

Rationality, Theism and Atheism: Basic Premises Critically Assessed

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Introduction

Atheism and theism have been at daggers drawn for over a century now (Craig, 1984; Alston, 1995). Although the world was largely theistic for a good many centuries with atheism in the fringes, it made its strong debut after the 1859 publication of Darwin's origin of species (Plantinga, 1991). The evidence adduced and claims made by many Darwinists and evolutionists for a season appeared to prove that God was dead and out of step with the times. Atheism thrived on rationality, scientific method or any mode that supported its enterprise. With time, the apparently novel idea soon wormed its way into main stream tertiary institutions soon nearly taking over literary every public institution across the world. Today, much of what is viewed as 'science' in whatever form is premised on atheistic rational tenets (Gitt, 2001). The theist therefore appears sitting at the edge of the chair if not ejected to the floor in academic circles. Is this view, perception and attitude correct? Has theism been proved false and therefore public enemy number one to the quest of knowledge? Further, has agnosticism made things better or worse? In this short paper, we highlight some views that demonstrate that Theism makes sense and deserves far more respect than it presently receives.

A Description of Atheism, Theism and Rationality

Atheism is the view that posits that God does not exist due to lack of evidence or some other factors (Geisler, 2008). It flatly rejects the existence of God or any allusion to Him. Theism, on the other hand, holds that God¹ exists and evidence is abundantly available both in creation² and the inner witness in human beings by virtue of being image bearers of the divine. Agnosticism is somewhat between these two extremes, if we may call them claiming that we cannot positively or negatively assert that an intelligent supernatural being exists, ordering the affairs of the world. Rationality has to do with things making logical sense following a thought process, analysis or experimentation. Reasons for holding a given position or view are backed up by reasonable evidence in whatever testable

¹ Or some supernatural being

² Or natural revelation

form. Thus, if evidence is not forthcoming, it is perceived unreasonable to hold or support a given view. It may further be said that rationality has to do with the correct functioning of the noetic structure or reasoning faculty (Plantinga, 1991; Nash, n.d.). Thus, in the absence of testable evidence through the five senses, a claim is considered false, untrue or non-existent.

Charges Raised Against Theism by Atheists and Others

Atheists and explicit naturalists accuse theism of being based on subjective convictions without any factual or physical evidence. They allege that theism is not rational, averse to scrutiny or conventional means of establishing facts, if not testable and therefore to be rejected as false. They further claim that religion is '*the opium of the masses*' creating an imaginary 'father' figure that can take care of them by divine providence. This is wishful thinking or insanity at best, the atheist claims (Dawkins, 2006). If theism is to make sense and appeal to the contemporary mind, it ought to find a means or way to be testable rather than being premised on subjective intuitive thinking³. Until that is established, theism will remain on the fringes of the intellectual enterprise if not squeezed out of the main stream academic thinking or institutions (Craig, 1984; Geisler, 2008). Already, this has happened and will progressively grow stronger, although the modern age is already past and gone into the irretrievable past.

Atheism and Rationality under scrutiny

Atheists and naturalistic rationalists ought equally to be queried as well because what they claim to be the only reasonable premise for epistemic belief may not necessarily be the case. God has given alternative ways to arrive at a conclusion, truth or position. According to Plantinga (1991), some facts or truths are basic and intrinsic in human beings not needing external physical proof as rationalists assert. They are self-evident such as the existence of God. The scientific method may not be employed in that sense.

The Right way to Think

The right way to think is difficult to distinctly determine except to say that the core beliefs of someone eventually affect their world view and therefore interpretation of facts (Craig, 1984; Gitt, 2001; Poythress, 2014). The correct thing therefore is to ensure that one's outlook to life is premised on the right foundation, which premise depends on one's inclination. For the Christian, the Biblical world view offers the right premise to begin and end with. Furthermore, it may be said, the theist has as much right to hold to a position as much the atheist without coercion

³ The call is that Theism should be subject to the Scientific method of establishing truth. Any method outside that is considered false and irrational, according to the reigning standard atheistic thinking.

(Plantinga, 1991). The definition of rationality, obviously evidence based, is not therefore to be defined one sided only. The theist holds that inherent belief in God makes as much sense as that which is based on physical evidence because God has placed this in the human psyche (Romans 2).

What Others have Said or Written on/about Rationality, Atheism and Theism

Professor Alvin Plantinga⁴ has made many insightful arguments and presentations not only challenging the long held notions against theism but forcefully and somewhat convincingly established the fact that it is perfectly right and normal to be a theist. He has presented over two dozen reasons for theism in one of his legendary papers for instance, but the paper on 'Atheism, theism and rationality' is of special relevance to this write up. In that self-same paper, he argues that the way the noetic structure of a person functions determines all other views they eventually hold. He further argues that no one has control on what they eventually, naturally believe as true, given hind exposure as well as their preferences. The atheist therefore oversteps his/her bounds by claiming that the Christian is irrational in believing in God in the absence of physical evidence but a question may equally be raised, 'what about the atheist themselves, on what premise do they hold their claim?' The agnostic is equally in the dock here because the evidence for God is all over at every turn. In his book, '*Christian Apologetics*' Geisler (2008) gives several world views at play in the world including atheism, rationalism and theism among others. His penetrating arguments and objective description of each view is worth reading. Dr Verner Poythress (2001) is another worthy Christian thinker arguing that the Christian has a philosophical right to take a position, premised on the right foundation, not necessarily as defined by the rationalist. Ronald Nash (n.d.), equally from a Philosophical perspective brings fresh ideas to the table worth considering. His audio sessions in digital format available on Biblical Training site are a good treat. Christians have a right to hold a position. Theism has a long stream of witnesses including John Whitcomb, Henry Morris, Bert Thompson, Andrew Snelling, John Frame, Price, Donald Patten and Johnson C Philip, among many. These are some of the best minds there ever was! Others, however, have argued that truth or facts must be evidence based such as the empirical. If the five senses cannot prove, then that very claim is false or does not exist. Sadly though, some with the Christian bracket claim that simple belief in the written word of God is to be held in suspicion until science verifies. In short, the scientific method should be the arbiter on truth not scriptural claim assertions. These are theistic evolutionists⁵ like Hugh Ross, Behe and to some extent, William

⁴ Often using Ontological arguments from a Reformed epistemic perspective

⁵ It must be admitted that most of these have some good arguments and made tremendous contributions to the arguments but strictly speaking do not believe the entire word of God but parts of it. Often, these are Old earth Creationists, seeking to integrate evolution and the Bible. Interesting, some pockets of Islam seem to favour evolution over fiat creation!

Dembski. Subtly, these people essentially reject God's word accepting only parts of it. They have gone the way of Marcion the heretic, though not heretics in and of themselves. Many evolutionary scientists and atheists fall in this category. Names like David Hume, Huxley, Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawkins, Bertrand Russell, T. Khun and Karl Popper among others immediately come to the fore. The goodness about the latter two is that they give a good philosophical framework for the scientific method.

Lessons Gleaned from this Consideration

We yield many lessons in this consideration given what some leading minds on these grand matters have argued over the matter at issue. Atheists often charge theists of being irrational in believing that God exists without a shred of evidence. This matter was put in the right perspective by Professor Plantinga and others. Below are some thoughts that crossed my mind as I ploughed through the research data:

1. The definition of 'rationality' is not conclusive.
2. Leading Atheists such as Bertrand Russell and others assert that it is insane to believe in the existence of something in the absence of tangible evidence. They further assert that anyone that so believes is not normal needing counselling or some form of psychic help.
3. Atheists further assert that it is not only foolish to believe in God but dangerous as well because religious faith is premised on an illusion of an all loving providing father, when in fact the solution lies in the human being himself to emancipate self by innovation, invention, diligence, technological advancement and hard work. Scientific naturalism is purported to be the only answer not treacherous prayer.
4. Atheists claim that a theist is not only irrational but has a cognitive problem where the cognitive mental structure is not functioning properly. The subjective belief in things not evident or seen is a sign of such a disease. Karl Marx, Freud and others repeatedly asserted these sentiments in their writings suggesting that the best is to eliminate religion altogether.
5. Ideally, rationality, should be premised on tangible evidence that can be referred to at will. In its absence, it is inconceivable or illogical to believe in a being that exists somewhere. Atheists often argue in these lines.
6. The theist equally has arguments in favour of their position, stating that rationality may be looked at differently making the assertions by the atheist null and void. In other words, rationality should not be viewed in the narrow sense as often touted by Atheists.

7. The theist claims that they are perfectly rational because they function accordingly to the designer's terms that they should inertly believe in His existence. The order and correct functioning should point to an intelligent designer, in this case we call God. Romans 1:18ff alludes to this fact.
8. God has laid in the hearts of men that they ought not only know He exists in their hearts but evidence around points to that effect.
9. People attempt to reject the fact of God's existence by denying brutal facts in unrighteousness as demonstrated in Romans 1.
10. The Christian's noetic structure is fashioned in a way that will naturally respond to what the creator placed in their hearts, despite some claiming that they totally have no concept of God in their thinking, given their back ground.
11. The Christian is therefore warranted to hold a position as they are as much sane as the other camp, if not more realistic.
12. The argument between theism and atheism over rationality are ontological and theological rather than rational.

Value and proposed ways to deepen appreciation of the subject under Consideration

The discourse, evidently, is very enlightening though demanding meticulous amounts of critical thinking skills. Though very briefly addressed in this paper, these related aspects are well worth consideration as Professor Alvin Plantinga has done in several sources that we consulted. His is an outstanding job to objectively highlight all the rationale arguments from all sides and then proceeds to demonstrate what he opines is the right way to perceive or treat matters. Despite being relatively shorter than other spheres of study, this study proffers some excellent triggers to further research, if assessed with other equally credible sources like current journals, books or whatever is deemed helpful on the subject. Though many things are assumed in the pluralistic relative times, arguments advanced from a Reformed Epistemic perspective are especially recommended because they are often handled from presuppositional premise. We would further propose that readers cultivate a deeply reflective, logical, questioning and probing mindset to things thrown at them by life's experiences. If they anchor their thought on scripture, they certainly will detect, discern and repel seemingly fine looking sayings such as one we recently came across on a prominent international NGO motto: "*Having children by choice not chance.*" At face value, this saying looked fine but on deeper reflection, this organization was actually a ruthless baby exterminating machine promoting and facilitating the so-called "safe abortions." What this entity did was to do a clever play on words

subtly mixing ethically good desirable aspects to life while promoting a murderous agenda. That is how Atheist and materialistic naturalism operates. It can be a killing machine! Only with a well developed noetic structure premised on a biblical world view, not rank rationalism will do. Thus, in the case of Plantinga, his consideration is not only helpful but essential in these degenerate times.

Conclusion

The definition of '*rationality*' in epistemic belief as relates to proper function of cognitive faculties depends on one's noetic structure, world view and inclination. The charge that the Christian is somewhat insane and his mind is not functioning well is not founded on a sound premise because the accuser may equally be liable to the charge of not being sane. The Christian is therefore justified to hold their position while considering and waiting to hear the exact definition of proper functioning of noetic structure from the atheist.

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