

Evaluating and Religious Beliefs

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1 Strong Rationalism/Evidentialism

- In order for a religious belief system to be properly and rationally accepted, it must be possible to prove that the belief system is true or false.
 - Here *prove* means: to show that a belief is true in a way that should be convincing to any reasonable person.
 - W. K. Clifford: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”
- This view can be held by theists, atheists, and agnostics.
- Arguments and evidence are rationally necessary for belief in God (the presumption of non-theism)
- The view is often associated with *strong foundationalism* in epistemology
- Issues:
 - Is rational guarantee even desirable from the standpoint of religious faith?
 - Is it even possible to prove that a particular religious belief system is true?
 - Assumes that reason is neutral with respect to a person’s worldview.

2 Fideism

- Religious belief systems are not subject to rational evaluation.
- Proof defeats the whole point of faith.
 - “Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual’s inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.” — Søren Kierkegaard
- Issues:
 - How do we decide which faith to leap for?
 - A religious belief system can be subject to rational evaluation without sacrificing faith.
 - * Reason can help us better understand our faith (faith seeking understanding)
 - * Reason can lead us to revise some of our religious beliefs without discarding the system as a whole.

3 Critical Rationalism

- In order for a religious belief system to be properly and rationally accepted, it must be possible to provide reasons and arguments in its favor and/or defend it against rational criticism.
- Religious belief systems can and must be rationally criticized and evaluated although conclusive proof of such a system is impossible.

- *Critical Evidentialism*:
 - We cannot prove our religious belief system, ...
 - but we must be prepared to offer positive reasons and evidence for it ...
 - and we must be prepared to defend it against critics.
- *Critical Anti-Evidentialism*:
 - We cannot prove our religious belief system, ...
 - nor are we under any obligation to provide reasons or arguments for it; ...
 - nevertheless, we must be prepared to defend it against rational criticism.
- Evaluating a Particular Religious Belief
 - Understand the belief as accurately as possible.
 - Consider the reasons and arguments for and against the belief.
- Evaluating Religious Belief Systems or Worldviews
 - Is the worldview internally consistent?
 - Is the worldview consistent with known facts?
 - Does the worldview have sufficient explanatory power? (I.e., Does it help make sense of the world around us?)
 - To what extent does the worldview enable us to make sense of the actual living of our lives?
- Issues:
 - Does critical rationalism lend itself to an open-ended process by which we never reach the point of having faith and being religious?
 - Does critical rationalism promote only a tentative or partial commitment to one's belief system?

References

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