggestion that sinfulness explains why many people don't believe in God?

What follows is one possible way to make sense of the suggestion that sinfulness can explain lack of belief in God. (Notice that the goal here isn't to prove the truth of the explanation of unbelief in terms of sinfulness or of this particular way of making sense of it. Rather, it's to show how explaining unbelief by pointing to sinfulness can be consistent with the observation that nontheists often seem to be better behaved than theists.) We first need to distinguish inherited sinfulness from willful sinfulness. Ever since humans fell into sin, the result (according to Christians, including those in the Reformed tradition) has been that *all* of their descendents have been born with an inherited tendency to selfishness and pride.¹¹ This

⁹ Some might think that the analogy breaks down because vision can be cross-checked with other perceptual faculties such as our sense of touch whereas we can't cross-check the sense of divinity in that same way. But see Alston (1991, ch. 5) for a discussion of how something like the sense of divinity might be subject to cross-checking.

¹⁰ Additional explanations for differences between properly basic religious belief and properly basic perceptual belief are given in Alston (1983) and Alston (1991).

¹¹ Must one believe in a literal reading of early Genesis to believe that there was a time that humans fell into sin? And doesn't that literal reading conflict with the well-established theory of evolution? A literal reading of early Genesis does seem to conflict with evolutionary theory. But many religious people who accept the teachings of the

inherited tendency seems to come in various degrees. Because it is inherited, this tendency is not something we've chosen. Nor did we choose how severe it is in our own case.¹² In addition to inherited sinfulness, which we don't choose, there is also willful sinfulness. This occurs when we freely choose to act in a way that is contrary to our conscience. We are responsible for our willful sinfulness even though we aren't responsible for our inherited sinfulness. The explanation I want to consider for why not all people believe in God appeals, in part, to both inherited sinfulness and willful sinfulness.

There are really two things that need explaining: how sinfulness can keep people from believing in God and why, despite that first explanation, there isn't a tight correlation between one's belief status (as theist or nontheist) and one's moral status (as well-behaved or badly behaved). As for the first explanation, there are two ways sinfulness can hinder belief in God: it can hinder it in a way for which the unbeliever is *not* to blame; and it can hinder it in a way for which the unbeliever *is* to blame. Let's consider how it might hinder it in ways for which the unbeliever is not to blame. For starters, the inherited tendency to selfishness and pride damages the sense of divinity in all people so that it doesn't work as it was originally intended.¹³ It's as if all of us have blurred vision when it comes to detecting God noninferentially. And because our inherited sinfulness comes in varying degrees, the damage it causes to the sense of divinity also comes in varying degrees. On top of that, due to both the inherited and willful sinfulness of

Bible as authoritative think that (i) early Genesis is not best interpreted in that literal way, (ii) evolutionary theory is true, and (iii) one thing we can learn from early Genesis is that humanity fell into sin in some way or other, even if not in the precise way described there.

¹² Is it fair for God to let the immoral choices of our ancestors cause us to have this inherited tendency? This is just an instance of the more general question: is it fair for God to let the wrong choices of some people negatively affect the lives of others? It's not implausible to think that, so long as God has some justifying reason for doing so (one that treats those negatively affected with love and respect), it *is* fair for God to do that.

¹³ How does selfishness and pride cause damage to the sense of divinity? This might happen in any number of ways: perhaps selfishness and pride make one less inclined to believe in a being to whom they owe worship and service; or perhaps the sense of divinity works by way of divine blessing that is withheld from those who are selfish and proud; or perhaps the damage to the sense of divinity caused by selfishness and pride comes about in some other way.

those in our family and our larger society, our upbringing can cause further damage or hindrance to the operation of the sense of divinity in us. Here too, the resulting damage will come in varying degrees, depending on what has happened in our family and society, on what damage was caused by our own inherited sinfulness, and on how those two kinds of damage interact. All of these sin-caused effects on our sense of divinity hinder belief in God in a way for which the unbeliever is *not* to blame.

But, in addition to the above-mentioned things that affect what we might think of as our unchosen “starting point”, there are other things that hinder belief in God. These other things affect how we progress from our starting point either further from or closer to belief in God. One contributor here could be willful sinfulness. By choosing to go against my conscience, I can perhaps further contribute to the damage to my sense of divinity. This is a case in which I am partially to blame for the way in which sin hinders my belief in God. But there are other possible contributors as well. God may choose to give experiential evidence for theistic belief to some people and not to others—evidence on which a properly basic belief in God can be based without inference.¹⁴ (This might involve giving experiences to a person that the person wouldn’t otherwise have had. Or it might involve correcting damage to the sense of divinity so that the person treats as evidence for belief about God experiences that the person wouldn’t otherwise have treated in that way.) God’s decision to give or delay giving such evidence might be based on the willful sinfulness of the person in question. But it might be based on other things as well. Perhaps God thinks the person isn’t yet ready to respond correctly to such evidence. Or perhaps God has a reason for wanting this person to progress further morally than others before coming

¹⁴ Recall that, although basic beliefs are ones that are not inferred from other beliefs, they might still be based on evidence of some kind.

to believe in God. And there may be other good reasons God has for delay in giving evidence, reasons that we don't know of.

In light of the above explanation for how sinfulness can hinder belief in God, we can see why it might be that there isn't a tight correlation between one's theistic-belief status and one's moral-behavior status. For, as we've just noted, though unbelief may be due to sinfulness in the ways described, God might give or delay giving evidence for properly basic belief in God on the basis of considerations that aren't correlated with how well-behaved the person is. And we aren't well-placed to discern why there is unbelief in a particular case.

Moreover, appearances can be deceiving when we consider the moral goodness of those around us. It's natural to think that if God existed and were just and fair, he would judge people based on how well they did with the moral resources they were given. Consider two people, one of whom is given the opportunities of a naturally pleasant and co-operative personality and excellent moral training in her home and society while the other naturally has a more irritable and stubborn personality and is raised in a terrible home environment and influenced by a morally depraved society. It's easy to see how it might turn out that the person with the less fortunate background *might* be judged by God to have done much better, morally speaking, with what she was given than the more fortunate person; and this could be so even though the more fortunate person appears in many ways to behave better than the one with the less fortunate background. The point here is just that we really aren't able to tell how people are to be judged unless we can look into their hearts and backgrounds to see how well they are doing with what they were given, something we are rarely, if ever, able to do with much accuracy. This point is reinforced when we consider that motives matter tremendously. A person may perform many seemingly kind and generous actions but be doing them from motives of selfishness and pride.

Again, it seems that if God existed and were to judge us fairly, he would take that into account. Because we can't always tell how good people are (in terms of their motives or how well they've done with what they've been given), we aren't well-placed to draw conclusions about how belief in God is in fact correlated with goodness in people. There might be more of a correlation there than meets the eye. But even if there isn't (and Reformed Epistemologists certainly aren't committed to thinking there is), there are the other considerations noted above explaining why there needn't be any such correlation even if sinfulness (both inherited and willful) does go some way toward explaining why people don't believe in God.

Objection 5: Religious Disagreement as a Reason for Doubt. In addition to the problem of people who don't believe in God, there's the problem of people who do believe in God but hold very different views about God. If each of them is relying on the sense of divinity and yet getting such different beliefs as a result, doesn't that give a person good reason to mistrust this alleged belief-forming ability in herself, especially given that many don't seem to have it at all? This problem is especially disconcerting when we consider that intelligent, thoughtful people who are sincerely seeking the truth discuss their disagreements about theism at length, explaining their evidence to each other, and yet continue to disagree.

There are three points to make in response to this objection.¹⁵ The first has to do with the principle on which the objection seems to be based. The principle focuses on disagreement with someone who is intellectually virtuous (let's say a person is intellectually virtuous when he or she is intelligent, thoughtful, and sincerely seeking the truth). The basic idea seems to be that when someone who is intellectually virtuous disagrees with you, especially if you recognize that this person is about as intellectually virtuous as you are, then you thereby have a good reason to give up your belief. We can call this principle on which this objection seems to rely 'the Withholding Principle'. It can be formulated as follows:

Withholding Principle: If an intellectually virtuous person (whom you realize is about as intellectually virtuous as you are) disagrees with you on a controversial topic even after each of you has tried your best to disclose all your relevant evidence to the other (where this evidence falls short of being a knock-down proof that every intelligent thoughtful truth-seeker would accept), then to be rational each of you should give up your contentious belief on this topic and, instead, withhold judgment on the matter.

¹⁵ These three points are developed at greater length in a different context in Bergmann (2009).

The problem is that intelligent thoughtful truth-seekers disagree about the Withholding Principle itself. Some think you should withhold judgment whenever you're in the circumstances described in the principle; but others think that's not so. Moreover, those who endorse the Withholding Principle don't have a knockdown proof for the principle, one that every intelligent thoughtful truth-seeker would accept. The result is that if the principle is true, then rationality requires you to reject it—since you can't *prove* the principle's truth to intelligent thoughtful truth-seekers who think it's false. And that means that the principle is self-undermining, saying about itself that it's irrational to accept it.

A second thing worth pointing out is that the Reformed Epistemologist can distinguish internal rationality from external rationality, conceding the former but not the latter to those who disagree about religious matters. This distinction highlights the fact that there are two stages in the formation of noninferential beliefs based on experiential evidence rather than on arguments. The first stage is where the person comes to have the experiential evidence; the second stage is where the person bases the noninferential belief in question on that experiential evidence. The belief so based is *internally rational* if it is an appropriate (reasonable, sensible) response for a person to have to that sort of experiential evidence. One way to put this point is to say that, in the formation of an internally rational belief, all is going well *downstream* from (i.e., in response to) the experience on which it is based. The belief is *externally rational* if, in addition to being internally rational, it's also the case that all is going well *upstream* from that experience—that is to say, the experiential evidence arises in the right way in the person who has it and is not due, for example, to any sort of cognitive malfunction. With this distinction in hand, the Reformed Epistemologist can point out that those who disagree with her may well be internally rational even if they aren't externally rational. Thus, for example, a Jewish theist who denies the divinity

of Christ and who endorses the Reformed Epistemologist approach¹⁶ can say (i) the Christian is internally rational in believing, on the basis of her experiential evidence in support of the doctrine, that *Jesus is God incarnate* and (ii) the atheist who lacks any experiential evidence in support of belief in God is internally rational in believing there is no God. But the Jewish believer can go on to add that the Christian is externally *irrational* because it is only due to some sort of cognitive malfunction that the Christian has that experiential evidence supporting the doctrine that Jesus is God incarnate; likewise, the Jewish believer can say that the atheist is externally irrational in believing there is no God because it is only due to some sort of cognitive malfunction (affecting the sense of divinity) that the atheist lacks any experiential evidence in support of belief in God.¹⁷ In this way, those who endorse the Reformed Epistemologist approach can recognize that there is a sense in which the intelligent thoughtful truth-seekers who disagree with them may be rational—they may be internally rational. But the Reformed Epistemologist can also explain why her beliefs are epistemically better than the religious beliefs of those who disagree—her own beliefs are externally rational whereas the beliefs of those who disagree with her are externally irrational.

The third point to make is that there seem to be examples where it is entirely appropriate to say—of intelligent thoughtful truth-seekers whose views you disagree with but can't prove wrong—that their contrary views are externally irrational and mistaken whereas yours are externally rational and correct. Consider a case of moral disagreement about how to evaluate the

¹⁶ To endorse the Reformed Epistemologist approach is *not* to endorse the teachings of the Reformed tradition within Christendom or any other distinctively Christian doctrines. Rather, it's to say that belief in God (or other religious beliefs) can be properly basic.

¹⁷ This example is not meant to suggest that Jewish believers must or often do explain Christian and atheistic belief in this way. The point is just to give an illustration of how one *could* explain the beliefs of those with whom one disagrees on religious matters. Moreover, in explaining that Christian and atheistic belief involve cognitive malfunction, the Jewish believer needn't think the Christian and the atheist are insane or brain-damaged. Instead, the Jewish believer would just be saying that the sense of divinity isn't working properly in the Christian or in the atheist.

following very disturbing behavior of Jack's. Jack takes pleasure in torturing and killing children, and he has found a way to do this without getting caught. I assume that you think this behavior of Jack's is morally wrong (extremely so). But you have a friend—who, like you, is an intelligent thoughtful truth-seeker—who disagrees. She is a moral nihilist, someone who thinks it's false that Jack's behavior is morally wrong because there are no moral facts and nothing is morally wrong—or morally right. Like you, this friend is utterly disgusted by Jack's behavior and very strongly wishes that Jack wouldn't engage in it. But, unlike you, your friend doesn't think it is morally wrong. Now suppose you and your friend try to share with each other all your evidence for your opposing views. You point to your properly basic belief (based on some sort of intuitive seeming¹⁸) that actions of the sort Jack performs are morally wrong, which shows that moral nihilism is false. Your friend points to her properly basic belief (also based on some sort of intuitive seeming) in a key premise used to support her belief in moral nihilism—a view implying that Jack's behavior is neither morally wrong nor morally right. Unfortunately, even after you each try your best to share your relevant evidence, the disagreement persists. Does rationality require that, upon learning of this persistent disagreement with your friend, you should give up your belief that Jack's behavior is wrong? No. Instead of being moved to doubt the reliability of our own beliefs on this topic, we are sensibly moved to feel badly for the friend who disagrees with us and to be glad that we are fortunate enough not to lack the moral insight we have or to have the misleading moral views that our moral nihilist friend has.

Moreover, you can acknowledge that your moral nihilist friend may be *internally* rational in thinking Jack's behavior isn't wrong. After all, your friend has strong experiential evidence (i.e., *her* intuitive seemings) in support of that noninferential belief in the premise supporting moral nihilism. And your friend doesn't have the additional evidence you have which would

¹⁸ An intuitive seeming that p is true is an experience of it seeming intuitively to you that p is true.

outweigh this—namely, stronger experiential evidence (i.e., *your* intuitive seemings) in support of the view that Jack’s behavior is wrong. You can concede that the right response to the evidence your friend has may be to believe in moral nihilism; so all may be going well downstream from your friend’s experiential evidence. But you will insist that your friend isn’t externally rational because something has gone wrong upstream from her experiential evidence. The very fact that moral nihilism seems intuitively more plausible to your friend than the claim that Jack’s behavior is morally wrong shows that your friend is suffering from some sort of cognitive malfunction or problem, despite your friend’s intelligence, thoughtfulness, and sincere interest in discovering the truth.¹⁹

The Reformed Epistemologist can, therefore, insist that, in the above scenario, it is appropriate for you to think Jack’s behavior is wrong despite the fact that your intelligent, thoughtful, and truth-seeking friend continues to disagree with you about this, even after you share all your evidence. Moreover, it seems sensible for you to think that your friend is mistaken and externally irrational in her moral nihilist view that Jack’s behavior is not wrong, though you could allow that that view of hers may be internally rational. And the Reformed Epistemologist can then point out that something similar is going on in the case of religious disagreement. Those who disagree with her religious beliefs might be *internally* rational in their beliefs in a different religion or against all religions. But the beliefs of those who disagree with her are both mistaken and *externally* irrational, despite the fact that they are held by intelligent thoughtful truth-seekers. The point here is most definitely *not* that there is any connection between rejecting moral nihilism and endorsing a religious view. Rather, the point is that *if*—in the case of your belief that Jack’s behavior is wrong—you can sensibly think your friend is mistaken and

¹⁹ Again, the point isn’t that your friend is insane or brain-damaged but just that the process by which her moral intuitions are formed is not working properly.

externally irrational despite the fact that she's also an internally rational intelligent thoughtful truth-seeker, *then* there is, in principle, no bar to your sensibly thinking something similar of a friend in the case of a religious disagreement. In addition, the fact that you and your friend are both relying on intuitive seemings in arriving at your opposing views about the morality of Jack's behavior, doesn't show that you rationally ought to give up all views you have that are based on intuitive seemings. Likewise, the fact that you and someone else differ in your views about God even though you both rely on the sense of divinity, doesn't show that you rationally ought to give up all your views based on the sense of divinity.

Of course, it's true that the nontheist will be inclined to think that her nontheistic beliefs are externally rational and that it's the *theist* that is externally irrational. But why think this should be a problem for the theist? After all, your moral nihilist friend will be inclined to think that she is externally rational and that *you* are externally irrational in thinking Jack's behavior is morally wrong. Should the fact that the moral nihilist views you this way lead you to give up your view that you, not her, are the one that is holding the externally rational belief on this matter? It seems not. Even if your moral nihilist friend thinks that of you, it seems perfectly reasonable for you to continue holding your belief and thinking that you are externally rational in doing so.²⁰ In the same way, even if the nontheist will be inclined to view the theist as externally irrational, it doesn't follow that the theist should give up her view that she, and not the nontheist, is externally rational.

²⁰ But won't the same hold for your moral nihilist friend? Won't the fact that you view her as externally irrational fail to show that she should give up her view that she, not you, is the one that is externally rational? That may be right. But if that's right, which of you *really is* externally rational? Presumably it could only be the one whose views on this matter are correct. Which one of you is that? Unfortunately, that's a matter of dispute. But you (and many others) will sensibly think that your view (that Jack's behavior is morally wrong) is both true and externally rational. Questions parallel to those raised here can be raised in the case of disagreement over theistic belief and parallel answers can be given.

Conclusion

We've considered in this paper the Reformed Epistemologist's position that belief in God can be rational even if it is not based on any argument. We've tried to understand what her view is—the sense in which she thinks belief in God is more like belief in other people than belief in electrons. And we've considered several challenging objections to the Reformed Epistemologist's proposal. There is a lot more that could be said in explaining and trying to make plausible the Reformed Epistemologist's position, especially as it applies to religious beliefs other than belief in God. And more should also be said in response to the above objections and to others besides.²¹ Nevertheless, I hope what has been said here helps the reader to appreciate why many people take this sort of view seriously.²²

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²¹ The main places to look for further discussion of these topics are Alston (1991) and Plantinga (2000).

²² Thanks to Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.