

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 8, Reformed Epistemology

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 8, Reformed Epistemology.

Okay, we've talked a lot about rational justifications for belief in God and arguments for theism.

Now we're going to take a look at an approach to the question of the rationality of religious belief that is a bit different, and that really constituted a major change of direction in the history of scholarship and philosophy of religion in the 20th century and that is Reformed Epistemology. The leading proponent of this approach is Alvin Plantinga. So, here's a little bit of history leading up to Plantinga.

In another lecture, we mentioned the school of thought, which is known as Logical Positivism. It was, you know, headed up by people like Moritz Schlick, who must have the ugliest name in the history of philosophy, and another was called the Vienna Circle in the teens back in 1917, 1918 as they got going. Their goal was to bring philosophy back down to earth.

There were a lot of highfalutin forms of metaphysical idealism in the 19th century and still advocated by a lot of scholars in the early 20th century, and these philosophers in the Vienna Circle and other scholars like them wanted to bring philosophy down to a more scientific kind of verifiable, respectable, practical kind of foundation. So, what they did is they devised something called the verification principle, the idea that any statement or belief needs to be verifiable through empirical confirmation or testing and that anything that can't be scientifically verified or empirically proven or confirmed would be considered out-of-bounds or not knowable. As the positivists developed this approach, it became more and more influential, and one of the many unfortunate implications of positivism, of course, is that beliefs about morality and beauty and God, human souls, become completely meaningless without any cognitive value; they would say.

It took a few decades for the inherent problems in positivism to be properly emphasized so that this view could finally be dismissed. But in the meantime, positivist ideas became very popular among scholars, and generations of college students in the West, Europe as well as the United States came under the influence of this view, positivism. The most fundamental problem with positivism is, as we've noted in another lecture, that it can't satisfy its own demands.

If it's the case that any belief is only rationally respectable and justifiable if it can be empirically proven or demonstrated, that principle itself cannot be empirically proven or demonstrated. This verification principle is not something you can scientifically confirm. So, it fails its own test.

It's self-refuted. If positivism is true, then we need to reject positivism as cognitively meaningful, that it's a cognitively meaningless thesis according to its own standard. But again, this positivist mindset and orientation was highly influential, and it influenced a number of thinkers into the 40s, 50s, and 60s, who then increasingly became more and more skeptical about any kind of claims of religion, specifically belief in God.

Atheism, agnosticism, and religious skepticism became the default orientation. With Anthony Flew, in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, arguing for a presumption of atheism, it became more or less a default position for those who were respectable philosophers of religion, to begin with a positivist mindset or orientation. So, by 1966, I want to say in May of 1966, there was a Time Magazine cover story.

And on the death of God in the academy, the cover just said, Is God Dead? Stories on the rise of atheism and the demise of religious belief among scholars and positivism, and Flew's influence as well, were huge in this. At precisely that time, as it turns out, in the humble office of a scholar at Calvin College, he might have been at Wayne State at the time, Alvin Plantinga was writing a book that was addressing this issue, specifically, do you need evidence to justify your belief in God in order for it to be rationally respectable, in order for you to satisfy your intellectual obligations? This book was eventually published under the title God and Other Minds. And Plantinga's conclusion is that no, you don't need to provide, you know, rigorous arguments and evidences to be warranted to believe in God.

And so, he developed this thesis in very significant ways over the decades, culminating in this trilogy of books called The Warrant Trilogy, published by Oxford University Press in the 90s and the third volume in 2000, developing a whole epistemology that's come to be known as a reformed epistemology. So I'm going to outline the main themes in reformed epistemology kind of, and it'll become clear how different this is from the ways of thinking about religious belief and what it means to be a rational believer in God that are, you know, that are common in other quarters. So reformed epistemologists argue, Plantinga included, for starters, that natural theology is not very useful.

Arguments for the existence of God have their limits, and others, you know, in the presuppositional apologetic tradition, have been making this point for many years, emphasizing human sin as being a kind of block in terms of really being convinced by the evidence for God. But there are other reasons as well that Plantinga highlights why natural theology, you know, is not particularly useful, or at least it's limited in

terms of its usefulness. So, he thinks that a more humble view on the prospects of natural theology is appropriate.

And then, but that's okay because the religious believer doesn't need evidential justifications or arguments to support or ground their belief in God. The believer can assume from the outset that God exists. So, Alvin Plantinga proposes that belief in God is actually properly basic, and that is a central thesis in his reformed epistemology, that belief in God is properly basic.

And we'll talk more about what he means there, but again, this is the kind of terminology that is communicating that we can begin with belief in God. Belief in God is not something that needs to depend upon or be inferred from other beliefs. That belief in God is grounded in experience, certain experiences that we have about the world.

And you know, that it's not that belief in God just arises willy-nilly, you know, out of nothing, but no, they're grounded in experiences that we have. That belief in God is warranted by the proper function of our cognitive faculties. It's his claim that when our cognitive faculties are functioning properly, then belief in God will result.

But we must experience a certain cognitive redemption to restore proper cognitive function regarding beliefs about God. We need God's help here. However, he initially provided it in what John Calvin calls the *sensus divinitatis*, or the natural sense or awareness of God.

But because of the impacts of sin on the mind and cognitive function, there is, unfortunately, a kind of tendency to drift away from theistic belief because of our sin, or at least to have that compromised. So, we need special divine help to restore proper cognitive function that might be lost because of our sin. So, you can see why this is called reformed epistemology.

You have a very strong emphasis on human sin and the need for God to act upon our minds to bring us into a proper cognitive orientation towards God. So the key and most controversial claim here is this belief that God or this idea that belief in God is properly basic. But why should we believe that this is a properly basic belief? A properly basic belief is one that is not accepted on the basis of other beliefs.

That's the key idea there with proper basicity of beliefs. Again, it's not that beliefs aren't grounded in something. Our beliefs are grounded in beliefs about God, in particular, grounded in experience, but they are not or at least need not be grounded or inferred from other beliefs.

But Plantinga develops this whole orientation, beginning with a critique of classical foundationalism, which is an epistemological theory. Theory about knowledge, the

theory about how a person's noetic structure or system of beliefs works or how it should work, and how our beliefs should be related to one another in our noetic structure. So classical foundationalism says first that there is a foundation to one's beliefs and that foundation consists of basic beliefs, those that are not accepted on the basis of other beliefs, and all non-basic beliefs are ultimately justified by the foundational beliefs.

So far, this is a kind of generic foundationalism, just the idea that you have basic beliefs that give rise to or from which we infer other beliefs, that there are certain beliefs that are not based on other beliefs. Any foundationalist would affirm that much, but what makes classical foundationalism is this idea that a properly basic or foundational belief must have one of the following characteristics. It needs to either be self-evident, or evident to the senses, or otherwise certain or incorrigible, such that there's no way that it could be false.

Only appropriately basic beliefs are those that are self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, logically incorrigible, and that is a high demand when it comes to proper basicity, and that's exactly where Plantinga makes his critique. He rejects the third point that properly basic beliefs have to have one of those qualities. The problem here is if we hold this view that properly basic beliefs have to be self-evident, evident to the senses, or incorrigible, it's going to rule out all sorts of beliefs.

It will fail to account for beliefs that we have that say physical objects endure even when we're not looking at them, that there are minds other than one's own, and that the world has existed for more than five minutes, as opposed to having been created with the appearance of age and memories implanted in us. Even the belief I had breakfast this morning and memory beliefs are very basic beliefs. We all believe these things.

You'd be insane if you didn't, but you cannot prove these things with any kind of evidence or argument. You can't demonstrate with finality that these things are true. We do take them to be basic.

The point is they're basic, but they're not inferred from other beliefs. So, this is a sign right here that Plantinga points out that we need to relax our standards for proper basicity and certainly not insist that they be incorrigible, always evident to the senses, or self-evident. That isn't true of any of these things.

So, that's one major problem with classical foundationalism. Another is it doesn't meet its own criterion of proper basicity. Here we go with another self-refuting standard.

Since classical foundationalism itself, and its demands for proper basicity specifically, are not self-evident, not evident to the senses, and certainly not logically

incorrigible, it fails its own standard. It's kind of like the verification principle and logical positivism do. So, he was not the first to critique classical foundationalism, but he might have been the one who dealt the decisive blow against this particular epistemological theory.

So, if we reject classical foundationalism, what does that leave us with? Well, that, you know, we need to have a much more generous view on what may count as a properly basic belief. And, if we're going to allow as properly basic beliefs, our beliefs that are basic memory beliefs, as well as our belief that other people have minds, right, which has never been proven. The best arguments for that are woefully bad.

Then, we're also going to have to include, to be consistent, belief in God. Beliefs in God that, you know, especially since they are grounded in so many human experiences. So, one does not need, one need not justify one's belief in God with evidence or other beliefs.

We are within our intellectual rights to start with belief in God. And, that's the idea here of beliefs in God and beliefs about God being properly basic. And, by the way, you know, it isn't just the belief, the bare belief that there is a God that's properly basic, but also things like God is pleased with me, God loves me, or God, you know, wants me to, you know, start loving people better, or, you know, God is unhappy with, you know, some comment I made that was hurtful to someone, you know, convicting kinds of feelings that God is unhappy or displeased with what I've done.

Things like that are properly basic, too. It isn't just the bare belief in God. And so, this parallels many other basic beliefs that we hold.

This basic belief in God, including what we've talked about in some other context, are basic beliefs in the general reliability of sense perception, the existence of the external world, the law of causality, the uniformity of nature, and the existence of other minds. A brief explanation about why I place the existence of the external world on that list since, well, isn't it evident from my senses that there's an external world? Well, maybe what is actually more of an assumption is that I am aware of an external world or even that I am awake now and not dreaming. Again, that's not something you can prove philosophically or scientifically without making significant assumptions that are, again, articles of faith.

So, that's somewhat connected to the assumption we make regarding the general reliability of sense perception. However, beliefs about causality and uniformity of nature are properly basic beliefs. And I wanted to highlight the last item on that list regarding the existence of other minds.

This is something that we all assume every day, if we are sane, regarding all the people that we interact with throughout any given day, that other people have their

own beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, just like we do. Even though that is something we all believe and should believe, it's something that we can't prove or demonstrate that there are actual minds behind the faces that we meet and interact with. So, the parallel here between the other minds within the human bodies that we encounter every day and the mind behind the world is a significant one, that analogy, that parallel.

And this is what Plantinga seems to be getting at in titling his book, the first book he wrote on this topic, *God and Other Minds*. God is the mind behind the cosmos. And just as I am rationally justified in believing in a properly basic way that other human beings have minds, similarly, by analogy, I am within my intellectual rights in believing that there's a mind behind the universe and starting there in a properly basic way.

So, God is, you might say, just another mind about whom we have a properly basic belief, no different in one sense from the other human minds we encounter and have beliefs about. Of course, he is unique because he is the infinite, all-wise, all-mighty, all-good mind behind the universe as a whole, not just occupying a particular human body. So, regarding God and other minds, we have properly basic beliefs according to Plantinga and other Reformed epistemologists.

So, Plantinga has been roundly critiqued for many decades. There's a lot of resistance to his ideas here, as you can imagine, particularly when he first proposed this view in the 60s and then in the 70s, developing these ideas. There's a lot of resistance, a lot of critiques because he was kind of laying his axe at the root of the tree and challenging some of the presuppositions of classical foundationalism and the lingering effects of logical positivism.

So, among the objections that have been made to Plantinga's Reformed epistemology is this one that his whole approach will make properly basic belief arbitrary, that people could just believe anything they want in a basic way, and that it kind of opens the floodgates to irresponsible belief. Plantinga's response here is that it might be very difficult to establish a criterion for proper basicity, but really, the onus is not on him to provide that because nobody else has been able to provide it any better. So, why should he have the burden of proof to provide it? Just because he identified the problems with classical foundationalism.

He'd certainly invite the development of some good criteria there, but just because it's difficult to establish, it doesn't mean that, well, that means anything goes in terms of the proper basicity of beliefs. And then this other objection, the so-called great pumpkin objection, that's the illustration that Plantinga uses. If belief in God is properly basic, then why not believe in such wacky things as the great pumpkin? It's a reference to the *Peanuts* cartoon, that there's this great pumpkin figure that comes and bestows, I don't know, what gifts on little girls and boys.

I don't even know if I understand that whole cartoon mythology there, but that is just an example of a wacky belief. So, doesn't Plantinga's view invite such crazy beliefs as that? He notes, I think, that wisely and appropriately, certainly from a Reformed theological perspective, that a big difference between belief in God and the great pumpkin is that we have a natural tendency to believe in God. There is no natural tendency to believe in the great pumpkin, the flying spaghetti monster, or any number of ideas that have been proposed to try to lampoon belief in God.

We have the *census divinitatis*. We have a natural tendency to believe in a higher power. Whatever names that might go by in different traditions and different cultures, there is that natural tendency, which would explain why 90% plus of the human population believes and has always believed, in some sort of higher power.

So, we don't need to worry about people literally believing in completely cockamamie entities like the great pumpkin or the flying spaghetti monster. So, that's how Plantinga responds to those objections, and to this day, Reformed epistemology is highly respected and much discussed. Epistemological orientation, which I think is very helpful and encouraging for those of us who have religious beliefs, and shows why it is that we are perfectly within our intellectual rights to believe in God, even if we don't have arguments that we can offer to defend that belief.

We can begin with belief in God, which is perfectly respectable from a rational standpoint.

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