

# How to Be a Very Friendly Atheist Indeed

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**ABSTRACT** Friendly atheists hold atheism to be true, and believe that theists may be rational when holding theism to be true. Theists may be rational, they claim, either because they lack the evidence for atheism, or because they are mistaken regarding the evidential force of the arguments for theism. Both these reasons can be interpreted as suggesting that theists are making a mistake, and perhaps even that they are blameworthy for having made that mistake. In this paper, I argue that friendly atheists might even say that the most intellectually oriented theists are rational and blameless for holding theism to be true. I give two reasons for this. The first reason is based on the denial of doxastic voluntarism regarding at least some of our beliefs. Theists might not have voluntary control with respect to their belief that God exists. The second reason is based on a meta-epistemological consideration. Often, we choose our epistemology by looking at paradigm examples of knowledge. Growing up in a theistic context might lead one to regard the belief that God exists as a paradigm example of knowledge, and a theist could be considered perfectly rational and blameless for doing so, even though they may be aware of reasonable arguments for atheism. With these modifications, I suggest that Friendly Atheism is very friendly indeed.

**KEYWORDS** blameless; Friendly Atheism; problem of criterion; Rowe, William

## INTRODUCTION

Much has been said about William Rowe's evidential argument from evil, but not so much has been said about his position known as Friendly Atheism. In this paper, I present the latter, together with my own version of Friendly Atheism. I argue that my version makes it possible for an atheist to think of both non-reflective and reflective theists as rational and blameless for believing that God exists. These consequences make my version of

Friendly Atheism not only “friendly,” or even “very friendly,” but actually “very friendly indeed.”

It is worth mentioning that one of the motivations for this paper is to argue for an atheistic position contrary to New Atheism. According to the new atheists, people who hold religious beliefs are positively irrational, if not even blameworthy.<sup>1</sup>

I begin with some definitions. Following Rowe, theism is defined in a restricted sense as the belief that there is an all-knowing, all-powerful and perfectly good God who created the world.<sup>2</sup> Atheism is also defined in this narrow sense as the denial of restricted theism. The term “rational” is used in a deontological sense: i.e., a person S is rationally justified in believing p, if S is blameless and has not violated S’s epistemic duties by believing p. Evidence is a truth indicator for a person. A non-reflective theist is a theist who, to some extent, lacks knowledge of the arguments for and against theism and has not reflected much on the truth of his or her belief in God. A reflective theist, on the other hand, is a theist who knows all the common arguments for and against theism and has reflected very carefully on these arguments.

#### FRIENDLY ATHEISM

Rowe presents his position of Friendly Atheism in connection with his *now-classic* evidential argument from evil (in *PoE*). We follow the same procedure. If we think of pointless suffering as human or animal suffering which is not necessary, either for a greater good or for the avoidance of worse suffering, we can formulate Rowe’s argument from evil as follows:

- (1) Probably there are pointless instances of suffering.
- (2) If God exists there is no pointless suffering.

Therefore,

- (3) Probably God does not exist.

The argument is valid. Premise (1) is often supported by induction and

1. See, for example, Richard Fumerton, “Epistemic Toleration and New Atheism,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37, no. 1 (2013): 97, doi:10.1111/misp.12001.

2. William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no 4 (1979): 335, doi:10.2307/20009775. Hereafter cited in the text as *PoE*.

premise (2) is, Rowe thinks, generally admitted to be true by both atheists and theists (*PoE*, 336). In order to present Friendly Atheism, Rowe offers theists some advice on how to respond to the above argument. He suggests that theists can invert his argument as follows:

- (¬3) Probably God exists.
- (2) If God exists there is no pointless suffering.

Therefore,

- (¬1) Probably there are no pointless instances of suffering.

This argument is also valid. Just as (1) is usually inductively supported by an appeal to real-life cases of suffering, Rowe suggests that theists might support (¬3) by alluding to the classical arguments for God's existence or arguments from religious experience (*PoE*, 340).

Instead of taking on the enormous project of refuting all arguments for the truth of (¬3), Rowe formulates the following typology of atheistic positions, each of which takes a different stance regarding whether or not theists are rational in believing in God:

Friendly Atheism: The position of (i) holding atheism to be true and (ii) holding that some theists may be rational in respect of their belief in God.

Indifferent Atheism: The position of (i) holding atheism to be true and (ii) being indifferent concerning whether or not theists are rational in respect of their belief in God.

Unfriendly Atheism: The position of (i) holding atheism to be true and (ii) holding that no theists are rational in respect of their belief in God.<sup>3</sup>

Rowe suggests that atheists endorse Friendly Atheism. Furthermore, he gives two reasons for why theists may be rationally justified:

[T]he atheist may take the view that some theists are rationally justified in holding to theism, but would not be so were they to be acquainted with the grounds for disbelief—those grounds being sufficient to tip the scale in favor of atheism when balanced against the reasons the theist has in support of his belief.

3. Cf. *PoE*, 340.

Friendly atheism becomes paradoxical, however, when the atheist contemplates believing that the theist has all the grounds for atheism that he, the atheist, has, and yet is rationally justified in maintaining his theistic belief. But even so excessively friendly a view as this perhaps can be held by the atheist if he also has some reason to think that the grounds for theism are not as telling as the theist is justified in taking them to be. (*PoE*, 340)

Here Rowe argues that a theist (a) may be rational in believing in God because he lacks evidence for atheism, and (b) may be rational because he or she is mistaken regarding the evidential force of the arguments for theism. Both (a) and (b) can be interpreted as suggesting that theists are making a mistake and both (a) and (b) are compatible with the idea that theists are blameworthy for having made that mistake.

#### A VERY FRIENDLY ATHEISM

Let us start with reason (a), that is, with the reason suggesting that a theist may be rational in believing in God because he lacks evidence for atheism. I think that a theist might be rational in the sense of being blameless for believing in God because he or she lacks evidence for atheism. According to a modest and, to my mind, reasonable version of evidentialism, a theist may be rational if he or she believes in accordance with the evidence he or she currently has.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, since the theist lacks evidence for atheism, he or she might make the correct judgment that theism is more probably true than atheism, given the evidence he or she currently has.

However, with respect to (a), one might think that the theist is irrational in a sense that entails being blameworthy for having made a mistake. One might, e.g., think that the theist has failed to look for further evidence. This would be in accordance with a radical version of evidentialism, which suggests that a theist should gather evidence over time. The suggestion would be that although the theist may be rational in a synchronic sense, by believing in accordance with the evidence he or she currently has, the theist is irrational, or at least not rational, in a diachronic sense, since he or she has failed to gather more evidence than he or she currently has.

It is quite difficult to know whether theists generally should gather more evidence. Such a question, I think, needs to be answered by deliberating

4. See, for example, Scott F. Aikin, "Modest Evidentialism," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (2006), doi:10.5840/ipq200646319; or Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48, no.1 (1985), doi:10.1007/BF00372404.

on a case-by-case basis, and this deliberation would involve answering questions like: Is the possible truth of my belief important to me in some way? Are there other things in my life I should spend my time on? Is my place in society such that I should have more evidence for and against the belief than I currently have? With this in mind, I think it is safe to say that there are at least some theists who lack evidence for atheism, and who are perfectly rational and blameless in not gathering more evidence for and against theism.

However, one might think that an *unreflective theist*, who lacks evidence for atheism, should withhold belief in God until he or she has gathered evidence for and against theism. To do otherwise would be to make a mistake, for which he or she would be blameworthy. This suggestion presupposes that a theist has direct voluntary control, at least with respect to belief in God. However, many, or at the very least some, theists may not have control over their belief in God. Indeed, many of our beliefs seem to be formed spontaneously, and perhaps this is the case for at least some theists. It seems even more difficult to stop believing in some things. Even if you were to offer me money to cease believing that Stockholm is the capital of Sweden, it is impossible for me to cease believing that in order to get the money.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, perhaps belief in God belongs to the class of beliefs which are extremely difficult to stop having. Furthermore, since “ought” famously implies “can,” and since the theist might not be able to withhold belief in God, it follows that it is wrong to blame them by claiming that they have made a mistake for which they are blameworthy.<sup>6</sup>

Someone might object by claiming that it is patronizing to think that theists are wrong, but, since they cannot help themselves, are not to blame. I do not know if this objection is correct. I am at least inclined to think that there is something friendly about thinking of another person as blameless. Nevertheless, the word “friendly” is here not primarily used as we do in our everyday language: i.e., it is not primarily used to mean “kind,” or to mean something in the neighborhood of “kind.”

These opening considerations allow us to think of at least some non-reflective theists, who lack evidence for God, as being perfectly rational and blameless, and so an atheism that allows for this will not just be Friendly, but actually Very Friendly.

5. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, “Theism, Atheism and Rationality,” *Truth Journal* 3 (1991), accessed 10 October 2013, <http://www.leaderu.com/truth/3truth02.html>.

6. The claim here is not that no one has voluntary control with respect to any beliefs; it is just that it is possible that some theists have no voluntary control with respect to the particular belief that God exists.

## A VERY FRIENDLY ATHEISM INDEED

Let us now recall reason (b), which was that a theist may be rational because he or she is mistaken regarding the evidential force of the arguments for theism. Perhaps one could make a friendly interpretation of this reason by arguing that theists might be viewed as blameless for misjudging the force of the evidence for both theism and atheism. However, I will be even friendlier than that, by arguing for the conclusion that one can be a *reflective theist* and, say, correctly think that the evidence speaks in favor of atheism, while still being considered rational in holding to theism.

Obviously, in that case, the reflective theist cannot base his belief in God on the classical arguments for and against theism. However, he or she might be able to appeal to a meta-epistemological consideration. Actually, I think the theist is rational in believing:

- (4) The belief that “God exists” constitutes knowledge.

One of the central problems in meta-epistemology is the so-called problem of the criterion. Richard Fumerton describes this problem neatly as follows:

Does one first decide what one knows and then try to learn from paradigmatic examples of knowledge the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge? Or does one discover first the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge and apply what one learns to discover what one knows?<sup>7</sup>

Using Roderick Chisholm’s terminology, we can call the first approach particularism and the second approach methodism.<sup>8</sup>

There is no easy way to choose between these two approaches. Both approaches seem *prima facie* acceptable. Even though there are, I think, some good reasons for choosing a particularistic approach, all I will say here is that the problem of the criterion is a disputed problem, and that it seems wrong to say that it would be irrational to opt for either one of the two approaches.

When taking the particularistic approach, the usual way of choosing a particular case of knowledge as paradigmatic for knowledge is to appeal to

7. Richard Fumerton, “The Problem of the Criterion,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, ed. John Greco, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 36.

8. Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Prentice Hall Foundations of Philosophy Series (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 7.

intuition. Moreover, growing up in a theistic community, the theist might very well have the intuition that God exists.

The question now is this: Should we blame a theist for believing (4)? I cannot see why. There might be reasons for why the theist has no evidence for (4). God might, for example, for some presumably good reason, have chosen not to provide overwhelming evidence of God's existence. However, even without such reasons, I cannot see why the theist should be blamed. Being a particularist, the theist does not necessarily know what the condition or conditions are, that would render theism a case of knowledge, and even if one condition for knowledge turned out to be that one needs to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence one has, one would not be blameworthy prior to one's knowing that particular condition.

Someone might object that the theist's intuition that God exists constitutes evidence for the theist, in which case the theist actually believes that, given the evidence the theist currently has, theism is more probably true than atheism. However, the intuition that God exists need not play any part in the justifications the theist has for theism. In other words, the intuition does not need to be interpreted as a truth indicator.

Nevertheless, an atheist will of course think that (4) is false; but since the theist appeals to a meta-epistemological consideration, and not to arguments for and against theism, the atheist may think that the theist is rational and blameless in believing (4).

Moreover, the atheist can then also agree that it would be rational (blameless) for the theist to reason as follows:

- (4) The belief that "God exists" constitutes knowledge.
- (2) If God exists there is no pointless suffering.

Therefore,

- (5) There is no pointless suffering.<sup>9</sup>

9. Let me offer two comments in one, here. (i) To be clear, I do not claim that the belief that "God exists" actually constitutes knowledge, only that a theist can be rational (blameless) to believe that his or her belief that "God exists" constitutes knowledge, even when not knowing the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. (ii) Strictly speaking, since truth clearly is a necessary condition for knowledge, and the theist is rational (in the sense of being blameless) in believing (4) that "the belief that 'God exists' constitutes knowledge," the theist is equally rational when inferring (6) that "God exists." Given (6) and (2), it then follows that (5) "There is no pointless suffering." So, to be clear, if a theist is blameless in believing (6) and (2), then he would seem equally blameless in using *modus ponens* to conclude (5).

Summing up, then, even though atheism may be true, theists may be rational in believing in God because they lack evidence for atheism. Moreover, since some theists may not have voluntary control over their belief in God, they may also be blameless for lacking evidence for atheism. Furthermore, reflective theists may be rational in believing in God, because they appeal to particularism and take the belief that God exists as a paradigmatic example of knowledge.

Finally, I think it is safe to say that a Friendly Atheism that allows both non-reflective and reflective theists to be rational in their belief in God, is not only “friendly,” not only “very friendly,” but actually “very friendly indeed”!<sup>10</sup>

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