

Is There a Rational Road To Faith?

The affirmative argument for a debate for the Oregon State University Socratic Club, 16 February 2009.

Ken Funk

Thank you. Thanks to the Socratic Club, to everyone here tonight, and especially to Rich, for agreeing to discuss this important question with me.

Before I begin, let me say that the opinions I express here tonight are my own and do not reflect a position of Oregon State University.

I believe that there is a rational road to faith in that there is an epistemic way to Christian faith that satisfies certain criteria for rationality. But reason compels no one to follow it to its end and many who otherwise might follow it find roadblocks.

The Meaning of the Question

First, what does the question mean? We must assume that “road to” is meant metaphorically as a path, a course, a way through successive points, leading to one of special significance.

Faith

Faith, in the sense, I think, intended by the question is a set of beliefs. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines faith as “[t]hat which is or should be believed...”¹ Now belief and knowledge, believing and knowing, are the subject of epistemology. So a road to faith would be an epistemic way, a path through successive states of belief or knowledge, to a state including all the essential beliefs of the faith.

Rational, Reason

What would make that road rational? The *OED* defines “rational” as “... [b]ased on or derived from reason ...”² and reason as “[t]hat intellectual power or faculty ... which is ordinarily employed in adapting thought or action to some end ...”³. I had hoped for a clearer definition of reason from the philosophers, but, according to *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* “[t]here is ... no universally agreed or uniquely correct sense of [the word].”⁴ That gives me great latitude in setting the criteria for a rational road to faith. But I think that I will not be taking too many liberties to say that a line of thought is rational if it satisfies three criteria.

1. It must be **consistent**, containing no contradictions.
2. It must be **coherent**; orderly and logically connected.
3. And it must be **empirically justifiable**, consistent with evidence from experience.

1 *ibid.*, s.v. “faith”.

2 Oxford University Press, *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: author, 2008), s.v., “rational”, <http://www.oed.com/>.

3 *ibid.*, s.v. “reason”.

4 G.J. Warnock, “Reason,” in Paul Edwards, Ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1967) p. 84.

Rational Road to Faith

So then, a rational road to faith would be an epistemic way to faith that is consistent, coherent, and empirically justifiable.

Christian Faith

Here then, in brief form, is a road, an epistemic way, to Christian faith, a way presented in the Bible, a way which we often refer to as the Gospel.

A Road To Christian Faith

1. There is a supernatural. There is more to Reality than the universe of matter and energy.
2. There is a God. There is a supernatural Agent outside the universe who created, ordered, sustains, and is sovereign over the universe.
3. God created Man, in His own image, to enjoy an eternal, communal relationship with Him. That is Man's chief end and highest good. God made that relationship contingent upon Man's compliance with the moral order He imparted to the universe.
4. Man individually and collectively broke that order, thus breaking communion with God and bringing upon himself the greatest evil, utter and eternal separation from God.
5. But, in an act of love, mercy, and grace, God interceded in His creation to restore the broken relationship. He became a man, Jesus Christ, who lived a perfectly moral life but allowed Himself to be unjustly executed, so taking Man's punishment upon Himself. He rose from the dead and returned to the supernatural realm, thereby restoring the connection of Man to God.
6. Finally, communion with God is restored to those individuals who believe in Christ: His incarnation, perfect life, substitutionary death, and resurrection.

The Gospel: A Rational Road To Faith – With Roadblocks

Is the Gospel a rational road to faith? It is consistent in that there are no contradictions among the beliefs. It is coherent in that it provides an orderly progression through successive states of belief. Each belief provides necessary conditions or semantic context for the next. Each follows logically, if not necessarily, from the previous. It is empirically justifiable, for experience provides evidence for its validity. Thus I believe that it is a rational road to faith.

But reason does not compel one to follow it; one can go astray on on this road. Some find roadblocks on it, raising objections to these beliefs. Let us examine a few of these roadblocks to see whether or not this road to Christian faith is clear.

Roadblock: The Supernatural

Certainly, the first roadblock on the rational road to faith must be the supernatural. Skeptics object that in the absence of any direct empirical evidence of the supernatural, it is irrational to believe that there is anything to Reality besides the material universe.

In response, I say that the absence of direct empirical evidence is no proof that the cosmos is all there is. On the contrary, it would be unreasonable to expect that, if there is something more to Reality than matter and energy, that *something* is necessarily observable by means of our senses, either directly or through our instruments. Indeed, some physicists, cosmologists, astronomers, philosophers, and psychologists believe it reasonable to

postulate the existence of multiple, parallel universes existing in a much larger Reality.

For example, Max Tegmark is a physicist with a PhD from Berkeley, formerly a Research Associate with the Max Planck Institute, currently Associate Professor of Physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and therefore a person with pretty good credentials for rationality. In an article in *Scientific American*⁵, Tegmark described a four-level “Multiverse” Theory. A Level I Multiverse is one containing many, many universes similar to our own but each too far away from us to have been observed since the Big Bang. All have the same physical laws, but, with different initial conditions, are different from ours. Not all necessarily support life, much less consciousness.

A Level II Multiverse is more elaborate, consisting of clusters or “bubbles” of similar universes having similar laws, but each bubble with different laws. That would account for why our laws of physics are what they are. It just so happens that our bubble has a universe that supports life and consciousness, and we are in it.

A Level III Multiverse is one in which each quantum event in a universe branches to multiple universes corresponding to all possible outcomes of that quantum event.

A Level IV Multiverse is one in which a universe is simply the manifestation of a mathematical structure or system. Every mathematical structure is so manifested as a separate universe existing in an abstract realm. Our universe is just one such manifestation. Level IV Multiverse Theory would “explain” why our universe is so mathematical, why mathematics is such a good explanation of our universe.

My point is not in Multiverse Theory’s truth but in its form. It appears to me to be consistent and coherent and, as Tegmark points out, subject to indirect empirical validation. It is thus rational. And, like the Gospel, it goes outside our universe to explain what we experience in our universe.

It is not necessarily unreasonable to believe that Reality is bigger than our universe. The supernatural need be no roadblock on a rational road to faith.

Roadblock: God

The second roadblock is God. The skeptic objects that the universe, life, and consciousness can be explained satisfactorily in terms of natural causes. There is no need for a God hypothesis.⁶

Since well before the Christian era, thinkers have offered rational arguments for their belief in God. These include the Cosmological Argument for the Uncaused Cause, the Teleological Argument from design, the Ontological Argument from the definition of “God”, and the Moral Argument from goodness.

The most recent turn in the debate about God comes from Antony Flew. Flew is a respected, contemporary philosopher, educated at Cambridge and Oxford, who lectured at Oxford and the University of Aberdeen, and served as Professor of Philosophy at the Universities of Keele and Reading. Flew was a prominent atheist who argued that one should presume that God does not exist until evidence of God surfaces and that one should follow the evidence where it leads. The evidence led Flew to a change of mind.

In his latest book, *There Is a God*⁷, Flew wrote that

Science ... cannot furnish an argument for God's existence. But three items of evidence ... -- the laws of nature, life with its teleological organization, and the existence of the universe – can only be explained in the light of an Intelligence that explains both its own existence and that of the world. Such a discovery of the Divine does not come through experiments and equations, but through an understanding of the structures they unveil and map.

5 Max Tegmark, “Parallel Universes,” *Scientific American* (May 2003): 41 – 51, <http://cosmos.phy.tufts.edu/~zirbel/ast21/sciam/ParalellUniverse.pdf>.

6 After Pierre Laplace.

7 Antony Flew, *There Is a God* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) p. 155.

With regard to the laws of nature, Flew observed that not only are they finely tuned, but the laws themselves are orderly. Even if the laws result from chance in the evolution of our universe, there must be a deeper law that led to their origin. That deeper law is God.

Life has teleological organization. Life has a purpose, an end, a *telos*: the persistence of the living cell in an environment that tends to disorder, death, and decay, the growth of the acorn to the oak, our own individual purposes for being here tonight. But inorganic matter has no purpose. The only satisfactory explanation for the emergence of purpose from non-purpose is the existence of a purposive Intelligence that imposes its orderly purpose on matter and energy to produce teleologically organized life.

Flew ultimately found the very existence of the universe to be problematic for the atheist. Assuming that natural laws exist as a "brute fact", then can the universe be explained in terms of them? Laws are transformation rules. To produce a final state, they must have an initial state. The only natural explanation of the initial state is another brute fact. In attempting a naturalistic explanation of the origins of our universe, we are left with several brute facts which offer no meaningful explanation.

Flew concludes by saying "I have followed the argument where it has led me. And it has led me to accept the existence of a self-existent, immutable, immaterial, omnipotent, and omniscient Being."

It is not unreasonable to believe in God. God need be no roadblock on a rational road to faith.

Roadblock: The Moral Order of the Universe.

The third roadblock is the moral order of the universe. The skeptic objects that morality is an emergent property of biology, or a social construct, or both. There is no moral order to the universe. In response, I must point out that it is well within the purview of a Divine Creator of the Universe to impose moral, as well as physical order on it, and two remarkable facts are evidence that He did.

The first remarkable fact is the existence and profound influence on human behavior of value, either as objective reality or universal subjective experience. Every decision, every choice we make is based on a judgment of value – goodness over evil, right over wrong, better over good. We may disagree over what is good or what is right, and we certainly disagree over what is better or worse, but we all agree that things and actions have value. We cannot articulate a definition of value that is not circular, but every thinking person understands intuitively and experientially what value is.

We choose this over that because this is better. We do this rather than that because we believe this leads to a better end. We believe that this action is right, but that action is wrong. Without value there would be nothing to motivate the will, everything would be just so, and we would languish in indecision and inaction. But we become passionate because some things are precious to us. Because of value, we reason, argue, strive, fight, even die, all for the good. Consciousness is remarkable. Consciousness of value is even more remarkable.

The second remarkable fact supporting the idea of a moral order is the commonality of the world's moral systems. When we examine the religions of ancient Egypt, Babylon, China, India, Greece, Rome, Africa, Europe, and North America we find remarkably similar moral codes. In these religions we find the same affirmations of the value of human life, duties to parents and elders, duties to children and posterity, honesty, mercy, spousal fidelity, and duties to God.

No matter where we turn, we find pretty much the same principles of morality. Why is that? Did they merely arise from a single proto-religion? Is this a case of parallel social evolution? Or do these principles just happen to "work"?

If so, why do they work? They work because, built into the universe, besides a physical order and consistent with it, is a moral order as well. Immanuel Kant summed this up well: "Two things fill me with increasing awe, the starry skies above and the moral law within."

It is not unreasonable to believe in a moral order. The moral order need be no roadblock on a rational road to

faith.

Roadblock: The Need For Redemption

It is ironic that although there is a moral order to the universe and some would say that moral order is perceptible by everyone, that order is universally broken. That leads to the fourth roadblock, the need for redemption, salvation from sin. The skeptic argues that it is incorrect to say that everyone is wicked. People are fundamentally good or, at worst, morally neutral.

Dinesh D'Souza responded to the skeptic's challenge in a Socratic Club debate in 2007⁸. If moral behavior were innate, why do we have to work so hard to inculcate it in people? Why do we have rules, laws, diversity training, locks, police forces, prisons? Because we all – I, you, everyone – we all fail to treat others as we wish to be treated. We all are fundamentally self-seeking and, though that is necessary to a certain degree, we all take self-interest beyond its proper limits. Excessive self-interest places the self before others, the self before God. It is self-idolatry, a violation of the First Commandment, and the fundamental reason for our separation from God.

So it not unreasonable to believe that there is a need for redemption. The need for redemption is no roadblock on a rational road to faith.

Roadblock: The Bible/The Resurrection

I will consider the last two roadblocks together. The skeptic objects that the resurrection of Jesus Christ, absolutely pivotal to the Gospel, is a myth. Dead people do not come to life. And the only record of the resurrection is in the Bible, which is no reliable authority.

Let me respond⁹ to the second part of the objection first and focus on the reliability of the New Testament, the part of the Bible that contains the record of the Resurrection. There exist now about 5,000 Greek manuscripts of part or all of the New Testament, some fragments dating back to around 70 AD, which was well within the lifetime of those who witnessed Jesus' ministry first hand. There also exist manuscripts of early translations of the original Greek into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and other languages. These are, of course, hand copies of the originals and the original translations. The original manuscripts were copied, those copies were copied, the copied copies were copied, and so on, to arrive at the huge number of manuscripts that must have existed.

Now, we would expect that all that copying of copies would have resulted in substantial deviation from the original text. We would expect that copyists would not only make unintentional errors in the copies, but would also add embellishments and omit problematic passages or ones with which they did not agree. It is truly remarkable, then, that, apart from minor textual differences, all of these manuscripts are in agreement. That, along with other evidence, leads to the fact that there is now no disagreement about any historic fact or point of doctrine contained in the New Testament. As the Bible scholar Sir Frederic Kenyon put it, "... the Scriptures have come down to us substantially as they were written."

But this serves merely to verify that today's New Testament text is faithful to the original. What about its validity? How do we know that what the new Testament says about the Resurrection -- or about anything -- is true? We know by internal evidence from the content of the New Testament, by archaeological evidence, by its consistency with extra-Biblical literature and, from those, by reason. Early Christians would not have so systematically faced hardship, persecution, and martyrdom if they had known – or even strongly suspected – the Resurrection to be a fake.

And another line of evidence for the historicity of the Resurrection and the validity of New Testament accounts of it has emerged. N.T. Wright is an Oxford historian and New Testament scholar who, after a careful study of

8 Dinesh D'Souza, Socratic Club Debate, "Is Christianity Good For the World?", 15 October 2007.

9 Ken Funk, "The Resurrection Of Christ: History Or Myth", panel discussion at Oregon State University, 12 April 2001.

ancient beliefs about life after death and resurrection, concludes that the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection violate classic Jewish beliefs in several ways. First, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ happened to one person in advance of a general resurrection. Second, it involved a transformation of the body in a novel way. Third, it occurred to the Messiah who, according to Jewish belief, would not die in the first place. Fourth, the Resurrection became central to the belief system of the early Christians while, to the Jews, resurrection was a minor point. In these and other ways, this early Christian view of Jesus' resurrection was very new and, according to Wright, "... the wide extent and unanimity of early Christian belief in resurrection force us to say that something definite *happened*, way back early on, that has shaped and colored the whole early Christian movement."¹⁰ That something, we believe, was the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is not unreasonable to believe in the validity of the Bible or that the Resurrection really happened. These need be no roadblocks on a rational road to faith.

Faith As More Than Epistemic

In the foregoing I have described a road to Christian faith and argued that it is rational, for it is an epistemic way that is consistent, coherent, and empirically justifiable.

Faith As Fiduciary

But I have not demonstrated – beyond doubt – that any of the beliefs of Christianity are true. There is room for doubt – and need for trust. To overcome the doubt and believe, as a Christian, I must trust. I trust the authority of the Bible, the church, my parents, my teachers, my fellow Christians. I must trust my experiences, my memory, my intuition, my reason. In that way, faith is no different from any other knowledge. As Michael Polanyi, the physical chemist and epistemologist said, all our knowing is a fiduciary act, an act of trust, in which, humanly speaking, there is no guarantee that we are right. To believe anything, I – we all – must trust. All we believe, all we know, is based on trust. Trust in parents, teachers, colleagues, graduate students, books, journals, authors, editors, instruments. Trust in our own senses, memory, intuition, even trust in reason.

Before we can decide what to believe, we must decide what or who to trust. And how do we decide that? By reason? But Goedel, Turing, and Church showed us that reason, turned on itself, ultimately fails. And even if, reason were infallible in principle, in practice it is fallible humans who reason. To reason about realistically complex problems, we have to use heuristics, heuristics that make us susceptible to systematic biases. Reason too is fallible.

Faith As Elpistic

In any case, knowledge is a matter of trust. Above all things, Christians trust God and His word, the Bible. And that trust goes hand in hand with hope. Hope is the expectation of something good that is not completely within our control. The Christian's hope is in restored communion with God and eternal life in His kingdom. Hope is such an important dimension of Christian faith that the only explicit definition of faith given in the Bible is in terms of hope. Hebrews 11:1 says that "... faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."¹¹ So Christian faith is not just epistemic or fiduciary, but "elpistic", to coin a word from the Greek, *elpis*, hope.

Faith As Ontic

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for. The English word "assurance" translates the Greek, *hypostasis*, which

10 N.T. Wright, "The Self-Revelation of God in Human History: A Dialogue on Jesus with N.T. Wright," Appendix B in *Flew*, *op. cit.*.

11 All scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.

also can be translated substance, but, considered in the context of Greek thought and held alongside other use of the word in the book of Hebrews, we must understand that *hypostasis* here means not only belief, trust, or expectation, but transcendent reality. Faith is the reality of things hoped for. Hope realized. Christian faith is not just epistemic, fiduciary, or elpistic. Faith is ontic. Faith is Reality, the real experience of communion with God and eternal life in His kingdom here and now. Not yet fully manifested, to be sure, but really real nevertheless.

Faith As Divinely Rational

Can there then be a rational road to faith as realized hope, to faith as ontic? Reason is epistemic. Faith, as ontic, is beyond belief. Faith, as ontic, is beyond human reason. It seems that we have a problem here. But the Bible (in I Peter 3:15) says that we as Christians are to be "... ready to make a defense to everyone who asks [us] to give an account for the hope that is in [us] ..."

The Greek word for "account" is *logos*. While *logos* can be translated "word", "speech", or "thought articulated," here it can be interpreted in the sense of its English derivative, "logic". The equivalent Latin word is *ratio*, from which we get "rational".

The Christian is to be ready to give a rational explanation for his hope. There must be a rational road to faith in all its dimensions. And the key to finding that road is in the word *logos*. Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers developed the concept of *logos* as articulate thought to *logos* as the articulate thought of God, expressed in an orderly cosmos. Starting with Heracleitus around 600 BC and later elaborated by the Stoics, including the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, *logos* took on deeper meaning in ancient western thought. The *logos* is the universal, eternal, fundamental ordering principle of the cosmos, its meaning, plan, and purpose, and the source of human reason. But the *Logos* is the Divine Reason. And the *Logos* echoes today in the words of physicists striving to explain the orderliness of our universe. The *Logos* is the deeper law from which the physical laws of our universe come.

The Bible speaks of the *Logos* in the Book of John (John 1:1-3):

In the beginning was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with God, and the *Logos* was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ...

But the Bible does not leave the *Logos* merely transcendent, as the Greeks would have had it. John goes on to say (John 1:14) that "... the *Logos* became flesh, and dwelt among us ...". The *Logos*, the fundamental ordering principle of the universe, became a man, Jesus Christ, who said to his disciples and to us (John 14:6), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. ..." and (John 6:44) "[n]o one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him ..."

Faith in the the deepest sense, faith as ontic, faith as the reality of communion with God eternally in His kingdom, is inaccessible by human reason. But through His Divine Reason God draws the believer to and into faith as realized hope. The road to faith begins with the Divine Reason of creation and ends with the Divine Reason of salvation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a rational road to faith as epistemic in that there is an epistemic path leading to Christian faith that satisfies principles of rationality. But human reason compels no one to follow it to its end, and many who otherwise might, find roadblocks. In the end, the Divine Reason, the *Logos*, draws believers to and into a faith that is not just epistemic but ontic. So there is a rational road to faith -- Divinely Rational.

Alternate Conclusion

There is a road to faith, a way, that is epistemic, fiduciary, elpistic, ontic, and rational – Divinely Rational.