

In Defense of the Unbeliever

BRYNNA GANG

Bertrand Russell, so the story goes, was once asked what he would say to God on the judgment day if it all turned out to be true. Russell famously replied, “Not enough evidence God, not enough evidence!” Russell did not assert that God did not exist; he only asserted that he didn’t have sufficient reason to believe in Him. As he says, “Nobody can prove that there is not between the Earth and Mars a china teapot revolving in an elliptical orbit, but nobody thinks this sufficiently likely to be taken into account in practice. I think the Christian God just as unlikely” (Russell 6). Russell does not deny the existence of God, he simply asserts that it would not be rational to believe in God, even if such a being did exist (just as it would be irrational to believe in a teapot orbiting the sun). Many, like Russell, have thought that we do not have sufficient reason to believe in God. Others have claimed that belief in God is a product of wishful thinking, social conditioning, or some other irrational cause. In all of these attacks, the central issue is whether a Christian is rationally justified in believing in God, not whether God exists. Christians are accused of being irrational, unjustified in their belief, and epistemically at fault in some important ways.

Brynna Gang is a senior at Brigham Young University, with no intention of leaving any time soon (her expected graduation is winter 2022). She is double majoring in philosophy and classical studies, with a minor in art. After graduation, she plans to get a PhD and become a professor of philosophy. She is principally interested in metaethics, existential philosophy, and philosophy of art, but philosophy of religion is a contender as well.

Alvin Plantinga responds to this attack at length (and I mean at length) in his book *Warranted Christian Belief*. He argues that Christian belief could be justified as a properly basic belief—one not held on the basis of other beliefs. He offers a model for how such a belief could be rationally justified. Plantinga’s model is intellectually satisfying, but the consequences are morally reprehensible. In Plantinga’s model, the believer and the unbeliever cannot both be justified; if God exists, then the unbeliever is morally and epistemically at fault for their unbelief. I will argue that this conclusion must follow from Plantinga’s theory about the rationality of belief in God. As long as belief in God is a fully rational basic belief of the kind which Plantinga describes, we cannot explain unbelief without condemning the unbeliever.

I find this view troubling because it dismisses such a large portion of the population as irredeemably immoral. I believe that many of the agnostics and atheists I know are very moral and epistemically responsible people, despite their unbelief. I will reject the claim that these people are morally at fault and, consequently, reject Plantinga’s claim that belief in God is a properly basic rational belief according to his model. I will argue that a certain kind of fideism permits an attitude of tolerance towards the faithful and the unfaithful alike, without undermining faith. I will argue that this responsible fideism can defend belief in God, even though this belief is not brought about through ordinary rational means. Because faith is not strictly rational, we can retain room for the unbeliever to be justified as well as the believer.

Willful and Conscientious Unbelief

Before we can make room for the unbeliever, we must first distinguish between two kinds of unbelief, what I will call willful unbelief and conscientious unbelief. A willful unbeliever does not believe in God because of their immoral desire for God to not exist. They have an interest in God not existing. It is to their benefit, and they would even be willing to practice self-deception if they could continue to behave as though God does not exist. Despite all evidence to the contrary, they would disbelieve in God because they don’t want to believe in Him.

Peter Van Inwagen gives a clear example of the kind of willful unbelief I have in mind in his lecture “The Hiddenness of God.” Van Inwagen imagines a Russian general who sends bombs disguised as toys into the Afghan countryside to be found by the village children (146). This man is only interested in power, and God’s existence would only be an inconvenience to him, because it might require that he change his behavior,

acting against his true desires. Even if God's existence were evident to such a man, he would be unwilling to believe it, and only believe it if he had no other choice. This man's brother, the strategist who invented the toy bomb ploy, dies and goes to Hell. Now that the strategist has experienced the punishment that also awaits his brother the general, the strategist gains permission to visit and warn him. When the general learns that God exists, he is forced to reevaluate his decisions, but he does so grudgingly. In fact, God's existence is the worst news of his life. He may believe that a Hell does await him if he doesn't change his behavior, but he only believes this unwillingly and would undoubtedly be happier to think that God did not exist after all. Van Inwagen says, "I shouldn't be surprised if our general would, before too long, find some way to convince himself that his vision of his brother was some sort of illusion, perhaps a transient psychotic episode, and to push it out of his mind altogether" (148). He has a strong incentive to disbelieve in God, despite the hellish visitation he has received. If he were to disbelieve in God, he would do so willfully, because he does not want God to exist. His unbelief, then, is willful.

Conscientious unbelief stands in contrast to willful unbelief. The conscientious unbeliever is a decent, moral person who reaches the conclusion that God does not exist. They do not reach this conclusion because they prefer to live in a world in which God does not exist, like the willful unbeliever. On the contrary, they don't believe in God because they sincerely think that God does not exist. They might even think that it would be wrong to believe in him, because it would deny their true beliefs and be a kind of damaging self-deception. They are not hasty or careless in this decision. They are, on the contrary, conscientious. This is what the conscientious unbeliever would look like.

We have not established that such a person exists, and we will not establish this definitively in this paper. My goal is merely to see what model of belief in God would have room for the conscientious unbeliever—would allow for the possibility that an unbeliever could be moral and conscientious. We will now examine belief in God and see if both the believer and the unbeliever can be justified.

Justified Belief

To begin with, we have many beliefs which we hold on the basis of others, but some beliefs are basic, from which all other beliefs are formed. For instance, I believe that I am sitting on my couch, and I hold this belief in the basic way. It is not based on any other propositions which I hold. From this basic belief, I can derive other beliefs. For instance, I could derive

the belief that couches in college apartments are generally uncomfortable. Both of these are rational beliefs. A belief is rational either if it is properly inferred from basic beliefs or if it is properly basic; however, not all basic beliefs are proper ones. A person could claim that a china teapot orbits the sun. When asked why they believe this or what evidence they have, they might say that they have no evidence. It just feels right to them that there is a china teapot orbiting the sun, so they believe it. They are holding this belief as basic (not on the basis of any other beliefs), but most would agree that this is an improperly basic belief which they are not justified in holding.

What does it take for a person to be justified in their beliefs? There are many kinds of justification and many criteria that have been put forth over the millennia. Philosophers have at various times accepted two main forms of justification: internal justification and external justification. According to an internalist view, we can be justified in believing something even if it is not true, as long as we meet the right requirements and follow a proper rational principle. External justification, conversely, requires that our belief formation is properly related to the source which causes it and that the belief is actually true.

In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga argues that a Christian can be justified according to both of these criteria. He argues that regardless of whether Christians are wrong in their beliefs (holding an improperly basic belief), they are still justified in the sense that they have behaved responsibly and fulfilled their duties to the truth. He says of a theist, “How could she possibly be blameworthy or irresponsible, if she thinks about the matter as hard as she can, in the most responsible way she can, and she still comes to these conclusions? Indeed, no matter what conclusions she arrived at, wouldn’t she be justified if she arrived at them in this way? Even if they are wholly unreasonable, in some clear sense?” (Plantinga 114). Such a person is clearly not blameworthy for her belief in a moral sense, because she has tried her hardest to fulfill her duty to the truth. If she is blameworthy, it is in another sense. Plantinga says, “There could be something defective about her . . . She could be mistaken, a victim of illusion or wishful thinking, despite her best efforts. She could be . . . pitifully wrong, in thinking these things; nevertheless, she isn’t flouting any discernible duty. She is fulfilling her epistemic responsibilities; she is doing her level best; she is justified” (114).

In the sense of doing their level best to fulfill their responsibility to the truth, Christians can certainly be justified according to this internalist criterion, but can they be justified according to an externalist criterion? Plantinga believes that this, too, is possible. Plantinga gives an externalist theory of what it takes for a belief to be properly basic and therefore

justified, which he calls warrant. He describes warrant in the following way: “A belief has warrant for a person S only if that belief is produced in S by cognitive faculties functioning properly . . . in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for S’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth” (180). Does the theist have this kind of warrant? Certainly, if God does not exist, then we could probably only explain belief in Him by saying that it comes from some sort of irrational urge, which is clearly not aimed at truth. But if God does exist, then the same cognitive faculty is now aiming at truth since it leads us to believe in Him. This cognitive faculty would very likely have been implanted by God for this reason. And in this case, the theist would be warranted in their belief.

Accordingly, Plantinga argues that we cannot determine whether Christians have warrant without first establishing whether God exists:

What you properly take to be rational, at least in the sense of warranted, depends on what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt. It depends on what kind of beings you think human beings are, what sorts of beliefs you think their noetic faculties will produce when they are functioning properly, and which of their faculties or cognitive mechanisms are aimed at the truth. Your view as to what sort of creature a human being is will determine or at any rate heavily influence your views as to whether theistic belief is warranted or not warranted, rational or irrational for human beings. And so the dispute as to whether theistic belief is rational (warranted) can’t be settled just by attending to epistemological considerations; it is at bottom not merely an epistemological dispute, but an ontological or theological dispute. (214)

Depending on the claims we accept, we would hold a different view of whether a theist is warranted or not. If God does *not* exist, the theist is never warranted. On the other hand, if God *does* exist, then Plantinga thinks that he can imagine a model under which the Christian could be perfectly warranted.

The A/C Model

The model which Plantinga puts forth is a combination of ideas from Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, which he calls the Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model. Plantinga theorizes that if God exists, he could have designed us with an innate sense of the divine, called the *sensus divinitatis*. This

sensus divinitatis is a natural propensity to believe in God, which naturally arises in us, perhaps at the sight of the sweeping ocean or a delicate flower. When this belief arises in us, it is not because we make any inference from the sweeping ocean, although it may be triggered by this; instead, we hold the belief in the basic way. Plantinga says, “Under these circumstances, we develop or form theistic beliefs—or, rather, these beliefs are formed in us; in the typical case we don’t consciously choose to have those beliefs. Instead, we find ourselves with them, just as we find ourselves with perceptual and memory beliefs” (195). According to this model, our theistic beliefs are properly basic, because they arise from a cognitive faculty correctly aimed at truth, in the right environment, according to a successful design plan. Thus, they have warrant, as well as internal justification.

Within this model, it is clear that the believer could be justified, both in the sense that they are fulfilling their moral duties to the truth and in the sense that they are warranted. What about the unbeliever? Obviously, many people in fact do not believe in God, despite the fact that God has implanted the *sensus divinitatis* in everyone. How can we explain this unbelief? Plantinga explains that it is the result of the fall of Adam. Because of our fallen and sinful nature, Plantinga claims, “We no longer know God in the same natural and unproblematic way in which we know each other and the world around us. Still further, sin induces in us a resistance to the deliverances of the *sensus divinitatis* . . . we don’t want to pay attention to its deliverances” (230). In Plantinga’s model, the unbeliever is suppressing a cognitive faculty that is aimed at truth, because everybody should believe in God. If God exists, then the unbeliever cannot be warranted in their unbelief, just as someone who claims that $2+2$ does not equal 4 would not be warranted in this belief. Clearly, according to this model there is no such thing as a conscientious unbeliever. The unbeliever lacks both warrant and moral justification, because they are suppressing a proper cognitive faculty and are shirking their duties to truth out of sinful desire. The only kind of unbeliever, according to this model, is the willful unbeliever.

Justification of the Unbeliever

We want to find a model of rational belief in God that allows for the conscientious believer. Clearly, the *sensus divinitatis* fails. If we accept the *sensus divinitatis* as put forth by Plantinga, we are committed to the conclusion that all unbelievers are willful. But we want to say, if we can, that belief in God could be both properly grounded and not condemn the unbeliever. Is there a properly basic belief in God that could justify the believer while leaving room for the unbeliever? We have two kinds

of properly basic beliefs: *a priori* beliefs (beliefs which are not derived from experience) and *a posteriori* beliefs (beliefs which are derived from experience). Which of these two kinds of basic belief has the potential to redeem our conscientious unbeliever? Let us examine *a priori* beliefs first, to see if we could have a rational *a priori* belief in God that would still allow for a conscientious unbeliever.

A Priori: Properly basic *a priori* beliefs are either universal and necessary (like the rules of basic logic), or else they are immediate and self-evident (like our experience of our own will). Because *a priori* beliefs of this kind are categorically true, everybody is required to believe them. For instance, everybody should believe that $2+2=4$. If a person does not believe this, there is something seriously wrong with him. Either he has a severe mental impediment, or else he is a quibbler and there is no point talking with him. Even Descartes, who thought that God could have made so that $2+2$ did not equal 4, still firmly believed that $2+2$ does equal 4. Anyone who does not believe that $2+2=4$ is in a deeply reprehensible epistemic position. Likewise, a person is in a reprehensible position even if they don't believe *a priori* beliefs which are contingent (if such beliefs exist), because these fall into the category of self-evident and immediately available (like beliefs about our own will).

If belief in God is a properly basic *a priori* belief, then it would probably be universal and necessary, or else immediate and self-evident. This belief in God might be confused and jumbled, just like somebody's belief in $2+2=4$ could be jumbled. The person who doesn't immediately accept that $2+2=4$ might not fully understand what "2" represents, or what "=" represents. Thus they might initially disagree with $2+2=4$. But once somebody is fully acquainted with what we mean by "2," "4," "+," and "=", we think that they are bound to believe that $2+2=4$. The particular framing of the meaning may confuse them, but even if the symbols may initially be unclear, we think that they must believe that the core meaning behind these symbols entails that $2+2=4$. If anyone, anywhere, does not believe in the core meaning and process behind $2+2=4$, then something must be seriously wrong with them. This holds for all sources *a priori*. If belief in God has an *a priori* source, then everyone, everywhere, is epistemically bound to believe in God. This model of belief in God does not bode well for the conscientious unbeliever.

This kind of proper basic belief is the kind which we see in Plantinga's A/C model. Plantinga's *sensus divinitatis* must be a kind of *a priori* belief in God, because it is a belief that is universal and necessary for all human beings. According to Plantinga, the only reason that people do not have belief in God is because they are suppressing it through sin, a highly reprehensible epistemic position to be in.

Can we perhaps adjust this model in a way which does not entail willful unbelief on the part of the unbeliever? Perhaps instead of their cognitive faculty being suppressed by sinful desire, it is suppressed by some other means. Perhaps they are woefully dysfunctional instead. They are not to be blamed for shirking their duty, because they are not capable of fulfilling it because of how deeply irrational they are. While such an adjustment skirts the moral aspect of unbelief, it does not leave any room for the careful and epistemically responsible unbeliever we were looking for. All we are left with is a wildly unreasonable and pitiable irrational believer. Not quite our conscientious unbeliever. Let us turn instead to possible *a posteriori* sources of belief in God.

A *Posteriori*: Properly basic *a posteriori* beliefs, as opposed to *a priori* ones, are not always general, necessary truths which every rational person must hold, or a kind of immediate experience available to everyone (like experiencing their own will). Instead, they are frequently contingent and particular, like beliefs gained from perception, and not every person has access to the required experience to form this belief. Although *a posteriori* beliefs are not always universally accessible, this does not mean that we cannot blame a person for not forming certain *a posteriori* beliefs in certain conditions. For instance, if I were to sit next to any person with functioning eyes and direct their gaze to the apple on the table in front of me, they should believe that they are perceiving an apple. At the very least, they should believe that they are perceiving something that looks roundish and red. Anyone who would deny such a thing is either quibbling again, or there is something seriously defective in their cognitive processes.

The case of the apple is slightly different than $2+2=4$, because only a person who is brought into this specific room and directed towards this specific apple is rationally bound to acknowledge seeing something roundish and red. But everyone, everywhere, is bound to acknowledge that $2+2=4$. I can explain the general world's disbelief and lack of interest in the apple by acknowledging that they have no experience with it because only those who are also in the room with me are bound to believe in the apple. There is nothing wrong with somebody who doesn't believe in my apple, as long as they would believe in it if they did have the right experiences with it.

If our belief in God arises from some *a posteriori* source, like perception, then we may have room for the conscientious unbeliever, because we could say that they are missing the experience that would lead them to believe in God (rather like someone who isn't in the room with my apple), so we are not required to say that they are bound to believe in God. Perhaps they could not form any belief in Him and still have fulfilled all of their epistemic and moral obligations.

Is Perception of God Strictly Rational?

While an *a posteriori* source of belief in God is far more promising than an *a priori* one, it still has some difficulties. Perception of God does not follow the pattern of other perception. In most cases, we do not literally see God with our eyes, hear Him with our ears, smell Him, or touch Him. Some may have visions or hear His voice, but on the whole people describe their experience with God as a kind of feeling, which does not quite conform with any of the senses. It is its own sense and a sense that is only ever directed towards God. Accordingly, it is entirely unlike the other senses, since they can be directed towards multiple objects. In addition, this feeling of God cannot be corroborated in the way the other senses can. When I see a table in front of me, I can reach out and touch it to assure myself that it is really there—I can press my face against it to get a whiff of its sappy smell, and if I really want I could even lick it. We have no such options at our disposal when it comes to sensing God. Although we may have a strong feeling that He is present, we cannot see Him, and we cannot reach out and touch Him. In all other instances of perception, we can corroborate the experience among our senses, but when we sense God, we cannot. It is a truly unique experience.

I am not merely asserting that experience of God is different from all of our other experiences because God is different from anything else we have experienced. We experience many things that are completely different from anything we have experienced. For instance, the first time a person eats an orange, the first time a person sees the ocean, the first time a formerly blind person sees, or a formerly deaf person hears. Every particular object of experience is different from all other object experiences and some are fundamentally different. An orange and the ocean are very different—and we experience them as different. But although *what* we experience is always different, the *way* we experience it is the same, because we are still applying the same senses and modes of perceiving which we do in all other cases. But with God, the way in which we experience Him is fundamentally different from all other cases of perception.

Perhaps the fact that experience of God is truly *other* provides us with the key to make room for the conscientious unbeliever. I say this because although the conscientious unbeliever is not bound to believe in God if they don't have experience with Him, they may still be bound to seek out and attain an experience with Him. In many cases of experience, we would not be bound in this way. For instance, I do not think that anybody is required to find out if I have an apple on my table. The apple on my table is of no importance to anyone, and nobody is required to gather information about it and form a belief about it. But there are times when we do have a

responsibility to attain an experience. A member of a jury is morally bound to acquaint themselves with the details of a case, in a way that nobody is morally bound to acquaint themselves with the details of my apple. Theistic beliefs may fall under the category of things which we are bound to acquaint ourselves with, and if the unbeliever does not, they might be culpable. Perhaps everyone is morally bound to seek out an experience with God, so no unbeliever is justified. But I believe that the unique nature of experience with God precludes the same kinds of epistemic obligation we might have otherwise.

Because perception of God is unique among perceptions, when we condemn the unbeliever for not seeking out experience with Him, we are not condemning them for quite the same thing as the irresponsible jurist or other ordinary cases. In ordinary cases where people do not fulfill their obligation to gain experience, we condemn them for not seeking out a particular, maybe exceptional experience, but through general, ordinary means. For example, let's say that a person is morally bound to see if there are cars on the road before attempting to cross it. They could ascertain this by looking both ways before they cross. We are asking them to seek out a new particular experience (the experience of perceiving the road in both directions), but we are not asking them to seek out a new *kind* of particular experience. They may never have seen a road or a car before, but they have *seen*. We are accordingly asking them to gain a new experience through an established mode of experiencing. I am not sure we can say the same thing about experiencing God. Because we experience God in a unique way, we would be asking the unbeliever to gain a new experience through a completely new mode of experiencing. Not only has the unbeliever not had any experiences with God, they have also never had this kind of experience. So when we say that a person is morally bound to gain experience with God, we are not merely saying that they should seek out a new experience, we are saying that they should seek out a new kind of experience altogether. While I am willing to say that in many cases we are morally bound to seek out certain experiences, I think it is less clear that we are morally bound here. We may have different kinds of obligations to gain ordinary new experiences than we have to gain new ways of experiencing.

While Plantinga tries to argue that belief in God is properly basic and therefore fully rational, we have to acknowledge that even if perception of God is properly basic, it would not be properly basic in the ordinary way. We would not perceive God through our ordinary senses, but through a unique kind of sense that only applies to Him. If by rational we mean that something is properly basic in the ordinary way, then belief in God may not be rational. It may be basic, it may even be proper, but we have to acknowledge that it is something fundamentally different than all of our normal kinds of

perception, which are consistent across different encounters. Not only are we perceiving an object different from other objects we have experienced (which happens often enough), but we are also experiencing something in a *way* which is different from all other experiences and is unique to God alone. This kind of belief formation is not consistent with the usual kind. We can claim that it is proper and valid, but it does not conform to ordinary rationality. It doesn't fit the pattern of all other properly basic beliefs. It is, perhaps, something outside of rationality: something real, valid, and yet irrational, or more likely arational. Not, perhaps, *opposed* to ordinary rationality, but also not contained within the normal bounds of rationality. We have edged onto a kind of fideism here, where we believe in God through faith alone, and not through reason.

This model is, I think, the best able to accommodate the conscientious unbeliever, because at the very least their obligation is not obvious, and we may find that they don't have one at all. If we insist that the unbeliever seek out this unique kind of experience we have outlined, a conscientious unbeliever may be able to carefully, thoughtfully, and with only the best intentions, decline, because we are asking them to do something that is not within the bounds of ordinary rationality. We can say fairly easily that a person may be obligated to direct their senses in certain ways, but should we really say that they are obligated to exercise a sense that operates outside of the ordinary bounds of rationality? We would be asking something very unusual of our unbeliever, so the answer is by no means clear. If the answer is no, we have made room for the conscientious unbeliever.

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