

**Can we Justify Belief in God?**

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- Evaluating Our Options:**
- 1. Our belief in God is justified in reason**
  - 2. Our belief in God is justified via appeal to experience**
  - 3. We have no grounds for justifying our belief in God whatsoever!**
  - 4. Traditional grounds are not required; belief in God is a matter of faith; such a belief is either 'basic' or requires a 'leap of faith'**

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**1) Reason and Experience**

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## 1. The Failure of Reason:

- The cosmological argument fails to establish, amongst other things, the God of classical theism
- The ontological argument fails as it is not possible to 'build bridges' from the conceptual to the real
- Both arguments were presented to justify a *pre-existing* belief rather than to establish God's existence *ex nihilo*
- Reason fails as a means for establishing God's existence

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## 2. The Failure of Experience:

- The Teleological (design) argument *also* fails to establish the God of Traditional theism
- Miracles are inconclusive and the 'weight of evidence' is stacked against them
- 'Religious experiences' can be given psychological explanations and thus the 'author' of such events remains uncertain
- God's existence cannot be established via appeal to experience

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## Conclusion:

- Neither reason nor experience can conclusively establish God's existence; our faith in such arguments is groundless.
- In light of this, there appear to be only two options left:
  1. A 'suspension' of belief or
  2. A thoroughgoing atheism

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### 3. Atheism!

- **Atheism rejects both God's existence and religious faith**
- **For atheism to work, both of the following propositions would have to be true:**
  - **God's existence cannot be established**
  - **God's non-existence *can* be established**
- **However, God's non-existence can no more be established than his existence can be!**
- **Atheism thus makes little philosophic sense.**

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### A Return to Reason? - Pascal's Wager:

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### Background to Pascal's Wager

- **Pascal:**
  - ***Accepts* that God's existence cannot be established by argument**
  - ***Accepts* that the very nature of God renders him beyond our comprehension**
  - ***Rejects* the view that belief in God is thus irrational. For Pascal, faith is rational and atheism, irrational**

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### The 'Wager' Itself:

- We have no way of establishing, beyond doubt, whether God exists
- Nevertheless, we accept as true the claim 'God exists, or he doesn't'. If you:
  - lead a 'good, Christian life' and God does exist, eternal bliss awaits you. If he doesn't, you've lost little.
  - *Do not* lead a 'good, Christian life' and God *does* exist, you will suffer eternal damnation. If he doesn't, you've lost nothing.
- Given the outcomes, it is rational to believe God exists and lead a good Christian life!
- Reason and faith are thus not incompatible.

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### *Gambling and Losing!*– Some Problems with the Wager:

- Is it reasonable to ground religious faith in self-interest?
- What if God does exist, but not the God of Christian theology?
- Can reason really lead to faith?

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### 2) Epistemology Reformed: Belief in God as 'Basic'.

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### **Plantinga's Argument:**

- **Belief in God is never established through argument, nevertheless, such a belief can still be rational**
- **This is because certain beliefs are taken as 'basic' (i.e. without question); the self and the external world are two such examples**
- **Basic beliefs require no justification, but rather themselves serve to justify other beliefs we may hold**
- **God is an example of such a belief**

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### **Problems With Such an Account**

- **To what extent can we make sense of a belief that requires no justification?**
- **Why do we infer the existence of God from such beliefs and not, say, the existence of a divine clown/teapot/any other type of creator?**
- **Without appeal to justification, we have no means for establishing any of the characteristics we might usually associate with God**

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### **3) Fideism: Faith Rather than Reason as the Source of Justification**

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### **Kierkegaard's 'Leap':**

- **Fidelsm** is the belief that faith, rather than reason, provides the only grounds for religious belief
- Faith, for Kierkegaard, is brought about by a personal, passionate commitment rather than an objective rational decision
- Anyone who requires a rational justification for believing in God, has either not understood the nature of faith, or fundamentally lacks it
- We can provide no rational justification for God's existence and thus belief requires a 'leap of faith'
- In the religious sphere, reason is thus incompatible with, or subordinate to such faith

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### **Problems with such an account:**

- If faith requires us to commit to a belief system 'without reason' (Kierkegaard's 'leap') how are we to decide between the differing belief systems on offer?!
- Could it not be argued that 'blind faith' is more akin to fanatical devotion (cults etc.) than serious religious commitment?
- If we analysed faith thus, would it not be closer to a psychological need rather than a 'revelatory state of cognition'?

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### **Evaluating the Arguments**

- Reason cannot conclusively establish God's existence or non-existence
- Blind faith without reason is indistinguishable from fanatical devotion
- Pascal's attempt to unify faith with reason was arguably unsuccessful (can we have faith because it is *reasonable* to do so?!)
- Perhaps then agnosticism is the only (philosophical) way forward!

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