The Epistemology of Religious Belief

Overview

Religious Belief

Is religious belief rational – or can it be?

1. Postivism (cf. Ayer, vs. Swinburne): no; it is in fact meaningless
2. Clifford: a belief is only rational if there is sufficient evidence for it; there is no such for God's existence
3. Pascal: the approach is wrong; the question is not whether God exists but what we *ought* to believe even if we don't know.

1. Verification, Falsification

Vienna circle: Moritz Schlick (1882–1936); Otto Neurath (1882–1945); Friedrich Waismann (1896–1959); Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970).
Meaningful statements:

1. mathematical claims ($2 + 2 = 4$), tautologies ('all cats are cats'), logically necessary claims ('p and $not - p$ cannot be true at the same time')
2. factual claims: they can be confirmed by means of sense experience.

Cf. David Hume (*Enquiry*, Oxford 1975, 165.)

"If we take in our hand any volume; of divnitiy or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

1. Verification, Falsification

Anthony Flew: the parable of the jungle clearing

- religious claims seem suspicious since there is no experience that could count against them
- the jungle clearing and the invisible gardener
- It makes no difference!

1. Verification, Falsification

But:

- Maybe religious claims are not empirical hypotheses
- The verificationist principle (even in the weak form) does not satisfy its own criterion of meaningfulness.

Swinburne

"A man can understand the statement 'once upon a time, before there were men or any other rational creatures, the earth was covered by sea', without his having idea of what geological evidence would count for or against this proposition."

- So we don't always know what counts for or against a claim, even if we understand the claim.
- Maybe religious claims are like that.
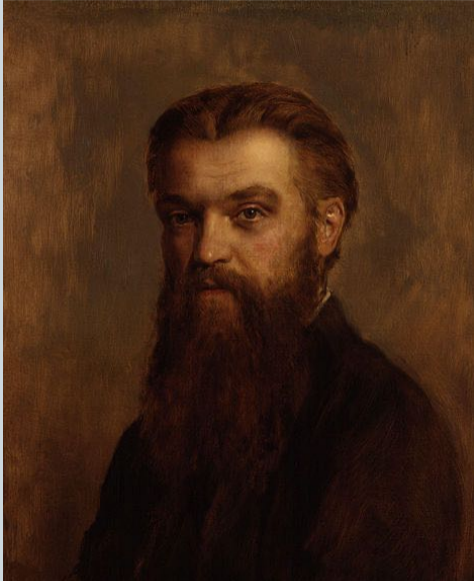- But does this mean we can just believe *any* religious claim?

2. Sufficient Evidence

William Kingdon Clifford

- 1845–1873, England
- English philosopher, mathematician
- Travels to Italy, survives a shipwreck

2. Sufficient Evidence

The Cliffordian Thesis:

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

Shipwreck
Francis Danby, 1793-1861, British
ca. 1850

2. Sufficient Evidence

- In what sense is it wrong? Is it morally wrong?
- What if we really lived this way? What would you still believe?
- What counts as (sufficient) evidence? Is it context-dependent?
- If we can prove neither God's existence nor his nonexistence, what should we do?
- Can there be practically useful consequences of believing in something we should not believe in?

3. What We *Ought to* Believe

Blaise Pascal

- 1623–1662, French
  mathematician
- contemporary of Descartes
- probability theory, conic sections,
  mechanical calculator, etc.;
  correspondance with Fermat

3. What We *Ought to* Believe

This approach is wrong. The question is not whether God exists; it is whether we ought to believe that God exists.

- prudential reasons, not evidential reasons
- 'whether to believe S' is a decision problem: we can assign utilities to each of the outcomes, and probabilities to S and $\neg S$.
- Sometimes we know the probabilities of the outcomes; sometimes we don't.
- We can model these decisions in a decision-table; the rational choice is whatever maximises the expected utility.

Which of these bets are rational for you to take?

Favored outcome	Gain if ✔	Loss if ✘
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 1
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 2
Dice: 6	$ 120	$ 120
Dice: 6	$ 180	$ 30
I'm younger than 33	$ 10,000	$ 1
There are fairies	$ ∞	$1

The Rational Wager

Which of these bets are rational for you to take?

Favored outcome	Gain if ✔	Loss if ✘	P	$\sim P$
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 1	0.5	0.5
Coin-flip: tail	$ 1	$ 2	0.5	0.5
Dice: 6	$ 120	$ 120	1/6	5/6
Dice: 6	$ 150	$ 30	1/6	5/6
I'm younger than 33	$ 10,000	$ 1	?	?
There are fairies	$ ∞	$1	?	?

A bet is rational iff:

$$P \times [gain\checkmark] \geq \sim P \times [loss\times]$$

3. What We *Ought to* Believe

Pascal's Wager

"But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly... by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in which out of an infinity of chances there is one for you, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. 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...."

3. What We *Ought to* Believe

The argument:

1. Either God exists or God does not exist, and you can either wager for God or wager against God. The utilities of the relevant possible outcomes (f_1, f_2, f_3) are finite but otherwise unknown.

	God exists (p)	**God does not exist ($1-p$)**
Wager for God	∞	f_1
Wager against God	f_2	f_3

2. It is rational to suppose that $p(God\_exist) > 0$.
3. You ought to perform the act of maximum expected utility if there is one.
   - E(wager for God) $= \infty \times p + f_1 \times (1-p) = \infty$
   - E(wager against God) $= f_2 \times p + f_3 \times (1-p)$, which is finite.
4. Therefore, you ought to wager for God.