

God and Reason: Why Theism is more Rational than Atheism or Agnosticism

Thesis: Theism is more rational than atheism or agnosticism

Road map:

- 1) No special accommodations: theism can accept all of the rules of reason that atheists and agnostics affirm (except those that are themselves irrational rules (e.g. truth is limited to that which can be empirically demonstrated)).
- 2) Atheism and agnosticism require irrational conclusions that theism avoids (see Modal Cosmological Argument and Moral Argument)
- 3) Theism, properly presented, can avoid irrationality

Theism: Affirmation of the existence of God (not necessarily the God of any particular religion, but rather a perfect being characterized by the traditional omni's – omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, etc.)

Atheism: The denial of theism

Agnosticism: The principled refusal to either affirm or deny the existence of God

Faith: An understanding of the world relative to purposes pursued (actions taken)

I have faith in my children

I have faith in God (not quite the same as the belief that God exists)

Beliefs: Propositions about the world held to be true

Faith is a way of being and acting in the world. Some call it an attitude toward the world. Beliefs are propositions that we affirm about the world. Religious beliefs help to explain why one has the religious faith that one does, but they are not the same thing as that faith. One can change one or more of one's beliefs without also changing one's faith. However, it is possible to change one's faith, especially if enough of one's beliefs change.

Faith is unavoidable, even for atheists, because our understanding of the world must always exceed demonstrable beliefs (beliefs that we must affirm without looking plain silly). Theists, atheists, and agnostics, must have faith about the nature of reality because their understanding of the nature of reality will always exceed strictly demonstrable beliefs.

Two levels of faith: Lips and heart. The extent to which my faith truly informs my understanding of purpose will be revealed in the choices I make. Thus, to know my real faith, pay attention more to what I do than to what I say.

THE ARGUMENT

1) Reason and belief: all beliefs should be rational (includes rules of reason – especially law of non-contradiction), credible (inductively sound), and coherent (internally sound and not arbitrary). These rules apply to theists, atheists, and agnostics, alike.

Limits to reason:

- 1) Limits of induction (Spock did not appreciate these)
- 2) Understanding must always exceed the rationally demonstrable (faith)

2) The irrationality of atheism and agnosticism: In the two arguments below for God's existence, C1-C4 and M1-M4 represent possible non-theistic explanations for either the existence of anything at all, or of moral worth. Yet, C1-C4 and M1-M4 can only be affirmed at the cost of rational penalties, penalties that do not exist if one affirms either C5 or M5. Thus, theism is more rational than atheism or agnosticism.

Why is agnosticism irrational? Agnosticism affirms that it is rational to affirm the possibility of atheism (C1-4 and M1-M4), even if it does not explicitly affirm atheism. But if all non-theistic possibilities are irrational, then agnosticism must be irrational, because one should not rationally affirm even the possibility of the irrational.

[Note: this is not the same as saying that the theist might be wrong, which is, indeed, possible. The possibility of error can never be a sufficient reason for affirming the irrational].

Modal Cosmological Argument (modal = ways of being, e.g. necessary, possible): The existence of God is the only rational way to explain the existence of anything at all (interesting corollary: absolute nothingness is impossible)

Conditional reality: Depends on other things for its existence; only exists when its conditions are fulfilled; contingent – did not have to exist and would not exist if its conditions were not fulfilled; possible but not necessary.

Conditionality tree: Identifies levels of conditionality, ending in the “most fundamental condition.”ⁱ The most fundamental condition allows all conditions higher in the conditionality tree to be fulfilled.

C1 = Nothing conditioned exists

Rational Penalty: determinism or epiphenomenalism

C2 = There exist only a finite number of conditioned causes

Rational Penalty: nothing exists

C3 = There exist only an infinite number of conditioned causes

Rational Penalty: nothing exists

C4 = There exists an unconditioned cause that is not divine

Rational Penalty: cannot be differentiated from divine; presumption shift in favor of C5

C5 = There exists an unconditioned cause that is divine

Moral Argument: Only the existence of God explains moral worth and so only the existence of God makes moral difference possible.

Moral worth: That which differentiates states of affairs in their moral consideration, making some more moral than others

Moral difference: The difference in moral worth between possible states of affairs

M1 = Moral worth does not exist

Rational Penalty: not credible given our experience of moral difference

M2 = Moral worth is only subjective in character

Rational Penalty: Prevents moral accountability and so devolves into M1

M3 = Objective moral worth is non-universal

A state of affairs to be maximized or minimized (non-theistic teleology)

Rational Penalties: begs the question regarding moral worth (e.g. Mill or Rawls); Incompleteness fallacy

A principle of practical reason (non-theistic deontology)

Rational Penalty: Partialist fallacyⁱⁱ

Common Rational Penalty: Nullification of worth

M4 = Objective moral worth is universal but not divine

Rational Penalty: Cannot be differentiated from the divine; presumption shift in favor of M5

M5 = Objective moral worth is universal and divine

3) No theistic irrationality

No “Unknowable” God

God must be at least minimally knowable

No Problem of Evil

No external providence

Internal providence cannot stop evil

No doubt, there are more possible problems of theistic rationality to be addressed, but I will conclude by noting that a theist should affirm that all of these apparent problems have rational solutions. If not, theism cannot be more rational than atheism or agnosticism.

ⁱ See Robert J. Spitzer, *New Arguments for the Existence of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), p.110 – 119

ⁱⁱ See Franklin I. Gamwell, *Existence and the Good* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011) p. 103