Rationality, the *tu quoque* defence, and the theistic stance

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Introduction: a problem for theism

The growing presence of 'New Atheism' (Stenger 2009) in recent decades has brought with it a fairly commonplace argumentative strategy: first, the New Atheist will lay claim to be 'rational', 'reasonable', or 'justified' in their beliefs (see Hitchens 2007; Harris 2004; Stenger 2012). The New Atheist will then usually proffer a number of theologically, philosophically and factually questionable arguments (Amarasingam 2010; 'Dawkins' god*less* delusion') that the theist lacks any reasons, evidence or justification (see Dawkins 2006, pp. 31–32), or theism contradicts a position that has reasons, grounds, evidence or justification (see Harris 2006; Coyne 2015). The New Atheist concludes the theist is therefore delusional (Dawkins 2006) or 'irrational' (Hitchens 2007, p. 56); the theist must rely on 'faith' rather than reason (see Krauss 2012; Luftus 2008), on 'blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence' (Dawkins 1989, p. 198). Oftentimes, this argumentative strategy moves one more step: the New Atheist claims theists are, by relying solely on 'faith', deserving of public derision, invective or opprobrium (see Hitchens 2007; Harris 2006). This denunciation of theists often continues: religion is 'one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus' (Dawkins 1997). Thus move the iron chains of logic. Case closed. But is this argumentative strategy appropriate?

The New Atheists often assume a particular theory of rationality, most often a form of scientism (see Stenger 2007; Stenger 2009) or naïve empiricism (see Krauss 2012; Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006). However, there are many different theories of rationality, each setting out differing standards. These New Atheists have played a weak hand, for the existence of many different theories of rationality raise a second-order question of interest to theists and atheists alike: *What standards should be adopted when choosing between conflicting theories of rationality?*

Presumably, we should rationally choose our standards–yet this produces a feeling like floating on air: we are faced with two problems, namely *what should count as the rational adoption of some standard?* and *which standards should be rationally adopted?* The first requires a standard of rational adoption; the second requires the rational adoption of standards. Each question demands the answer to the other, with no obvious starting-point with which to 'bootstrap' to an answer. This is but to restate briefly the traditional *problem of the criterion*.

Furthermore, we can consider for our purposes a particular term: a 'theistic stance' designates a number of moral and ontological positions and attitudes that are often jointly held by theists. All or some of these positions and attitudes may be held, For example, it may include the belief that a deity exists, has certain attributes, has previously acted or acts (or does not act) on the world in certain ways, and so on. Though the New Atheist's debate tactic is fairly crude, implicit in it is an interesting question raised by the problem of choosing between conflicting theories of rationality: According to *which* theories of rationality is it irrational or rational to adopt a theistic stance?

In what follows, I focus on three proposed attempts at jointly solving the problem of the criterion and preserving the possibility of the rational adoption of a theistic stance: (1) Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology, (2) the radical form of presuppositionalism developed by Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, and (3) comprehensively critical rationalism (hereafter 'CCR'), a theory of rationality developed by W.W. Bartley that abandoned the assumption that rationality and justification were one in the same.

I explain the philosophic problem-situation that lead to developing these three theories of rationality, compare their respective approaches, and conclude that CCR provides the most principled approach for both resolving the problem of the criterion and permitting the possibility of the rational adoption of a theistic stance. I then provide historical evidence that there exist versions of theistic stances that are compatible with CCR.

A problem for theistic comprehensive rationalism

In this section, I set out the stated criteria in *comprehensive rationalism* (hereafter 'CR'), note how the New Atheists will often claim a theistic stance fails to satisfy CR (or some other implicitly affirmed variant), and introduce a trilemma for the theist in light of its presumed failure to satisfy CR.

W.P. Alson and R.B. Brant dub CR the 'Establishment' view (Alston and Brandt 1978, p. 605). W.K. Clifford, for example, exemplified the normative element behind CR when he said in his essay, 'The Ethics of Belief': 'It is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' (Clifford 1999, p. 138). This theory of rationality can be traced back at least to Epictetus: 'To

be a reasonable creature, that alone is insupportable which is unreasonable; but everything reasonable may be supported' (Epictetus 1904, ch. 2).

Hence, under CR the 'Establishment' view of rationality led to the adoption of something approximating the following condition of rationality: (1) *an individual is rational if, in principle, upon questioning by a critic, for any proposition, they can produce a chain of propositions, each justifying each other; the chain could only be accepted using relationships between propositions that preserved the forms of logical entailment found in classical logic*. (This framing of (1) ties rationality to the ability to engage in public discourse, although other variations may frame (1) as an entirely private matter in which the individual imagines or anticipates how a potential critic may reply.)

However, (so it is claimed), if one were to enact this in practice, then there would be no end. *Infinitism* was not a proper path down the fork in articulating an appropriate theory of rationality. Nor was coherentism an appropriate alternative, for any maximal set of coherent beliefs and their negation would exist equally justified, and two opposing belief-systems would be equally rational. There had to be a third way.

What was needed was some terminating point(s) for discourse, that is, an additional condition to this proto-Establishment theory of rationality: (2) *the chain of propositions ends in a proposition or collection of propositions that satisfy specific standards, such as being necessarily true, analytic, self-evident, incorrigible, self-justifying, foundational, undoubtable, or evident to the senses.*

These two conditions were, however, not enough, and two other (implicit) conditions are included: (3) *rational individuals must accept only those propositions that satisfy (1)–(2)*; (4) *rational individuals must reject propositions that conflict with propositions that satisfy (1)–(2)*.

Reframing the debate between the atheist and theist

Naturally, atheists that are more familiar with philosophy of religion than the New Atheists (call them 'Refined Atheists') often are able to articulate far more explicitly that, to their eyes, the available arguments that justify theism are lacking (i.e. the claims made by theists fail to satisfy (1) and (2)), or are at odds with beliefs that are justified (i.e. (3) and (4), plus the available arguments and evidence for atheism, entail the rejection of theism) (Ruse 2015). Therefore (so the Refined Atheist claims), just as with the New Atheist's dialectical move, according to the standards set forward in CR, 'faith' is contrasted with 'reason': it is 'not rational', 'unreasonable', or 'irrational' to adopt a theistic stance; the theist must instead rely on 'faith'. For example, Daniel Dennett concludes,

> ...what I want to see is a reasoned ground for taking faith seriously as a *way of getting to the truth* ...you must not expect me to go along

with your defense of faith as a path to truth if at any point you appeal to the very dispensation you are supposedly trying to justify. Before you appeal to faith when reason has you backed into a corner, think about whether you really want to abandon reason when reason is on your side (Dennett 1995, p. xi).

It may be an open question whether arguments from Refined Atheists against widely-held theistic stances have been successful. However, for the sake of argument, assume that these theistic stances do not obviously satisfy CR for a number of reasons (Everett 2003). This assumption can be granted in the trivial sense that Refined Atheists have articulated why they believe arguments in favour of these theistic stances are deficient at great length (Mackie 1983), and (presumably) not all rejoinders have been sufficiently addressed. While there may be (by supposition) similar unconvincing arguments for adopting an atheistic stance, at minimum both stances *prima facie* do not satisfy CR. If we adopt CR, agnosticism (presumably) reigns. What, then, should the theist do?

Once conceded that it is irrational to jointly adopt a theistic stance and CR, there are at least three options open to the theist:

1. Concede that it is impossible to adopt a theistic stance with intellectual integrity, but continue to adopt it while accepting CR as an appropriate standard. There *are* no good reasons for a theistic stance (Tillich 1957, p. 58). Without good reasons, theism is then irrationally adopted (Barth 1969, pp. 17–24), based more on a commitment come what may to faith or revelation, rather than on evidence or argument (Van Huyssteen 1999, pp. 53, 29). This choice ends all rational discussion between the theist and atheist.

2. Concede that it is irrational to adopt a theistic stance according to the standards in CR, but argue that this is not a serious problem for the theist, for it is irrational to accept *any* standard on principled grounds (Van Huyssteen 1999, p. 25). If one were to believe that rationality and justification are one in the same, then the conclusion is devastating to the theist and atheist alike (Mitchell 1973):

   > ...rationality is so limited that *everyone* must make a dogmatic irrational commitment ...therefore, the [theist] has a right to make whatever commitment he pleases ...no one has a right to criticize him (or anyone else) for making such a commitment (Bartley 1984, p. 72).

   No universally-recognised standards of rational adoption are possible. If so, this creates an 'independent standing ground' or 'impregnable stronghold' for a theistic stance (Heim 1957, pp. 32–33).

3. Modify the conditions set out in CR so that a theist may rationally adopt a theistic stance, but without appealing to standards such as a chain of justification or undoubtable propositions about shared experience. Some other appropriate basis is available to the theist. Plantinga makes this move by arguing that CR is too strict (Plantinga 1981). A more lenient standard is necessary, such as the standards set out in reformed epistemology.

The first option provides no compelling arguments to adopt a theistic stance, atheism is uniquely rational, and the theist is branded irrational; the second option looks more promising than the first, however, it appears to give up a great deal at the cost of saving a theistic stance (namely any standards for assessing the rationality of belief); the third looks like the best path to take: a compromise between the motivations for the joint adoption CR and a theistic stance.

Plantinga's reformed epistemology

I will now briefly address some potential motivations for a theist to accept the third path in the fork of the trilemma, exemplified in Plantinga's reformed epistemology. I then sketch out a rough version of reformed epistemology, and set out three overarching concerns raised by weakening the second condition in CR to include personal revelatory experience such as a *sensus divinitatus*.

I first address whether, by adopting reformed epistemology, a number of behaviours are designated as 'rational' although they are *prima facie* not. This is a bullet too hard for many theists to bite. I then argue that if the bullet is bit, it is questionable whether reformed epistemology permits the communal assessment of whether any purported case of a *sensus divinitatus* exists or, if it were to exist, is properly functioning. The last concern focuses on whether Plantinga's reformed epistemology hinders the facilitation of critical discussion amongst theists that accept reformed epistemology. I conclude that reformed epistemology may give a satisfying account of *warranted true belief*, but does not succeed in providing a satisfying account of *rational adoption*.

Motivations for abandoning CR

It should first be noted that Plantinga's approach to reconciling the apparent incompatibility between CR and a theistic stance is unarguably brilliant in its execution: the 'Establishment' view was augmented once to include foundational, basic beliefs such as beliefs that are self-evident, incorrigible or evident to the senses. And yet, as Plantinga notes,

I was somehow both accepting but also questioning what was then axiomatic: that belief in God, if it is to be rationally acceptable, must be such that there is good evidence for it. This evidence would be propositional evidence: evidence from other propositions you believe, and it would have to come in the form of arguments. This claim wasn't itself argued for: it was simply asserted, or better, just assumed as self-evident or at least utterly obvious (Plantinga 2000, p. 70).

The question is then raised: if a number of standards in CR were too strict or inconsistent, why not broaden the set of what counts as 'foundational', 'self-justifying' or 'undoubtable' to include the experience of a personal relationship with God? The motivations for weakening the standards of CR are well-known, and not limited merely to the theist.

For example, weakening CR appears to take into account a number of problematic beliefs that are not clearly justified by an appeal to further (unarguably undefeated) argument or evidence, such as the belief that the universe was not created less than ten minutes ago, the belief that I am not a brain in a vat, the belief that I have two hands, and so on. Since these beliefs are often thought to be at least reasonably held, but without recourse to any clear and definitive arguments that terminate in some uncontroversial foundations, the standards of CR are too strong.

Furthermore, as Plantinga properly notes, CR is self-referentially incoherent: (1)–(4) could themselves not justify belief in (1)–(4). Consequently, Plantinga has suitable reasons for why CR must be weakened, and properly basic beliefs appear like a plausible candidate class to replace the limited set available in (2).

Setting out reformed epistemology

Plantinga's approach is roughly as follows: given these issues with CR, what other candidate beliefs are there to count amongst other 'foundational', 'self-justifying' or 'undoubtable' beliefs? Perhaps we should turn to psychological states that share these features, such as a personal experience of the existence or imminent presence of God–a *sensus divinitatis*. To an individual that had this experience, such an experience would be no more open to doubt than holding aloft a hand. Furthermore, *if God were to exist,* this would be a genuine *sensus divinitatis*.

Since the experience of an inner awareness of God (as articulated by John Calvin and other Protestant theologians) is not doubted by the theist, and is as secure for the theist as the experience of witnessing ones hands, they are permitted to include this *sensus divinitatis* in the set of properly basic beliefs, along with the set of beliefs that fell outside the bounds circumscribed by CR. These beliefs are properly basic. The acceptance of empirical evidence or rational argument would no

longer be necessary conditions for the rational adoption of a proposition. Thus CR is subject to little overt modification, done on principled grounds, all while still permitting maintaining a theistic stance. Thus reformed epistemology is a massive improvement over CR.

Some concerns with Plantinga's reformed epistemology

While reformed epistemology may have been developed in response to the apparent incompatibility of CR and a theistic stance and the the overly strict and self-referentially incoherent standards of CR, it's important to consider whether reformed epistemology addresses three potential objections that are a consequence of weakening these standards.

Cult members are not paradigmatic rational agents

Reformed epistemology provides a plausible account of the necessary conditions for *warranted true belief*; however, positing a *sensus divinitatis* is not an appropriate answer to whether a theistic stance can be *rationally adopted*: Plantinga's reformed epistemology is not a defence of theism *per se*, but of *many* potential stances. If so, cult members may be, by reformed epistemology's lights, rational agents. This conclusion is absurd, therefore reformed epistemology does not answer the question of whether a theistic stance can be rationally adopted.

As Plantinga himself acknowledges (Plantinga 1981, p. 48), if the condition of a proper basic belief is too lenient, there is the possibility of collapsing Plantinga's reformed epistemology into a state of anarchy. Any set of well-entrenched beliefs that are thought to be the consequence of a purported properly functioning belief-forming sense-organ are *de facto* properly basic for that epistemic community.

A variation of this objection is present in the well-known 'Great Pumpkin' objection, but an even more concerning objection can be raised by considering small social communities with dangerously aberrant beliefs that are, for them, believed to be genuinely derived from a properly functioning sense-organ of the leader of a cult.

It is not problematic to conclude that, after examining the behaviours exhibited by members of a number of cults, if any set of beliefs have been honestly claimed to have been formed due to a properly functioning sense-organs of certain leaders of cults, these beliefs are genuinely and earnestly held. For leaders of these cults, their personal (purportedly) revelatory experience is no more open to doubt than the existence of their own hands. Nevertheless, these communities are paradigmatic instances of an epistemic community irrationally adopting beliefs. Furthermore, these epistemic communities remain—at least under a pre-theoretical understanding—irrational *even if* we posit that these sense-

organs were properly functioning. Something has gone wrong in the way cultists evaluate their beliefs, even if (by supposition) they have warranted true beliefs. What could have gone wrong?

Cults frequently aim towards the preservation of the cults' core belief-set by protecting the cult leader from criticism come what may, rejecting any plausible rejoinders or criticism out of hand, engaging in indoctrination, social isolation and conformity to dogma. Cult members exemplify paradigmatically intellectually and epistemically vicious behaviour, up to and including committing violent acts directed at critics both from within and outside the cult. Repeated attempts to save a core set of beliefs from apparent defeaters by any and all means necessary, no matter how convoluted and absurd the explanations given, deflections provided, or violent acts committed to silence critics, qualify as paradigmatic instances of the irrational adoption of said beliefs.

If, however, the reformed epistemologist were to reply that cultists are not rational agents, for some additional conditions are necessary for the rational adoption of a stance, then by this same reasoning other conditions may override the basic beliefs of theists, making the beliefs of theists no longer properly basic. Thus, while reformed epistemology may provide a superb account of *warranted true belief*, it does no service for the theist to adopt a standard for rational adoption that are so broad as to include cultists as rational agents; if, however, other conditions are required, it undermines the very purpose of introducing a *sensus divinitatis*.

Rational deliberation between differing epistemic communities looks increasingly difficult

There is a further worry that even if this objection were to be dismissed, Plantinga may be successful only in showing that *de jure* objections to theism fail: theists may be rational according to this new, weaker standard; however, without a way to arbitrate between the theist's and the atheist's standards, both the theist and atheist will be rational according to their *own* standards, yet the theist will still fail to be rational according to any mutually agreed-upon standards.

This issue is precisely what issues concerning meta-rationality are supposed to (at least implicitly) appeal to: it is of no interest to an epistemic community in answering the first-order question of whether a theistic stance can be rationally adopted, the theist notes that a theory of rationality can be constructed that would, by its very lights, grant some special designation of 'rationality' to adopting that theistic stance. This is a trivial result: for any set of beliefs and attitudes, a standard of rationality can be at least in principle constructed *ad hoc* to designate that set of beliefs and attitudes as 'rational'. There is something at least *prima facie* desirable in setting out some acceptable second-order features of a theory of

rationality, such as, at least, superficial plausibility to its critics.

Why would an atheist (or a theist that rejects reformed epistemology) ever accept appealing to a *sensus divinitatis* as a properly functioning sense-organ? If the very plausibility of the existence of a *sensus divinitatis* is subjected to criticism, for example, whether its functioning is due to some insight into the divine and not some evolutionary 'spandrel'–a (mis)firing of neurons that was an unexpected byproduct of some underlying material process in our evolutionary past–, it more often than not fails to survive critical scrutiny (at least to individuals not already committed to accepting it). Plausible alternative–and intersubjectively testable–explanations are readily available: cognitive scientists have proposed many alternate, ontologically simpler and parsimonious explanations for revelatory experiences classified as a *sensus divinitatits* (Austin 1998; Stifler, Sneak and Dovenmuehle 1993; Persinger 1983; Joseph 2001).

We are left at an impasse: the reformed epistemologist welcomes adopting a *sensus divinitatis*, but it appears, at least to outside observers, to be a questionable move in order to salvage the rational adoption of a theistic stance, especially given the far more parsimonious explanation for revelatory experiences present in the available scientific literature.

Criticism between differing theistic communities is no longer viable

Lastly, there is the further objection that what makes a theory of rational adoption of a stance so valuable has been overshadowed by an attempt to employ a theory of warranted true belief in service of salvaging a theistic stance: since the prior acceptance of properly basic beliefs such as private revelatory experience or a *sensus divinitatis* are *uncriticisable in principle*. Any criticism, even presenting a materialistic account of an 'experience of the divine', may be explained away or incorporated into the theist's explanation. Consequently, reformed epistemology produces a position leaving the theist insulated from criticism, *viz.* even if there were a sense-organ such as a *sensus divinitatis*, there is no intersubjective (or private) dialogical process to assuage a critic's doubts over whether the sense-organ is properly functioning; furthermore, there is no other available avenue for the reformed epistemologist to check whether the experience is genuinely of the divine and not due entirely to some material cause.

As an illustration of this difficulty, imagine for a moment that we were to rationally reconstruct some idealised epistemic community. Members of this community are faced with two individuals, Adam and Bert, that honestly claim they have a properly functioning sense-organ on par with a *sensus divinitatis*. Adam and Bert each have a private (to them) revelatory experience: Adam personally experiences a divine presence that demands Adam testify to the community that they are obligated to do *A*; Bert personally experiences a divine presence that de-

mands Bert testify to the community that they are obligated to do *B*. These experiences for Adam and Bert are no more open to doubt than the experience of a hand. Adam and Bert naturally disagree with each other on whether the community should do *A* or *B*. No further theological or evidential grounds are viable to determine whether to accept the testimony of Adam or Bert. There is no further way to resolve this disagreement through a critical discussion of whether to do *A* or *B*. Unlike other sense-organs, there is no intersubjective method or critical discussion by which to check whether the sense-organs of Adam or Bert are properly functioning or not. Therefore, there is no way for the rest of the community–or, for that matter, Adam or Bert–to determine if either of them have a properly functioning sense-organ, if one or both of their sense-organs is *improperly* functioning, or whether their experience is due to solely to a material cause that instills them with an unshakable experience.

This problem is borne out, for example, by examining the historical proliferation of differing Protestant sects that developed (in part) due to proclaimed heresies and schisms. Historically, this consequence of the lack of any intersubjective check of the proper functioning of a *sensus divinitatis* helped produce a proliferation of schisms within Protestant countries. Each new sect was unable to critically engage in a discussion with other sects over their respective dogmas that were purportedly personally revealed to their respective prophets.

A brief summation: intellectual stalemate

Plantinga may have discovered a problem with CR and provided a viable theory of warranted true belief. Furthermore, reformed epistemology is undoubtedly a genuine improvement over CR; however, there remain a number of problems with using reformed epistemology as a theory of rational adoption of a stance: it may permit aberrant epistemic groups to have (by its lights) rationally adopted stances that are *prima facie* irrationally adopted; it conflates a viable account of warranted belief and an implausible account of rational adoption of stances; it closes off debate or discussion between theists and atheists; and has historically facilitated the proliferation of competing communities within Christianity that lack any obvious further route for resolving disagreement. These problems lead to the provisional conclusion that reformed epistemology does not provide a suitable account of how one may rational adopt a theistic stance.

Tillich, Barth and the *tu quoque* defence

Now that the difficulties with Plaintinga's approach have been briefly set out, I will turn to the more radical option in addressing the inadequacies of CR, as artic-

ulated by Paul Tillich and Karl Barth. Rather than, as Plantinga does, augmenting CR in light of its strictness and apparent self-referential incoherence, Tillich and Barth level the field with an explosive charge, mooting the discussion between the theist and atheist: they allege that *all* standards will ultimately be either incoherent or question-begging.

The first path of the fork runs as follows: if one 'accepts only those propositions that can be justified,' then all of the conditions of CR must be rejected, for none are 'self-evident, or incorrigible, or evident to the senses.' Any standard that is self-referentially incoherent will also be summarily rejected. If, however, a standard of rational adoption were not self-referentially incoherent, justifying the rationality of a standard of rationality by appealing to that standard is a blatant *petitio principii* (Plato. 1981, p. 80d). Therefore, if a standard is not self-referentially incoherent, then it is question-begging. Since there is no way out of this fork, all standards are ultimately presupposed (Kołakowski 2001, p. 79).

All standards are ultimately presupposed

This conclusion alone does not require that the theist must be *committed* to any presupposed standards of rationality. Suppose we were to speak of meta-standards of rational adoption of standards, and find some agreed-upon meta-standard. This approach cannot get off the ground, for it would (presumably) require appealing to a common meta-standard with which to arbitrate between the two. However, honest people disagree on which meta-standards ought to be adopted: 'There is no rock which can serve as a fulcrum on which ...claims ...can be weighed in some absolutely decisive way' (White 1959, p. 48). Therefore there is no way to rationally arbitrate between these standards of rationality by appealing to a commonly-shared meta-standard of rationality (Montaigne 1967, p. 423) without making the assumption that this meta-standard is acceptable, which is itself to succumb to the second half of the fork, and we are back to begging the question once more, but now for how to adopt differing meta-standards of rationality.

Talk about standards, meta-standards, meta-meta-standards, and so on, cannot be a successful venture. For our own sake, it is better to cut this twisted, ever-expanding knot in two. Subsequently, so Tillich and Barth argue, all standards, all forms of reasoning, all grounds, are ultimately presupposed, even the stated justifications provided for standards of rationality. The New Atheist (or Refined Atheist) may be correct in their assessment that theists adopt a theistic stance based on standards that are not rational or irrational *according to the atheist's standards*, but that is no problem, for *all* people, atheists and theists alike, make a similar irrational *commitment* to their respective standards of rationality, come what may (Barth 1969, pp. 187–188).

The theist has, as does the atheist, the right to make whatever commitment

she chooses, for there can be no 'external' or 'internal' criticism of the act of making the commitment (Van Huyssteen 1999, p. 195):

> Everyone must take a stand somewhere ...no matter what center is chosen, it cannot be objectively demonstrated–partly because it is the expression of ultimate concern, and partly because all value-arguments presuppose its acknowledgement before they can have any point (Roberts 1953, p. 110).

This choice to make such a commitment shows how far-reaching the blast wave of the *tu quoque* defence reaches: the theist acknowledges that they adopt their standards without recourse to any further explanation, but *all* standards are ultimately either self-referentially incoherent or question-begging; all question-begging standards are held with equal intellectual integrity (Bartley 1984, p. 82). Thus runs the *tu quoque* defence.

Some concerns with presuppositionalism

There are at least three concerns with accepting the *tu quoque* defence, and subsequently accepting the descent into presuppositionalism.

First: by legitimating any and all viewpoints, there is the further danger that relativism and epistemological anarchy ultimately reigns. Adherence to argument or a critical conversation loses its particular normative force, since '...there is no arguing against people that deny first principles' (Montaigne 1967, p. 404). The theist may rest content that they are no longer branded by the atheist as 'irrational' (for the word no longer counts as a disparagement, but rather the triviall claim that the theist fails to satisfy the atheist's standards of rationality), however, this puts to rest the idea that rational acceptance of an argument or evidence is of considerable value (Schwöbel 2000, p. 33). The difficulty in accepting this conclusion leads to some issues: were this reasoning taken to its logical conclusion, if arguments are no longer of particular normative value, then why take the *tu quoque* defence seriously?

Second: if all standards are potentially secure refuges from criticism, when faced with intractable disagreement, ultimately underhanded and bombastic rhetoric that appeals to base emotions or desires, or the use of force may be appropriate methods to solve disagreement. As Wittgenstein said, "Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with another, then each man declares the other a fool and a heretic. ...At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*.' (Wittgenstein 1969, pp. 611–12). If persuasion is unsuccessful, then violence remains a viable alternative: 'The Nazi disbelieves in public morality in the same way we disbelieve in witchcraft. It is not that he has never heard of it, but that he thinks

he has valid grounds to assert that such a thing cannot exist' (Polanyi 1951, p. 106). This consequence of concluding that everyone makes presuppositions, and therefore the theist is just as rational as the atheist–may legitimise both intolerance and abject cruelty.

Third: accepting the *tu quoque* defence as laying waste to all standards comes at a massive cost to the theist. Many theists believe that evidence and arguments are not just methods used to convert; evidence and arguments can, so many theists believe, rationally *support* a theistic stance, or at least defend a theistic stance from unfair criticism. The loss of the normative role of argumentation is, for some theists, too much to bear.

In sum, presuppositionalism throws not just the baby out with the bath water, but the entire normative house–all in the service to salvage theistic stances from the atheist's charge of irrationality. For many theists, there must be some way to respond to the *tu quoque* defence such that theists–on principled grounds– may rationally adopt a theistic stance without opening the epistemic floodgates or abandoning the possibility of a productive and valuable dialogue with others with differing opinions.

Framing a desirable response to the *tu quoque*

The potential moral and intellectual concerns over the consequences of accepting the *tu quoque* defence may be avoided by first examining exactly why the *tu quoque* is so broad in scope. An argument can be *too* effective: when a dialectical move such as the *tu quoque* wipes the slate clean, it does not follow that all possible theories of rationality are at fault, but rather there is a shared implicit assumption held by all *currently accepted* theories.

Specifically, the standards of rationality seen in CR and its variants are part of the *rationality-as-justification* programme: *rational adoption* and *justification* are inexorably intertwined. Justification is a fundamentally defensive maneuver, protecting a proposition or experience from criticism by appealing to either one of two things: (a) the proposition cannot be criticised because it is a logical consequence of a proposition that is uncriticisable (for it is a consequence of a basic belief) or (b) it is itself uncriticisable (it is a basic belief). Why adopt the assumption that rationality and the ability to produce a justification are one in the same?

There are a number of issues with this assumption: first, this assumption is not self-justifying or justified by a further line of justifications that terminate in some self-justifying proposition. Second, adherence to rationality-as-justification dialectically leads to the *tu quoque*: everyone is committed come what may. Third, as seen in the previous section, the *tu quoque* may end the possibility of critical discussion amongst individuals that disagree about core issues. And yet, critical

discussion is possible, and likely most valued in these instances. If so, then how can critical discussion be conducted? One proposal is to *never play defence*.

Setting out CCR

W.W. Bartley developed *comprehensively critical rationalism* (hereafter 'CCR') in response to the scope of the damage the *tu quoque* defence. Rational adoption is, by hypothesis, no longer a defensive maneuver, designed to protect a proposition or experience from criticism. What other forms of argument or dialogue are permitted?

What sort of criticisms do not rely on justifying a belief by appealing to a further belief or basic beliefs? These include 'internal' criticisms of apparent incoherence, the inability to explain the existence of counter-examples or defeaters without recourse to *ad hoc* defensive maneuvers, or the production of a *reductio ad absurdum*. There are other forms of 'external' criticism of a failure of a proposition to appropriately fit within a broader system of propositional beliefs, as well as comparative assessments of the proposition when compared to known alternatives.

The forms of communal dialogue that remain once justification are disallowed lead to a surprising a result: the person advancing a proposition must make the a self-conscious attempt at playing *as if* one were their strongest critic, or must listen attentively to criticism from a critic, and then take this criticism as seriously as possible. Therefore, 'rationality' is nothing but a process of searching for error, with focus directed primarily towards the beliefs one holds most dear.

In sum, 'Reasons for belief' are no longer of any interest (van Fraassen 2000, pp. 277–279). 'Nothing gets justified; everything gets criticized. Instead of positing infallible intellectual authorities to justify and guarantee positions, one may build a philosophical program for counteracting intellectual error' (Bartley 1984, pp. 112–113).

Consequently, CCR's argumentative tools are more limited than CR, but this is to be expected if adopting rationality-as-justification leads to the *tu quoque*: the argumentative toolkit is lighter than under CR; however, certain *attitudinal requirements* are more strict. The permissible argumentative tools in CCR rely heavily on adopting a particular *attitude*, the willingness or eagerness to critically evaluate core beliefs, that is, to never take a defensive posture:

> The new framework permits a rationalist to be characterized as one who is willing to entertain any position and holds *all* his positions, including his most fundamental standards, goals, and decisions, and his basic philosophical position itself, open to criticism; one who protects nothing from criticism by justifying it irrationally; one who never

cuts off an argument by resorting to faith or irrational commitment to justify some belief that has been under severe critical fire; one who is committed, attached, addicted, to no position (Bartley 1984, p. 118).

CCR's three main conditions can be roughly expressed as follows: The *rational method* should be construed as nothing but (1) engaging in a critical discussion of core beliefs, not their justification, (2) adopting the critical attitude: being open and willing to subject any problematised belief of interest to further critical discussion, and (3) making the deliberate choice to reject beliefs–including beliefs about standards–when the only argumentative move presently available in a critical discussion is *ad hoc*, that is, designed entirely to defend a proposition from criticism.

A potential criticism of CCR

There is, however, at least one issue for CCR: Bas C. van Fraassen adopts a theory of rationality similar to, but different from CCR in some respects, and for much the same reasons as Bartley. After seeing the limitations of CR, van Fraassen rejects the assumption that rationality is tethered to justification and concludes,

> I take it that what is rational is precisely what is rationally permitted…not good reasons, not a rationale, not support of any special sort, not a pedigree of inductive reasoning or confirmation, nothing is needed above and beyond coherence. Thus [the adoption of] any truly coherent position is rational (van Fraassen 2000, p. 277).

The maintenance of coherence would seem to place a stumbling block in front of CCR, for it would reduce rational adoption to the adoption of any coherent set of propositions, and this path was previously disallowed: CCR appears to reduce to a form of coherentism.

Bartley and van Fraassen take this problem into account, for while all coherent sets of propositions (including propositions about sets of standards) can be *held*, some are (as far as we can determine) preferable than others: '…there may be infinitely many coherent alternatives…but almost none of those will be live options for us' (van Fraassen 2000, p. 278). How can a coherent alternative not be 'live' for us? Laudan provides a summary of a *problem-centered approach* to rational preference: 'The first and essential acid test for any theory is whether it provides acceptable answers to interesting questions: whether, in other words, it provides satisfactory solutions to important problems' (Laudan 1977, p. 13).

Those approaches that are not 'live' (as far as we can determine) do not answer interesting problems, are overly complex, not criticisable, conflict with presently

uncontroversial background assumptions, appear *ad hoc*, have little explanatory content, and so on (Bartley 1984, pp. 127–128). However, for an approach to be (as far as we can determine) preferable to all known alternatives does not make it the *best* (Peirce 1955, p. 59)–it just remains (provisionally) preferable to others, until it is abandoned for another. In this way, CCR does not reduce to coherentism.

Of course, one retort is that our evaluation of what problems are interesting, what background assumptions are uncontroversial, what criticisms are unanswered, what criticisms have been addressed, and how well a standard solves a problem is a matter of interpersonal preference. Under CR, in which there must be some independent standing ground, this would be the death-knell of CCR; however, this is a *feature* of CCR, since CCR has already repudiated any attempt at setting out foundational beliefs. Standards may be revised or rejected, and the very possibility of revision of the previously mentioned standards is not troublesome, for discovering that they fail to solve problems is a genuine intellectual *achievement*.

CCR avoids the *tu quoque*

In the process of solving the second-order problem of choosing between competing theories of rationality, W.W. Bartley, as well as other philosophers that repudiate the implicit assumption that any theory of rationality must wed rationality and justification, developed a theory of rationality that does not succumb to the problems that face CR, that is, it avoids the *tu quoque*.

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, CCR can be subjected to criticism, amended, and possibly even replaced. Some philosophers (Watkins 1987, p. 274) have questioned whether CCR is self-legitimating (Post 1987) or coherent (Musgrave 1991, p. 30). These criticisms have been answered elsewhere at length (Miller 1994, pp. 75–93), and may lead others to rationally adopt variations of CCR or neighbouring positions that also repudiate rationality-as-justification. Other philosophers have presented their own theories that bear similarities to van Fraassen and Bartley's theories of rationality (Maxwell 2017; Miller 1994), and the differences in their approaches should be explored further.

This, however, is not the same as saying that CCR ought to be adopted, since no sufficient defence of CCR has been made here, nor is it possible to provide justification for adopting CCR; rather, it is that theists ought to seriously consider theories of rationality like CCR, for they do not suffer from the problems that plague CR and reformed epistemology and skirt the undesirable consequences of accepting the *tu quoque* defence. Dialogue remains open between the theist and atheist, and the two may come to learn from one another.

The historical compatibility of theism and CCR

The *tu quoque* was adopted by Bartley in part due to people like Tillich and Barth defending theism from criticism. Nothing, however, forbids theists from adopting some version of the principles behind CCR, as has been done relatively recently by some Christian theologians (Van Huyssteen 1999, pp. 45, 59).

Furthermore, the principle of radical fallibility and exemplifying the attitudes of humility and humbleness are not unprecedented within the history of theology, for the differing attitudes adopted by Bartley and Van Huyssteen versus Tillich and Barth are similarly found in the differing attitudes adopted by Erasmus and Luther: while Luther attempted to defend and justify his standards in the face of criticism, saying, 'A Christian ought ...to be certain of what he affirms, or else he is not a Christian' (Luther 1908, p. 601), Erasmus collected the various arguments on either side of the issues, granted the uncertainty of the matter, and adopted the most plausible position at the time. Montaigne, too, maintained his radical fallibilism while remaining a believing Catholic (Montaigne 1967). Schleiermacher too rejected Luther's foundationalism, presenting a similar account of rationality to CCR of pursuing the truth not by justifying belief, but by envisioning the construction of social institutions where people were free from authoritative influences, able to communicate differing experiences of the world and engage in open and honest dialogue (Barth 1969, p. 38).

Furthermore, the earliest recorded theists held similar principles: Xenophanes, perhaps one of the first monotheists, said,

> ...and of course the clear and certain truth no man has seen nor will there be anyone who knows about the gods and what I say about all things. For even if, in the best case, one happened to speak just of what has been brought to pass, still he himself would not know. But opinion is allotted to all (Lesher 1992, 155, B34).

Even Augustine adopted a form of fallibilism in *City of God* (7.17): *hominis est enim haec opinari, Dei scire* ('For human beings may speculate on such matters, but only God has knowledge of them.') (Augustine 2009) and as the Christian theologian Nicholas of Cusa said in his Prologue to *De coniecturis*, '...the exactness of truth cannot be attained. The consequence is that every positive human assertion of the truth is a conjecture...' (Miller 2003, p. 70). In light of these theists advocating this principle of fallibilism, CCR, has a number of predecessors within history of theology.

CCR and theism

In order to rationally adopt a theistic stance under CCR, the theist must first be willing to, at minimum, in good faith grapple with the strongest available criticism. The theist must be willing to critically evaluate the core theses of their stance *as if* they were theism's most level-headed and insightful critic. No *ad hoc* or self-serving defences of theism are permitted.

Paradoxically (at first blush), in order to rationally *adopt* a theistic stance, rather than *defend* their theistic stance against criticism, the theist must then seek out to learn about how to *best effectively criticise* their most cherished beliefs. The best (and easiest) approach would be to engage in the philosophical literature written by atheists and other critics. This would involve reading these texts *not* in order to mount a defence of theism from outside assault, but to *act as if* one aims at abandoning their theistic stance.

In fact, the repeated insistence by New Atheists that they alone are 'scientific', 'rational', 'reasonable' or 'justified' has crumbled upon further examination: their claims amount to affirming that they alone adopt scientism. Adherence to a stance is not what makes an individual rational; rather, it is how one is willing to evaluate it. Since the New Atheists adopt a disreputable position–scientism–well-known to suffer from debilitating criticism, it would be in their best interest to adopt a position similar to CCR as well. Consequently, both theists and atheists alike can appreciate this form of rationality, in that it compels honest and open communication, and seeking out other, differing opinions. Dialogue is not an adversarial intellectual battle that must be 'won', but as a joint quest for truth, and that admits the high likelihood that one will change their mind, that is, *learn from others*.

Concluding Remarks

New Atheists often assert adopting theism is irrational for failing to satisfy specific criteria of rationality, often expressed (naïvely) as positions that assume the standards set out in *comprehensive rationalism*. In response, the theist faced at least three choices: embrace irrationality while still accepting comprehensive rationalism; embrace irrationality while undermining comprehensive rationalism; or augment comprehensive rationalism in some way, such as in Plantinga's reformed epistemology. However, all three options run into significant difficulties.

And yet, irrationalism is not inevitable for the theist, for according to comprehensively critical rationalism, a theory of rationality that has attitudinal precedents within the history of theism, it is in principle possible for the theist to be rational, so long as the theist is willing to subject theism to criticism and their theistic stance survives the best available criticism. In fact, this theory of rationality

appears to be a theory of rationality that is preferable than theories of rationality that assume rationality is identical to justification for both theists and atheists, and provides a suitable answer to under what conditions it is rational to adopt the theistic stance. Furthermore, comprehensively critical rationalism provides a plausible answer to the second-order question of what theory of rationality we ought to (provisionally) adopt.

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