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# Pascal's Wager

*Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God*

Jeff Jordan

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For Julia and Jacob Jordan

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## Preface

A disconnect exists between the arguments that philosophers find interesting and the arguments actually employed by Christians and other theists as reasons in support of their religious commitments. Think of the Ontological argument. Books and articles aplenty are directed toward it, yet few of those found in a pew would cite the Ontological argument as a reason for their being a theist. Pragmatic theistic arguments bridge the gap between the academy and the 'real world', with theoretical issues in epistemology, the ethics of belief, and decision theory enticing the specialist; while a practical strain of common sense and familiarity draws the non-specialist.

In this book I investigate various theistic pragmatic arguments and the objections employed against them. Special attention is paid to Pascal's Wager, as the most prominent example of a theistic pragmatic argument. A result of this investigation is a new version of the Wager that I shall call the 'Jamesian Wager', which survives the objections hurled against theistic pragmatic arguments and provides strong support for theistic belief.

I am grateful to the colleagues and friends who slogged through drafts of the chapters found within and generously offered comments and suggestions: Michael Almeida, Stephen T. Davis, Alan Hájek, Andrew Marx, Tom Morris, Joel Pust, Kate Rogers, William Rowe, Paul Saka, and William Wainwright. I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Doug Stalker for his unflagging encouragement, and sage advice, despite the glacial pace of my writing. I also appreciate the support of those at OUP: Peter Momtchiloff, Jacqueline Baker, Eva Nyika, Andrew Hawkey; and Hilary Walford, who performed a heroic job of copyediting.

Several previous publications of mine have been extensively revised and form the base upon which the superstructure of the book has been raised. 'Pascal's Wagers', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 26 (2002), 213–23, forms part of Chapter 1, while 'Pragmatic Arguments', in P. L. Quinn and C. Taliaferro (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 352–59, and 'Pragmatic Arguments and Belief', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 33/4 (1996), 409–20, form parts of Chapter 2. Parts of Chapter 3 come from 'The Many Gods Objection', in *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's*



*Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994), and 'Pascal's Wager Revisited', *Religious Studies*, 34/4 (1998), 419–31. Bits of Chapter 4 originated in 'Duff and the Wager', *Analysis*, 51 (1991), 174–6; 'Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities', *Faith and Philosophy*, 10/1 (1993), 49–59, and 'Pascal's Wager and the St Petersburg Paradox', *Philosophia*, 23 (1994), 207–22, with 'Hume, Tillotson, and Dialogue XII', *Hume Studies*, 18/2 (1991), 125–39, forming some of Chapter 5, and 'Pascal's Wagers and James's Will to Believe', in W. Wainwright (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook for Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 168–87, providing a part of Chapter 6.

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## *Abbreviations*

- D. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), ed. N. Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947)
- K. *Blaise Pascal Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1966)
- L. *Blaise Pascal Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)
- T. John Tillotson, 'The Wisdom of Being Religious', Sermon I, in *Works of Tillotson*, i (London: J. F. Dove, 1820), 317–89
- W. *Blaise Pascal Pensées*, trans. John Warrington (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960)

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# Introduction

## The Castaway's Fire

A castaway builds a fire hoping to catch the attention of any ship or plane that might be passing nearby. Even with no evidence that a plane or ship is nearby, he still gathers driftwood and lights a fire, enhancing the possibility of rescue. The castaway's reasoning is pragmatic. The benefit associated with fire building exceeds that of not building, and, clearly, no one questions the wisdom of the action.

Of course, the castaway's building of the fire does not require that the castaway believes that it will be seen. It requires only a belief that it might be seen. Now consider the question of God. What if there is no strong evidence that God exists? May one believe, justifiably, that God exists? Or is belief in the absence of strong supporting evidence illegitimate and improper? Pragmatic arguments for theism are designed to motivate and support belief even in the absence of strong evidential support. These arguments seek to show that theistic belief is permissible, even if one does not think that it is likely that God exists.<sup>1</sup> *Theism* is the proposition that *God exists*. *God* we will understand as that individual, if any, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect. A *theist* is anyone who believes that God exists.

Pragmatic arguments employ prudential reasons on behalf of their conclusions. A prudential reason for a proposition is a reason to think that believing that proposition would be beneficial. Other theistic arguments—the Ontological proof or the Cosmological argument, for example—provide epistemic reasons in support of theism. An epistemic reason for a certain proposition is a reason to think that that proposition is true or likely. The French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal

<sup>1</sup> Some versions of the Wager are intended to persuade, even if it is extremely unlikely that God exists.

(1623–62) is famous, in part, for his contention that, if the evidence is inconclusive, one can properly consult prudence: ‘your reason suffers no more violence in choosing one rather than the other ... but what about your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss involved by Wagering that God exists’ (L. 153–6). According to Pascal, theistic belief, because of its prudential benefits, defeats its doxastic rivals of atheism and agnosticism. Pascal’s contention is encapsulated in what is famously known as Pascal’s Wager.

Pascal’s Wager is the most prominent member of the family of pragmatic arguments in support of theism. Another prominent member of the family is found in the 1896 essay ‘The Will to Believe’, written by the American philosopher William James (1842–1910). James’s argument, as we will see, is concerned in large part with the immediate benefits of cultivating theistic belief, rather than any alleged benefit in the hereafter. This world is the primary concern, not the world to come.

Pragmatic theistic arguments are the focus of this study, with most of our attention directed toward Pascal’s Wager. Devoting a majority of our study to the Wager is natural enough, since issues in epistemology, the ethics of belief, and decision theory, as well as theology, all intersect at the Wager. But the Wager is not the exclusive focus of our study. William James’s argument in support of theistic belief receives much attention. As will a largely unknown pragmatic argument authored by the English philosopher J. S. Mill (1806–73), published posthumously, which supports the propriety of hoping that quasi-theism is true. These arguments contend that certain positive attitudes—whether belief, or acceptance, or hope—are properly attached to theism, because the benefits associated with those positive attitudes exceed those associated with disbelief or the suspension of belief.

## 1. A PREVIEW

Chapter 1 is an in-depth look at Pascal’s Wager. The logic involved in the Wager is discussed, as is the basic topography of decision theory, the systematic study of rational decision making. Seven different versions of the Wager are identified, each corresponding to a significant landmark of decision theory. Two versions of Pascal’s Wager will be earmarked for close examination. One version is a favorite of philosophers, and so it might be called the *Canonical* version of Pascal’s Wager. In short, the Canonical Wager contends that, since there is everything to gain and

very little to lose, the expected utility of forming theistic beliefs exceeds that of not forming theistic beliefs, as long as it is logically possible that God exists.<sup>2</sup> This version of the Wager enjoys favored status not because philosophers believe it is sound. They generally do not. It is a favorite among philosophers because it is such an audacious challenge to the idea that, as David Hume might put it, a rational person conforms her beliefs to the evidence. The Canonical Wager, I argue, falls prey to various objections. The other version of the Wager, however—what I shall call the *Jamesian Wager*—survives the gauntlet of challenges and objections explored in Chapters 2–5. The Jamesian Wager, as we shall see, can serve as a tie-breaker, such that anyone who has as much evidence for atheism as she has for theism has, compliments of the Jamesian Wager, a rational way of moving beyond that evidential impasse toward the cultivation of theistic belief.

Theistic pragmatic arguments are controversial; some even find them scandalous. In general, the objections to theistic pragmatic arguments can be classified into three broad kinds: moral, methodological, and theological. Moral objections to theistic pragmatic arguments are not complaints that are particularly virtuous, but are complaints concerning the virtue of pragmatic reasoning with regard to belief formation. Most prominent are objections that pragmatic arguments violate an ethic of belief—that it is immoral to form or maintain beliefs on the basis of pragmatic reasons, rather than the evidence. The moral person, it is alleged, cultivates her beliefs only with evidence. Another version of a moral objection is that Pascal's Wager exploits cupidity and selfishness. In effect, moral objections allege that Pascalian Wagers, and pragmatic arguments generally, entangle one in a morally problematic situation. It is immoral, put simply, to generate beliefs on the basis of pragmatic arguments. In Chapters 2 and 5, I argue that moral objections to pragmatic reasoning generally, and to Pascal's Wager specially, fail. For one thing, it is possible that one could have a moral duty to engage in pragmatic reasoning, to form and maintain a belief on the basis of a pragmatic reason and in the absence of adequate evidence (indeed, even in the face of contrary evidence). For another thing, as we will see, the Wager can be formulated so as to appeal not to selfish greed, but to a concern for others.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1 for the details on the Canonical Wager, and the concept of maximizing expected utility.



Methodological objections are the most perplexing for the friend of the pragmatic. This kind of objection is a complaint about validity, or, perhaps more precisely, a complaint arguing invalidity. Put simply, methodological objections allege that pragmatic arguments contain an argumentative flaw. Even if their premises are true, the conclusion of a Pascalian Wager does not follow. The most famous example of this kind of objection is the many-gods objection, which is also the complaint most frequently lodged against the Wager. The Pascalian, according to the many-gods objection, is left with an embarrassment of riches, as the Wager recommends no particular deity, or theological tradition, but many mutually incompatible ones. Another methodological objection is that the notion of an infinite utility is incoherent or at least problematic, since standard decision theory implies several theorems and principles that are incompatible with infinite utilities. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine various methodological objections. Chapter 3 looks at three versions of the many-gods objection, while Chapter 4 examines several problems that arise from the notion of an infinite utility. As we will see, both the many-gods objection and objections to infinite utility are fatal to some formulations of Pascal's Wager. They are not, however, the bane of every formulation, since the Jamesian Wager escapes these methodological objections unscathed.

In Chapter 5 nine objections to Pascal's Wager are examined. Seven of these objections are classifiable as methodological objections, with the other two being theological objections. A theological objection to the Wager is a complaint that arises from the doctrines of Christianity. The first such complaint is that the divine plan presupposed by the Wager is implausible, since, the objection goes, God would not have designed the world in the way that the Wager presupposes. The second is that Pascalian wagering is incompatible with the doctrine of predestination. As with the moral objections and the methodological objections, these theological objections are not fatal complaints to the Jamesian Wager.

Chapter 6 is one part examination of William James's 'Will to Believe' argument, one part examination of J. S. Mill's 'Religious Hope' argument, and one part examination of the argument that the consoling benefit of theistic belief is so great that theistic belief is permissible even when one thinks that the existence of God is much less likely than not. As we will see, while the consolations of theistic belief may be great, they are not so great as to overcome the moral and epistemic duty not to accept propositions that one takes to be much less likely than not.

As mentioned earlier, it is the contention of this study that one version of the Wager—the Jamesian Wager—survives the various objections hurled against theistic pragmatic arguments. Indeed, I will argue that the Jamesian Wager is valid, and there is strong evidence in support of its premises. The Jamesian Wager, in other words, provides good reason in support of theistic belief. The Jamesian Wager contends that benefits associated with theistic belief hinge not just on a world to come, but also on this world. According to the Jamesian Wager, theistic belief as such is beneficial, whether God exists or not. If the castaway's fire provides warmth, and a means to cook, as well as a signal, then the castaway has all the more reason to build the fire. Even if one finally denies that the Jamesian Wager provides support for theistic belief, the study of theistic pragmatic arguments is important, since grappling with the puzzles and problems raised by the pragmatic is reason enough, and reward enough, to undertake the study.

## 2. EXCURSUS I: A NOTE ON THE *PENSÉES* TEXT

Pascal's *Pensées* ('Thoughts') was first published in 1670, eight years after Pascal's death. Pascal had intended to publish an apology for Christianity, and the *Pensées*, a collection of unfinished notes and jottings and fragments, is a very rough draft toward that end. A version of the Wager, however, was published earlier, in the last chapter of *The Port-Royal Logic* (1662). The unfinished nature of the *Pensées* generates much dispute concerning the order in which Pascal intended to present the various fragments. The fragment containing the Wager is entitled '*Infini rien*' ('infinity-nothing') and is described by Ian Hacking as 'two pieces of paper covered on both sides by handwriting going in all directions, full of erasures, corrections, insertions, and afterthoughts'.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, there is no uniform numbering of the *Pensées* fragments in the various translations and editions of the *Pensées*, but the numbering employed by M. Louis Lafuma's Delmas edition (Paris, 1948) is widely used. John Warrington in his English translation of 1960, *Blaise Pascal Pensées* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960), widely available in the Everyman series, follows the Lafuma Delmas numbering (in the Warrington text, the *Infini rien* fragment is 343). Complicating

<sup>3</sup> Ian Hacking, 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 9/2 (1972), 187–8.

matters, Lafuma published a later edition that numbers the *Pensées* fragments differently (the Luxembourg edition of 1951). Another widely available English translation, part of the Penguin classics series, is that of A. J. Krailsheimer, *Blaise Pascal Pensées* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), which follows the Lafuma Luxembourg edition. The *Infini rien* passage in the Krailsheimer translation is 418. A recent English translation by Honor Levi, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), follows a third order of numberings (that of Philippe Sellier). In this translation *Infini rien* is numbered 680. Among older English translations, for instance that of W. F. Trotter (*Pascal's Thoughts* (New York: Collier, 1910; also New York: Modern Library, 1941, and New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), the numbering of Leon Brunschvicg is used, in which *Infini rien* is 233. Dover Publications, as part of the Dover Philosophical Classics series, reissued the Trotter translation in 2003. The Dover reissue includes an introduction by T. S. Eliot, written in 1958.

In the chapters that follow I will cite references to the *Pensées* in the text, using the fragment number and not page number. The Warrington translation I will cite as (W. with fragment number). Whenever I stray from the Warrington translation, and use the Krailsheimer translation I will cite it as (K. with fragment number), and the Levi translation I cite as (L. with fragment number).

# 1

## Pascal's Wager

Pascal's Wager was a revolutionary apologetic device. The Wager is not an argument that God exists. That sort of argument, the appeal to evidence, whether empirical or conceptual, is the domain of the other theistic arguments. Pascal's Wager is an argument that belief in God is pragmatically rational, that inculcating a belief in God is the response dictated by prudence. To say that an action is pragmatically rational implies that it is in one's interests to do that action. In the absence of conclusive evidence, Pascal contends, prudential rationality should be our guide (L. 680). Pascal's pragmatic turn, although foreshadowed in earlier writers, was an attempt to argue that theistic belief was the only proper attitude to adopt when faced with the question of God. Because epistemic reason cannot determine whether God exists, it must yield the field to prudential reason, which wins the day for theism. Impressively enough, even though the evidence should be inconclusive regarding theism, one would be irrational not to believe, if the Wager succeeds. The Wager, at least in its original intent, is not a weapon of the friendly theist; the Wager is intended to show that unbelief is rationally impermissible. With this emphasis on the rationality of belief, Pascal was a modern thinker in his concern with what it is that one should believe.

The Wager presupposes a distinction between having reason to think a certain proposition is true, and having reason to induce belief in that proposition. Although a particular proposition may lack evidential support, it could be that forming a belief in the proposition may be the rational thing, all things considered, to do. So, if there is a greater benefit associated with inducing theistic belief than with any of its competitors, then inducing a belief that God exists is the rational thing to do.

Like the Ontological proof and the Cosmological argument, the Wager is protean. Pascal himself formulated several versions of the Wager. Three versions of the Wager are generally recognized within

the concise paragraphs of the *Pensées*.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I argue that there is a fourth found there also, a version that in many respects anticipates the argument of William James in his 1896 essay 'The Will to Believe'.<sup>2</sup> This fourth version differs from the better-known three by having as a premise the proposition that theistic belief is more rewarding than non-belief, independent of whether God exists or not. The better-known three focus exclusively on the benefit of theistic belief if God exists. As we will see, a variant of this fourth Wager is the strongest of Pascal's Wagers. Let us begin with a brief overview of the apologetic role Pascal intended for the Wager.

## 1. THE APOLOGETIC ROLE OF THE WAGER

While it is impossible to know the role in his projected apologetic work Pascal intended for his Wagers, there are hints in the fragment containing the Wager argument.<sup>3</sup> The first hint is the sentence 'let us now speak according to natural lights', while a second hint is the use of the indefinite article, 'if there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension'.<sup>4</sup> These sentences suggest that Pascal intended

<sup>1</sup> Ian Hacking, 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 9/2 (1972), 186–92.

<sup>2</sup> William James, 'The Will to Believe' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover, 1956), 1–31. The standard interpretation of James's argument is that it is a pragmatic argument. In Chapter 6 I examine an interpretation of James's argument, which sees it both as a pragmatic argument, and as an epistemic one.

<sup>3</sup> While the present study is primarily a study of Pascal's Wager as an argument and is not a study of the historical context of the Wager, I do hazard a few speculations concerning that context. For studies in English treating the Wager in its historical context, the reader is well advised to consult two important books: David Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief: Catechesis and Conversion in the Pensées* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), and Leslie Armour, *'Infini Rien': Pascal's Wager and the Human Paradox* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993). See also John Ryan's informative article 'The Argument of the Wager in Pascal and Others', *New Scholasticism*, 19 (1945), 233–50. Nicholas Rescher provides an insightful comment about alleged precursors to the Wager in *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 138–9 (n. 35). Roger Hazelton discusses Christian precursors to the Wager in a very useful article, 'Pascal's Wager Argument', in R. E. Cushman and E. Grislis (eds.), *The Heritage of Christian Thought: Essays in Honor of Robert Lowery Calhoun* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 108–26.

<sup>4</sup> See Charles M. Natoli, 'The Role of the Wager in Pascal's Apologetics', *New Scholasticism*, 57 (1983), 98–106; and his *Fire in the Dark: Essays on Pascal's Pensées and Provinciales* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 8–12.

the Wagers as arguments for the rationality of theistic belief, and not as arguments for the rationality of Christian belief. Theism is the proposition that there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, morally perfect being. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all theistic religions. It is likely that Pascal had in mind a two-step apologetic strategy. The first step consisted primarily of the Wager employed as an ecumenical argument in support of theism generally, with the second step being arguments for Christianity in particular.

As an ecumenical argument in support of theism, the Wager was designed to show that theistic belief of some sort was rational, while appeals to fulfilled prophecy and to miracles were Pascal's favored routes by which his reader was to be led to Christianity. Many of the *Pensées* fragments consist of arguments that either Christianity is the true religion, or that it is superior to Judaism and Islam in significant respects (see *Pensées* 235–76 in the Levi translation, for instance). If this speculation is sound, then Pascal's apology was very much in line with the standard seventeenth- and eighteenth-century apologetic strategy of, first, arguing that there is a god, and then, second, identifying which god it is that exists. This is the strategy adopted by Robert Boyle (1627–91) and by Bishop John Tillotson (1630–94), for instance, and by those, like William Paley (1734–1805), who employed the design argument to argue for a divine designer, and then used the argument from miracles to identify that designer.<sup>5</sup>

As we shall see in Chapter 5, this two-step strategy may also explain the focus of David Hume's (1711–76) works on religion, with his *Dialogues* directed toward the first step, and the essay contra miracle reports directed toward the second. It also explains Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) characterization of the Cosmological argument and the Physicotheological argument as two-staged arguments, with the first arguing from experience to the existence of a superior being, and the second identifying that being with the *ens realissimum*.

One might object to this speculation of a Pascalian two-step that theism as such—the bare proposition that God exists—cannot motivate a Pascalian Wager, which does after all presuppose certain ideas of afterlife (heaven certainly and perhaps hell). This objection is correct. Pascal probably thought of theism as including more than the existence

<sup>5</sup> See Boyle's *Final Causes* (1688); Tillotson's 'The Wisdom of Being Religious', Sermon I, in *Works of Tillotson*, vol. i (London: J. F. Dove, 1820), 317–89; and Paley's *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1795), pt. 3, ch. 8.

of God. William Rowe has a helpful distinction between restricted theism and expanded theism, which provides an idea of how we should understand theism in the context of theistic pragmatic arguments:

Expanded theism is the view that [God] exists, conjoined with certain other significant religious claims, claims about sin, redemption, a future life, a last judgment, and the like. (Orthodox Christian theism is a version of expanded theism.) Restricted theism is the view that [God exists], unaccompanied by other, independent religious claims.<sup>6</sup>

As a first-step argument for theism the Wager was probably an argument for expanded theism and not the restricted kind. The expansion, however, was not so broad as to include the entirety of Christian doctrine, but it probably does include certain propositions about afterlife possibilities in addition to the proposition that God exists. The second step, which includes the appeals to miracle reports and satisfied prophecies, is the argument for full-blown Christian belief. So it is best to understand Pascal as presenting a wager between naturalism and expanded theism, and throughout the balance of this chapter and those that follow, by theism we will mean some suitably expanded version of theism. Of course, as critics have often gleefully pointed out since at least 1746, there are various versions of expanded theism, and, indeed, various versions of what we might call expanded 'quasi-theism' (propositions asserting the existence of supernatural beings distinct from God). This plethora of theistic expansions—what is known as the 'many-gods objection'—will be a focus in a later section of this chapter, and the sole focus of Chapter 3.

## 2. DECISION-MAKING

Having an idea of the basic theory of decision-making greatly facilitates understanding the Wager. The theory of decision-making codifies the logic of rational action in situations in which one's knowledge is limited. The usual limitation is a lack of a reliable basis on which to know or to estimate the objective probabilities of various states of the world. In decision-making situations three elements are of importance: actions,

<sup>6</sup> William L. Rowe, 'The Empirical Argument from Evil', in R. Audi and W. J. Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, & Moral Commitment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 239.

states, and outcomes. Actions are the alternative ways of acting available to the deliberator. States are ways the world might be. Outcomes are the anticipated consequences or effects of each action if a particular state occurs. A decision matrix (Fig. 1.1) usefully represents the relationships of these elements. The outcomes will be arranged in cells, the number of which depends on the number of acts and states ( $2 \times 2$ , or  $2 \times 3$ , or  $3 \times 3 \dots$ ). The cells are numbered sequentially from the upper left-hand cell across (Fig. 1.2).

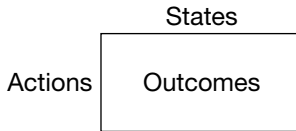


Fig. 1.1.

	State 1	State 2
Act 1	F1	F2
Act 2	F3	F4

Fig. 1.2.

For simplicity's sake, let us stipulate that we are concerned only with actions and states that are causally and probabilistically independent. One's actions, that is, do not causally influence which state obtains. The deliberator values some outcomes; others he does not. 'Utilities' is the term employed to represent the worth of the various outcomes for the deliberator. Some outcomes have a high value or utility for the deliberator, some a low or even negative utility (a disutility). Probabilities, or the likelihood, whether objective or epistemic, of the various states play a large role in decision-making. If one knows the relevant probabilities (the *risk* involved), then a well-established rule is available: the Expectation rule. According to the Expectation rule, for any person S, and any number of alternative actions,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to S, if  $\alpha$  has a greater expected utility than does  $\beta$ , S should choose  $\alpha$ . One calculates the expected utility of an act  $\varphi$  by (i) multiplying the utility



and probability of each outcome associated with  $\varphi$ , (ii) subtracting any respective costs, and then (iii) summing the totals. So, for example, suppose one were deciding whether to carry an umbrella today. One prefers not to do so, but one also prefers even more not to get wet. We can use a  $2 \times 2$  (two actions and two states) matrix to model these preferences, with the numbers within the cells representing the agent's preferences ranking of the various outcomes (the higher the number the greater the preference) (Fig. 1.3).

	Rain	No rain
Carry	10	2
Do not carry	1	5

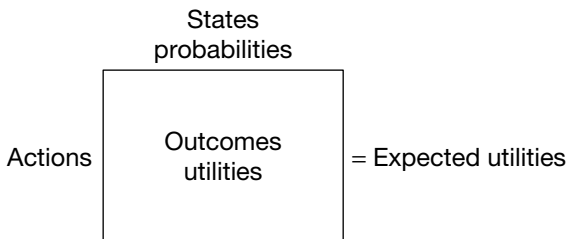
*Fig. 1.3.*

Suppose there is a 50 percent chance of rain today. The expected utility (EU) of carrying an umbrella is greater than that of not carrying, since:

$$\frac{1}{2}(10) + \frac{1}{2}(2) = 6 = \text{EU (carry)}$$

$$\frac{1}{2}(1) + \frac{1}{2}(5) = 3 = \text{EU (do not carry)}$$

This kind of decision-making or deliberation with knowledge (or estimation) of the relevant probabilities and utilities of the outcomes is what is known as 'decisions under risk'. So, if one deliberates armed with knowledge of both the outcomes and the probabilities associated with those outcomes, one faces a decision under risk (Fig. 1.4).



*Fig. 1.4.*

Typically, decisions under risk require an 'objective evidential basis for estimating probabilities, for example, relative frequencies, or actuarial tables, or the relative strengths of the various propensities of things (states of affairs) that affect the outcome'.<sup>7</sup> Even so, decisions under risk can employ subjective probabilities, or probabilities that are degrees of belief, or estimations of likelihood.

On the other hand, when deliberating with a knowledge of the outcomes but no knowledge of the probabilities associated with those outcomes, one faces a 'decision under uncertainty' (sometimes called a 'decision under ignorance'). No single rule governs decisions under uncertainty. Various rules are relevant depending upon one's circumstances and preferences. Seven rules, some well established, some not, for decisions under uncertainty are:

- D1. Weak Dominance rule: for any person S, if one of the actions,  $\alpha$ , available to S has an outcome better than the outcomes of the other available actions, and never an outcome worse than the others, S should choose  $\alpha$ .

According to the Weak Dominance rule, an action weakly dominates if there is a state in which that act has a better outcome than the alternatives, and there is no state in which that action has a worse outcome than the alternatives. But it is a *weak* domination, since it occurs only with some outcomes and not all outcomes.

- D2. Strong Dominance rule: for any person S, and action  $\alpha$ , if in each state  $\alpha$  has a better outcome than the alternatives in that state, S should choose  $\alpha$ .

Strong Dominance occurs whenever an action always has better outcomes than its competitors. An action strongly dominates if it has better outcomes no matter how the world turns out. The last few sentences of Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto* present a nascent appeal to Strong Dominance as a reason for worker solidarity and ruling-class fear, since there is a world to win and nothing to lose but exploitative chains.

<sup>7</sup> John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. E. Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard Press, 2001), 106.

- D3. Satisfactory Act rule: for any person S, and actions  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , if S is satisfied with every outcome of  $\alpha$ , but not with every outcome of  $\beta$ , S should choose  $\alpha$ .

If an action carries only outcomes that one can live with, while the other alternatives have some intolerable outcomes, then the former is said to be satisfactory.

- D4. Indifference rule: assume each action is equiprobable and employ the Expectation rule.

The Indifference rule converts decisions under uncertainty into decisions under risk. Doing so provides a kind of methodological elegance to decision theory, since only two rules are then necessary. On the other hand, many critics have argued that the Indifference principle is problematic, since, by crediting some alternatives with unacceptably high probability values, one's decision is systematically skewed.

- D5. Maximin rule: choose that action the worse outcome of which is superior to the worst outcomes of the other alternatives actions.

The Maximin principle is perhaps best known as the principle of choice in John Rawls's famous theory of justice. It is a conservative principle advising the avoidance of the worst case as the decisive guide to action.

- D6. Maximax rule: choose that action the best outcome of which is superior to the best outcomes of the other alternatives.

The Maximax principle is an extravagant principle with its advice to throw caution to the wind and 'go for the gusto'.

As we will see, Pascal's four versions of the Wager correspond to the Weak Dominance rule, the Indifference rule, the Expectation rule, and the Strong Dominance rule. One could easily construct variations of the Wager corresponding to Maximin (indeed Locke presents a Maximin version), Maximax, and the Satisfactory Act principle. I will argue that a refinement of the Wager, employing a principle I will call the 'Next Best Thing rule', proves the strongest member of the family of Pascalian Wagers:

- D7. Next Best Thing rule: for any person S making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the actions,  $\alpha$ , available to S has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available

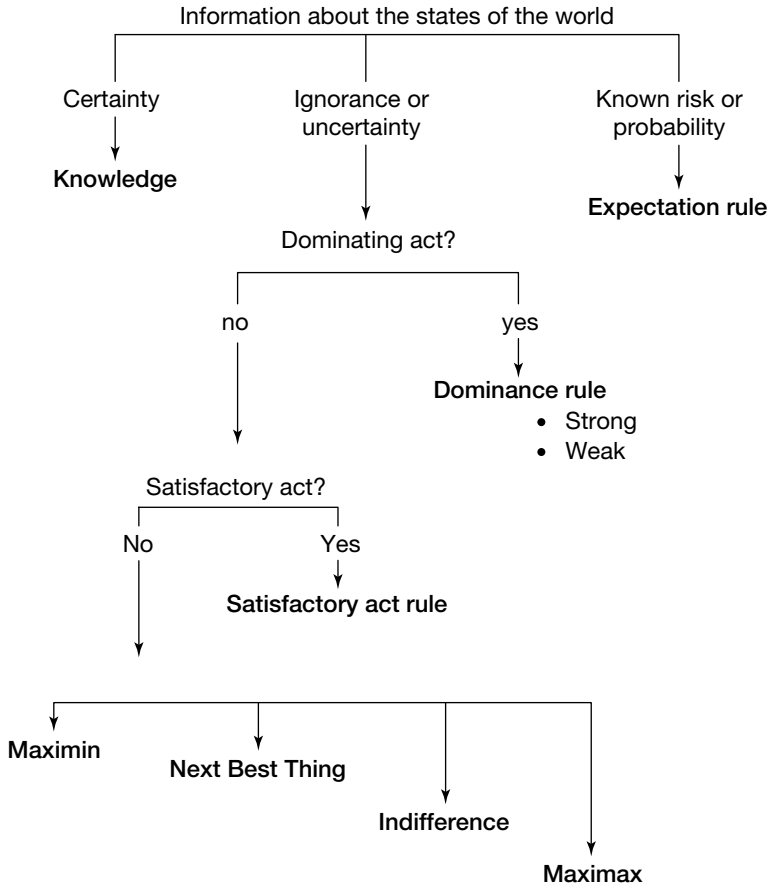
actions, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other available actions, and, excluding the best outcomes and worse outcomes of the available actions, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other available actions, S should choose  $\alpha$ .

This principle advises choosing an action whose middling outcomes are better than those of its competition, whenever the best outcomes and worst outcomes of the alternatives are the same. The Next Best Thing principle asserts that a particular action should be chosen if, in the state in which that action does best, it does as well or better as its competitors do in the states in which they do best; and in no state does that action have an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of its competitors, and in every state other than the states in which the best and worst outcomes of the alternatives are found, that action has outcomes better than its competitors. The Next Best Thing principle, we might say, is a cousin of the Weak Dominance principle, since, if there are states in which a particular alternative has an outcome better than that of the others and, moreover, that alternative has no outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, then that alternative is the next best thing.

It is important to recognize that the Next Best Thing principle is a principle of uncertainty and not risk. It would be utterly inappropriate in a risk situation. Suppose that the best outcome of  $\beta$  is extremely likely, but has the same expected utility as the best outcome of  $\alpha$  (while  $\alpha$  carries much payoff,  $\beta$  is nearly a sure thing with a smaller payoff). Suppose further that the worst outcome of  $\alpha$  is extremely likely, but has the same expected utility as the worst outcome of  $\beta$ . So, the best cases and the worst cases of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  are the same. Further, the middling outcomes of  $\alpha$  are slightly better than those of  $\beta$ . In such a case one might reasonably choose  $\beta$  over  $\alpha$ . Indeed, if the odds were stretched enough, it would seem foolish to make any other choice. But the Next Best Thing principle proffers contrary advice. When the risk is known, the Next Best Thing principle is irrelevant.

The relationship between the various rules and principles of decision-making is illustrated by Fig. 1.5.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I have adopted and adapted this chart from the class notes of Professor Douglas Stalker. Stalker adapted his chart from Ronald N. Giere, *Understanding Scientific Reasoning* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996), 293.

*Fig. 1.5.*

### 3. A FAMILY OF WAGERS

About a third of the way into *Pensées* 680 a dialogue commences.<sup>9</sup> Along with most commentators I assume that Pascal formulates his

<sup>9</sup> For more detail on the various versions of the Wager see, in addition to Hacking, 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager', Edward McClennen, 'Pascal's Wager and Finite Decision Theory', in J. Jordan (ed.), *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 115–37. And see Alan Hájek, 'The Illogic of Pascal's Wager', in T. Childers et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 10th Logica International Symposium*

Wager arguments in response to seven questions and comments from an unnamed agnostic interlocutor, usually described by commentators as a libertine, who contends that Christians, lacking proof, are indictable for committing to belief without reason.

Before presenting his Wager arguments, Pascal sets the stage with certain observations. The first is that neither the nature nor the existence of God admits of rational proof: 'Reason cannot decide anything... Reason cannot make you choose one way or the other, reason cannot make you defend either of two choices' (L. 680). This should not be taken as asserting that evidence and argument are irrelevant to philosophical theology. Pascal did not think that. Certain kinds of arguments and evidence are irrelevant; while certain kinds are relevant.<sup>10</sup> Pascal clearly thought that his Wager arguments were not only relevant but also rationally compelling. Secondly, wagering about the existence of God is unavoidable: 'you have to wager.' Wagering is forced, since refusing to wager is tantamount to wagering against. A decision is forced whenever deciding nothing is equivalent in practical effect to choosing one of the alternatives. Voltaire (1694–1778) objected that

'Tis evidently false to assert, that, the not laying a wager that God exists, is laying that he does not exist: For certainly that man whose mind is in a state of doubt, and is desirous of information, does not lay on either side.<sup>11</sup>

Voltaire is no doubt correct that not laying a wager that God exists is not the same as wagering that God does not exist. But Pascal never asserted it was. When Pascal asserts that one must wager, he is not asserting that the refusal to do so is identical with wagering against, but rather that refusing to wager has the same practical consequence as wagering against. One remains in a state of religious skepticism by either wagering against or by laying no wager. To wager for God requires movement out of the status quo.

(Liblice: Filosophia, The Institute of Philosophy of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 1997), 239–49.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Daniel Foukes, 'Argument in Pascal's *Pensées*', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 6/1 (1989), 57–68.

<sup>11</sup> F. M. A. Voltaire, 'Pascal's Thoughts Concerning Religion' (Letter XXV, 1734), in *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733), ed. N. Cronk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127. The translator of Letter XXV is unknown. It first appeared in English in the second edition of *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1741). Why Letter XXV was included in a text ostensibly devoted to English topics is not apparent.

What is it to wager that God exists? There are at least six possibilities here.<sup>12</sup> The first is that a pro-wager (a wager that God exists) consists of acting or behaving as if God exists. This need not involve belief in God, since an agnostic or even an atheist could behave as if God exists. Of course, since one tends to acquire beliefs that fit one's behavior, it may be that over time acting as if God exists results in theistic belief. Indeed, toward the end of the *Pensées* passage Pascal counsels imitating those who have already made a pro-wager as a way of trying to inculcate belief: 'Follow the way by which they set out, acting as if they already believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. This will naturally cause you to believe ...' (W. 343). A second possibility is that wagering for God is to believe that God exists. If wagering as such implies belief, then Doxastic Voluntarism is implied by this second possibility. Doxastic Voluntarism is the thesis that one can believe at will. The problem with this possibility is that belief as such does not imply appropriate action or behavior. The devils believe that God exists and they shudder, proclaims the New Testament book of James. But presumably, even though they believe and shudder, the devils do not reform, they do not act appropriately. A striking passage in the *Pensées* text suggests that Pascal did not take wagering and believing as the same. Pascal's interlocutor laments that, even though he agrees with the Wager argument, he is unable to believe: 'my hands are tied and my mouth is gagged; I am forced to wager, and am not free; no one frees me from these bonds, and I am so made that I cannot believe' (W. 343). So while he cannot believe, he is yet forced to wager. If we understand the second possibility as implying a belief that God exists and no other belief or action on the part of the bettor, then this possibility is problematic. The third possibility is that pro-wagering is to inculcate theistic belief. It is to take steps to bring about theistic belief. Perhaps, however, one can wager without having successfully inculcated theistic belief. So, the fourth possibility is that pro-wagering is attempting to inculcate theistic belief. This fourth possibility, unlike the third, does not imply that pro-wagering is always a successful endeavor (clearly enough, the third possibility implies the fourth). I assume, by the way, that the third and fourth possibilities both imply the first. Taking steps to inculcate belief requires acting as if God exists.

<sup>12</sup> My account of what wagering for God amounts to is influenced by Lucien Goldmann, 'The Wager: The Christian Religion', in H. Bloom (ed.), *Blaise Pascal: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 53–60.

The fifth possibility is that pro-wagering is to accept that God exists. Acceptance is a voluntary action that consists of a judgment that a particular proposition is true. Acceptance implies assenting to a proposition, and acting on the proposition (there is more on acceptance in Chapter 2). More strongly, the sixth possibility is that wagering is committing oneself to God. This possibility implies the first, and both the fourth and fifth possibilities. To commit to God is to reorient one's goals, and values, and behavior by including the proposition that God exists among one's most basic values and beliefs. It implies much more than just belief. Pascal seems to employ this sense of wagering when he says 'learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have' (L. 680). Put concisely, to commit to God is to believe in God, which involves more than merely believing that God exists. I will take the sixth possibility as what is meant by wagering that God exists. A con-wager or a wager against, then, is to remain as one is. It is not to commit oneself. For convenience, I usually express wagering for God as inculcating theistic belief, or as believing in God, but these phrases are convenient shorthand for committing oneself to God. Wagering for God, in short, is to commit oneself to God.

Pascal was not, and no Pascalian need be, a doxastic voluntarist. A Pascalian Wager neither entails nor assumes that belief is under our direct control. What is necessary, perhaps, is that we can bring about belief in a roundabout, indirect way. For those making a pro-wager Pascal suggests a regimen of 'taking holy water, having masses said' and imitating the faithful. It is not anachronistic to note the Jamesian similarities here: wagering about God arises because argument and evidence are inconclusive. Moreover, wagering is forced, and, clearly, the matter is momentous and involves, for most of Pascal's readers, living options.

Ian Hacking in his important 1972 paper 'The Logic of Pascal's Wager' identifies three versions within the *Pensées* fragments. The first, which Hacking dubs the 'Argument from Dominance', is conveyed within the admonition to 'weigh up the gain and the loss by calling that heads that God exists ... If you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating' (L. 680). Rational optimization requires adopting a particular alternative among several mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive options, whenever doing so may render one better off than by not doing so, and in no



case would doing so render one worse off.<sup>13</sup> According to Pascal theistic belief (weakly) dominates.<sup>14</sup> Consider Fig. 1.6. In this matrix there are two states of the world, one in which God exists and one in which God does not exist; and two acts, wagering that God exists (a pro-wager), and wagering against the existence of God (a con-wager). Given that the outcomes associated with the acts have the following relations:  $F1 \gg F3$ , and  $F2$  is at least as good as  $F4$ , believing weakly dominates not believing (the expression  $X \gg Y$  should be understood as  $X$  greatly exceeds  $Y$ ). Following Pascal, no great disvalue has been assigned to  $F3$ . Nowhere in L. 680 does Pascal suggest that nonbelief results in hell, or in an infinite disutility, if God exists. The version of the Wager found in the *Port-Royal Logic* does employ the idea of a loss greater than all the evils of the world totaled, attached to nonbelief, if God exists.

	God exists	~ (God exists)
Wager for	F1	F2
Wager against	F3	F4

Fig. 1.6.

The Argument from Dominance proceeds:

1. for any person  $S$ , if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , available to  $S$  has an outcome better than the outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the others,  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
2. believing in God is better than not believing if God exists, and is no worse if God does not exist.<sup>15</sup> Therefore,
3. one should believe in God.

<sup>13</sup> And given that the acts are causally independent of the states.

<sup>14</sup> As described, the first version of the Wager is an argument from *Weak Dominance*.

<sup>15</sup> Clearly enough the acts in this case have no propensity to bring about the states. William James, perhaps it should be noted, does allow that, for all we know, the acts in this case could play a part in bringing about the states. In his 1895 essay, 'Is Life Worth Living?' he writes: 'I confess that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity.' See 'Is Life Worth Living?' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1896; repr. New York: Dover, 1956): 61). James is the only philosopher I know of who entertains this possibility.

This first Wager is an example of a decision under uncertainty. Given Pascal's claim that 'if there is a god, he is infinitely incomprehensible to us ... we are incapable, therefore, of knowing either what He is or if He is', it is not surprising that his first version of the Wager is a decision under uncertainty.<sup>16</sup>

The conclusion—that one should believe that God exists—is an 'ought of rationality'. Pascal probably did not intend, nor should a Pascalian for that matter, to limit the imperative force of (3) to pragmatic rationality only. The idea of (3) is that belief in God is the rational stance all things considered. Let us distinguish between something being rationally compelling and something being plausible. An argument is rationally compelling if, upon grasping the argument, one would be irrational in failing to accept its conclusion. On the other hand, an argument is plausible if, upon grasping the argument, one would be reasonable or rational in accepting its conclusion, yet one would not be irrational in failing to accepting it. Pascal believed that his Wager made theistic belief rationally compelling. Since (3) will figure as the conclusion in all Pascal's Wagers, we will hereafter designate the proposition expressed in (3) as proposition (C).

The transition to the second version of the Wager is precipitated by the interlocutor's objection to the assumption that theistic wagering does not render one worse-off if God does not exist. In response Pascal introduces probability values to the discussion, and, more importantly, the idea of an infinite utility:

Since there is an equal chance of gain and loss, if you won only two lives instead of one, you could still put on a bet. But if there were three lives to win, you would have to play ... and you would be unwise ... not to chance your life to win three in a game where there is an equal chance of losing and winning. (L. 680)

There are versions of the Wager shorn of probability considerations found previous to Pascal. Pascal's genius, in part, was the introduction of probability to the Wager. While probability plays no part in the first argument, it has a prominent role in the second version of the Wager, which Hacking calls the 'Argument from Expectation'. Built upon the concept of maximizing expected utility, the Argument from Expectation stipulates that the probability that God exists is just as likely as not.

<sup>16</sup> Contra J. J. MacIntosh, 'Is Pascal's Wager Self-Defeating?', *Sophia*, 39/2 (2000), 6–13.

Perhaps Pascal here employs a nascent Indifference principle in order to sustain the claim of an even probability. In any case, the expected utility of believing in God, given an infinite utility and a probability of one-half, is itself infinite. With the assumption of an infinite utility, theistic belief easily outdistances not believing, no matter what finite value is found in F2, F3 or F4 (Fig. 1.7).

	God exists $\frac{1}{2}$	$\sim$ (God exists) $\frac{1}{2}$	
Wager for	0.5, $\infty$	0.5, F2	EU = $\infty$
Wager against	0.5, F3	0.5, F4	EU = finite value

*Fig. 1.7.*

The symbol  $\infty$ , though not one that exists in transfinite mathematics, is meant to represent the notion of an infinite utility. I will assume that  $\infty$  consistently represents the same order of infinity whenever employed.

Put schematically:

4. for any person S, and alternatives,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to S, if  $\alpha$  carries a greater expected utility than does  $\beta$ , S should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
  5. given that the existence of God is as likely as not, the expected utility of believing in God vastly exceeds that of not believing. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

Hacking asserts that the assumption of equal chance is 'monstrous'. Perhaps it is. The beautiful thing about infinite utility, though, is that infinity multiplied by any finite value is still infinite. The assumption that the existence of God is just as likely as not is needlessly extravagant, since, as long as the existence of God is judged to be greater than zero, believing will always carry an expected utility greater than that carried by nonbelief. And this is true no matter the finite value or disvalue associated with the outcomes F2, F3, and F4. This observation underlies

the third version of the Wager, what Hacking titles the 'Argument from Dominating Expectation' in which  $p$  represents a positive probability range greater than zero and less than one-half (Fig. 1.8). No matter how unlikely it is that God exists, as long as there is some positive non-zero probability that he does, believing is one's best bet:

	God exists, $p$	$\sim$ (God exists), $1 - p$	
Wager for	$p, \infty$	$1 - p, F2$	EU = $\infty$
Wager against	$p, F3$	$1 - p, F4$	EU = finite value

Fig. 1.8.

- 6. for any person  $S$ , and alternatives,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to  $S$ , if the expected utility of  $\alpha$  exceeds that of  $\beta$ ,  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
- 7. believing in God carries more expected utility than does not believing. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

Because of its ingenious employment of infinite utility, the third version has become what most philosophers think of as Pascal's Wager. This is the version dubbed in the Introduction as the *Canonical version* of the Wager.

The Canonical version may seem a surprising argument from one who denied the human capacity to know independent of revelation that God exists. Perhaps Pascal's motivation for the Canonical version is this: given that God is a possible being, there is some probability that he exists.<sup>17</sup> And, as long as there is some positive probability (or as long as we know the probability is not zero), coupled with an infinite utility, the Canonical version supports its conclusion.

The appeal of the Canonical version for theistic apologists is its ready employment as a worst-case device. Suppose the theist were to encounter a compelling argument for atheism, and so theism appears

<sup>17</sup> In Chapter 3 I argue that this proposition is false whenever subjective probability is at issue.

much more unlikely than not. With the Canonical version the theist has an escape: it can still be rational to believe, even if the belief is itself unreasonable, since inculcating theistic belief is an action with an infinite expected utility. This use as a worst-case device is something like throwing down a trump defeating what had appeared the stronger hand.

The neglected version of the Wager, version number four, found in *Pensées* 680, resides in the concluding remarks that Pascal makes to his interlocutor:

But what harm will come to you from taking this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend. It is, of course, true; you will not take part in corrupt pleasure, in glory, in the pleasures of high living. But will you not have others? I tell you that you will win thereby in this life ... (L. 680)

The fourth version brings us full circle, away from decisions under risk and back to those under uncertainty (Fig. 1.9). Like its predecessors, the fourth version implies that the benefits of belief vastly exceed those of nonbelief if God exists; but, unlike the others, the fourth implies that, even if God does not exist,  $F2 > F4$ . No matter what, inculcating belief is one's best bet. Belief strongly dominates nonbelief. Let us call this version of the Wager the 'Argument from Strong Dominance':

8. For any person S, if among the alternatives available to S, the outcomes of one alternative,  $\alpha$ , are better than those of the other available alternatives, S should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
  9. believing in God is better than not believing, whether God exists or not. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

	God exists	$\sim$ (God exists)
Wager for	$\infty$	F2
Wager against	F3	F4

*Fig. 1.9.*

Premise (9) is true only if one gains simply by believing. Pascal apparently thought that this was obvious:

The Christian's hope of possessing an infinite good is mingled with actual enjoyment as well as fear, for, unlike people hoping for a kingdom of which they will have no part because they are subjects, Christians hope for holiness, and to be free from unrighteousness, and some part of that is already theirs. (K. 917)

Sincere theistic belief results, he thought, in virtuous living, and virtuous living is more rewarding than vicious living. The response of Pascal's interlocutor, we might plausibly imagine, would be that Pascal has made an illicit assumption: why think that virtuous living requires theism? And, even if virtuous living requires theism, why think that being morally better is tantamount to being better off, all things considered? Now, whether virtue is its own reward only in a theistic context or not, the relevant point is whether theistic belief provides more benefit than not believing, even if God does not exist. If it does, then this is an important point when considering the many-gods objection.

Nicholas Rescher argues, in effect, that the fourth of Pascal's Wagers is not Pascal's at all. According to Rescher, Pascal's Wager must be 'other-worldly' and not empirical. Pascal did not seek to motivate belief, he suggests, by arguing that the 'this-worldly' benefits of theistic belief exceed those of not believing.<sup>18</sup> Two points of response are in order. First, there is clear textual support for the fourth version. The natural reading of the end of fragment 680 is represented by (8)–(C). There is little doubt that the fourth Wager resides there. Moreover, while the Canonical Wager may have been Pascal's argument of choice (and arguably the formulation of the Canonical Wager ranks as an intellectual achievement with Anselm's Ontological proof, or Thomas's Five Ways), it does not follow that the fourth Wager is not Pascalian. It is not anachronistic to acknowledge what is found in the text, even if it is not generally been recognized.

The decision-theoretic relations between the various versions of the Wager might be represented as shown in Fig. 1.10.

<sup>18</sup> Rescher, *Pascal's Wager*, 118–19.

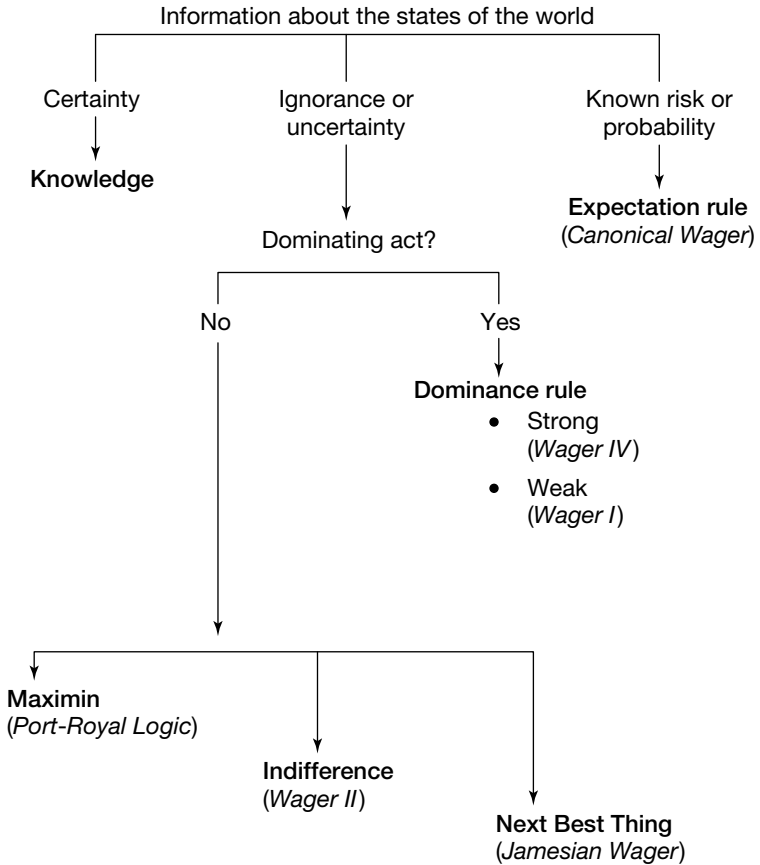


Fig. 1.10.

#### 4. THE MANY-GODS OBJECTION

Notice that in all four arguments the Wager consists of a  $2 \times 2$  matrix: there are two acts available to the agent, with only two possible states of the world. From Pascal's day to this, critics have pointed out that Pascal's partitioning of the possible states of the world overlooks the obvious—what if some deity other than God exists? Once theism is expanded, one might say, the possible permutation the expansion takes is limited only by the bounds of one's imagination. For instance, what if a

deity exists, something like Michael Martin's 'perverse-master' deity that harbors animus toward theism, such that he or she rewards nonbelief?<sup>19</sup> In effect, the many-gods objection asserts that Pascal's  $2 \times 2$  matrix is flawed because the states it employs are not jointly exhaustive of the possibilities.<sup>20</sup> Let us expand the Pascalian matrix to accommodate this objection (Fig. 1.11). With D representing the existence of a non-standard deity, a 'deviant' deity, whether personal or impersonal, which is exclusivist in doling out the benefits of afterlife to all but theists, and N representing the world with no deity of any sort (call this state 'naturalism'), theistic belief no longer strongly dominates.<sup>21</sup> With the values of F3, F6, and F9, even Weak Dominance is lost to theism.<sup>22</sup> Just as the many-gods objection is thought by many to be the bane of the Canonical version, one might think it is fatal to the fourth version of the Wager as well.

	G	N	D
Wager for G	F1 $\infty$	F2	F3
Wager for neither	F4	F5	F6 $\infty$
Wager for D	F7	F8	F9 $\infty$

Fig. 1.11.

Still all is not lost for the Pascalian. With a proposition similar to (9) in hand, along with the Next Best Thing principle, the Pascalian can salvage from the ruins of the fourth version a Wager that circumvents the many-gods objection. If we revise (9) to read that believing in God is better than not believing, whether God exists or naturalism obtains (that is, if neither G nor D obtains), and given that the utility of the lower two

<sup>19</sup> Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 232–4.

<sup>20</sup> Recent proponents include Paul Saka, 'Pascal's Wager and the Many-Gods Objection', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 321–41; Graham Priest, *Logic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94–8; and William Gustason, 'Pascal's Wager and Competing Faiths', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 44 (1998), 31–9.

<sup>21</sup> By 'non-standard deity' I mean the gerrymandered constructions of philosophers.

<sup>22</sup> As before I exclude infinite disutilities.



cells of the D column are the same as the upper cell of the G column, and that  $F3 = F4 = F7$ , the Pascalian can employ the N column as a principled way to adjudicate between believing theistically or not. That is, whether one believes theistically, or believes in a deviant deity, or refrains from believing in any deity at all, one is exposed to the same kind of risk ( $F3$  or  $F4$  or  $F7$ ). The worst outcomes of theistic belief, of deviant belief, and of naturalistic belief are on a par. Moreover, whether one believes theistically, or believes in a deviant deity, or refrains from believing in any deity at all, one enjoys eligibility for the same kind of reward ( $\infty = \infty = \infty$ ). The best outcomes, that is, of theistic belief, of deviant belief, and of naturalistic belief, are on a par. Given the revision of (9), we have reason to believe that the utility associated with  $F2$  exceeds that associated with  $F5$ . In addition, we have no evidence to think there is any deviant analogue of the revision of (9). We have no reason, that is, to think that belief in a deviant deity correlates with the kind of positive empirical benefits that correlate with theistic belief. But this absence of evidence to think that belief in a deviant deity correlates with positive empirical benefit, conjoined with the obvious opportunity costs associated with such a belief, is itself reason to think that  $F2$  exceeds  $F8$ . Indeed, no matter how we might expand the matrix in order to accommodate the exotica of possible divinity, we would have reason to believe that  $F2$  exceeds any this-world outcome associated with the exotica.<sup>23</sup> So, given that  $F2$  exceeds  $F5$  and that  $F2$  exceeds  $F8$ , even if the  $2 \times 2$  matrix is abandoned in favor of an expanded one, a Pascalian beachhead is established:

10. for any person  $S$  making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , available to  $S$  has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other available alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and worse outcomes, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other available alternatives, then  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
11. theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains. And,
12. the best outcomes of theistic belief are as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and the worst

<sup>23</sup> Even though it is possible to imagine any number of deviant gods, any extension beyond a  $3 \times 3$  matrix is logically redundant given that  $F2$  exceeds the 'this-world' outcomes of the deviant deities, and given that the best cases and worst cases are on a par.

outcomes of theistic belief are no worse than those of the other available alternatives. Therefore,

- C. one should believe in God.

Since this argument is strikingly similar to William James's famous Will to Believe argument, let us dub it the 'Jamesian Argument' or the 'Jamesian Wager'. While the many-gods objection may show that theism does not dominate its competitors, it is not a fatal objection to the Wager. Given the popularity of the many-gods objection, however, it is a topic that deserves more scrutiny than we have perhaps given it here. We best return to it in Chapter 3 to ensure by a more thorough examination that the many-gods objection is in fact benign.

## 5. THE LOGIC OF PASCAL'S WAGERS

The title *Pascal's Wager* is misleading for a couple of reasons. First, as we have seen, Pascal's Wager comes in various formulations. There is not just one Wager presented by Pascal but four. Second, there are versions of the Wager not found in Pascal's *Pensées*. For instance, it is commonly thought that the prospect of hell, or an infinite disutility, is employed in the Wager.<sup>24</sup> It is not. One does, however, find that dismal prospect employed in the *Port-Royal Logic* presentation of the Wager. Despite the infelicities associated with the title *Pascal's Wager*, we will continue to use it as a title for any of the family of Pascalian Wagers, whether found in the *Pensées* or not, that has as its conclusion the practical proposition that one should believe in God.

Every member of the family of Pascalian Wagers shares three features. The first is that Pascalian Wagers constitute a distinct class among pragmatic arguments. As mentioned above, pragmatic arguments are arguments that have premises that are prudentially directed rather than

<sup>24</sup> Even prominent philosophers mistakenly assert that Pascal employs hell or a negative infinite disutility. See, for instance, Bernard Williams, 'Rawls and Pascal's Wager', in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 94–100; and see Stephen Stich, 'The Recombinant DNA Debate', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 7/3 (1978), 189–91.

Pascal does hint at a version of the Wager (a Maximin version) incorporating hell in a passage that is not part of the Wager fragment (the *Infini rien* fragment): 'Who has the most reason to fear hell: he who does not know whether there is such a thing as hell and who is sure of damnation if there is, or he who is certainly convinced that hell exists, but hopes nevertheless to be saved?' (W. 349).

truth-directed. Pascalian Wagers are not just pragmatic arguments. Pascalian Wagers are pragmatic arguments that have the structure of gambles, a decision made in the midst of uncertainty. Pascal assumed that a person, just by virtue of being in the world, is in a betting situation such that he must bet his life on whether there is or is not a god. This may be a world in which God exists or this may be a world in which God does not exist. The upshot of Wager-style arguments is simply that, if one bets on God and believes, then there are two possible outcomes. Either God exists and one enjoys an eternity of bliss; or God does not exist and one loses little, if anything. On the other hand, if one bets against God and wins, one gains little. But, if one loses that bet, the consequences may be horrendous. Because the first alternative has an outcome that overwhelms any possible gain attached to nonbelief, the choice is clear to Pascal. Even if epistemic reason does not provide an answer, prudential reason does—one should try to believe. There is everything to gain and little, if anything, to lose.

And this leads to the second constitutive feature: a Pascalian Wager is a decision situation in which the possible gain or benefit associated with at least one of the alternatives swamps all the others. With the Canonical version, of course, the possible gain of theism is supposed to be not just greater than that of nonbelief, but infinitely greater. Because an infinite gain minus any finite loss is still infinite, the possible gain attached to theistic belief appears nonpareil. Pascalian Wagers can come in topics that are not religious, so it is best to understand the swamping property as a gain that is vastly greater than any of its rivals, even if it is not an infinite gain. As Rescher notes with the swamping property of the Wager, ‘agreement on the exact size of values is wholly unnecessary ... All that matters is the rough and ready consideration that the magnitude of the value of the heavenly alternative is “incomparably greater” than that of the mundane.’<sup>25</sup> Typically the gain is so great as to render the probability assignments, even if they are known, virtually irrelevant.

The third feature has to do with the object of the gamble. The object must be something that is of extreme importance. The existence of God is not the only relevant topic. For instance, a Pascalian argument might be employed to contend that the catastrophic consequences that may flow from global warming make conservation measures compelling,

<sup>25</sup> Rescher, *Pascal's Wager*, 20.

even if the risk of catastrophe is less likely than not.<sup>26</sup> Or one can imagine a Pascalian Wager, call it the 'patients' Wager', in which a person diagnosed with a terminal disease, and having exhausted the available conventional therapies, deliberates whether to invest any effort in unconventional therapies as a long-shot desperate last hope.<sup>27</sup> This sort of Pascalian Wager, like a desperate 'Hail Mary' pass on the last play of a football game, is a 'go-for-broke-since-there-is-nothing-to-lose' Wager. Pascalian Wagers deal with subjects that are of great concern. As long as one's argument is pragmatic in nature, with the swamping property, and it has to do with something of an ultimate concern, one is using an argument form due to Pascal.

## 6. THE MAXIMIN VERSION

John Locke (1632–1704) formulated a version of the Wager, which we might call the maximin version:

when infinite happiness is put in one Scale, against infinite Misery in the other ... Who in his Wits would chuse to come within a possibility of infinite Misery ... If the good Man be in the right, he is eternally happy; if he mistakes, he is not miserable, he feels nothing. On the other hand, if the wicked be in the right, he is not happy; if he mistakes, he is infinitely miserable ...<sup>28</sup>

The Maximin rule advises the adoption of any available alternative whose worst outcome is singularly better than the worst outcomes of all other available alternatives. Locke clearly has a Maximin rule in mind as he advises his reader to avoid the risk of infinite misery.

Locke probably encountered the Wager in the *Port-Royal Logic* (1662) written by Pascal's fellow Jansenists Antoine Arnauld (1612–94) and Pierre Nicole (1625–95). The Wager is presented there in the last chapter as a Maximin Wager:

It is the nature of finite things, however great they are, to be able to be surpassed by the smallest things if they are multiplied often ... Only infinite things such as eternity and salvation cannot be equaled by any temporal benefit. Thus we

<sup>26</sup> David Orr, a Professor of Environmental Studies, presents something like this argument in his 'Pascal's Wager and Economics in a Hotter Time', *Ecologist*, 22/2 (1992), 42–3.

<sup>27</sup> I owe this example to Doug Stalker.

<sup>28</sup> John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. P. H. Nidditch, bk. II, ch. XXI, sect. 70 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 281–2.

ought never to balance them off against anything worldly. This is why the slightest bit of help for acquiring salvation is worth more than all the goods of the world taken together. And the least peril of being lost is more important than all temporal harms considered merely as harms. This is enough to make all reasonable people draw this conclusion, with which we will end this Logic: the greatest of all follies is to use one's time and life for something other than what may be useful for acquiring a life that will never end, since all the goods and harms of this life are nothing in comparison to those of the other life, and the danger of falling into those harms, as well as the difficulty of acquiring these goods, is very great.<sup>29</sup>

More generally, the Maximin Wager is an example of a type of decision-theoretic argument that Stephen Stich calls the 'doomsday' argument.<sup>30</sup> Doomsday arguments recommend avoidance of possible horrendous scenarios, catastrophic events, as a way of choosing among alternatives. Doomsday arguments advise disaster avoidance above all other considerations. For instance, David Orr has used a doomsday argument to advocate widespread changes in industrial societies in order to forestall global warming. Orr admits that the scientific evidence is (at least at the time of writing) inconclusive regarding the impact of industry on global warming. But, he says, 'if it turns out that global warming would have been severe and we forestalled it by becoming more energy efficient and making a successful transition to renewable energy, we will have avoided disaster'.<sup>31</sup> Letting *I* stand for *Climate affected by industry*, and *A* stand for *conservation policies adopted*, we can represent Orr's argument with a simple  $2 \times 2$  matrix (Fig. 1.12). The worse outcome of *A* is *F2*, with *F3* the worse outcome of  $\tilde{A}$ . Assuming that *F3* is worse than *F2*, Orr contends that the choice is clear: industrial nations should adopt widespread conservation measures and policies.

	<i>I</i>	$\tilde{I}$
<i>A</i>	<i>F1</i>	<i>F2</i>
$\tilde{A}$	<i>F3</i>	<i>F4</i>

Fig. 1.12.

<sup>29</sup> Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, trans. Jill Vance Buroker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 275.

<sup>30</sup> Stich, 'The Recombinant DNA Debate', 189.

<sup>31</sup> Orr, 'Pascal's Wager and Economics in a Hotter Time', 43.

Stich argues that doomsday arguments fall prey to an analogue of the many-gods objection—given the swamping property, and given a non-zero probability associated with at least two mutually exclusive alternatives, a doomsday Wager makes no recommendation.<sup>32</sup> Stich's analysis is done within a context of evaluating a doomsday objection against the moral permissibility of recombinant DNA investigations. As Stich notes, 'it is at least possible that a bacterial culture whose genetic makeup has been altered in the course of a recombinant DNA experiment may exhibit completely unexpected pathogenic characteristics ... a strain against which humans can marshal no natural defense'.<sup>33</sup> The doomsday objection might be represented using *E* to stand for *engage in recombinant DNA research*, and *O* to stand for *a catastrophic mutation occurs* (Fig. 1.13). The first thing to notice is that there is a causal connection between the acts and the states. This causal connection renders the doomsday objection, as presented, invalid. Perhaps there is an assumption at work that the possibility of a catastrophe in the absence of active research ( $\tilde{E}$ ) is ignorable. Let us suppose so. If *F3* is neglected, *F1* is clearly the worst case. Given the assumption that the mutation is catastrophic, *F1* swamps *F2* and *F4*. On a Maximin rule, then,  $\tilde{E}$  prevails. While Stich does not comment on the causal connection between the acts and the states, he argues that this doomsday objection fallaciously assumes the proposition that 'all endeavors that might possibly result in such a catastrophe should be prohibited'.<sup>34</sup> And, as long as *O* carries a swamping property (always outweighs  $\tilde{O}$ ), then *F3* cannot be ignored: 'if we fail to pursue recombinant DNA research now, our lack of knowledge in the future may have consequences as dire as any foreseen in the doomsday scenario argument'.<sup>35</sup> The upshot of Stich's evaluation of doomsday arguments is that the swamping property renders them all logically fallacious—for any conclusion supported by a doomsday argument, the denial of

	<i>O</i>	$\tilde{O}$
<i>E</i>	Catastrophe	<i>F2</i>
$\tilde{E}$	<i>F3</i>	<i>F4</i>

Fig. 1.13.

<sup>32</sup> Stich, 'The Recombinant DNA Debate', 190–1.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 189.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 190.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 191.

that conclusion is also supported with equal dialectical force by that argument. If Stich is correct, then the swamping property renders a doomsday argument, 'logically overbearing', we might say, by providing equal support to both its intended conclusion and the denial of its conclusion.

Has Stich given us reason to think that doomsday arguments are invalid because they are all logically overbearing? He has not. While some doomsday arguments may be logically overbearing, others are not. Consider an embryonic argument suggested in an essay by Ronald Reagan against abortion on demand:

I have also said that anyone who does not feel sure whether we are talking about a second human life should clearly give life the benefit of the doubt. If you don't know whether a body is alive or dead, you would never bury it. I think this consideration itself should be enough for all of us to insist on protecting the unborn.<sup>36</sup>

While much detail is omitted, the argument suggested here is that, in the absence of knowledge whether the fetus counts as a moral person or not, abortion on demand is morally ill advised: if one aborts and the fetus is a person, one has committed murder. On the other hand, if one does not abort and the fetus is not a person, one has not committed any wrongdoing comparable to murder. Let *A* stand for *abort*, and *P* for *the fetus is a person* (Fig. 1.14). Reagan's antiabortion argument is a doomsday argument, the assumption being that the commission of murder is a moral catastrophe that swamps F4. But clearly this argument, whatever faults it may have, is not logically overbearing.

	P	~P
A	Murder	F2
~A	F3	F4

*Fig. 1.14.*

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984), 21.

## 7. WHAT IS AHEAD?

Two versions of the Wager will be featured in the chapters that follow. The Canonical version:

6. For any person  $S$ , and alternatives,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ , available to  $S$ , if  $\alpha$  carries greater expected utility to  $S$  than does  $\beta$ ,  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
7. believing in God carries more expected utility than does not believing. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

And the Jamesian Wager:

10. For any person  $S$  making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and worst outcomes, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other alternatives, then  $S$  should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
11. theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains. And,
12. the best outcomes of theistic belief are as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and the worst outcomes of theistic belief are no worse than those of the other available alternatives.<sup>37</sup> Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

In looking at the various objections to Pascal's Wager I will focus on whether these two Wager arguments survive the objections. It is my contention that the Canonical version does not, but the Jamesian Wager does. The Canonical Wager stumbles three times. In Chapter 2 I argue that one can endorse both a moderate version of Evidentialism and a

<sup>37</sup> The Jamesian argument has as a suppressed premise the proposition that:

Theism has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and worst outcomes, theism has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other alternatives.



wager that serves a kind of tie-breaker function. The Canonical Wager, however, is incompatible with all versions of Evidentialism. In Chapter 3 I argue that the Canonical Wager succumbs to the many-gods objection. But with the Jamesian Wager the Pascalian has the resources to elude all versions of the many-gods objection. In Chapter 4 I argue that the Canonical Wager is incompatible with the most plausible solution to the St Petersburg paradox. The Jamesian Wager, again, is compatible with that solution.

The Jamesian Wager, as we will see, is the strongest member of the Pascalian family, as it enjoys both validity and premises that no one would be irrational in accepting. Indeed, in the chapters to follow I argue that there is good reason to think that the Jamesian argument is sound. With the Jamesian Wager in hand, we might do no better than to invoke James himself: 'Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith ... complete.'<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', 11.

## 2

# The Ethics of Belief

Like all pragmatic arguments, the Wager is not truth-directed. An argument is truth-directed if it seeks to provide reason for thinking a proposition true. A pragmatic argument is benefit-directed, seeking to motivate an action because of the benefits associated with performing that action. A pragmatic argument, then, is definable as an argument intended to motivate an action, because of the benefits associated with the performance of that action.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I argue that there are occasions in which it is permissible, morally and intellectually, so to act as to form and maintain beliefs on the basis of pragmatic reasons and not on the basis of evidence. After arguing that there are such occasions, I propose two permissibility-conditions that regulate the employment of pragmatic arguments as belief-inducers. The thesis that there are occasions in which it is permissible, morally and intellectually, to form and maintain beliefs on the basis of pragmatic reasons runs counter to 'Evidentialism': the view that proper belief-formation is limited to sufficient evidence only. Evidentialism has enjoyed a philosophical hegemony since at least the Enlightenment, and the Pascalian is something of a nonconformist against that orthodoxy. But the Pascalian is not a thoroughgoing dissenter against the evidentialist orthodoxy, since, as we shall see, a Pascalian can endorse a modest form of Evidentialism. Prior to a discussion of Evidentialism a few words about Doxastic Voluntarism are in order.

<sup>1</sup> I should say something about my use of the term 'pragmatic'. I will presuppose that there is a substantial distinction between evidence and pragmatic reasons (in Chapter 6 I look at a view that denies any substantial distinction)—a distinction, that is, between truth-directed reasons, and beneficial or prudential reasons. My use of the term does not presuppose a pragmatic theory of truth.

## 1. DOXASTIC VOLUNTARISM

The idea that persons can voluntarily and directly choose what to believe is what we shall term 'Doxastic Voluntarism'.<sup>2</sup> According to Doxastic Voluntarism, believing is a direct act of the will, with the propositions we believe being under our immediate control. A basic action is an action that a person intentionally does, without doing any other basic action. Jones's moving of her finger is a basic action, since she need not perform any other action to accomplish it. Her handing the book from Smith to Brown is not basic, since she must intentionally do several things to accomplish it. According to Doxastic Voluntarism, some of our forming beliefs are basic actions. We can will, directly and voluntarily, what to believe, and the beliefs thereby acquired are freely obtained and are not forced upon us. In short, one can believe at will. The proponent of Doxastic Voluntarism need not hold that every proposition is a candidate for direct acquisition, as long as she holds that there are some propositions belief in which is under our direct control.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear enough that Doxastic Voluntarism is implausible. Assurance of this can be had by surveying various propositions that one does not currently believe, and seeing if any lend themselves, directly and immediately, by a basic act of the will, for belief. Certainly there are some beliefs that one can easily cause oneself to have. Consider the proposition that I am now holding a pencil. I can cause myself to believe that by simply picking up a pencil. Or, more generally, any proposition about my own basic actions I can easily enough believe by performing the action. But my coming to believe is by means of some other basic action. I do not have direct control over what I believe. Bernard Williams argues, in effect, that Doxastic Voluntarism is not just implausible, but necessarily false, since it is not possible both to believe

<sup>2</sup> For discussion concerning the distinction between direct voluntary control and indirect voluntary control over one's belief formation, see Louis Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). And see Murray Clarke, 'Doxastic Voluntarism and Forced Belief', *Philosophical Studies*, 50 (1986), 39–51.

<sup>3</sup> See Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*; and see Laurence Bonjour, 'Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge', in P. French, T. Uehling, and H. K. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, V, *Studies in Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 53–73. Interestingly, proponents of doxastic voluntarism appear to be doxastic incompatibilist libertarians. There could be doxastic compatibilists, but I am unaware of any.

a certain proposition and to know that that proposition is false. Yet, if Doxastic Voluntarism were true, that would be possible.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps a proponent of Doxastic Voluntarism might avoid Williams's objection by proposing a restricted view that limits belief at will to only those propositions that we know neither to be true nor false. In any case, even if conceptually possible, this restricted Doxastic Voluntarism is implausible. Does the implausibility of Doxastic Voluntarism show that pragmatic belief-formation is also implausible? Not at all. Pragmatic belief-formation neither entails nor presupposes Doxastic Voluntarism. As long as there is indirect control, or roundabout control, over the acquisition and maintenance of beliefs, pragmatic belief-formation is possible. What constitutes indirect control over the acquisition of beliefs? Consider actions such as entertaining a proposition, or ignoring a proposition, or critically inquiring into the plausibility of this idea or that, or accepting a proposition. Each of these involves a propositional attitude, the adoption of which is under our direct control. Indirect control occurs since accepting a proposition, say, or acting as if a proposition were true, very often results in believing that proposition. Insofar as there is a causal connection between the propositional attitudes we adopt, and the beliefs that are thereby generated, we can be said to have exercised indirect, or roundabout, control over belief-formation.

## 2. TWO KINDS OF PRAGMATIC ARGUMENTS

As with so much in philosophy, the first recorded employment of a pragmatic argument is found in Plato. At *Meno* 86b–c, in response to the paradox of the knower, Socrates tells Meno that believing in the value of inquiry is justified because of the positive impact upon one's character:

MENO. Somehow or other I believe you are right.

SOCRATES. I think I am. I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story, but one thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can, in word and act—that is, that we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover.

MENO. There too I am sure you are.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe', in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 136–51.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by W. K. C. Guthrie.

Socrates' point is if being better, braver, and more active are among our desires, and if believing that inquiry is permissible facilitates our becoming better, braver, and more active, then we have pragmatic reason to believe that inquiry is permissible. Socrates' argument is an argument in support of cultivating a certain belief. Pragmatic arguments are practical in orientation, justifying actions that are thought to facilitate the achievement of our goals, or the satisfaction of our desires, or the demands of morality. Pragmatic arguments in support of theistic belief can be predicated either on prudence, or on morality. A pragmatic argument predicated on prudence is one that employs self-interest as a reason to act. If among your goals is A, and if doing such and such results in your achieving A, then, all else equal, you have reason to do such and such:

- a1. doing  $\alpha$  helps to bring about  $\beta$ , and
- a2. it is in your interest that  $\beta$  obtain. So,
- a3. you have reason to do  $\alpha$ .

By pragmatic arguments predicated on morality I mean arguments that contend that morality, or some proper part of morality, presupposes, or is facilitated by, theistic belief. If conforming to the demands of morality, or to a proper part of morality, is rational, then so too is theistic belief. Moral arguments as pragmatic arguments will be examined toward the end of this chapter.

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of pragmatic arguments having to do with belief-formation. The first is an argument that recommends taking steps to believe a proposition because, if it should turn out to be true, the benefits gained from believing that proposition will be impressive. This first kind of pragmatic argument we can call a 'truth-dependent' pragmatic argument, or, more conveniently, a 'dependent argument', since the benefits are obtained only if the relevant state of affairs occurs. The prime example of a dependent argument is a pragmatic argument that uses a calculation of expected utility and employs the Expectation rule to recommend belief:

in a decision situation where both probability and utility values can be assigned, one should choose to do an act which has the greatest expected utility.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> One might object that maximizing expected utility involves probability and that probability is a kind of evidence; and, consequently, no argument employing expected utility considerations could be a pragmatic argument. The problem with this

Pascal employs this rule in the Canonical version of the Wager: no matter how small the probability that God exists, as long as it is a positive, non-infinitesimal, probability, the expected utility of theistic belief will dominate the expected utility of disbelief. Given the distinction between having reason to believe a certain proposition, and having reason to inculcate belief in that proposition, it may be that taking steps to generate a belief in a certain proposition might be the rational thing to do, even if that proposition lacks sufficient evidential support. The benefits of believing a proposition can rationally take precedence over the evidential strength enjoyed by a contrary proposition; and so, given an infinite expected utility, the Canonical Wager contends that forming the belief that God exists is the rational thing to do, no matter how small the likelihood that God exists.

The second kind of pragmatic argument, which can be called a ‘truth-independent’ pragmatic argument, or, more conveniently, an ‘independent argument’, is one that recommends taking steps to believe a certain proposition simply because of the benefits gained by believing it, whether or not the believed proposition is true. This is an argument that recommends belief cultivation because of the psychological, or moral, or religious, or social, or even prudential benefits gained by virtue of believing it. In David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, for example, Cleanthes employs an independent argument: ‘religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals that we never ought to abandon or neglect it’ (*D.* 219). Perhaps the best-known example of an independent argument is found in William James’s celebrated ‘Will to Believe’ essay, in which he argues that, in certain circumstances, it is rationally and morally permissible to believe a proposition because of the benefits thereby generated.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike independent pragmatic arguments, dependent ones are, in an important sense, truth-sensitive. Of course, being pragmatic arguments, dependent arguments are not truth-sensitive in an evidential sense; nevertheless they are dependent on truth since the benefits are gained only if the recommended belief is true. In contrast, independent

objection is that a calculation of expected utility is not using probability values in any straightforward evidential sense, since the probability values are employed as weighted averages discounting something’s utility and not as guides to the truth.

<sup>7</sup> I note (once again) that my classification of James’s Will to Believe argument as an independent pragmatic argument is controversial and tentative, since, in Chapter 6, I suggest that James’s argument is more than a pragmatic argument.

pragmatic arguments, yielding benefits whether or not the recommended beliefs are true, are indifferent to truth. Independent arguments, we might say, are belief-dependent and not truth-dependent. Interestingly, the Jamesian Wager is an instance of an independent argument, with the premises that theistic belief more likely generates a better life now than does non-theistic belief, whether or not God exists.

### 3. SIX KINDS OF EVIDENTIALISM

One interesting question regarding pragmatic arguments concerns their relation to the influential tradition of evidentialism. As a first stab we might understand evidentialism as asserting that:

- EV. for all persons *S* and propositions *p* and times *t*, it is permissible for *S* to believe that *p* at *t* if and only if believing *p* is supported by *S*'s evidence at *t*.<sup>8</sup>

The notion of support encapsulated in (EV) is that of a preponderance of evidence: a person may believe a proposition *p* just in case *p* is more likely than not on *S*'s evidence. Put more familiarly, (EV), or what we might call the 'evidentialist imperative', asserts that one should believe a proposition only if it is supported by adequate evidence.

Endorsing principle (EV), many philosophers have held that pragmatic reasons for belief-formation are illegitimate, since such reasons do not constitute adequate evidence for the truth of the belief. No doubt the best-known statement of the evidentialist imperative is that of W. K. Clifford (1845–79): 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'.<sup>9</sup> Clifford presented (EV) in a moral sense: it is morally impermissible to believe

<sup>8</sup> Two observations concerning (EV). The first is that principle (EV) might be revised to read:

- EV'. for all persons *S* and propositions *p* and times *t*, it is permissible for *S* to induce a belief that *p* at *t* iff believing *p* fits *S*'s evidence at *t*.

(E') makes clear that doxastic voluntarism is not assumed in what follows.

The second is that (EV) could be formulated with an internalist reading, such that:

- EV''. for all persons *S* and propositions *p* and times *t*, it is permissible for *S* to believe that *p* at *t* iff *S* believes that she has adequate evidence in support of *p* at *t*.

The argument of this essay would not be materially affected by an internalist formulation of (EV).

<sup>9</sup> W. K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Fredrick Pollock, ii (London: Macmillan and company, 1879), 186.

anything that lacks adequate evidence. This understanding of (EV) might be called 'ethical evidentialism'. The most plausible construction of ethical evidentialism is an indirect consequentialist one. An indirect consequentialist construction grounds the normative import of (EV) on the claim that *one should obey any rule that is such that, if everyone were to follow it, collective utility would be maximized*. Clifford employs something like this in support of (EV) when he argues that:

if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery.<sup>10</sup>

Since the possible baneful consequences of believing upon insufficient evidence are great, there is a general duty not to subvert civilization by promoting credulity. One is obligated to follow (EV) because the pernicious consequences of everyone violating it are so great.<sup>11</sup>

Ironically enough, one might take Clifford's argument itself as a pragmatic argument in support of forming beliefs only on nonpragmatic grounds. Taken as such, Clifford's argument may look self-defeating. But, while it may seem odd to employ a pragmatic argument against pragmatic belief formation, such employment need not be self-defeating. Clifford's argument is an argument contra the practice of belief-formation, but it is not itself a pragmatic argument having to do with forming a belief.

The normative force of (EV) can also be understood in an epistemic or intellectual sense: it is unreasonable to believe something without adequate evidence. This second understanding of (EV) is 'epistemic evidentialism'. Here the idea is that a violation of (EV) is impermissible because doing so makes one unreasonable. Something like this is implied by Locke's claim that 'there are very few lovers of Truth for Truth's sake ... How a man may know whether he be so in earnest is worth enquiry: and I think there is one unerring mark of it—the not

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 185–6.

<sup>11</sup> H. H. Price argues that there could be no moral obligation related to beliefs (given that doxastic voluntarism is false), since there would be an orgy of moral indignation and charity would disappear from the world. See his 'Belief and Will', *Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 28 (1954), 23. Price's argument is erroneous, since it neglects the obvious. Many people assume already that there is an ethics of belief, and the dreaded consequences do not obtain.



entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant',<sup>12</sup> and in Hume's dictum that 'the wise man proportions his belief to the evidence'.<sup>13</sup> The lack of sufficient evidence means, if Locke and Hume are correct, that the wise person lacks belief as well. Notice also that the dicta of Locke and Hume concern the strength of one's belief. The idea here is that one's degree of belief regarding a given proposition should be proportional to the probability of that proposition. This idea, along with the epistemic evidentialist understanding of (EV), is widespread in philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Further, it is important to see that evidentialism can be understood as encompassing not only what might be termed 'propositional' evidence, but 'experiential' evidence as well. Propositional evidence is a matter of the beliefs that one possesses. One would have sufficient or adequate propositional evidence for believing a proposition only if one is in possession of an argument that renders that proposition more likely than not. Although the dicta of Locke, Hume, and Clifford suggest that evidentialism recognizes only propositional evidence, propositional evidence does not exhaust the kinds of evidence.

Experiential evidence is having or being acquainted with nonpropositional grounds that properly support certain beliefs. For example, a person's belief that there is a tree in front of her may be supported by no proposition, since she has not really thought much about the matter, but it could yet be justified by her gaze at the tree. Sense perception is a paradigm of nonpropositional grounds for a particular proposition. When evidence is understood as being either propositional or experiential in nature, it is evident that the Reformed epistemologists' polemics against evidentialism, found in Plantinga and others, is really directed against only one understanding of evidentialism and not evidentialism as such.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. P.H. Nidditch, book IV, chapter XIX (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 697.

<sup>13</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 110.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1948), 397–8; Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Belief* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), 400 ff.; Alan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 36–7; and Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–11.

<sup>15</sup> See Philip Quinn, 'Moral Objections to Pascalian Wagering', in J. Jordan (ed.), *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 71–2.

What is the stringency of the evidentialist imperative? Is it absolute or defeasible? Absolute evidentialism holds that there are no exceptions; every proposition falls under its purview. In either the ethical or the epistemic sense, principle (EV) taken in the absolute sense consists of two normative claims: (E1) it is permissible to believe only propositions supported by sufficient evidence, and (E2) one's degree of belief concerning a proposition ought to be proportional to the strength of the evidence enjoyed by that proposition. Claim (E1) supplies a lower bound on permissible belief; while (E2) renders the degree of belief a function of the strength of the evidence. Taken together (E1) and (E2) imply that one ought to believe a proposition if it is supported by a preponderance of the evidence, whether propositional or experiential, and that one is permitted to believe a proposition only if it is supported by a preponderance of evidence.

Absolute evidentialism implies an 'agnostic imperative'. If the evidence is balanced, or one finds oneself in a state of radical uncertainty, then one should neither believe nor disbelieve. One should withhold belief. The only option available when the evidence is silent is to suspend belief. Understood in the absolutist sense, (EV) can be read as:

- AE. for all persons  $S$  and propositions  $p$  and times  $t$ ,  $S$  ought to believe that  $p$  at  $t$  if the evidence supports  $S$ 's believing  $p$  at  $t$ ; and  $S$  ought not to believe that  $p$  if the evidence does not support  $S$ 's believing  $p$  at  $t$ .

Defeasible evidentialism allows exceptions. Not every proposition falls under its purview, since it assigns the evidentialist imperative a limited scope, allowing the possibility that some propositions reside outside its jurisdiction. Defeasible evidentialism asserts that one ought to believe propositions supported by sufficient evidence, but it leaves open the possibility that one may have grounds other than the evidential from which to believe. Understood this way, (EV) would be revised to read:

- DE. for all persons  $S$  and propositions  $p$  and times  $t$ , if  $S$ 's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ , then  $S$  ought to believe that  $p$  at  $t$ .

According to (DE), if the evidence is adequate, then the question is settled. If there is a preponderance of support for  $p$ , then one is required to believe  $p$ . Where the evidence definitely speaks, one must listen and obey. (DE) differs from (AE) in part since it says nothing about those occasions in which the evidence is silent, or is inadequate. If one assigns  $p$  a probability of one-half, then there is not a preponderance of

evidence in support of  $p$ . (DE) says nothing about believing  $p$  in that case. Principle (AE), on the other hand, forbids believing  $p$  in that case.

While (DE) and (AE) are very attractive as they stand, neither passes muster, as there are occasions in which one either has a moral duty to believe a proposition that one takes to be less than well supported, or to disbelieve a proposition that one takes to be well supported.<sup>16</sup> And, since no one is irrational in doing her moral duty, it follows that there are occasions in which believing a proposition that is not well supported (a probability of one-half or less) is not only morally obligatory, but rationally permitted as well. To accommodate this development, (DE) should be revised to read:

DE'. for all persons  $S$  and propositions  $p$  and times  $t$ , if  $S$ 's evidence at  $t$  supports believing  $p$ , then  $S$  ought to believe that  $p$  at  $t$ , unless  $S$  is permitted to do otherwise.

Understood this way, defeasible evidentialism allows belief that in fact is not supported by one's evidence at a particular time.

Coupled with the earlier distinction between epistemic and ethical evidentialism (which are not mutually exclusive), the distinction between defeasible and absolute evidentialism generates six kinds of evidentialism. Absolute ethical evidentialism is what is found in Clifford. Absolute evidentialism, whether ethical or epistemic, is also, as will soon be argued, flawed beyond repair. Consequently, if one wants to hold that evidentialism is obligatory, it is at most a defeasible obligation. If the evidentialist imperative is defeasible, it can be overridden if there are occasions in which it is morally or rationally obligatory to believe a proposition that lacks adequate evidence. So, it is possible that a use of pragmatic arguments is compatible with the evidentialist imperative, understood as a defeasible obligation.

Moreover, remembering the distinction between (A) a proposition being reasonable to believe, and (B) inducing a belief in that proposition being the rational thing to do, pragmatic arguments can supplement epistemic evidence in determining whether it is permissible to believe a given proposition. For example, think of an Alpine hiker who, because of an avalanche and a blinding blizzard, is stranded on a desolate, mountain path facing a chasm.<sup>17</sup> The hiker cannot return the way he

<sup>16</sup> In what follows I focus on forming beliefs that lack adequate evidential support.

<sup>17</sup> I have adopted this example from William James. See his essays 'Is Life Worth Living?', 59; and 'The Sentiment of Rationality', 96–7, both in *The Will to Believe*

came because of the avalanche, yet, if he stays where he is, he will freeze as the temperature plummets. The hiker's only real hope is to jump the chasm. Knowing that exertion generally follows belief, the hiker realizes that his attempt will be half-hearted, diminishing his chance of survival, unless he brings himself to the belief that he can make the jump. In circumstances like these, one is clearly justified both in forming beliefs motivated by pragmatic reasons, and in suppressing beliefs (I cannot make the jump) motivated by pragmatic reasons; since one's best chance for survival depends on belief. The point of the Alpine hiker case is that pragmatic belief-formation is sometimes both morally and intellectually permissible. If this is correct, then the chasm between the pragmatic and the permissible is, at times, bridgeable.

#### 4. A DEFENSE OF PRAGMATIC REASONING

With regard to any proposition that one entertains, a person will stand in one of four doxastic states. Either one will have the belief that the proposition's probability value is greater than one-half, or one will believe that the proposition's probability is less than one-half, or one will believe that its probability value is one-half, or one will have no determinate belief concerning the probability value of the proposition. According to the evidentialist imperative, one should believe a proposition only if one finds oneself in the first doxastic state. The issue of pragmatic belief-formation concerns the propriety of believing in the latter three cases.

The most promising argument in support of the moral and rational permissibility of employing pragmatic reasons in belief-formation is erected upon the base of what we might call the *Basic argument* (or perhaps more precisely, the Basic argument scheme):

- BA1. Necessarily, no one is (overall) irrational in doing what he's morally obligated to do. And,
- BA2. possibly, doing  $\alpha$  is a moral obligation. Therefore,
- BA3. possibly, doing  $\alpha$  is (overall) rational.

*and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956). James himself may have adopted the example from the concluding paragraph of James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* (London: Spottiswoode & Co. Printers, 1873). See 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe*, 31. Fitzjames Stephen's brother, Leslie, also employs a somewhat similar case in his fable 'A Bad Five Minutes in the Alps', in *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873), 155–97; and also in his essay 'Darwinism and Divinity', in *ibid.* 73–4.

The Basic argument employs the alpha as a placeholder for actions, or kinds of actions. The locution '(overall) rational' or '(overall) irrational' presupposes that there are various kinds of rationality, including moral rationality, epistemic rationality, and prudential rationality. The idea that there are various kinds of rationality recognizes that at any time one could have conflicting obligations. One might be obligated to do various things, doing all of which it is not possible to do. Overall rationality is the all-things-considered perspective. It is what one ultimately should do, having taken into account the various obligations one is under at a particular time. Overall rationality, or all-things-considered rationality (ATC rationality), is, in Rossian terms, one's actual duty in the particular circumstances, even if one has other conflicting *prima facie* duties. The Basic argument can be formulated without presupposing that there are various kinds of rationality, by replacing the principle that no one is ever irrational in doing her moral duty, with the principle that moral obligations take precedence whenever a conflict of obligations occurs. In any case, the Basic argument assumes that, if in doing something one is not ATC irrational, then it follows that one is ATC rational in doing it.

Is (BA1) plausible? In chapter XV of the *Leviathan* Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) famously describes one who would doubt (BA1):

The Foole hath sayd in his heart, there is no such thing as Justice; and sometimes also with his tongue; seriously alleaging, that every mans conservation, and contentment, being committed to his own care, there could be no reason, why every man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto: and therefore also to make, or not make; keep, or not keep Covenants, was not against Reason, when it conduced to ones benefit. He does not therein deny, that there be Covenants; and that they are sometimes broken, sometimes kept; and that such breach of them may be called Injustice, and the observance of them Justice; but he questioneth, whether Injustice, taking away the feare of God, (for the same Foole hath said in his heart there is no God,) may not sometimes stand with that Reason, which dictateth to every man his own good; and particularly then, when it conduceth to such a benefit, as evilings, but also the power of other men.<sup>18</sup>

Since this is no place to argue against Hobbes's Foole, I will simply note that others have offered impressive answers to the Foole; and these answers, I believe, render (BA1) plausible.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 203.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Gregory S. Kavka, 'The Reconciliation Project', in D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason and Truth: New Essays on the Foundation of*

The relevance of the Basic argument is this. The action of forming and sustaining a belief upon pragmatic grounds can replace the placeholder. That is, pragmatic belief-formation could be one's moral duty. This is evident with what we might call an extreme case. The stranded Alpine hiker, whose only real chance of survival requires that he believe a claim for which he has little or no supporting evidence, illustrates the idea of an extreme case. Extreme cases come in two varieties. The first, the 'desperate' case, arises whenever an agent is faced with the dilemma of either believing a certain proposition with little or no probability value, or not believing it and a terrible event occurring as a result of not believing. If one's only real chance of escaping some great calamity is via believing an unlikely claim, then one is in a desperate case situation.<sup>20</sup>

The second, the 'fortuitous' case, arises whenever an agent faces the dilemma of either believing a certain proposition and gaining, as a result, an impressive good, even if it has insufficient evidentiary support, or not believing that proposition and not gaining the impressive good as a result of not believing.<sup>21</sup> The Jamesian Wager is an example of this variant. Another example of a fortuitous case has to do with the expectation of pain. Research has shown a correlation between the level of reported pain (felt pain) and one's expectation of the pain. In short, if one anticipates a painful event, the felt pain is higher than if one lacks that expectation.<sup>22</sup> Parents often tell their children that removing a Band-Aid will not hurt much, doing so with the hope that the felt pain will thereby be reduced. Clearly, under a direct consequentialist view, one would be obligated to form beliefs or to inculcate beliefs in others if doing so would lower the level of felt pain. Or think of sports psychology. Since exertion generally follows belief (a theme often

*Ethics*, (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985), 297–319; and his 'The Rationality of Rule-Following: Hobbes's Dispute with the Foole', *Law and Philosophy*, 14 (1995), 5–34. And see the informative discussion in Owen McLeod, 'Just Plain "Ought"', *Journal of Ethics*, 5 (2001), 269–91.

<sup>20</sup> An argument employing extreme cases is found in Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 5–7. Bishop Butler's argument is the earliest of which I am aware.

<sup>21</sup> There are two sub-variants of the fortuitous case: one is a 'believe and gain an impressive good' version, the other is a 'believe and maintain an impressive good' version. Jack Meiland, in 'What Ought We to Believe?', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 17/1 (1980), 15–16, employs the second sub-variant; as does Robert Nozick in *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 69–71.

<sup>22</sup> See L. Vase, M. E. Robinson, G. N. Verne, and D. D. Price, 'The Contributions of Suggestion, Desire, and Expectation to Placebo Effects in Irritable Bowel Syndrome Patients: An Empirical Investigation', *Pain*, 105 (2003), 17–25.

invoked by James), much sports psychology involves inculcating beliefs that lack adequate evidentiary support. By believing that one can achieve the goal, one is more likely to make an optimal effort. Having the belief that one will succeed often helps to bring it about that one does.

Although, clearly not common, extreme cases can occur and are justified exceptions to any general prohibition against believing less than well-supported propositions. Premise (BA2), as a consequence, seems beyond reproach.<sup>23</sup>

One might object that the Basic argument fails, since it is valid only if a proposition like the following is true:

- G. if S is justified in doing things that will result in her doing x, then S is justified in doing x.<sup>24</sup>

But one might argue that (G) is false. For instance, one might allege that the following is a counterexample to (G):

Suppose an evil and powerful tyrant offers me the following choice: die now, or submit to an irreversible and irresistible hypnotic suggestion which will cause me to kill myself five years from now. I have no other option. Surely I am practically justified in submitting to hypnosis in these circumstances. But it would be bizarre to maintain that five years from now, I am practically justified in killing myself.<sup>25</sup>

But this is no counterexample to proposition (G). Proposition (G) is specifically about actions. Irreversible and irresistible events that happen to one are clearly not actions of that person. In the alleged counterexample one's killing oneself is not an action (there is no deliberation or choice involved). It is an unavoidable consequence of gaining an additional five years of life. Of course the failure of this attack on proposition (G) does not entail that it is true, but, given its intuitive appeal, there is reason to accept (G).

<sup>23</sup> Contemporary employments of extreme-cases arguments are found in Elliott Sober and Gregory Mousin, 'Betting against Pascal's Wager', *Noûs*, 28/3 (1994), 382–95, for the ambitious task of supporting the permissible believing of an unlikely proposition. Clement Dore and Richard Foley can also be cited as proponents of the permissibility of believing an unlikely proposition, based on extreme cases. See the Mad Tyrant case described by Dore in *Theism* (Hingham, MA: D. Reidel, 1984), 104–5; and the Mad-Man case and the Million Dollar case, both described by Foley in *Working without a Net: A Study of Egocentric Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Eugene Mills, 'The Unity of Justification', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 58 (1998), 34–5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Premises (BA1) and (BA2), clearly enough, entail (BA3). But (BA3) does not warrant a general deployment of pragmatic arguments, since only independent pragmatic arguments are legitimately employable within an extreme-case situation, since believing is sufficient for obtaining the desired benefit. Belief, within the confines of a dependent pragmatic argument, may be necessary for gaining the desired benefit, but it is not sufficient. So, even though there is no general prohibition against pragmatic belief-formation, there may yet be a prohibition against forming beliefs on the basis of a dependent pragmatic argument. More precisely, consider the following rule or thesis, which we might dub as (I):

- I. it is rationally and morally permissible to believe a proposition  $p$ , even when the probability of  $p$  is less than one-half, if and only if (I.i) the utility of believing  $p$  is greater than the utility of not believing  $p$ ; and (I.ii) the utility of believing  $p$  is not contingent upon  $p$  being true; and (I.iii) either (a) believing  $p$  provides the only real chance of avoiding or escaping a desperate-case situation; or (b) believing  $p$  provides the only real chance of gaining an impressive good.

Thesis (I) codifies the permissibility of belief-formation within the sort of extreme cases described by James and others. It also makes clear that only independent pragmatic arguments and not dependent ones are permissibly used in an extreme-case situation that involves believing an unsupported proposition.

The argument for the plausibility of (I) is built upon the principle that:

- H. if the only means  $S$  has of gaining  $\beta$  is doing  $\alpha$ , then it is permissible for  $S$  to do  $\alpha$  if (H.i) bringing  $\beta$  about is permissible, and (H.ii)  $\beta$  obtaining is, all things considered, better than *not- $\beta$*  obtaining, even when brought about via the doing of  $\alpha$ .

This principle sets forth a permissibility condition that transmits permissibility from ends to means as long as the ends are themselves permissible, and the actualization of the ends via their sole feasible means is, all things considered, desirable. The notion of better involved in (H.ii) is that of an all-encompassing perspective, which, having access to the relevant facts, prefers the obtaining of one alternative to another. The idea of a sole means should be understood as that of the only means feasible, or, put another way, the only means practically available to the



agent in those circumstances. Although plagued with an unavoidable degree of vagueness, (H) appears nonetheless plausible.

It is evident that the plausibility of (H) supports the plausibility of clauses (I.i) and (I.iii), since pragmatic belief-formation, done in the context of an extreme case, would be a special case of (H). What about clause (I.ii)? Clause (I.ii) is important, since it is the clause that restricts the scope of (I) to independent pragmatic arguments only. Why include (I.ii)? Since we have seen that the evidentialist imperative has normative force, dependent arguments, contingent as they may be upon an unlikely proposition being true, do not override the stringency enjoyed by the evidentialist imperative. When is it permissible to deploy a dependent argument in belief-formation?

The use of dependent arguments is codified in another thesis that reads:

- D. it is rationally and morally permissible to believe a proposition  $p$  that is just as likely as not, or whose probability is indeterminate, at a time  $t$ , if and only if (D.i) the utility of believing  $p$  is greater than the utility of not believing  $p$ ; and (D.ii) believing  $p$  provides the only real chance of gaining some desired end  $E$ ; and (D.iii) there is no good reason to think that, at some time subsequent to  $t$ , such that  $E$  could yet be acquired, evidence will be forthcoming regarding the likelihood of  $p$ .

According to (D), if the probability of a proposition is just as likely as not, or is inscrutable, and if believing that proposition is the only feasible means one has of gaining a desired end, and if the utility of believing is greater than that of disbelief or suspending belief, then one may permissibly believe that proposition. Clause (D.iii) makes clear that, if there is reason to think that evidence might be forthcoming, before one loses all chance to believe, suspending judgment would be the rational thing to do, at least for a time.

Rule (D) does not depend upon the idea of an extreme case, although, of course, acting in the context of an extreme case would be a special case of clause (D.ii). Rule (D) allows for the propriety of invoking a dependent pragmatic argument, as well as an independent argument, whenever one finds oneself faced with a proposition whose probability is uncertain or just as likely as not, and believing that proposition would be, for some reason, beneficial.

Is (D) plausible? It seems so, since (D) allows one to form beliefs using a dependent argument only when doing so does not place one in a

position against which is arrayed a preponderance of counter-evidence. Without something like (D), we would find ourselves in possession of a doxastic policy that, paraphrasing James, would absolutely prevent one from acknowledging certain kinds of truths if those kinds of truths were really there, and from gaining certain kinds of goods. Such a policy would be, all things considered, irrational.

The plausibility of (I) and (D) generates the following results. First, it is permissible, rationally and morally, to induce belief via a pragmatic argument, whether independent or dependent, when one finds oneself faced with a proposition whose probability value is uncertain or just as likely as not, as long as believing that proposition is both useful and necessary for gaining some desirable outcome. Second, it is permissible, rationally and morally, to believe an unlikely proposition using an independent pragmatic argument, and not a dependent one, when the conditions outlined in (I) hold. Importantly, both (I) and (D) can be corralled with the evidentialist imperative. It is just that the evidentialist imperative must not take on Cliffordian proportions. It must be seen for what it is: a defeasible rule operative under typical conditions, but inoperative under extreme ones. The plausibility of (I) and (D) flows, in good part, from their specifying both the permissible employment of pragmatic arguments and, as a corollary, the operative range of the evidentialist imperative. Principles (I) and (D) also impact Pascal's Wagers. The Canonical Wager falls prey to (I); while the Jamesian Wager comports well with both. That is, insofar as one finds (I) plausible, one has reason to reject the Canonical Wager. But, importantly, one can accept both (I) and (D), and the Jamesian Wager. Indeed, one can accept (I) and (D), and defeasible evidentialism, and the Jamesian Wager. A Pascalian, that is, contrary to conventional thought, can be an evidentialist.

## 5. SIX OBJECTIONS

One objection to the foregoing is that pragmatic arguments are, by and large, pointless because beliefs are, by their very nature, psychological states that aim for truth. That is, whenever one believes a proposition, one is disposed to feel that that proposition is probably the case. A person ordinarily cannot believe a proposition that she takes to have a probability of less than one-half or whose probability is uncertain since such propositional attitudes do not aim for truth. As Richard Foley puts it:

many of our discussions concerning what it is rational for someone to believe take place in a context of trying to convince that person to believe some proposition. In an effort to convince her, we point out the reasons she has to believe it. But insofar as our aim is to get her to believe something that she does not now believe, the citing of practical reasons is ordinarily ineffective. Even if we convince her that she has good practical reasons to believe a proposition, ordinarily this is not enough to generate belief. By contrast, if she becomes convinced that she has good epistemic reasons—that is, reasons that indicate, or at least purport to indicate, that the proposition in question is likely to be true—in the normal course of things this is enough to generate belief.<sup>26</sup>

The point of this first objection is that absolute evidentialism is unavoidable.

If it is true, as this first objection holds, that believing a proposition ordinarily involves being disposed to feel that the proposition is probably the case, then it does appear at first blush that pragmatic belief-formation, as such, is ineffectual. But all that follows from this fact, if such it be, is that some sort of belief-inducing technology will be necessary in order to facilitate the acquisition of a proposition that is pragmatically supported. Now it is true that the most readily available belief-inducing technologies—selectively using the evidence, for instance—all involve a degree of self-deception, since one ordinarily cannot attend only to the favorable evidence in support of a particular proposition while neglecting the adverse evidence arrayed against it and, being conscious of all this, expect that one will acquire that belief. The fact that self-deception is a vital feature of the readily available belief-formation technologies leads to the second objection.

The second objection is that willfully engaging in self-deception renders pragmatic belief-formation morally problematic and rationally suspect, since willfully engaging in self-deception is the deliberate worsening of one's epistemic situation. It is morally and rationally problematic to engage in pragmatic belief-formation, insofar as belief-formation involves self-deception.<sup>27</sup>

This second objection is powerful if sound, but we must be careful here. First, while self-deception may be a serious problem with regard to inculcating a belief that one takes to be false, it does not seem to be a serious threat involving the inculcation of a belief that one

<sup>26</sup> Richard Foley, 'Pragmatic Reasons for Belief', in Jordan (ed.), *Gambling on God*, 38.

<sup>27</sup> This sort of objection is found in Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 82–92.

thinks has as much evidence in its favor as against it, nor does it seem to be a threat when one takes the probability of the proposition to be indeterminate, since one could form the belief knowing full well the evidential situation. Even if it is true that believing that *p* is *being disposed to feel that p is probably the case*, it does not follow that believing that *p* involves *being disposed to feel that p is probably the case based on the evidence at hand*. Second, this is not an objection to pragmatic belief-formation *per se*, but an objection to pragmatic belief-formation that involves self-deception. Although it may be true that the employment of self-deceptive belief-inducing technologies is morally and rationally problematic, this objection says nothing about those belief-inducing technologies that do not involve self-deception. If there are belief-inducing technologies that are free of self-deception and that could generate a belief on the basis of a pragmatic reason, then this objection fails.

Is there a belief-inducing technology available that does not involve self-deception? There is. Notice first there are two sorts of belief-inducing technologies distinguishable: 'low-tech' technologies and 'high-tech' ones. Low-tech technologies consist of propositional attitudes only, while high-tech ones employ nonpropositional techniques along with various propositional attitudes. The nonpropositional techniques include actions like acting as if a certain proposition were true, and morally questionable ones like hypnosis, and indoctrination, and subliminal suggestion. Consider a technology consisting of two components, the first of which is the acceptance of a proposition, while the second is a behavioral regimen of acting on that acceptance. Accepting a proposition, unlike believing, is an action that is characterized, in part, by one's assenting to the proposition, whether one believes it or not.<sup>28</sup> One accepts a proposition, when one assents to its truth and employs it as a premise in one's deliberations. One can accept a proposition that one does not believe. Indeed, we do this much of the time. For example, think of the gambler's fallacy. One might be disposed to believe that the next toss of the fair coin must come up Tails, since it has been Heads on the previous seven tosses. Nevertheless, one ought not to accept that the next toss must come up Tails, or that the

<sup>28</sup> On the distinction between acceptance and believing, see William Alston, 'Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith' in J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). See also L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 1–26.

probability that it will is greater than one-half. Acceptance, we should remember, unlike believing, is an action that is under our direct control.

If one accepts a proposition, then one can also act upon the proposition. Acting upon a proposition is behaving as though it were true. The two-step regimen of accepting a proposition and then acting upon it is a common way of generating belief in that proposition.<sup>29</sup> And, importantly, there is no hint of self-deception tainting the process.

Additionally, it is far from clear that every case of self-deception is morally or rationally problematic. Although the details cannot be developed here, it seems plausible enough that, just as it is sometimes permissible to deceive other people (for instance, leaving the lights on when one goes out for the evening is a permissible way of deceiving would-be burglars), it is likewise sometimes permissible to deceive oneself. Indeed, the defusing of a desperate case would seem just the sort of occasion in which it is permissible to do so.

The third objection is that employing pragmatic reasons, whether or not self-deception is involved, is rationally problematic, since believing a proposition based on pragmatic considerations is apt to put one in a risky epistemic situation. Since, as intellectual beings, we have the goal of possessing a comprehensive stock of accurate beliefs from which to draw when faced with urgent decisions, forming beliefs on the basis of pragmatic reasons seriously threatens to undermine that goal. Employing pragmatic arguments in belief-formation greatly enhances the risk that we might render ourselves epistemically incontinent: unable to control what we believe and, as a consequence, liable to believe nearly anything since we have undermined our commitment to having a comprehensive stock of accurate beliefs.

Again, this is a powerful objection if pragmatic reasoning is an epistemic toxin that, once encountered, proves fatal to one's epistemic health. But it is far from clear that it is, since the objection greatly exaggerates the risk that believing in the face of inconclusive evidence or even in the face of adverse evidence will plunge one into epistemic incontinence. After all, many people, if not most people, sometimes engage in believing without the support of adequate evidence, and there is no evidence that such credulity tends to threaten anyone's epistemic

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Daryl Bem, 'Self-Perception Theory', in L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental and Social Psychology* (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 1–62. And see Leon Festinger and J. M. Carlsmith, 'Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 58 (1959), 203–10.

health. Further, while it may be true that promiscuously engaging in pragmatic reasoning may enhance the risk that we render ourselves epistemically incontinent, (I) and (D) serve as restraints, rational stoppers as it were, against any indiscriminate pragmatic reasoning. Complying with (I) and (D) prevents one from employing pragmatic arguments in support of just any proposition. With rules (I) and (D) in hand, the frequency of permissible pragmatic reasoning will be significantly less than what a Cliffordian would fear.

Perhaps, however, this objection should be understood as contending that pragmatic reasoning, even done under the auspices of (I) and (D), is so epistemically damaging to our goals, qua intellectual agents, that it is never permissible to engage in it. The idea here is that, even if it is morally permissible to reason pragmatically, it is yet unreasonable to do so for the reason that pragmatic considerations are never epistemically relevant, since they tell us nothing regarding truth or probability.<sup>30</sup> The problem with this understanding of the third objection is that it runs afoul of the Basic argument. We can imagine desperate cases in which it is not just morally permissible to reason pragmatically, but it is obligatory to do so. For instance, suppose one were faced with the dilemma either of believing an unlikely proposition (via a doxastic-producing pill, let us imagine), or of a madman causing the death of many innocent people otherwise. In a case like this, believing the unlikely proposition appears not only morally permissible, but obligatory as well. And, since one is never irrational doing one's moral duty, there are circumstances in which it is not only morally permissible to reason pragmatically; it is rationally permissible as well.

Moreover, the third objection, by identifying rationality with epistemic justification, brands pragmatically based beliefs as irrational. While it may be true that pragmatic reasons tell us nothing directly about truth or probability, it does not follow that pragmatic reasons have no epistemic relevance at all. It pays to remember that the principle of epistemic conservatism, for instance, is not an epistemological principle so much as it is a pragmatic one. Even so, the principle may well have relevance with regard to a person's epistemic justification of some of her beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> This sort of objection is found in John Heil, 'Believing What One Ought', *Journal of Philosophy*, 80/11 (1993), 752–65.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Gilbert Harman's argument in support of epistemic conservatism in *Change of View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), chs. 4, 5. See also the dissenting view offered by David Christensen, 'Conservatism in Epistemology', *Noûs*, 28/1 (1994), 69–89.

Be that as it may, the identification of rationality with epistemic justification is erroneous, since there are different kinds of rationality. In addition to epistemic rationality, we can identify moral rationality as well as pragmatic rationality. The diversity of rationalities entails that any straightforward identification of rationality with any single kind misconstrues the topography of rationality.<sup>32</sup> Like the first two objections, then, we can conclude that the third objection fails to show that we are never morally or rationally justified in forming beliefs on the basis of pragmatic reasons.

A final point about the third objection: it is doubtful that we have the intellectual goal of possessing a comprehensive stock of accurate beliefs from which to draw. If we have such a goal, then omniscience is an epistemic ideal toward which we should aspire. But does it make sense to aspire or seek the impossible? No human can attain omniscience. Perhaps unattainable ideals have a place, since some might contend that unattainable ideals play an important role in morality. Still, it may be self-defeating to aspire to a comprehensive stock of accurate beliefs from which to draw. There are any number of true propositions, belief in which carries no extrinsic or practical value at all. How many grains of sand are there now at a certain part of Rehoboth Beach? Suitably defined, there is an answer. But what good would there be in knowing? Indeed, there may be significant costs, even harm, in believing certain true propositions. Revise the Rehoboth Beach proposition with a variation in time (keeping in mind the effects of wind and surf): how many grains were there on 1 April 1860, and on 2 April 1860, and on 3 April 1860, and on ... The stock of beliefs possessed by a human is limited, even if the disposition to believe may not be. Assuming a cost to the acquisition of belief (a cost in time or effort of inquiry, or an opportunity cost (inquiring into  $p$  now means postponing inquiry into  $q$  until later)), believing propositions involving grains of sand on a certain part of Rehoboth Beach may be a bad investment, even if believing a true proposition has intrinsic value. Trying to implement the goal of possessing a comprehensive stock of accurate beliefs from which to draw without filtering out the clutter of extrinsically worthless propositions may result in one's stock of beliefs being less useful than it otherwise could have been.

The fourth objection asserts that the employment of pragmatic arguments as inducements to belief is objectionable since morally

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion concerning the various kinds of rationality and the relations among them, see Paul Moser, *Empirical Justification* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1985), 211–38.

problematic propositions might be considered rational, even if we adhere to (I) and (D). The idea is that using pragmatic arguments as belief-inducements makes it easier for, say, racist beliefs to qualify as rational than would be the case if one holds to the evidentialist imperative. Denying an absolute status to the evidentialist imperative opens a window of opportunity for the acceptance of morally objectionable beliefs.

This objection is correct so far as it goes: the likelihood of morally objectionable beliefs qualifying as rational is somewhat greater if we employ pragmatic reasoning than it would be if we were to adhere to the evidentialist imperative alone. But it does not follow that pragmatic reasoning is morally impermissible or irrational. Moreover, if moral rationality takes precedence over pragmatic rationality, which seems likely, then, even if it is pragmatically beneficial to adopt a morally objectionable belief, it would not be rational to do so from an all-things-considered perspective. The precedence enjoyed by moral rationality supplies a further constraint upon the scope of pragmatic reasoning. So, this alleged risk turns out to be no risk at all.

A fifth objection is the bald claim that no sane person (or at least no one not suffering from a serious cognitive malfunction) could employ a pragmatic argument. Michael Rea puts the objection this way:

To believe a proposition while at the same time appreciating the fact that one has no epistemic justification for believing it is consciously to ignore evidential considerations in belief formation. Of course, people sometimes do ignore evidential considerations. But sane people typically do so by not attending to those considerations rather than by attending to but flagrantly disregarding them. Thus, it is hard to see how a person not suffering from cognitive malfunction could believe a proposition for which she consciously takes herself to have no epistemic justification ... if pragmatic and epistemic rationality can diverge at all, they can diverge only in those people who suffer from serious cognitive malfunction.<sup>33</sup>

While extravagant in its psychological claims, this objection is pedestrian in its mistakes. Suppose Rea is correct that believing a proposition while flagrantly disregarding that one has conclusive evidence for its denial is sufficient for insanity. Clearly enough, the Pascalian is not insane on that score. A proponent of the Jamesian Wager will not find himself having conclusive reason for thinking that God does not exist, since the Jamesian Wager is predicated upon situations of epistemic parity.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Rea, *World without Design: The Ontological Consequences of Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 143.



Moreover, to say that one has 'no epistemic justification' for believing  $p$  is ambiguous between one having adequate reason for denying  $p$ , and one lacking adequate reason for believing  $p$ . One who holds that  $p$  is just as likely as not lacks adequate evidence for  $p$ , but neither does she have adequate evidence for not- $p$ . Well, what about the Canonical version? Does insanity flow automatically from a use of it? Again, clearly not, since a proponent of the Canonical version presumably could proceed by ignoring con-evidence, rather than attending to it and flagrantly disregarding it. The belief-formation strategy of ignoring con-evidence is commonplace, even if it is not epistemically respectable.

Finally, the last objection is that knowingly to believe, or to cultivate, a proposition not supported by the evidence is an intrinsic evil so bad as always to fall on the far side of impermissibility. This objection might be built upon the notion of a basic evil from Thomistic natural law. A basic evil, or what is sometimes called 'evil *per se*', is an action that is always wrong for an agent intentionally to do, no matter what instrumental benefits may follow from it. Suppose that lying were a basic evil. It would be wrong to lie, even if the heavens should otherwise fall. Likewise knowingly to cultivate belief in a proposition that is not supported by the evidence is to expose oneself to the great wrong of basic evil.

It is hard to take this objection seriously. Consider the Alpine Hiker case again. Is it really plausible to hold that the hiker commits a basic evil by maximizing his chance for survival? Or consider the following thought experiment, which we might call the 'ET case'. Suppose you were abducted by very powerful and very smart extraterrestrials that demonstrate their intent and power to destroy the Earth. Moreover, these fiendish ETs offer but one chance of salvation for humankind, that you acquire and maintain a belief for which you lack adequate evidence. You adroitly point out that you cannot just will such a belief, especially since you know of no good reason to think it true. Devilish in their anticipation and in their technology, the ETs produce a device that can directly produce the requisite belief in willing subjects, a serum, say, or a supply of one-a-day doxastic-producing pills. It is clear that you would do no wrong by swallowing a pill or injecting the serum, and, hence, bringing about and maintaining belief in a proposition for which you lack adequate evidence, done to save humankind. If this objection were valid, you have impermissibly dirtied your hands in the service of humankind, by committing a basic evil. But that conclusion is too wildly implausible to take seriously. It is clear enough that there are occasions in which it would not be a basic

evil knowingly to cultivate belief in a proposition that is just as likely as not.

## 6. ALL THINGS CONSIDERED?

So far in the discussion I have made ample use of the idea that there are various kinds of rationalities or obligations—epistemic, moral, pragmatic, legal, aesthetic, religious ...—that can conflict. Moreover, I have suggested that there is a kind of rationality *überhaupt*, a rationality all-things-considered (ATC), which sometimes adjudicates these conflicts. One might ask whether my ample use of this idea is justified, or whether it even makes sense.

Richard Feldman has argued that the idea of rationality ATC does not make sense.<sup>34</sup> In brief Feldman's contention is that there are moral obligations and epistemic obligations and prudential obligations, but there is no generic, overall obligation that settles dilemmas. Intra-adjudication makes sense according to Feldman. So, for example, it is possible that one of two conflicting moral obligations can take moral precedence for an agent at a particular time. But inter-adjudications are not possible, he argues. To say that one ought to fulfill one's moral duties even when they conflict with one's epistemic duties carries a 'dangling ought'. What kind of obligation is the first ought in the preceding sentence? Moral? Well, that is not helpful when the issue is the conflict of moral oughts and nonmoral oughts, and which kind of ought, if any, takes precedence. ATC? But what kind of value is that? It follows from Feldman's argument that assertions like 'moral oughts always take precedence over prudential oughts' are meaningless. No matter how meaningful such an assertion might seem.

A Pascalian could very well agree with Feldman that there is no meaningful way of adjudicating the dilemmas between the various kinds of rationalities. Jones may be morally obligated to do A, but epistemically obligated at the same time to do B (and unable to do both). The Pascalian, following Feldman, could say that there is no fact of the matter here concerning what Jones ought to do. If Jones chooses to do A, there is little point in criticizing her choice, since, no matter

<sup>34</sup> Richard Feldman, 'The Ethics of Belief', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60/3 (2000), 693–5, repr. in Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*, 166–95.

which choice she made, A or B, she would be exposed to the same sort of critique. So, if there is no ATC adjudication, or no knowable hierarchy of obligations, the ethics of belief dissolves. It becomes a pseudo-problem with which the Pascalian need not bother.

But Feldman's argument, while powerful, is not conclusive. It is not conclusive just because sentences like:

13. moral obligations take precedence over prudential obligations

are meaningful. Allow me to sketch a theory of rationality ATC, supplying just enough detail to make the theory understandable. My theory, while sketchy, is sufficient to show that a determinate sense can be given to the idea of rationality ATC. The first point to note is that talk of dilemmas between moral oughts and nonmoral oughts suggests a nonconsequentialist view of morality. Within a consequentialist morality, as standardly conceived, dilemmas are not possible. Since one is obligated to do that action that maximizes value, there is a principled way of adjudicating conflicts. If there is not a maximizing action, any of the conflicting alternatives may be done. So, the problem of dilemmas arises most naturally within a nonconsequentialist context.<sup>35</sup> So, let us assume that alleged conflicts between epistemic duties and pragmatic considerations take place within a nonconsequentialist context. Within that context, the way to understand the claim that one ought, ATC, to do, say, one's moral duty whenever one is in a dilemma between moral obligations and prudential obligations requires importing a bit of consequentialism at a meta-level. One should do one's moral duty whenever there is a conflict between a moral duty and a prudential duty because doing so produces more value overall than does doing one's prudential duty. The idea of rationality ATC is similar but not identical to the idea of consequentialism in morality. Just as the consequentialist asserts that one is morally obligated to do whatever action maximizes value, so too rationality ATC asserts that one ought to do that action that maximizes value (moral value added to prudential value added to epistemic value ...), even if morality is nonconsequentialist. The ATC ought attaches to whatever makes the world more valuable than it otherwise would be. What kind of ought is the ATC ought? It is a

<sup>35</sup> One might object that moral and epistemic and prudential values are not commensurable, and hence there is a problem even within a consequentialist framework. I ignore this complication by assuming that the various values, the various rationalities, are commensurable.

means–end ought, a practical ought, what Kant would call a hypothetical imperative. Given a goal of maximizing value, one is subject to an ATC ought. In saying that the ATC ought is practical, I am not, of course, saying that it is prudential. Maximizing value may require an imprudent action. Maximizing value may require an epistemically unreasonable action or belief. Indeed, it is conceivable that maximizing value may require an immoral action (if morality is nonconsequentialist). Presumably, of course, doing what is right is nearly always also making the world better than it otherwise would be. Doing what is right is nearly always a case of maximizing value (and, of course, the consequentialist will argue that doing what is right just is maximizing value). But this idea of rationality ATC, a practical ought, is compatible with nonconsequentialist morality. Is the goal of maximizing value a natural goal of humans? If it is, then there could be ATC oughts. While I know no way to argue that humans just naturally have the goal of maximizing value, since it seems very plausible that we do, I assume that we do.<sup>36</sup>

Earlier I asserted that the possibility of a dilemma between various kinds of obligations suggests a nonconsequentialist view of morality. Why suggests and not implies? Is it possible to be a consequentialist with morality, and a nonconsequentialist with other obligations, whether epistemic or prudential? Although this permutation is odd and I know of no one who would subscribe to it, let us suppose it is possible. The theory of a practical rationality ATC is relevant even with this oddity. One's fulfilling of one's epistemic duty (deontological in nature let us suppose) at a particular time will have the effect of either making the world better off or not. The same thing is true of one fulfilling one's prudential duty. If the world is better off by fulfilling one's prudential duty, say, than it would be if one fulfilled one's epistemic duty, then, from the ATC perspective, one ought to fulfill one's prudential duty.

While there is much more detail to fill in with this account of rationality ATC, enough has been said to make it clear that assertions like (13) are meaningful; and to make it clear enough what is meant when someone says such things.

<sup>36</sup> Either humans have no natural goals about maximizing value at all, or humans do have a natural goal about maximizing value for oneself (or one's group), or humans do have a natural goal of maximizing value *simpliciter*. Since I think it is likely that humans do have natural goals, and since I find egoistic and relativistic goals (in this context) implausible, I assume that humans have the natural goal of maximizing value.

## 7. THE CUPIDITY OBJECTION

G. E. Moore once said of Pascal's Wager that he would say nothing of it except that it was 'absolutely wicked'.<sup>37</sup> William James had the memorable remark that:

You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming table, it is put to its last trumps ... We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward.<sup>38</sup>

It is a common enough complaint that the Wager is predicated upon human selfishness by dangling a possible reward to entice a self-interested belief. Is the Wager predicated on selfishness? Is it, in short, immoral, to form beliefs, especially religious beliefs, on the basis of pragmatic reasons? Many people apparently think so, since a charge of moral turpitude is one of the most common objections leveled against the employment of pragmatic reasoning in matters of faith. While this charge of moral turpitude is not part of the ethics of belief debate, this is a natural context in which to investigate the charge. There are two notable versions of the Cupidity objection: the *Avarice* charge, and the *Conditionality* charge.

The *Avarice* charge comes in many versions, but at base the charge is that cultivating theistic belief on the basis of a pragmatic argument violates a moral duty prohibiting injury, whether it is injury to oneself or to another. Earlier in this chapter we looked at ethical evidentialism, which commands fidelity to the alleged moral duty to conform one's beliefs to the evidence. While ethical evidentialism is an instance of

<sup>37</sup> Reported in Paul Levy, *Moore* (New York: Humanity Press, 1979), 214. This remark was made in an 1898 paper presented to the Sunday Essay Society, 'Religious Belief', which was later revised and published in the *International Journal of Ethics* in 1901 as 'The Value of Religion'. See Tom Regan, *Bloomsbury's Prophet* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 40. Explicit reference to Pascal's Wager was excised in the published version. It is interesting to note that Moore asserts in 'The Value of Religion' that religious faith is sometimes justified even though in principle there can be no evidence, pro or con, regarding the existence of God. The justification is in no way due to positive effects of religious belief, but to the unshakable conviction that some have that God exists. See 'The Value of Religion', in *G. E. Moore: The Early Essays*, ed. T. Regan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 115–18.

<sup>38</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', 6.

the avarice charge, it is not the only one. Consider these provocative comments by J. L. Mackie:

Although you cannot believe by simply deciding to do so, you can come to believe by deciding to cultivate belief... No doubt Pascal is right about this; but it goes against his earlier claim that to bet one way or another about God will do no injury to your reason. Deliberately to make oneself believe, by such techniques as he suggests—essentially by playing tricks on oneself that are found by experience to work upon people's passions and to give rise to belief in non-rational ways—is to do violence to one's reason and understanding... It will make you stupid. Others have put it more mildly: to acquire faith, you must become as a little child. But, however, it is expressed, the point remains: in deliberately cultivating non-rational belief, one would be suppressing one's critical faculties.<sup>39</sup>

To believe on the basis of the Wager, this objection alleges, is harmful to one's cognitive health. Just as consulting astrology tables or taking advice from an Ouija board injures one's critical faculties, engaging in Pascalian Wagering generates credulity and gullibility, or so it is alleged.

Perhaps there is something to this objection. But if there is, it applies to the Canonical Wager, and not to the Jamesian Wager. As noted earlier rules (I) and (D) play an important role in protecting the cognitive health of the Pascalian. While it is true that the Canonical Wager violates these rules, the Jamesian Wager does not. Moreover, even if it were true that every Pascalian Wager invites self-injury, it does not follow that it is immoral to employ a Pascalian Wager. Consider the Basic argument. It follows from the Basic argument that pragmatic belief formation may be one's moral duty. So, if it is true that every possible occasion of pragmatic belief formation is self-injurious (which is dubious), and there are possible occasions in which pragmatic belief formation is morally obligatory, then there could be occasions in which pragmatic reasoning is morally permissible even if it is injurious to the bettor. One can be morally obligated to sacrifice one's own interests, even one's own life. Actions that are injurious are not always immoral. Mackie's objection fails.

One might frame the Avarice charge another way. The injury caused by Pascalian Wagering is not likely to be morally permissible, one might assert. To engage in Pascalian Wagering is to corrupt oneself, by dulling one's reason. Moreover, this self-corruption is not an acute condition but a chronic one. That is, while a synchronic self-injury (an

<sup>39</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 202–3.

injury limited to a restricted time) may be morally permissible, it is not likely that a diachronic self-corruption is permissible (a corruption that persists). This objection may have a point about some versions of the Wager, but the effect attributed to Pascalian Wagering is dubious as long as one keeps in mind that the Jamesian Wager is done only within the restrictions imposed by (I) and (D). Perhaps a diachronic self-corruption may result from an 'anything-goes' kind of pragmatic belief formation, but that is not what is at issue. As long as one is compliant to the strictures of (I) and (D), self-injury, whether chronic or acute, is not a serious risk.

Since there is reason to think that Pascalian Wagering does not always cause self-injury, and since self-injury is sometimes morally permissible, the Avarice charge framed as a matter of self-injury is not promising. Let us consider the charge as a matter of causing injury to others. W. K. Clifford's robust comments provide an example of the Avarice charge framed as a matter of injuring others:

If I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery ... Habitual want of care about what I believe leads to habitual want of care in others about the truth of what is told to me ... What would be thought of one who, for the sake of a sweet fruit, should deliberately run the risk of bringing a plague upon his family and his neighbors?<sup>40</sup>

Here the idea is that pragmatic belief formation injures others, or, more plausibly, puts others at an unacceptably high risk of injury. As noted earlier, Clifford's argument is most plausibly seen as an indirect consequentialist argument; if everyone were to refrain from pragmatic reasoning, collective utility would be maximized.

What can we make of this version of the Avarice charge? Not much I think. There is good reason to doubt the claim that pernicious consequences follow from every case of nonevidential reasoning. Most people engage, at least occasionally, in pragmatic reasoning, and the alleged dreaded consequences do not follow. Further, even if injury to others is a foreseeable consequence of pragmatic reasoning, it does

<sup>40</sup> Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', 185–6.

not follow that it is immoral to engage in pragmatic belief formation. Keeping in mind that ‘injury’ needs to be understood in a sense broader than just physical harm, a sense something like diminished interests, or frustrated preferences, it is clear that there can be morally permissible injuries to others, even deliberate injury to others. Consider a case formulated by Robert Nozick:

Suppose there are twenty-six women and twenty-six men each wanting to marry. For each sex, all of that sex agree on the same ranking of the twenty-six members of the opposite sex in terms of desirability as marriage partners: call them A to Z and A' to Z' respectively in decreasing preferential order. A and A' voluntarily choose to get married, each preferring the other to any other partner. B would most prefer to marry A', and B' would most prefer to marry A, but by their choices A and A' have removed these options. When B and B' marry, ... [they] choose among fewer options than did A and A'. This contraction of the range of options continues down the line until we come to Z and Z'. Each prefers any one of the twenty-five other partners ...<sup>41</sup>

Unhappiness, disappointment, frustration, perhaps even anguish are the effects of morally permissible free choice in this case, even though no immoral action has occurred. Without a plausible reason for thinking that pragmatic reasoning in general, or Pascalian Wagering in particular, tends to result in morally unacceptable injury to others, the Avarice charge founders.

Although heard less often than the Avarice charge, the Conditionality charge is the more interesting of the pair. Briefly put, the Conditionality charge is that pragmatic reasoning provides only prudential support for something, support that is conditional in nature. To say that the support lent by the Wager is conditional means that it is contingent upon the circumstances. If the circumstances were to change such that it is no longer within one's self-interest to believe, so too would the support offered by the Wager. The Pascalian, so the charge goes, is a kind of ideological mercenary, ready to lend his services to the highest bidder. Perhaps the Conditionality charge is best illustrated by the following. A man stands up in a crowded restaurant and calls out, quieting the din, ‘I have lost my wallet. It's a brown leather duo-fold and contains a thousand dollars. If you find it, bring it to my table and I will give you a hundred dollars.’ As soon as the man sits down, a second man stands up and calls out, ‘bring it to my table, and I will give you a hundred dollars and buy you dinner’.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 263.



William James was probably mentioning the Conditionality charge with the claim, already quoted above, that ‘we feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith’s reality . . .’. In brief, the Conditionality charge is that the Wager motivates one to do what is right, not because it is right, but because it is prudent. The Pascalian may act in conformity with the law, but she is not acting out of respect for the law.

There is a kernel of truth lodged in the Conditionality charge—pragmatic support is less desirable than evidential support. The Pascalian could agree with J. S. Mill’s claim that ‘it is a most painful position to a conscientious and cultivated mind to be drawn in contrary directions by the two noblest of all objects of pursuit—truth and the general good’.<sup>42</sup> A sound and widely accepted cosmological argument for the existence of God is more desirable than a sound and widely accepted pragmatic argument for theistic belief. But where the charge misses the mark is that this desirability is not moral but intellectual. Three mitigating points are important to keep in mind in the context of this charge. First, motives can be overdetermined, even those motives generated by Pascalian Wagering. One can engage in Pascalian Wagering out of self-interested motives clearly, but it can also be done out of a concern for others. One might engage in Pascalian Wagering, at least in part, in order to put oneself in position more effectively to bring others to that position. Even if one’s dominant motive for engaging in Pascalian Wagering is not concern for the interests of others, concern can still play a part. Second, it is clear that Pascal thought that, even if one comes to faith via selfishness, it is likely that one’s selfishness will dissipate over time as one matures in the faith. Pascal famously thought that faith was catching, that routine exposure to the faithful generates faith. Genuine faith directs one’s priorities and values away from oneself and toward others, so one may begin down the path of faith selfishly, but one is not likely to remain selfish while journeying down that path. As William James might have put it, what is important is not the root of the tree, but the fruit that the tree eventually produces. Third, with Pascal’s Wager, everyone can win. The situation is not

<sup>42</sup> J. S. Mill, ‘Utility of Religion’, in *Three Essays on Religion* (1870; New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1874), 71. This posthumously published essay was probably written sometime between 1850 and 1858.

a zero-sum game, in which self-interested maximization is costly to others.

With these points in mind, it is clear enough that the Conditionality charge is not decisive against the Wager. While from a purely intellectual perspective pragmatic arguments are less desirable than epistemic arguments, it certainly does not follow that, an employment of pragmatic arguments is immoral. Importantly, by the way, it also does not follow that, since pragmatic arguments are less desirable than epistemic ones, an employment of pragmatic arguments is intellectually suspect. One cannot assert that unless one is willing to say that an employment of inductive arguments is intellectually suspect, since sound deductive arguments are intellectually more desirable than are inductively reliable ones. Of course, since no one is willing to say the latter, the Pascalian has good reason no longer to hear the former.

## 8. FINAL MATTERS

Four primary results flow from the foregoing. The first is that there are occasions in which it is permissible, both rationally and morally, to form beliefs based upon pragmatic reasons in the absence of adequate evidence. The various charges of moral impropriety leveled against the Wager fail. The second result is that among the class of pragmatic arguments two kinds are discernible: those that are truth-independent and those that are truth-dependent. We have also seen that each has a different role to play when one is faced with a less than optimal evidential situation. The third result is that the Basic argument does not have as wide a scope as might be thought. Only independent pragmatic arguments and not dependent ones are properly employed within a context of adverse evidence. The fourth result is that the Pascalian can be an evidentialist. This result can be expressed another way: one can employ the Jamesian Wager, even while holding to defeasible evidentialism. On the other hand, the Canonical Wager stumbles on this point. One cannot endorse both rule (I) and the Canonical Wager. Defeasible evidentialism can be retained by the Pascalian in its most plausible form only at the cost of surrendering the Canonical Wager. One cannot have both. These four results provide good reason for thinking that the ethics of belief and epistemology generally should encompass the pragmatic as well as the epistemic.

## 9. EXCURSUS II: MORAL ARGUMENTS AS PRAGMATIC ARGUMENTS

As indicated earlier, pragmatic arguments in support of theistic belief can be predicated either on prudence, or on morality.<sup>43</sup> By pragmatic arguments predicated on morality I mean arguments that contend that morality, or some proper part of morality, presupposes, or is facilitated by, theistic belief. And, if morality, or the proper part of morality, is rational, then so too is theistic belief. Put generally:

- a. doing  $\alpha$  helps to bring about  $\beta$ ; and,
- b. it is morally desirable that  $\beta$ . So,
- c. it is *prima facie* morally desirable to do  $\alpha$ .

Since (a) specifies actions, we should understand accepting theistic propositions as an action, or taking steps to inculcate theistic belief, even if believing is not an action.

It is important to recognize the distinction between theoretical moral arguments for theism (arguments intended to show that God exists), and pragmatic moral arguments for the rationality of theistic belief. George Mavrodes, for instance, constructs a theoretical moral argument by contending that it would be extremely odd that we would have moral obligations the fulfillment of which results in a net loss to the agent. Such a world seems absurd.<sup>44</sup> His argument is built upon the idea of a Russellian world, a universe in which mental events are products of non-mental events, and in which there is no human post-mortem survival, and extinction is the final end of every biological species. A Russellian world implies atheism. Summarized, Mavrodes's argument is that there are real moral obligations in the actual world and not just the appearance of duty. Real moral obligations impose hard burdens, requiring actions that often result in a foreseeable net loss or sacrifice on the part of the moral agent. Real moral obligations would be absurd in a Russellian world, since there is no deep explanation of real moral obligation in such a world. The deep features of a Russellian world

<sup>43</sup> My analysis and discussion here are influenced by Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 358.

<sup>44</sup> George Mavrodes, 'Religion and the Queerness of Morality', in R. Audi and W. Wainwright (eds.), *Rationality, Religious Belief, & Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 213–26.

would be things like forces and atoms and chance, features that provide no reason why the moral agent should conform to sacrificial duties and not to self-interest. Sacrificing one's own good for the good of another seems absurd from the perspective of a Russellian world. But, fulfilling moral obligation is not absurd. So, in this respect, there is reason to think that the actual world is not a Russellian world.

Two recent examples of pragmatic moral arguments are in two essays, written by, respectively, Robert Adams and Linda Zagzebski.<sup>45</sup> Adams builds his argument on the concept of demoralization—weakening of moral motivation—and the concept of a moral order—roughly, the idea that to achieve a balance of good over evil in the universe requires something more than human effort, yet human effort can add or detract from the total value of the universe. While we cannot do it all on our own, the idea is, we can make a significant difference for better or worse. In short, Adams's argument is that it is demoralizing not to believe that there is a moral order in the universe, and demoralization is morally undesirable. So, there is moral advantage in accepting that there is a moral order, and theism provides the best account of why that is. Hence, there is moral advantage in accepting theism.

Zagzebski builds her argument upon the ideas of moral skepticism, and moral efficacy, and, though she does not employ the term, moral order. Morality is efficacious if we can make significant contributions to the production of good in the universe and to the elimination of evil. Moral skepticism is a doubting of our ability to acquire moral knowledge, and a doubting of moral efficacy. Zagzebski argues that it is rational to try to be moral only if it is rational to believe that the probability that the attempt will succeed and will produce a great good is not outweighed by the probability that one will have to sacrifice goods in the course of the attempt. But, given what we know of human abilities and history, it is not rational to believe that the attempt to be moral is likely to succeed if there is no moral order. Since it is rational to try to be moral, it is rational to believe that there is moral order in the universe, and Christian doctrine is, in part, an account of there being a moral order in the universe. So, accepting Christian theism is more rational than accepting that there is no moral order in the universe.

<sup>45</sup> See Robert Adams, 'Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief', in C. Delaney (ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 116–40; and Linda Zagzebski, 'Does Ethics Need God?' *Faith and Philosophy*, 4/3 (1987), 294–303.

Probably the strongest objection to Pascal's Wager is the many-gods objection, which contends, as we shall see in detail in the next chapter, that Pascal's partition of Christian theism and atheism is too narrow. A similar problem arises for theistic moral pragmatic arguments, at least insofar as those arguments are intended to provide strong support for theistic belief. Let us say that a pragmatic argument provides strong support for theism just in case it provides reason for thinking that theism alone provides the benefit; and let us say that a pragmatic argument provides weak support for theism just in case it provides reason for thinking that theism is just one of several alternatives in providing the benefit. This distinction parallels the distinction introduced in the first chapter between arguments that are rationally compelling, and ones that are plausible. There we said that an argument is rationally compelling if, upon grasping the argument, one would be irrational in failing to accept its conclusion. On the other hand, an argument is plausible if, upon grasping the argument, one would be reasonable or rational in accepting its conclusion, yet one would not be irrational in failing to accepting it. This distinction, however, is broader than the one we are introducing now, since it has to do with arguments generally, and not just pragmatic arguments. Pascal's Wager, for instance, is intended to provide strong support for theism; while James's Will to Believe argument is intended to provide weak support. Pragmatic moral arguments, if they are to provide strong support for theism, must provide reason to think that theistic belief alone is necessary for morality, or that theistic belief best facilitates moral practice. But it is not entirely obvious that theistic belief exceeds its competitors in facilitating moral practice. Until reason for thinking that is forthcoming, it would be premature to hold that theistic moral pragmatic arguments provide strong support.

### 3

## An Embarrassment of Riches?

If frequency of employment provides the relevant count, the many-gods objection is the most serious challenge to Pascal's Wager, as the objection most often leveled against the Wager. It arises because, despite appearances, Pascal's betting partition is not exhaustive. As Pascal presents it, the Wager is a  $2 \times 2$  matrix (see Fig. 3.1), with two possible states of the world and two alternative actions.

	God exists	$\sim$ (God exists)
Wager for	F1	F2
Wager against	F3	F4

Fig. 3.1.

But as early as 1762 Denis Diderot (1734–84) objected that:

Pascal has said if your religion is false, you have risked nothing by believing it true; if it is true, you have risked all by believing it false. An Imam could have said as much.<sup>1</sup>

In 1764 Voltaire in the course of a dialogue on freedom of conscience offered a remark that, in effect, objects that Pascal had overlooked relevant possibilities:

When some business matter is proposed to you, don't you consider it at length before taking a decision? What greater business is there in the world than that

<sup>1</sup> Denis Diderot, 'Additions to Philosophical Thoughts' (1762), para. LIX. Diderot's *Pensées philosophiques* was allegedly written over Easter weekend, 1746. Paragraph LIX is found in *Œuvres*, ed. J. Assezat (Paris, 1875–7), i. 167. The 'Additions' were added to the *Pensées philosophiques* in 1762, and are enigmatic, since some of them were not authored by Diderot, but by a person or persons unknown.

of our eternal happiness and misery? There are a hundred religions in England all of which damn you if you believe in your dogmas, which they call absurd and impious. You should therefore examine these dogmas.<sup>2</sup>

And Leslie Stephen (1833–1904), in 1897, giving full voice to the nineteenth-century discovery of historicity, objected that:

The Hindu fakir can persuade himself of the enmity of Vishu as the Christian monk of the divinity of the Saviour. Holy water was used by Pagans as well as by Catholics. Pascal was partly blinded to this by the smallness of the world in his time. He saw as a mathematician that man was between two infinities. Geometry makes us sensible of the fact. But 'history' still meant a mere six thousand years. The Catholic Church could still represent itself to the historian as the central phenomenon of all human history, not as an institution which dates but from a geological yesterday, and peculiar to a special group of nations which forms but a minute minority of the race.<sup>3</sup>

The complaint of Diderot, Voltaire, and Stephen is that betting options are not limited to Christianity and atheism, since one could formulate a Pascalian Wager for Islam, certain sects of Hinduism, or for any of the competing sects found within Christianity itself. In Fig. 3.2, take C as the Christian God exists, N as naturalism (there being no deity), and A as Allah exists.

	C	N	A
Wager for the Christian God	F1	F2	F3
Wager for no deity	F4	F5	F6
Wager for Allah	F7	F8	F9

*Fig. 3.2.*

In effect, the many-gods objection asserts that Pascal's  $2 \times 2$  matrix is flawed because the states it employs are not jointly exhaustive of the

<sup>2</sup> F. M. A. Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, ed. and trans. T. Besterman (1764; repr. London: Penguin Books, 1971), 280.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Stephen, 'Pascal' in *Studies of a Biographer*, ii (London: Duckworth & Co., 1898), 278–9. This is a reprint with corrections of Stephen's 'Pascal', *Fortnightly Review*, 62 (1897), 1–18.

possibilities.<sup>4</sup> In other words, given the assumptions of (i) an infinite payoff gained for right belief; (ii) only a finite cost attached to religious belief; and (iii) a positive probability attaching to *every* possible religious option, no particular religious option is recommended.

In his formulation of the many-gods objection Stephen presents an innovation that has become a standard accoutrement for virtually all subsequent formulations of the objection:

We might, therefore, reply to Pascal ... After all, if there be such a God as you suppose, He may choose—it is not a very wild hypothesis—to damn me for lying or deliberate self-deception. If, as we are supposing, He has not supplied me with evidence of a fact, He may be angry with me for deliberately manufacturing beliefs without evidence ...<sup>5</sup>

Stephen's innovation consists of employing certain propositions involving what we might, albeit tendentiously, call 'philosophers' fictions', a deity or religion imaginatively described by a philosopher, usually in the course of criticizing the Wager, which is not tied to any historical religion. The employment of philosophers' fictions seems *de rigueur* for contemporary proponents of the many-gods objection. Richard Gale, for instance, regales us with the possibility of a sidewalk crack god, while Michael Martin conjures up a perverse master of the universe who 'punishes with infinite torment after death anyone who believes in God or any other supernatural being (including himself) and rewards with infinite bliss after death anyone who believes in no supernatural being'.<sup>6</sup> J. L. Mackie speculates that there could be a

<sup>4</sup> The number of contemporary critics invoking the many-gods objection is legion. Among their number are Paul Saka, 'Pascal's Wager and the Many-Gods Objection', *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 321–41; Graham Priest, *Logic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 94–8; William Gustason, 'Pascal's Wager and Competing Faiths', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 44 (1998), 31–9; Richard Gale, *On The Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 349–51; Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 232–4; Antony Flew, 'Is Pascal's Wager the Only Safe Bet?', in *The Presumption of Atheism and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 61–70; Michael Martin, 'Pascal's Wager as an Argument for not Believing in God', *Religious Studies*, 19 (1983), 57–64; J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 203; Peter Dalton, 'Pascal's Wager: The Second Argument', *Southern Journal of Religion*, 13 (1975), 31–46; Merle Turner, 'Deciding for God: the Bayesian Support of Pascal's Wager', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 29/1 (1968), 84–90; and James Cargile, 'Pascal's Wager', *Philosophy*, 41 (1966), 250–7.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen, 'Pascal', ii. 274–5. Stephen is the first critic I know of to have championed this innovation.

<sup>6</sup> See Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 350; Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*, 231.



deity who prizes doubt above all else, while Paul Saka endorses the possibility of a 'cockroach god'.<sup>7</sup> Walter Kaufmann imagines a deity that punishes all and only those who endeavor to engage in religious activities to please him, and who rewards those indifferent to religion—a god who would, in Kaufmann's words, 'outLuther Luther'.<sup>8</sup> Prior to Stephen's innovation, the diversity of actual religions provided the ammo for the many-gods objection; after the innovation, products of the imagination fueled the objection. Versions of the many-gods objection that employ philosophers' fictions we will call 'possibilist versions', while versions that do not, as found in Diderot and Voltaire, we might call 'actualist versions'. Possibilist versions are the most common today, with proponents of the many-gods objection generally not content with actualist versions.

The possibilist many-gods objection typically comes in one of two formulations. The first is the more ambitious, seeking to show that Pascalian Wagers are logically fallacious. I argue that this formulation entails a proposition that is false. The second formulation attempts to show that, because of the vast quantity of god possibilities involved, the expected utility of any particular belief in a god is infinitesimally small. Like the first formulation, the second founders because of its reliance on the same false proposition. The third formulation of the many-gods objection, the actualist version, argues that any version of the Wager is evidentially useless as a decision-theoretic guide to rational action, since a situation of indeterminacy or 'Pascalian parity' results even when one's partition includes only those religious options that one considers genuine options. This formulation succumbs, I argue, to the observation that naturalistic options (atheism and agnosticism) do not carry an infinite expected utility, while the several theistic religions do. So, even if the Wager cannot discriminate between a limited number of theistic options, it can discriminate between theistic options and naturalistic ones. After looking at three versions of the many-gods objection, I take a look at an objection similar in structure to the many-gods objection, which contends that there are various conflicting theologies, or belief-formation technologies, possible, no one of which is uniquely recommended by the Wager. This many-theologies objection,

<sup>7</sup> See Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 203; and Saka, 'Pascal's Wager and the Many-Gods Objection', 327–8.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 171.

I argue, is no more successful than its cousin the many-gods objection, since it too entails the very same false proposition.

## 1. THE FIRST POSSIBILIST FORMULATION

As noted earlier, the many-gods objection attempts to show that the partition used by Pascal is faulty since distinct possibilities are ignored. The most ambitious version of this objection tries to show that, once one expands the betting partition, the Wager argument is logically fallacious in that a contradiction follows.

It will aid our understanding, if we distinguish between wagers and ‘engulfing wagers’. A wager  $W$  is engulfing just in case there is another wager,  $W'$ , which recommends inculcating belief in a deity  $\alpha$ , while  $W$  recommends inculcating belief in a deity  $\beta$ , who rewards all and only those who believe in  $\beta$ , and punishes all and only those who believe in  $\alpha$ . With this distinction in hand, we can formulate the first version:

14. given any wager in which the expected utility of a belief in a supreme being  $P_1$  is infinite, there exists an engulfing wager in which the expected utility of a belief in  $P_2$ , where  $P_2$  punishes all and only those who believe in  $P_1$  and rewards all and only those who believe in  $P_2$ , is infinite. And,
15. the series of engulfing wagers is infinite. Hence,
16. there is no wager that dominates all the others. Therefore,
17. one cannot decide from a wager alone which deity to believe in.

The idea is basically this: for any wager that recommends belief in God, one can always construct another wager that recommends belief in some other deity, and even exposes those who believe in God to a risk of an infinite disutility. If it is possible that for any wager there is always another that, by the payoffs and costs it assigns, renders the first undesirable, one would receive contradictory advice: one should bet on the first god (from the first wager) and one should not bet on the first god (from the second wager). Proposition (16) would be true, given (14) and (15), if all the wagers yield an infinite expected utility, since there is a situation of betting indeterminacy. In effect, a decision-theoretic stalemate exists. Given this, the truth of (17) seems obvious: the Wager, contra Pascal, does not generate a unique decision.

Two initial observations are in order about this argument. First, premise (15) depends upon what we have dubbed philosophers’ fictions.

If a consistent description is sufficient for logical possibility, then perhaps the philosophers' fictions really are logically possible. The use to which the philosophers' fictions are put brings us to our second observation: while the argument is valid, it is very probably unsound, since the conjunction of premises (14) and (15) entail (16) only if:

F. for any proposition  $p$ ,  $\diamond p \supset P(p) > 0$ .

According to (F), logical possibility is sufficient for an assignment of positive probability. But this is false.

There are contingent propositions that are both logically possible and yet plausible candidates for a zero-probability assignment. For instance, when I consider the statement that:

J. there is not at present a living human body that is mine

and I call to mind that I enjoy neither necessary existence nor self-existence, and for that matter, with just a tiny change in the cosmological constants of the universe, or a slight revision of history, I would not exist, it would be absurd (and unduly modest) for me to assign (J) anything other than zero. And, of course, there is nothing unique about me with regard to (J); it would be absurd for anyone to assign (J) a positive probability. Or think of the proposition that:

K. human beings exist.

It would be absurd for any human to assign (K) a value less than one, and its denial anything greater than zero, even though (K) is not a necessary truth and its denial is not a contradiction, since there are possible worlds that contain no humans. Or consider the proposition that:

L. I had parents.

While it is logically possible that I had no parents, it would be madness for me to assign any value less than unity to the proposition that I in fact had parents. But, if I assign unity to (L), then the denial of that proposition, although logically possible, receives a zero value. There are many propositions that are both logically possible and deserving of a zero assignment. Think of the list of contingent propositions ('truisms' he calls them) that G. E. Moore claims to know, with certainty, in his 'Defence of Common Sense', or the propositions investigated by Wittgenstein in his *On Certainty*. It would be acceptable to assign unity to each of those propositions and, as a consequence, a zero-probability to

their denials. Since there are logically possible propositions that deserve a zero-probability assignment, it is clear that (F) is false.

One might object that rejecting (F) leads to a semi-Dutch book situation, in which one is open to a series of bets that one cannot win, but there is a *possibility* of loss. Perhaps it does. Of course, semi-Dutch books, or even a strict Dutch book for that matter (a situation in which one cannot win and can only lose), are fearful only if there are Dutch bookies about. But the degree of knowledge necessary to gain a Dutch book guarantees that one will never encounter a Dutch bookie. So, even if a semi-Dutch-book situation arises from the rejection of (F), this is not sufficient to show the rejection irrational. Indeed, there are, it seems, cases in which a semi-Dutch-book situation is acceptable. Because of cases like (J), (K), and (L), avoiding Dutch-book situations (semi or strict) is much too strong a constraint on rational belief.

Another objection might run as follows. Only contradictions and other necessarily false propositions have an objective probability value of zero. Further, it is absurd for one's assignment of subjective probability to a proposition not to reflect the objective probability value of that proposition. Since a possible proposition is not necessarily false, it follows that (F) must be taken as true as regards subjective probability (by subjective probability is meant, very roughly, one's personal assignment of probability values to various uncertain propositions, with the assignments reflecting the strength of one's belief in those propositions).

The problem with this objection can be seen when one of its premises is generalized:

- M. if the objective probability of a proposition  $p$  is not equal to  $n$  (and one knows that), then it would be irrational for one's subjective probability of  $p$  to be  $n$ .

Despite many attempts, Goldbach's Conjecture has been neither proved nor disproved. If true, the conjecture is necessarily true; if false, then necessarily false. According to the probability calculus, a necessarily true proposition is assigned probability one, a necessarily false one, zero. So, the objective probability of Goldbach's Conjecture is either one or zero. Nevertheless, it is perfectly reasonable to assign it a subjective probability that falls somewhere between one and zero. I, for one, suppose it to be true, based on the authority of others. I would not, however, take a bet with much at stake that it is true, and in no case with everything to lose and nothing to gain. So, I do not assign it probability one—and this seems perfectly reasonable. Given that one does not

know whether the conjecture is true or not, one is not required to assign it either one or zero, even though its objective probability is either one or zero.<sup>9</sup> The same point holds, clearly enough, if we switch from subjective probability to epistemic probability (by epistemic probability is meant, very roughly, the likelihood of a proposition relative to one's evidence). Relative to what one knows or what one justifiably believes, there are any number of propositions that are both logically possible and properly assigned a zero probability given what we justifiably believe. Propositions (J), not-(K), and not-(L) provide fine examples of that.

One might object that propositions (J), (K), and (L) are relevantly different from the philosophers' fictions. We know that not-(J), (K), and (L) are true, but we do not know that the philosophers' fictions do not exist. Or perhaps the alleged difference is that not-(J), (K), and (L) are with us in whatever epistemic situation we could find ourselves. They are so foundational that there is no possible epistemic situation in which we could really doubt or suspend belief about them. Everything speaks for them, a Wittgensteinian would say, and nothing against. But a denial of the philosophers' fictions is not foundational. If there is a relevant difference between (J), (K), and (L), and the denial of the philosophers' fictions, then the argument fails.

But I do know that the philosophers' fictions are fictional; that they do not exist. If I could be wrong about there being no sidewalk crack god, then I could be wrong about (J), (K), or (L) as well. Denying the existence of the philosophers' fictions seems no more epistemically dodgy than denying (J), not-(K), or not-(L). While the truth of not-(J), (K), and (L) may be more vivid in some sense than is the denial of the philosophers' fictions, the epistemic certainty of the respective cases is on a par. I think everything speaks for the denial of the philosophers' fictions and nothing against. And, my judgment here, I strongly suspect, is not idiosyncratic. No one who sincerely reflects on the matter will find the philosophers' fictions live hypotheses.

If one rejects the sufficiency of logical possibility for non-zero assignments of probability, a natural extension is a rejection of the philosophers' fictions. Rejection of the philosophers' fictions is justified in part since they do not enjoy the backing of a living tradition. Having been created on the spot, the philosophers' fictions have not stood the

<sup>9</sup> My development and response to this objection owe much to Richard Otte, 'Subjective Probability, Objective Probability, and Coherence', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 25 (1987), 373–80. Otte, however, draws a very different conclusion.

test of time, having undergone no vetting by multiple generations of inquirers. The backing of one's tradition should be given some epistemic weight, since those who have gone before us are yet, to some extent, our epistemic peers. Religious belief, unlike science perhaps but similar to morality, is not a free-floating enterprise. Certainly tradition cannot be accorded the last word, since, as Locke held, 'there is much more falsehood and error amongst men, than truth and knowledge. And if the opinions and persuasions of others, whom we know and think well of, be a ground of assent, men have reason to be heathens in Japan, Mahumetans in Turkey, Papists in Spain, Protestants in England, and Lutherans in Sweden.'<sup>10</sup> But it is hubris to think that one need not stand on the shoulders of others. The experiences and reflections of our community, of our intellectual peers, must be accorded some epistemic weight. Impromptu and rootless religious speculations are especially suspect, since the opportunity costs of accepting the plausibility of any of them would be so great that it is hardly an exaggeration to say that there is nothing to gain and everything to lose by taking them seriously. If, upon being asked your religious affiliation, you were to answer that you are a devotee of the sidewalk crack god, your listeners would properly think that the sidewalks are not the only things cracked. As stated earlier, no one who sincerely reflects on the matter will find the philosophers' fictions live hypotheses.

Moreover, being cooked up, the philosophers' fictions are maximally implausible. These gerrymandered hypotheses are so bizarre that one is justified in assigning them a zero probability, or perhaps, if it is possible, an infinitesimal probability assignment. When one tosses a coin, it is possible that the coin lands on its edge, or remains suspended in mid-air, or disappears, or any number of bizarre events might occur. Yet, one quite properly neglects these possibilities and considers the partition of heads and tails jointly to exhaust the possibilities. While heads and tails do not in fact exhaust the logical possibilities, they can be treated, practically speaking, as if they do. The same point holds even if the utility of a correct call were to have infinite value, so that, whether heads or tails or coin remains suspended or coin disappears (and so on), each had the same expected utility. Given the extreme improbability of the odd alternatives involved (remain suspended, disappear, so on), heads and tails are properly taken as jointly exhaustive. In like manner the

<sup>10</sup> John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. P. H. Nidditch, bk. IV, ch. XV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 657.

philosophers' fictions deserve a similar neglect. Because of their extreme improbability, one can treat the philosophers' fictions as, practically speaking, deserving the same consideration as a fair coin landing on its edge. It follows from rejecting (F) that (14) and (15) are probably false, and (16) and (17) are left hanging with no support. The first version of the many-gods objection fails.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. THE SECOND POSSIBILIST FORMULATION

The family resemblance is strong enough between the second version of the many-gods objection and the first that we might consider them siblings. The second version, like its sibling, concentrates on wagers employing the Expectation rule, contending that, instead of an infinite expected utility, a calculation of the expected utility of theistic belief generates an expected utility that is infinitesimal, because there is an infinite number of logically possible gods. And, if it is true that the Wager generates only an infinitesimal expected utility for theism, then the Wager provides no rational support for theism.<sup>12</sup>

More precisely, the second version of the many-gods objection can be formulated so:

18. the product of an infinitesimal and an infinite number is infinitesimal. And,
19. there is a denumerable infinity of possible gods. So,
20. the probability of any one of the denumerably many possible gods is infinitesimally small. So,

<sup>11</sup> In 'Pascal's Wager and the Many-Gods Objection', Paul Saka recommends replacing (F) with:

- S1 if, for all S knows, P is true, then S should not assign to P a probability of zero. And,
- S2 if S knows that, for all S knows, P is true, then S should assign to P a probability greater than zero.

The problem with this suggestion is that (S1) and (S2) are as vulnerable to the argument presented in Section 1 as was (F). If one knows that the philosophers' fictions do not exist, then (S1) and (S2) do nothing in rehabilitating the first version of the many-gods objection. Moreover, (S1) and (S2) imply (F). If that is so, then, instead of rehabilitating the first version of the many-gods objection via replacing (F) with (S1) and (S2), Saka's suggestion presupposes that (F) is true.

<sup>12</sup> This version of the many-gods objection is found, for instance, in Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 349–51.

21. the Wager does not generate an infinite expected utility for theistic belief but only an infinitesimal expected utility. Therefore,
22. the Wager provides no substantial support for theistic belief.

The Canonical version is the primary target of this objection, though any Wager formulated as a decision-under-risk would fall within its cross hairs.

One way a Pascalian might respond to (18)–(22) is that, even if there is a denumerable infinity of possible gods, it need not follow that each is equiprobable. And, since this claim is necessary for the inference from (19) to (20), the argument is invalid. The friend of (19) and (20) could seek to rescue the inference by sending in the reinforcements of skepticism and indifference. Consider Pascal's insistence that, 'if there is a God, he is infinitely incomprehensible ... We are incapable, therefore, of knowing either what he is or if he is' (W. 343). Since we can know little of the divine, one might contend, we should use the Indifference Principle to calibrate the probability values of the infinite number of possible gods. And, by employing the Indifference Principle, we assign each possibility an equal value. But why is Pascal's theological skepticism even relevant? Even if Pascal thought that nothing of the divine nature is knowable, it need not follow that a Pascalian agrees. A use of the Wager requires only that the evidence, pro or con, is inconclusive. If the evidence does not answer the question, one can turn to prudential considerations for an answer. While skepticism concerning the various possible deities may be compatible with the Wager, it is clearly not a necessary presupposition of the Wager.

There is a second problem with the second version. Like its sibling, it requires (F). What other reason could there be for thinking that (19) is true? But, as we have seen, there is ample reason to think that (F) is false. So, in the absence of a plausible reason independent of (F) to think that (19) is true, the second version of the many-gods objection is no more successful in defeating the Wager than its more ambitious older sibling, the first version.

Perhaps one might try to rehabilitate the many-gods objection by revising (F):

- E. for any proposition  $p$  about possible deities,  $\diamond p \supset P(p) > 0$ .

(E) does not imply that every possible proposition receives a probability value greater than zero, just that every possible proposition with religious or theological content does. With (E) the philosophers' fictions are



resurrected and given new life. Can the many-gods objection surrender (F) and survive on (E)?

There are at least three reasons to think not. First, (E) is arbitrary. What reason might one have for thinking it true, independent of rehabilitating the many-gods objection? Why would contingent propositions with religious content, no matter how absurd, receive a positive probability assignment but other contingent propositions need not? Second, as argued in the previous section, the idea of a 'sidewalk crack' god or a 'perverse master of the universe' god has no more plausibility than does (J), or not-(K), or not-(L). The claim of not having had parents, originating from spontaneous generation, or special creation, and the claim of there being a sidewalk crack god are on a par. Third, for every proposition like (J) or not-(K) or not-(L), which has no religious content and is an obvious candidate for a zero probability, one could easily imagine a deity that punishes all and only those who accept (J) or not-(K) or not-(L). For instance, embed (J) within a proposition with religious content:

J'. there exists a deity that punishes all and every human who refuses to take seriously that she at present lacks a living human body.

Why should (J') receive a positive probability assignment, while (J), the proposition embedded within it, receives zero? If (E) were true, one would have to take (J') seriously, while at the same time not taking (J) seriously. But, if there is a 'religious' counterpart to every proposition like (J) and not-(K) and not-(L), then there is good reason to think (E) false. If there is good reason to assign (J) a zero probability, there is likewise good reason to assign (J') zero as well. (E) is even less believable than (F), and just as false.

### 3. THE ACTUALIST VERSION AND ECUMENICITY

A version of the many-gods objection can be formulated without resorting to the philosophers' fictions by using the actual religions found in the world. This was the strategy of choice for the earliest presenters of the many-gods objection. Diderot and Voltaire apparently saw no need to employ fantastic speculations like sidewalk crack gods or cockroach gods to make their point. Paul Saka is a recent proponent of this strategy.<sup>13</sup> To simplify matters, suppose there were

<sup>13</sup> See Saka, 'Pascal's Wager and the Many-Gods Objection'.

just two religions, M and N, each of which promises infinite gain for its adherents. M and N each contain contrary doctrines such that at most only one of the two could be true. Suppose further that you believe that religion M is just as likely as not; but you concede that religion N has some likelihood (0.01). Atheism and agnosticism, of course, offer at most a finite utility. The problem is this. Your calculation of the expected utility (EU) of a belief in religion M runs:

$$EU(M) = \{[(0.5)(\infty) + (0.4)(r)] - s\} = \infty$$

employing  $s$  and  $r$  as finite values. Your calculation of the expected utility of a belief in religion N:

$$EU(N) = \{[(0.01)(\infty) + (0.99)(r)] - s\} = \infty.$$

Even though M was taken to be much more probable than N, and even though they offer the same payoff, they have the same expected utility. Neither religion M nor N is uniquely recommended by the Expectation rule. This actualist version of the many-gods objection, then, holds that Pascal's Wager is useless as a guide to what one should believe, even if the Wager does not render contradictory advice. As Saka puts it, 'there are versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam which make it foolish to risk believing in any of them ...'.<sup>14</sup>

An obvious point is missed by the actualist version. One's doxastic options with regard to religions M and N are: (i) to render no judgment about them (suspend belief about both); (ii) to disbelieve both; or (iii) to believe one but not the other. The first two options are certainly not recommended by a calculation of expected utility. Unless one assigns a zero probability to both M and N, one should adopt the third option, betting on either M or N. The problem is, though, on which of the two does one lay a bet? Like Buridan's ass, the Pascalian lacks a good reason to choose between M and N, since there is a tie when the calculations of expected utility are done for both.

Of course, the Pascalian might well respond at this point that the Wager, even though it does not specify which religion to believe, does specify religious belief of some sort. Let all the genuine religious options (in our simplified case M and N) that offer an infinite utility constitute set B; and let all the naturalistic options, those options that offer a

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 333.

finite utility only, constitute set A. It is important to keep in mind that set A will not be empty. It would be empty only if (F) were true. No one really thinks that atheism or agnosticism could result in an infinite utility. Saka objects that there are atheistic forms of religions (religions that are not theistic, and that posit no supernatural person), for instance, Buddhism that could offer an infinite utility. But this confuses atheism (no supernatural reality) with non-theism (no supernatural person). Assuming that the evidence does not dictate what to pick, the Wager demands that one pick from B and not from A, since each element of B carries an infinite expected utility, while those of A offer only a finite expected utility. Religious belief of some sort is what rationality demands. This employment of the Wager might be called its 'ecumenical' use. Indeed, in the first chapter I suggested that Pascal probably intended the Wager to be used ecumenically, with much of the rest of the *Pensées* arguing which particular deity one should accept.<sup>15</sup> Even if today, with our greater knowledge of world religions, our set B is more populous than Pascal would have envisioned, so what? Why would the cardinality of B matter? With the exclusion of the philosophers' fictions, the population of set B will not be so bloated as to be unmanageable.

One might object that the ecumenical employment of the Wager is not entirely satisfactory since what one wants is a good reason to decide between M and N, provided that one must choose between M or N. Since both M and N carry an infinite utility, the Ecumenical version of the Wager cannot decide between them; and so the Ecumenical Wager does not elude the actualist version of the many-gods objection after all.

But this objection says nothing about the cogency of the Wager. The Ecumenical Wager shows that theistic belief carries a greater expected utility than does disbelief, and so one ought to try to believe. The objection does nothing to dispute that. Even if the Ecumenical Wager is no help in deciding which theistic option to believe, it nonetheless does show that one ought to believe one of them. Which religious option in particular one should adopt is one thing; whether one should adopt any of them is quite another. Even if set B is bloated in membership,

<sup>15</sup> Pascal seems to have assumed that no one would consider atheism and agnosticism as possible avenues to infinite gain. In effect, then, he assumed the falsity of (F).

there are ways of culling its population. One could employ pragmatic considerations (opportunity costs, or sunk costs, for instance) to select through B, or one might employ probability assignments (this religion is more likely than that one) to thin B's population, or aesthetic considerations might be used to decide (the liturgy of this alternative is more pleasing than that one). Flipping a coin could even be used. However one does it, the Ecumenical Wager makes a recommendation: choose from B and not from A.

While it is true that the Ecumenical Wager does not uniquely recommend any particular option, it does show that agnosticism and atheism (and any other naturalistic option) are not pragmatically rational. Indeed, it would be rationally impermissible to adopt atheism or agnosticism, in the absence of strong evidence that atheism or agnosticism were true. Although the Ecumenical Wager may not support theism as the only rational option, it still plays a vital role of undermining the rationality of the naturalistic options.

#### 4. ESCAPE OF THE JAMESIAN WAGER

Clearly enough, the Pascalian can elude the many-gods objection by employing the Wager in an ecumenical way. This was the escape route favored by Pascal, it seems. But there is another option open to the Pascalian, which does not require an ecumenical use of the Wager, and allows a wager that specifically supports theism.

The many-gods objection, in its different versions, exploits the idea of an infinite utility to create a kind of decision-theoretic impasse. Consider again a matrix incorporating a philosophers' fiction, a deviant deity, whether personal or impersonal, that punishes all and only theists, and rewards all and only nontheists. Let us call this deity *D*. Moreover, let us allow a use of (F) to underwrite the idea of *D*. Now consider the matrix in Fig. 3.3. Even though it is possible to imagine any number of deviant deities beyond *D*, any extension beyond a  $3 \times 3$  matrix is logically redundant as long as the best-case outcomes of each alternative are on a par ( $F1 = F6 = F9$ ). Expanding beyond a  $3 \times 3$  matrix adds nothing of consequence to the objection. Fig. 3.3 looks as though it will do the job required by the many-gods objection, if the job can be done at all.

	G	N	D
Wager for God	F1 $\infty$	F2	F3
Wager for no deity	F4	F5	F6 $\infty$
Wager for D	F7	F8	F9 $\infty$

*Fig. 3.3.*

But the job cannot be done, since the Jamesian Wager can in principle elude the many-gods objection, even if (F) is true. To refresh our memory, the Jamesian Wager runs:

10. For any person *S* making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , available to *S* has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives,  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ , and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ , and, excluding the best outcomes and worst outcomes, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ , then *S* should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
  11. theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains. And,
  12. the best outcomes of theistic belief are as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and the worst outcomes of theistic belief are no worse than those of the other available alternatives. Therefore,
- C. one should believe in God.

To see how the Jamesian Wager escapes the many-gods objection, keep in mind that the upshot of the many-gods objection is that the infinite utility associated with each of the betting options results in a best-case decision-theoretic tie. So, whether one believes theistically, or believes in a deviant deity, or refrains from believing in any deity at all, one enjoys eligibility for the same kind of reward, whether that reward is conceived of as an infinite utility, or heaven, or even as an exceedingly great finite utility. The best outcomes—that is, of theistic belief, of deviant belief, and of naturalistic belief—are on a par ( $F1 = F6 = F9$ ). Extending this point, it is clear enough that, whether one believes theistically, or believes in a deviant deity, or refrains from believing in any deity at all, one is exposed to the same kind of risk, whether we think of that risk

as hell, or as the loss of heaven, or the forfeiture of an exceedingly great reward. So, the worst outcomes of theistic belief, of deviant belief, and of naturalistic belief are on a par ( $F3 = F4 = F7$ ).

But, even faced with this decision-theoretic tie, the Pascalian has a principled way of making a reasonable choice. She can employ the Next Best Thing Principle to clear the impasse. The Next Best Thing Principle asserts that a particular action should be chosen if, in the state in which that action does best, it does as well or better as its competitors do in the states in which they do best; and in no state does that action have an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of its competitors, and in every state other than the states in which the best and worst outcomes of the alternatives are found, that action has outcomes better than its competitors. So, as long as the utility associated with  $F2$  exceeds that of  $F5$ , and that of  $F8$ , a way is open to clear the impasse of the many-gods objection. Even if the best-case outcomes have equal value, and the worst-case outcomes have equal values, if the other outcomes of wagering for theism exceed those of wagering for deviant belief, or wagering for atheism or agnosticism, a principled decision can be made. What is important, then, is that theistic belief could be better than believing in a deviant deity, and better than disbelieving, and better than suspending belief, and in no case is it worse than the worst outcomes of any of these. Since, clearly enough, it is at least possible that theistic belief is better than not so believing, it follows that the many-gods objection fails and does not show that the Jamesian Wager is invalid.

But *is* premise (11) true? Nicholas Rescher suggests it is not: 'from every purely this-worldly point of view—material, social, and psychological—our interest is strongly engaged on the side of disbelief. As this world runs—to all appearances—every mundane advantage lies with disbelief.'<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, William James thought the appearances ran the other way. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James suggests that religious belief produces certain psychological benefits:

A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism ... An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 31.

<sup>17</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; New York: Modern Library, 1936), 475–6.

Are there empirical benefits to believing? To seek an answer requires our leaving philosophy and venturing into the social sciences. The question—whether theistic belief is more beneficial than not believing—is very difficult and complex, in good part because of the variability involved. Two benefits seem relevant here: hope and happiness. Since there is a significant body of social-science literature reporting empirical measures of well-being and theistic religiosity at the individual level and there is little in the literature on the effect of religiosity on hope, measures of happiness are the place to start. So, let us postpone discussion of hope until Chapter 6, and discuss happiness. To get a grip on this complex issue let us adopt something like Bentham's model of utility (duration plus intensity), stipulating that theistic belief provides more empirical benefit than not believing, even if no deity exists (a better 'this-world' outcome), if, on average, believing theistically ranks higher than not believing theistically in at least one of two categories, reported satisfaction and mortality (life span), and is never lower in either of the two. Moreover, let us assume that happiness correlates with greater life satisfaction.

What do the studies show? Two commentators (neither of whom could be called theistic apologists) characterize the relevant social-science literature as 'a huge, and growing literature that finds religion to be a reliable source of better mental and even physical health ... regardless of the age, sex, race, ethnicity, nationality, or time period of the population being studied'.<sup>18</sup> With regard to happiness in particular, one researcher asserts 'extensive studies have found the presence of religious beliefs and attitudes to be the best predictors of life satisfaction and a sense of well-being'.<sup>19</sup> While this claim may be inflated, there is reason to think the

<sup>18</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Fink, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 31–2. See also Harold Koenig, Michael McCullough, and David Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 394.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Bernard Spilka, Bruce Hunsberger, and Richard Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion* (2nd edn., New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 384. Another study found that 54% of those reporting having had a religious experience rate a high level of psychological well-being as opposed to 47% of those reporting never having had a religious experience: Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 127. Additionally, the Pew Research Center survey found that 43% of those who attend worship services weekly report high levels of happiness, while only 26% of those who never attend worship services report high levels of happiness. See 'Are We Happy Yet?' (13 Feb. 2006), a Pew Research Center Social Trend report, which can be viewed at: <http://pewresearch.org/social/> (accessed 11 July 2006).

correlation between religious belief and life satisfaction is significant. A study from the University of Minnesota of 3,300 parents of twins found a small but statistically significant correlation (0.07) between religious commitment and happiness.<sup>20</sup> More generally, a recent analysis of 100 studies, which examined the association of religious belief and life satisfaction, found that 80 percent of the studies reported at least one significant positive correlation between the variables.<sup>21</sup> This analysis grouped studies either as being statistically significant in one direction, or in the other direction, or as having no statistical significance at all, and then 'counted votes'. With regard to happiness, then, there is sufficient evidence that believing theistically outranks not believing, at least slightly.<sup>22</sup> This conclusion is no surprise, since it seems likely that theistic belief would generally produce a greater optimism among its adherents than would be found among nontheists. And, if optimism is a significant component of happiness, then we would expect the population with the greater incidence of optimism also to have a greater incidence of reported happiness.

The effect, if any, of theistic belief on mortality has been an object of study for well over a century. In 1872 Francis Galton, a cousin of Darwin, conducted a retrospective study of the life span of royalty, compared with others of similar economic status.<sup>23</sup> Galton hypothesized that royalty have their length of life prayed for more often than do their economic peers, and yet there appeared to be no noticeable effect ('long live the King'). To no one's surprise, Galton's methodology has not survived the test of time. A much more recent and sophisticated meta-analysis of twenty-nine independent studies conducted in 2000, involving data from 125,000 subjects, found that 'religious involvement had a significant and substantial association with increased survival'.<sup>24</sup> In particular, frequent religious attendance (once a week or more) is associated with a 25–33 percent reduction in the rate of dying

<sup>20</sup> David Lykken, *Happiness: What Studies on Twins Show Us about Nature, Nurture, and the Happiness Set Point* (New York: Golden Books, 1999), 18–19.

<sup>21</sup> Koenig, McCullough, and Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 117, 215–25.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 164–77.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Galton, 'Statistical Enquiries into the Efficacy of Prayer', *Fortnightly Review*, 12 (Aug. 1872), 125–35.

<sup>24</sup> Koenig, McCullough, and Larson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 328–30. For detail on the meta-analysis, see M. E. Cullough, W. T. Hoyt, D. Larsen, H. G. Koenig, and C. E. Thoresen, 'Religious Involvement and Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review', *Health Psychology*, 19 (2000), 211–22.



during follow-up periods ranging from five to twenty-eight years. The increased survival rate associated with religious involvement was found to hold independent of possible confounders like age, sex, race, education, and health status. This meta-analysis provides good reason to think that theistic belief provides a better this-world outcome with regard to mortality than does non-belief.<sup>25</sup> Another researcher looking at a study of mortality rates of regular church-goers and others found significant differences. For instance, the death rate per 1,000 persons over five years for heart disease of regular church-goers was less than half of that for others; and for suicide was almost two-thirds lower.<sup>26</sup> The conclusion drawn from the review of this study was that:

Mortality is a highly objective measure ... It can be seen that those who went to church had much lower death rates from these diseases. Could these results be due to the infirm being unable to get to church? No, because similar results have been obtained for the religious commitments of students and for rates of church membership in different areas.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, one might say that this result is not surprising, given the evidence on happiness. If it is true that happiness is more frequently found among the religious, and if we expect happier people generally to live longer than unhappy people, then we would expect the mortality rates of the religious to be greater than those of the non-religious. Still, until we have good evidence causally linking mortality rates with happiness rates, we can take the two as independent measures of empirical benefit.

Even a conservative reading of the evidence produced to date supports the judgment that believing in God is probably better for the individual than not believing with regard to happiness and mortality. As is the nature of social science, one's judgment is subject to revision as new data are discovered. And, of course, the studies are generally population studies, so what is true on average may not hold in a particular case. Further, there is no obvious downside to these benefits. Or, put another way, there seems to be no greater benefit generated by disbelief that

<sup>25</sup> See also the interesting report on religiosity and mortality and morbidity rates in Jeffrey S. Levin, 'How Religion Influences Morbidity and Health', *Social Science and Medicine*, 43/5 (1996), 850; and Harold Koenig, *Is Religion Good for your Health: The Effects of Religion on Physical and Mental Health* (New York: Haworth Press, 1997). For a contrary view, see W. J. Matthews, J. Conti, and T. Christ, 'God's HMO: Prayer, Faith, Belief and Physical Well-being', *Skeptic*, 8/2 (2000), 68.

<sup>26</sup> Argyle, *The Psychology of Happiness*, 169.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

overcomes the advantages enjoyed by belief.<sup>28</sup> So, even when these qualifications are noted, premise (11) of the Jamesian Wager is more likely than not, and provides the Pascalian with a sound escape from the many-gods objection.

One might object that perhaps there is a similar empirical benefit to be had with non-Western religions; we just lack the studies to know this. And, if so, the set of Pascalian approved choices once again inflates. The problem with this objection is that it ignores that we are discussing a forced issue. One lacks the option of not making a decision, since not making a decision here is equivalent to having chosen one of the alternatives. Suppose you were making an important medical decision for a loved one, some one under age perhaps, or incapacitated. You must decide which therapy, if any, to choose. Suppose therapy X has some experimental support. It would be irrelevant to point out that there are therapies no one has yet thought of. It would also be irrelevant to point out that there are alternative therapies, of which no studies have yet been done. Clearly, it would be irresponsible to forgo therapy X, which has some experimental support, in favor of an alternative therapy with no experimental support. It is true that, if the situation is desperate enough, you may consider an alternative therapy, but part of the desperation will be that the conventional therapies have all been tried and have failed. Likewise, those religions lacking the sort of social-science support enjoyed by theistic belief would have a value comparable to what is found in cells F5 or F8 of Fig. 3.3, and, hence, less than cell F2. Of course, if more information were to become available, assignments may change. As exploration proceeds, what had been designated *terra incognita* becomes a region now known. But, until the exploration is done, *terra incognita* it remains.

One might worry about the old bugaboo of statistical studies showing correlations. Do they show merely a correlation, or causality, and if

<sup>28</sup> There is benefit to having a true belief, of course. But in a situation in which the evidence is inconclusive, one may never know that one's belief is probably true. So, the benefit, whatever it is, must be independent of knowing that one's belief is probably true. In addition, there is an interesting possible post-mortem asymmetry noted by Pascal himself: 'Who has the most reason to fear hell: he who does not know whether there is such a thing as hell and who is sure of damnation if there is, or he who is certainly convinced that hell exists, but hopes nevertheless to be saved?' (W. 97). If the theist dies with a false theistic belief, it is likely that she will never have occasion to regret her false belief. The atheist, however, who dies with a false atheistic belief, could very well have the occasion to regret his false belief. The exposure to regret is greater on the atheistic side than on the theistic.

there is a causal connection, which way does it flow? For instance, it may be true that the depressed drink more than those not depressed, but is the depression caused by the excessive drinking, or the drinking by the depression, or do both flow from some other factor? Typically, the flow of causality is shown by the presence of a counterfactual dependency of an event or phenomenon upon another. In any case, a Pascalian response to this worry builds upon our ignorance. In the absence of an answer that settles the correlation question, the prudential response is to proceed as if the religious commitment produces the benefits, or plays a significant role in their production (which in fact the studies tend to support). There is little if any harm in doing so, and much that might be gained.

Some have contended, most famously Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Bertrand Russell, and, more recently, Richard Dawkins, that religious belief is a net harm on the social level.<sup>29</sup> Russell famously held that religious belief and religion was a 'source of untold misery to the human race'.<sup>30</sup> He did allow, we should note in fairness, that religion, considered worldwide, has provided humankind two benefits (and only these two): it motivated the Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses in such detail that eventually reliable prediction was possible; and the Church early on fixed the calendar.<sup>31</sup> Russell's toting of costs and benefits seems a bit one-sided. Considering just the United States, for the moment, with the abolitionist movement, civil-rights movement, and the social gospel movement as prominent landmarks in American history, it seems clear that religion has not been a net social harm. I suspect that the sociologists Stark and Fink are correct when they say 'that religion is harmful at the level of society is a political, not a scientific, claim'.<sup>32</sup> How would one measure the benefits and harms of religion to society?<sup>33</sup> Would we just clump all religions together? How would we distinguish

<sup>29</sup> Dawkins apparently believes that religious belief is a net harm at the individual level as well. See his 'Viruses of the Mind', in B. Dahlbohm (ed.), *Dennett and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 26.

<sup>30</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 24.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>32</sup> Stark and Fink, *Acts of Faith*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Relevant here is a recent study by two Harvard researchers, which concluded that religious belief has a significant impact on economic development: 'Results show that economic growth responds positively to religious beliefs, notably beliefs in hell and heaven...'. The researchers report 'that religion affects economic outcomes mainly by fostering religious beliefs that influence traits such as honesty, work ethic, thrift and openness to strangers'. Similar to Max Weber's work from the early 1900s, the recent study finds, in short, that, apart from whatever spiritual wealth flows from religious belief, there is reason to believe that material wealth flows from it. See Robert Barro

the religious component from the institutional component of organized religion? And, even if religion has been a net harm to society, it is possible that atheism has been an even greater social harm. Indeed, to get an idea of the obscurity involved here, consider atheism. Atheism was the official creed of the Soviet Union and still is of China. Do we tote the many millions murdered in those regimes to atheism, or to communism, or to both? Or consider European history since Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God near the beginning of the twentieth century. As the incidences of secularism and atheism in Europe increased, so too did the horror of totalitarian abuse and genocide. Perhaps there is no causation here, only an unhappy correlation, but clearly there are no easy answers. Since there is no ready literature and no metric of utility at the social level available, as there is at the individual level, I will ignore the issue of religion's utility at the social level.<sup>34</sup>

## 5. THREE STEPS TO SUCCESS

So far I have offered a three-step answer to the many-gods objection. The first step involves a principled rejection of (F). The rejection of (F) is not a particularly arduous business, since an ample supply of counterexamples to (F) abounds. The various versions of the many-gods objection nearly always entail, or presuppose, (F), and without it these versions are unsound.

The second step is a principled rejection of the philosophers' fictions. This step is intimately linked with the first, since it is hard to see how any one could propose assigning a positive probability to the claim that a sidewalk crack deity exists, or that a perverse master of the universe exists, without supposing (F). In any case, rejecting the philosophers' fictions is principled, since it is supported by the observation that the philosophers' fictions are maximally implausible (while logically possible, no one would be justified in thinking them practically possible, or, as James would put it, that they are live hypotheses), and by the

and Rachel McCleary, 'Religion and Economic Growth across Countries', *American Sociological Review*, 68/2 (2003), 760–81.

<sup>34</sup> J. S. Mill argued in the essay 'The Utility of Religion' (probably written between 1850 and 1858 and published in *Three Essays on Religion* (1870; New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1874)) that religion had little social utility. In his 'Theism' (probably written about 1870 and published in *ibid.*) Mill argued that religious hope could provide significant individual utility. See the discussion of Mill in Chapter 6.

observation that they are arbitrary constructs advanced with the sole purpose of objecting to the Wager. These two observations might be seen as giving content to James's notion of a live hypothesis. James says that a live hypothesis is 'one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed'.<sup>35</sup> If one finds a hypothesis maximally implausible, even if logically possible, and a pure fantasy, one will find that the hypothesis 'refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all'.<sup>36</sup>

In the first chapter I suggested that Pascal probably envisioned the apologetic strategy of the *Pensées* in a two-step fashion. Step one involved employing the Wager to show that theistic belief of some sort was pragmatically justified, while step two involved appeals to satisfied prophecies, and to the occurrence of miracles as a way of arguing that Christianity was the particular brand of theism to accept. The modern-day Pascalian, having rejected (F) and the philosophers' fictions, is at the point that Pascal would have called step one, the use of the Wager. But, even Pascal had to suggest ways of sorting between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (his step two). Likewise, the Pascalian today needs to sort between the various religious affiliations that are pragmatically justified by the Wager. This step, the third step, involves thinning the remaining population. I have suggested a variety of sorters that a Pascalian might employ: probability assignments, sunk costs, convenience, and aesthetic considerations are all possibilities. The best way, it seems, is found with the Jamesian Wager—sort on the basis of this world empirical gain. In any case, contrary to conventional belief, the many-gods objection is not a conclusive objection to Pascal's Wager.

## 6. THE KANTIAN GAP

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant contends that the Cosmological proof and the Design argument (which he calls the 'Physico-theological' proof and says of it, 'This proof always deserves to be mentioned with respect' (A623/B651)) both presuppose the Ontological argument.

Thus the so-called cosmological proof really owes any cogency which it may have to the ontological proof from mere concepts ... Thus the physico-theological

<sup>35</sup> William James, 'The Will to Believe' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

proof of an existence of an original or supreme being rests upon the cosmological proof, and the cosmological upon the ontological.<sup>37</sup>

What he meant by this is that only the Ontological proof could provide a full proof of the *ens realissimum* ('the most real being', typically identified with God), while the Cosmological and Design arguments, even if sound, provide support for a first cause, or a designer. But neither a first cause nor a designer is necessarily identical with the theistic god. There is a gap, Kant alleges, in all *a posteriori* theistic proofs between the sort of being they could provide support, and that of the god of theism. To bridge this gap required presupposing the Ontological proof, since it alone among the theistic arguments lacked this gap. The Ontological argument alone was an argument for the existence of the *ens realissimum*. However, the attempt to bridge this gap was futile and led to the downfall of speculative theology, since, Kant thought, the Ontological proof was fallacious. Let us call this alleged gap the 'Kantian gap'.

George Schlesinger concurs that the theistic arguments, with the exception of the Ontological argument, suffer from the Kantian gap. Consider the Design argument. Schlesinger writes:

Now even if we regard the argument absolutely compelling, it establishes at most—as was pointed out by Hume—that there exists a creator who is many hundreds of times more powerful and intelligent than ourselves. But such a creator's power and intelligence may still fall infinitely short of omnipotence and omniscience. About benevolence the argument says even less... Thus, an individual making use of any of the numerous known arguments for the existence of God can get no further than to conclude that there exists some supernatural power and intelligence behind the material universe.<sup>38</sup>

Schlesinger insightfully claims that the Kantian gap generates a kind of many-gods objection to nearly every theistic argument (except the Ontological). He also claims a kind of honorific priority among theistic arguments is bestowed upon the Wager by its critics, since the many-gods objection is so frequently employed against it, and so infrequently against the other theistic arguments. In warrior cultures one's prowess is often measured by the prowess of those whom one has vanquished. It is an honor to have defeated a great enemy. I take it that Schlesinger

<sup>37</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), trans. N. Kemp Smith (New York: St Martin's Press, 1965), A608/B636, A630/B658.

<sup>38</sup> George Schlesinger, 'A Central Theistic Argument', in J. Jordan (ed.) *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 98.

means something like that. The Wager is among the strongest theistic arguments, since its critics so often have had to resort to the many-gods objection against it, while using other objections contra the other theistic arguments, holding in reserve the many-gods objection. Since he believes the many-gods objection fails, Schlesinger finds the Wager very compelling.

Schlesinger is right, at least to a degree. There is a strong analogy between the problem generated by the Kantian gap, and what we have identified as the many-gods objection. When partitioning among explanations of apparent design theistic apologists cite three possibilities—chance, necessity, and intention—and often assume that God alone exhausts the last category. Still there is not a strict identity between the problem of the Kantian gap and the many-gods objection. The many-gods objection in the context of the Wager usually depends upon the idea of calculating expected utility, or some other way of ranking outcomes, and this is not found among the problem of the Kantian gap. The strong analogy is suggestive, however. As we have seen, rejecting (F) and rejecting the philosophers' fictions go a long way towards thinning the bloated and unmanageable partition that the many-gods objection predicates. Without pursuing the details here, the rejection of (F) and the philosophers' fictions may have application in natural theology beyond the Wager, and may contribute, if not to a bridging of the Kantian gap, at least to its significant narrowing.

## 7. THE MANY-THEOLOGIES OBJECTION

An objection similar to the many-gods objection is what we might call the 'many-theologies objection'. Not only is there a structural similarity between the many-gods objection and the many-theologies objection; their resolutions are similar as well. The many-theologies objection is a second-order complaint. Even if one should, from the rational point of view, try to inculcate belief in deity A (rather than deities B and C and so on), there are various possible incompatible technologies or mechanisms that might be employed in trying to inculcate saving belief. It is a second-order complaint, since it has to do with the various possible technologies, or theologies, that might be used to inculcate belief in the recommended deity. According to the Canonical Wager, one should wager that God exists. As we have seen, Pascal advises practical steps as to the technology of inculcating theistic belief, including associating with

those who are already faithful and attending worship services. Pascal's practical advice, or something very much like it, is, we might say, commonsensical. If one desires to become a theist, one should behave as a theist would. But, according to the many-theologies objection, as long as there is some positive probability that a deviant theology is effective in inculcating theistic belief, call it D, where D specifies that one seeking to inculcate theistic belief should avoid theistic worship services and should avoid other theists, and should associate exclusively with atheists and non-theists, adopting the deviant theology will carry an infinite expected utility. In short, according to D, if one desires to become a theist, one should behave as a non-theist would. So:  $EU(\text{behave non-theistically}) = \infty = EU(\text{behave theistically})$ , understanding *behaving theistically* as the adoption of the Pascalian technology of belief formation and *behaving non-theistically* as the adoption of D. The problem is that, as long as a particular belief technology, no matter how silly, has a positive probability and a possible infinite utility, an infinite expected utility is generated. Keep in mind that a deviant theology need not have any religious content. Perhaps inaction might count as a deviant theology, since perhaps there is a possibility that doing nothing might result in one acquiring the correct belief. As Antony Duff puts it, 'suppose I take no steps to make it more likely that I will come to believe in God. There must still be some probability, however small, that I will nonetheless come to believe in Him ... and that probability is enough to generate an infinite expected value for my actions.'<sup>39</sup>

The concept of decision-robustness plays a large role in a recent formulation of the many-theologies objection.<sup>40</sup> A decision D is robust just in case a slight revision of a background assumption of D does not materially affect the outcome of the deliberation. Suppose that B is a background assumption of D. Suppose further in deciding to act on D, we assumed that the probability of B was 0.75. D is robust only if it makes no difference to the status of D if we were to take the probability of B to be slightly different—say, 0.74 or 0.76. There are, in any decision problem, three elements: a set of background assumptions, a prudential reason, and a focal proposition. Consider again the umbrella example discussed in the first chapter. One background assumption is the proposition that *one will get wet if outside in the rain without*

<sup>39</sup> Antony Duff, 'Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities', *Analysis*, 46 (1986), 107–9.

<sup>40</sup> See Gregory Mougin and Elliott Sober, 'Betting against Pascal's Wager', *Noûs*, 28/3 (1994), 382–95.



*an umbrella*. Although this assumption is less than absolutely certain, revising its probability to unity would not entail a corresponding revision in the outcome of one's deliberation, we might suppose, of leaving the umbrella. One's decision is robust: a slight change in the probability of a background assumption entails no change of decision.

Notice that the many-theologies objection presupposes that there is such a thing as an infinite utility. But, if there are infinite utilities, every decision is robust. To see this, consider the umbrella case again. If there is even a remote chance that carrying an umbrella incurs an infinite disutility, then the expected utility of that act would be:  $EU(\text{carry umbrella}) = -\infty$ . And, if there is even a remote chance that being caught without an umbrella in the rain carries an infinite disutility, then  $EU(\text{leave umbrella}) = -\infty$ . But then, of course,  $EU(\text{leave umbrella}) = EU(\text{carry umbrella})$ . And this result can be generalized: if there are infinite utilities that possibly attach to actions, then every decision is robust. The only background revision, which could affect the decision outcome, is a revision from a positive probability to zero. By supposing that there are infinite utilities, the concept of robustness is rendered useless as ways of distinguishing between prudential decisions.

Is there a way of retaining infinite utilities and, yet, circumventing the many-theologies problem? There is. It involves a rejection of a proposition we have already seen fit to reject:

F. for any proposition  $p$ ,  $\diamond p \supset P(p) > 0$ .

By rejecting (F) one defuses the many-theologies problem without having to relinquish the idea of an infinite utility. If there is nothing beyond mere logical possibility, no credible evidence, in support of what appears to be a cooked-up theology, one can just set its probability to zero. Without the automatic assignment of infinity to every possible theology, the many-theologies problem cannot arise. In the next chapter, by the way, I argue that the Pascalian would be well advised to forgo the idea of infinity altogether. But, in any case, there is good reason to conclude that neither the many-gods objection nor the many-theologies objection is lethal to the Wager.

## 8. THE MANY-GODS OBJECTION: A EULOGY

We have distinguished between an unrestricted kind of the many-gods objection (what we called the possibilist version), and a restricted

kind (the actualist version). The possibilist version implies that every possible deity or theology must be included in an appropriate partition of the alternatives, while the actualist version does not. The possibilist version makes no allowance for *relevant* alternatives. Clearly enough, the possibilist version implies (F), while the actualist version need not. Of course, if the many-gods objection is restricted to actual religions, then the Wager, in its ecumenical guise, eludes it. To close that escape route requires (F). But, as we have seen, despite its initial plausibility, (F) is false. There are contingent propositions that deserve a zero-probability assignment. So, whether actualist or possibilist in formulation, the many-gods objection is addicted to an illicit proposition.

I also asserted that the many-gods objection is usually taken as the most serious challenge to Pascal's Wager. It is certainly the objection most often trotted out by philosophers, who usually present it as a novel insight. Perhaps now, with the realization that (F) is false, philosophers might be spurred to discard the many-gods objection onto the proverbial ash heap of philosophical history.

## 4

# The Problem of Infinite Utilities

A common objection to the Canonical version of Pascal's Wager is based on its use of the notion of an infinite utility.<sup>1</sup> This objection consists in the charge that a calculation of expected utility that uses an infinite utility will always result in a rational indeterminacy. Mathematical expectation, that is, when infinite utilities are employed, provides no guide for choosing between different courses of action.

In what follows I identify two versions of this indeterminacy objection to the Canonical Wager. One version argues that a decisional indeterminacy results whenever one holds that different alternatives offer an infinite utility. The other version of the objection contends that a mathematical indeterminacy arises from the use of infinite utilities in a calculation of expected utilities. Neither version, I argue, is fatal to the Canonical Wager. An examination of the indeterminacy objection has one other interesting result: it shows that the Canonical version of the Wager, if it is to have any cogency, must be augmented by certain non-standard decision-theoretic principles. After examining the indeterminacy objection, I turn to the St Petersburg paradox. This problem, formulated in the 1700s, seeks to show that unbounded mathematical expectation (a decision theory that involves infinite values) leads to unacceptable results. Again, I argue that the Pascalian can escape this charge by introducing a principle that allays the unacceptable results. Finally, I argue that the Pascalian is well advised to put aside versions of the Wager that employ the infinite and to stand contented with finite versions only.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Richard Jeffrey, *The Logic of Decision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 153–4. And see Antony Duff, 'Pascal's Wager and Infinite Expected Utilities', *Analysis*, 46 (1986), 107–9.

## 1. THE INDETERMINACY PROBLEM: VERSION ONE

The objection that the very idea of an infinite utility is problematic because indeterminacy always results can be formulated in a couple of different ways. One way argues that a decisional indeterminacy arises whenever one holds that it is possible that different acts might result in an infinite gain. The other way contends that a mathematical indeterminacy could arise even with acts considered in isolation. I begin with the former.

Suppose an agent believes that she can make the prospect of heaven more or less likely by doing one of two acts. Act one the agent takes to have a 0.5 probability of bringing it about that the heaven is achieved. Act two has but a 0.001 probability of the same end. It seems quite natural that the agent should prefer the performance of act one over act two; but, when one calculates the expected utility of each act, they both have the same EU. The mathematical expectation of act one is:

$$A1. [(0.5)(\infty) + (0.5)(0)] = \infty.$$

The calculation for act two is:

$$A2. [(0.001)(\infty) + (0.999)(0)] = \infty.$$

The problem is obvious:  $EU(A1) = EU(A2)$ . When the utility is taken to be infinite and the cost finite, then, no matter how small the probability, the expected utility is always infinite. To compound matters, the argument can be extended: any and every act has some probability, no matter how small, of resulting in religious belief and thus bringing about heaven. Every act, then, would have an infinite expected utility. As Antony Duff puts it:

suppose I take no steps to make it more likely that I will come to believe in God. There must still be some probability, however small, that I will nonetheless come to believe in Him ... and that probability is enough to generate an infinite expected value for my actions.<sup>2</sup>

Given that every course of action has some probability of resulting in theistic belief; and given that an infinite value multiplied by a finite

<sup>2</sup> Duff, 'Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities', 108.

non-infinitesimal value, no matter how small, generates an infinite value, it certainly seems that the inclusion of infinite utilities in a calculation of expected utility results in mathematical expectation being rendered useless as a means of decision resolution.

This objection, however, is vulnerable to the following response. Unlike Buridan's ass, the agent in the example does have a good reason to prefer act one over act two, and, further, this is the case even when the expected utilities are the same. With finite utilities the expectation rule requires indifference between alternatives with the same expected utility. But that will not do with infinite utilities, since act one makes it more likely that the pay-off will be obtained than does act two, and is quite properly preferable on that score. That is, the principle:

- N. if each available incompatible act  $A_1, A_2, A_3, \dots, A_n$  has an infinite expected utility and all other things are equal, one should perform that act  $A$  which is considered the most likely to bring about the pay-off

is a plausible addendum to the expectation rule when infinite utilities are present. The provision, *all other things are equal*, while vague, is meant to exclude from the scope of (N) those cases in which the utility assignments may be decisive. For example, imagine a case where an act,  $A_1$ , has an infinite expected utility and is also the most probable option of those that have an infinite expected utility, but carries some risk of a great loss (disutility).  $A_2$  also has an infinite expected utility, is just somewhat less probable than  $A_1$ , but has no risk of a great disutility. As described,  $A_2$  may well be preferable to  $A_1$ .  $A_2$ , we could say, because of its utility assignment, *overrides* the initial attractiveness of  $A_1$ , which was due to its somewhat greater probability.<sup>3</sup>

Since act one and act two both have an infinite expected utility, following (N), one should choose to perform act one because it makes the attainment of the pay-off more likely. The decision to perform act one, then, properly rests not only on its expected utility but also on its probability. The addition of (N) as a tie-breaking principle of calculation circumvents the alleged decisional indeterminacy of infinite expected utilities.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Maximin considerations would recommend  $A_2$  over  $A_1$ .

<sup>4</sup> See George Schlesinger, *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 152, for a proposal on the use of the probability and utility factors *individually* as decision-theoretic guides to be used in conjunction with utility maximization.

## 2. THE INDETERMINACY PROBLEM: VERSION TWO

The second way of formulating the indeterminacy objection proceeds without the claim that alternatives are necessary to generate the indeterminacy.<sup>5</sup> Without different acts, (N) is inapplicable. Suppose that an agent believes that a certain act  $\beta$  (where  $\beta$  is causing a belief in the theistic god) has a  $0.45 - x$  probability of bringing about an infinite outcome (heaven), a 0.55 probability of no afterlife, and a very remote probability of resulting in an infinite disutility (hell). The expected utility of  $\beta$  would be:

$$23. [(0.45 - x)(\infty) + (0.55)(r) + (x)(-\infty)] = \infty + -\infty$$

with  $r$  as a finite utility and  $x$  as a very small probability. Proposition (23) is problematic, since subtraction is not well defined for infinite cardinals. The expected utility of  $\beta$  is mathematically indeterminate.

Though it is true that (23) results in a mathematical indeterminacy, why think this is so generally? One plausible response to this indeterminacy involves a maneuver introduced in the previous chapter: the removal of the infinite disutility ( $-\infty$ ) from the calculation. Without the infinite disutility, (23) yields a determinate value. The justification for this removal is as follows. Every act has an infinite number of logically possible outcomes; and, consequently, every act has an infinite number of possible outcomes that are properly ignored or removed from the decision calculation.<sup>6</sup> To rehearse an example, when tossing a coin, though one justifiably takes the only possible outcomes to be 'heads' and 'tails', in fact any number of bizarre but possible events might occur: the coin might land on its edge, it may remain suspended in mid-air, the coin might vanish as it is tossed, and so on. In a similar way, a Pascalian could hold that the likelihood of a god who punishes all and only theists with an infinite disutility is so wildly remote that it is properly ignored.

It is important to notice that one cannot remove the infinite disutility just because it, along with the infinite utility, leads to indeterminacy. The removal of the infinite disutility is permissible because the state

<sup>5</sup> For an example of this version of the indeterminacy objection, see Jeffrey, *The Logic of Decision*, 153–4.

<sup>6</sup> I use the terms 'remove', 'ignore', and 'detach' interchangeably.

associated with it (there being this other sort of god) is thought to be so remote, so unlikely, that it warrants nothing but neglect.

One might think that the removal of the infinite disutility from (23) is impermissible just because there is an infinite value involved. That is, in most decision situations that have outcomes dependent on vanishingly small probabilities, one can ignore those outcomes because, when multiplied by a finite utility, these outcomes would contribute only a very tiny amount to the overall expected utility. This amount is irrelevant, because it is so small. With the coin toss, the probability of the outcome in which the coin lands on its edge is so small that that outcome is really not worth the notice. But, in the case of (23), things are different. There we have not a finite utility involved, but an infinite one. And, since infinity multiplied by any finite amount yields infinity, the resulting amount is not irrelevant.

The foregoing objection is erroneous since it neglects an important point. Every act carries with it possible outcomes that involve infinite utilities. Just as any and every act might result in religious belief and so might result in an infinite utility, there might be, for any act one picks, some bizarre god who punishes the doer of that act with an infinite disutility. This possibility is no doubt vanishingly small, but a non-zero probability is sufficient when multiplied with an infinite value to render an infinite value. Hence, any and every act carries the sort of indeterminacy found in (23). But clearly we are rational in acting in some ways and not in other ways, and this can only be because we ignore the outcomes involving infinite disutilities. So, just as we properly neglect very remote possibilities in mundane decisions, we are justified in doing so in Pascalian decisions also.

The neglect of very remote catastrophic outcomes is not, then, unique to the Pascalian. It is a maneuver that is both common and rational.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing that point, it is clear that the indeterminacy found in (23) is not incurable. The prescription is a good dose of partition exclusion: limiting the states in one's decision matrix to those with *real* outcomes only.<sup>8</sup> That which is merely possible and wildly

<sup>7</sup> For an example of this sort of maneuver that involves only finite utilities, see Stephen Stich, 'The Recombinant DNA Debate', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 7/13 (1978), 189–91.

<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, the notion of a real possibility is vague; the idea is, however, intuitive enough for our purposes here.

improbable is properly neglected and, paraphrasing William James, left for 'dead'.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, suppose that one assigned the following values in a calculation of expected utility:

$$24. [(0.44)(\infty) + (0.55)(r) + (0.01)(-\infty)] = \infty + -\infty.$$

Proposition (24) differs from (23) in that the probability assignment associated with the infinite disutility is much greater than is the case with (23). The indeterminacy in (24) cannot be removed in the manner outlined above, simply because the outcomes involved are all considered real, as relatively likely possibilities. If one considers outcomes associated with both infinite utilities and infinite disutilities as real possibilities, then the indeterminacy is not properly removable, as is the case with (23). Nevertheless, I see no reason to think that (24) is an example showing that any use of an infinite utility in a Pascalian Wager will result in a situation of mathematical indeterminacy. While it is true that certain expected-utility uses of infinite values may result in debilitating mathematical indeterminacies, it is also clear that other uses, like that of (23), need not.

One might wonder if the probability assignments found in (23) are realistic. Is there any reason to suppose that there might be circumstances in which it would be rational to have the probabilities specified in (23)? A use of the Indifference Principle, for instance, would not yield the probability disparities found in (23). The two deity hypotheses seem conceptually or *a priori* similar. So, a use of the Indifference Principle would sanction assigning the two hypotheses equal probabilities. If the two deity hypotheses have equiprobable assignments, then the probability disparity, which is necessary to remove the 'offending' infinite-utility assignment, is missing.

Though it is true that a use of the Indifference Principle will not yield the probability assignments found in (23), the probability assignments of (23) would be realistic and rational given other sorts of evidence. For instance, suppose that, after reflecting on the various arguments, pro and con, concerning the existence of God, you judge that the evidence

<sup>9</sup> Such outcomes are clearly not what William James called 'live hypotheses'. See 'The Will to Believe' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dorer Publications, 1956), 2-4.



is roughly balanced. Further, you judge that, if there is a god, it most probably would be the theistic god (although you are willing to admit that it is possible that you could be wrong about this, there might exist some deity other than God).<sup>10</sup> With regard to the evidence you would be in an agnostic position, having judged that the evidence is roughly balanced.<sup>11</sup> This is a general description of the sort of individual for whom Pascal originally wrote the *Pensées*—a person who, if she seriously considers any religious hypothesis, considers only the theistic one. The probabilities specified in (23) reflect the assignments of a person who sees theism and a purely naturalistic outcome as being the only real possibilities.

The Wager, under this description, is not a free-floating argument designed to demonstrate the rationality of theistic belief, no matter how small the positive probability one assigns to theism. The Wager is, rather, a sort of tie-breaker. If one judges that there is an epistemic parity between theism and naturalism, the Wager can tip the scales in favor of belief. Because the expected utility of theistic belief is greater than that of nonbelief and because the relevant evidence is roughly balanced, it is reasonable to believe. This view of the Wager is, briefly, that the Wager is operative only if the evidence is inconclusive. The theoretical advantage of this view is that the Wager would not be contrary to epistemic rationality (defeasible evidentialism as it was called in Chapter 2); it can only supplement the evidence.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear, I think, that the probability assignments of (23) are realistic and rational, given the sort of description found above. Indeed, many persons in contemporary society fit this description: persons who are agnostic about the existence of God, but who think that the only real outcomes are theism and naturalism. The Wager could be a good reason for them to believe, even if it is not a good reason for the convinced atheist.

<sup>10</sup> The bare possibility of there being some god other than the theistic god is found in (23) as the remote probability  $x$ .

<sup>11</sup> I say more about agnosticism in Chapter 5.

<sup>12</sup> This view of the Wager is consistent with Pascal's original formulation in that Pascal claims that 'reason cannot decide for us one way or the other ...' (W. 93). It is also similar to Thomas Morris's distinction between the epistemically concerned version of the Wager and the epistemically unconcerned version. See his 'Pascalian Wagering', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16 (1986), 437–54; repr. in *Anselmian Explorations: Essays in Philosophical Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 194–212.

### 3. THE PROBLEM OF THE PRIORS OR NATURAL THEOLOGY AND THE PASCALIAN

It is a consequence of the preceding section that the Wager needs the support of other theistic arguments if it is to have a chance at plausibility. How so? The role I have sketched for the Wager is that of a tie-breaker, which tips the scales in favor of theism. Tie-breakers, of course, are relevant only with a context in which the evidence is taken as being equal, or nearly so.

This role as a tie-breaker raises a question: what if the judgment about the evidence is irrational or unreasonable? What should the Pascalian say about one who holds that the scales are balanced, when in fact they are not? This is the problem of the priors. A probability value in the absence of certain bits of evidence is what is known as a prior probability. In Chapter 3 I argued, in effect, that some priors are in fact unreasonable—assigning (J) a positive probability, for instance—and I suggested some ways of distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable priors. But what should a Pascalian say about the problem of the priors?

There is an old saying once prominent in computer programming circles: garbage in, garbage out. And that old saying illustrates the proper attitude for the Pascalian. Rules (I) and (D) limit the use of pragmatic arguments in contexts of epistemic parity. If one judges that the evidence is roughly balanced between theism and naturalism, and any other alternative taken as relevant, then the Wager may be relevant. The judging here, of course, may be understood either in a person-relative sense, or in an objective sense. That is, is rationality judged relative to, and only to, what the person believes or knows, or is rationality judged relative to the evidence as such, even including propositions not available to the person? This is a difficult question, and one that runs far afield from our focus here. Perhaps the best one can do in limited space is to suggest an admixture of the objective and person-relative senses as the proper answer. In short, then, the answer a Pascalian might best give is this: the palm of rationality is awarded to those priors that would result from an inquiry that is not unreasonable, taking into account the inquirer's circumstances. The terms an inquiry might take—how extensive it is, for instance—depend in part on an inquirer's expertise. To whom much is given, we might say, much is

required. But less may be required from those who have less. Would an inquiry into the evidence regarding theism support the contention that the evidence is roughly balanced? Any one familiar with contemporary developments in natural theology and the philosophy of religion, with the work of, say, Richard Swinburne, William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, William Rowe, and Richard Gale, could very well say that a judgment of balancing priors is a reasonable prospect. Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect everyone to be familiar with contemporary developments in natural theology and the philosophy of religion, since, for one thing, texts in professional philosophy do not generally lend themselves to those who are not professionally trained. So to expect the general reader to have familiarized herself with professional philosophy is to expect too much. Still, if the general reader judges that the evidence is balanced, that judgment seems reasonable, since it is supportable by those who are familiar with work in contemporary philosophy of religion and natural theology. The Pascalian, then, needs natural theology. While she may judge that the theistic arguments do not rise to the level of providing conclusive reason in support of theism, she must judge, if her priors are to be reasonable, that those arguments provide reason sufficient to counterbalance the arguments of the natural atheologist.

One professed asset of the Canonical Wager was its independence from the project of natural theology. It needed but minimal support from the arguments of natural theology. The only support necessary was that which made it clear that there is some positive probability that God exists, no matter how small that positive value is. But, as we have seen, this runs afoul of rules (I) and (D). The Pascalian needs more from the arguments of natural theology, even if he does not believe that that project is fully successful. The success of natural theology must extend far enough to support the judgment that the evidence in support of theism is commensurate with that against.

#### 4. THE ST PETERSBURG PARADOX

One particularly interesting objection to the notion of an infinite utility is built upon the St Petersburg paradox. This paradox was formulated by Nicholas Bernoulli in correspondence with Pierre Montmort in the early eighteenth century, and was the occasion for the formulation of

the law of declining marginal value.<sup>13</sup> In broad terms the paradox holds that it is not true that, as long as the expected utility of an act is infinite, reason demands that one do that act at any finite cost. From this it is concluded that the notion of an infinite expected utility (and, by extension, the notion of an infinite utility) is problematic and best discarded. Given this conclusion, the Wager seems doomed to failure from the start.

There is, I argue, a way of defusing the St Petersburg paradox without resorting to the wholesale exclusion of infinite utilities. The paradox can be defused via a decision-theoretic principle, the Sure Loss Principle, which resolves the paradox in a way that is compatible with infinite utilities.

Daniel Bernoulli described the St Petersburg game as:

Peter tosses a coin and continues to do so until it should land 'heads' when it comes to the ground. He agrees to give Paul one ducat if he gets 'heads' on the very first toss, two ducats if he gets it on the second, four if on the third, eight if on the fourth, and so on, so that with each additional throw the number of ducats he must pay is doubled. Suppose we were to determine the value of Paul's expectation ... Although the standard calculation shows that the value of Paul's expectation is infinitely great, it has ... to be admitted that any fairly reasonable man would sell his chance, with great pleasures, for twenty ducats.<sup>14</sup>

So, a fair coin is tossed repeatedly until heads first turns up.<sup>15</sup> Suppose that heads first turns up at toss  $n$ ; the player then receives a pay-off of  $2^n$  value. Of course, it is logically possible that the coin, although fair, would always come up tails. Since this is so, the expected utility of the game calculates to infinity. The St Petersburg paradox, simply put, is that one should be willing to pay anything of finite utility as an entry fee in order to have a chance at winning an infinity of pay-offs. But clearly no one would pay much to play the St Petersburg game. It is concluded from this that the notion of an infinite-expected utility is problematic.

<sup>13</sup> On the history of the St Petersburg problem, see Issac Todhunter, *A History of the Mathematical Theory of Probability* (London: Macmillan, 1865), 133–4, 220–2. And see Jacques Dutka, 'On the St Petersburg Paradox', *Archive for the History of Exact Sciences*, 39/1 (1988), 13–40.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Bernoulli, in *Proceedings of the St Petersburg Imperial Academy of Sciences*, v. (1738), 175–92. The essay is reprinted as 'Exposition of a New Theory on the Measurement of Risk', trans. L. Sommer, *Econometrica*, 22/1 (1954), 23–36.

<sup>15</sup> On the various formulations and versions of the St. Petersburg game, see Paul Samuelson, 'St Petersburg Paradoxes: Defanged, Dissected, and Historically Described', *Journal of Economic Literature*, 15/1 (1977), 24–55. The version adopted in the text is the Bernoulli version.

The paradox argument can be set out as follows:

25. for every successive toss of a fair coin in which tails appears, the player receives a pay-off of one utile. And,
26. a fair coin logically could come up tails for any number of successive tosses. So,
27. the decision to play has an infinitely greater expected utility than does that of not playing. And,
28. it is rational to stake anything of a finite utility in order to have a chance at winning an infinity of pay-offs. So,
29. one should be willing to stake one's entire fortune for the chance of playing the game. But,
30. no one would be willing to stake her entire fortune for the chance to play the game. Therefore,
31. the notion of an infinite-expected utility is problematic.

The pay-off mentioned in (25) need not be seen as money; it can be seen as some non-monetary unit, or value. One might, for example, see it as happiness or perhaps as moments of time added to one's life.

Premise (26) is true. It is improbable that a fair coin would come up tails for any large number of tosses, but improbability does not entail a zero-probability assignment. When one calculates the expected utility of the game:

$$2(1/2) + 4(1/4) + 8(1/8) \dots = 1 + 1 + 1 \dots = \infty$$

Having no mathematical limit, it sums to infinity. Proposition (27) then is true: a calculation of the expected utility of playing results in an infinite-expected utility.

Premise (28) is an entailment of the Principle of Fair Costs and the notion of an infinite utility. The Principle of Fair Costs states that the expected utility of playing determines the value of a play in a game of chance. And it is an implication of the notion of an infinite utility that if X is valued infinitely and Y is valued but finitely, then clearly X is to be sought, even at the cost of Y, or even, the claim would go, at the cost of any set of finite-valued things  $Y_1, Y_2, Y_3, \dots Y_n$ , as long as this cost is not itself equal to infinity. Pascal, for one, certainly endorsed this implication when, in the *Pensées*, he claims that:

if there were an infinity of chances of which only one was in your favor, you would still do right to stake one to win two, and you would act unwisely in refusing to play one life against three, in a game where you had only one chance out of an infinite number, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life

to win. But here there is an infinity of infinitely happy life to win, one chance of winning against a finite number of chances of losing, and what you stake is finite. That removes all doubt as to choice; wherever the infinite is, and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against the chance of winning, there are no two ways about it, all must be given.<sup>16</sup> (W. 343)

According to Pascal, one should be willing to stake anything of a finite utility in order to have a shot at winning something of an infinite utility.<sup>17</sup> The sense of 'should' here is a prudential ought. Proposition (29) is, then, but an instance of (28).

Premise (30), an empirical claim, seems true enough: no one would pay much to play the St Petersburg game. Of course, one need not exhaust an infinite number of tosses in order to win the St Petersburg game, since any winnings in excess of the stake would constitute winning; even so, (30) is true. But how does this support (31)? The claim would go this way: given the incompatibility of (29) and (30), and that (30) is true, (28) is clearly false. And, given that the principle of fair costs is plausible, the notion of an infinite utility is problematic.

There have been several proposed solutions to the St Petersburg paradox offered at one time or another. Daniel Bernoulli, Laplace, and more recently George Schlesinger have all argued that a recognition of the 'moral expectation' or the declining marginal value of money defeats the paradox.<sup>18</sup> If Bernoulli's principle (which states that, if a certain gain  $G$  is added to an initial fortune  $F$ , then the utility of  $G$  decreases as  $F$  increases) is true, then the expected utility of the game is no longer infinite: though the 'physical' value still sums to infinity, the 'moral' value does not. However, given a fixed utility function for an agent, this solution would fail if one simply increases the pay-off of the game to some amount greater than  $2^n$  for the  $n$ th trial. The paradox, because the amount of pay-off would then increase faster than the marginal utility of money diminishes, is regenerated.<sup>19</sup> Richard Jeffrey has argued that

<sup>16</sup> George Schlesinger also endorses a principle like (28). See his *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion*, 149–52.

<sup>17</sup> William James stated the implication as 'any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable if there is but the possibility of infinite gain'. See 'The Will to Believe', 5–6.

<sup>18</sup> On Bernoulli, see 'Exposition of a New Theory'. On Laplace, see *A History of the Mathematical Theory of Probability*, 470–1. And see Schlesinger, *New Perspectives on Old-Time Religion*, 151.

<sup>19</sup> This result was shown by Karl Menger in 'The Role of Uncertainty in Economics', trans. W. Schoellkopf, repr. as chapter 16 in M. Shobik (ed.), *Essays in Mathematical Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 211–31.

the St Petersburg game itself is illicit, since no one has an infinite supply of money; and so anyone who offered the game is a liar in that she could not have an indefinitely large bank.<sup>20</sup> Without the game, the paradox cannot even get off the ground. Jeffrey's solution works when humans offer the game. But what if, as in Pascal's Wager, the supposition is that the payoff will be in units other than monetary and possibly involves a non-human person? Jeffrey's solution would be irrelevant and perhaps even irreverent. Another response is to argue the impropriety of using the mathematical expectation of a gamble, because it is an average, to determine the fair price of that gamble. According to this response, the Principle of Fair Costs is, in some sense, an inappropriate determinate of the stake. While this response may be cogent with unique or single-case gambles, it does not seem so with a series of gambles. It is not at all clear what would determine a fair stake if it is not the expected utility of a play. Even with unique gambles, it is not clear what would constitute a fair stake if it is not the expected utility. And besides, the St Petersburg game can be formulated as a long-run series of gambles.

As it stands (25)–(31) is not a paradox. The paradox proper is (25)–(30): the incompatibility of (28) and (30). Proposition (31), then, is a consequence of the paradox. In other words, the proponent of (25)–(30) holds that (31) is the best way to resolve the apparent paradox: it is (28) that is false.

Is (31) the best way to resolve the conflict between (28) and (30)? I will argue that it is not. Proposition (28) may well be false, but this is no support for (31). The falsity of (28) supports (31) only if (28) was an entailment of the notion of an infinite utility; but it is not.

Suppose one were offered the chance to play a game that consisted of a single toss of a biased coin, such that, if the toss were favorable (heads), one would win \$2 million; if the toss were unfavorable, then nothing. The cost to play this 'single-toss' game is, let us suppose, \$500. Heads (the favorable toss) is quite improbable (say  $1/1000$ ). No one, I submit, would play the single-toss game, because we believe it to be practically certain that we will lose. And this reaction is perfectly rational. Even if we raised the pay-off and lowered the cost, as long as it is practically certain that the player will lose and there is a substantial potential loss involved, the rational thing to do is to sit out the game.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey, *The Logic of Decision*, 153. See also the similar objection of Lloyd Shapley, 'The St Petersburg Paradox: A Con Game?', *Journal of Economic Theory*, 14 (1977), 439–42.

The single-toss game illustrates what seems to be a practical principle of rationality. This principle, call it the 'Sure Loss Principle' (SLP), is:

if two acts A and B are such that the expected utility of A is greater than the expected utility of B, but the probability of the favorable consequence of A occurring is such that the performance of A will probably result in a significant net loss for the agent, then the agent ought either (i) to perform B, if there is no risk of great loss; or, (ii) to perform neither A nor B.

According to the SLP, one should decline any act in which a large net loss is practically certain. In the single-toss game, the expected utility of playing is \$1,500, while the expected utility of not playing is \$500. Bayesianism recommends participation in the game. The SLP does not. Because of the very low probability of a favorable toss ( $1/1000$ ), and the substantial potential loss involved, the SLP recommends that one not play single toss.

The rational propriety of the SLP is supported by two arguments. The first argument entails that something like the SLP is needed whenever infinite utilities are included in a calculation of expected utilities. The second holds that there is a good reason to think that the SLP is true: a violation of the SLP would run counter to the rational goal of maximizing one's gain.

First, the motivating assumption behind the St Petersburg paradox is something like this: a calculation of expected utilities that uses infinite utilities must be problematic in that one factor of the calculation (the infinite utility) so swamps the other factor (the probability) that it makes this latter factor nearly irrelevant. This is problematic because one's decision ought to be a balance between utilities and probabilities: it is not the pay-off alone or just the probability that should determine one's decision. In many cases the Expectation rule best expresses this intuition, since a proper balance is achieved by the averaging of probability and pay-off. When a possible pay-off with the magnitude of infinity is involved, however, the Expectation rule needs supplementation of the kind supplied by the SLP. The SLP restores the importance of the probability factor without resorting to a wholesale loss of the notion of infinite utilities.

Secondly, a violation of the SLP will lead, almost certainly in the short term and often in the long, to the agent suffering a loss of the stake with little, if any, gain. Even if one has great resources, a net loss



is practically certain, given the Law of Large Numbers. Proven first in 1714 by Jacques Bernoulli, the Law of Large Numbers entails that:

32. if the probability of E at each trial is  $x$ , then in a large number of trials E will occur with a relative frequency which is close to  $x$ .

If E is the probability that a particular fair coin comes up Heads at each toss ( $1/2$ ), then, in 1,000 tosses, heads will come up about 500 times. Hence, a long favorable run is extremely unlikely given the Law of Large Numbers. But it is not just long runs that are unlikely. For example, suppose one decides to play the St Petersburg game and pays \$2,000 as an entry fee. To win the game one must have at least \$2,001 in hand at the end of game. The likelihood of this happening—the probability of a fair coin consecutively coming up heads eleven times—is small indeed (roughly  $1/2000$ ). To violate the SLP in this case would result in the player probably losing some or all of her \$2,000 stake. A violation of the SLP, then, would be counter to the rational goal of maximizing one's gain.

Principle SLP includes an important provision that it is *significant* probable losses that are to be avoided. State lotteries, then, since they cost a rather insubstantial amount to play, do not constitute a counterexample to the SLP. The significance of the loss though is judged by the agent involved and is, thus, person-relative. Just as the value one assigns to a sum of money is relative to one's total fortune, the significance of a loss is relative to a number of items, among which are one's holdings, how substantial the stake is, one's aversion to loss, and one's penchant for risk.

The SLP is also person-relative with regard to the probability value that constitutes the critical value beyond which one considers any smaller positive probability as being practically zero: the threshold of a 'sure loss'. Some of us will have relatively high thresholds; the more daring among us will have lower thresholds. We may all have different thresholds; but all of us must have some such threshold, customized though it may be to our own peculiar propensities.<sup>21</sup> Some gambles and some endeavors are just too risky even for the most daring among us.<sup>22</sup> The gambler who wagers ever onward, even in the face of immense and

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps experiments employing the von Neumann–Morgenstern method could determine the values for a given person of *significant* losses and also the *probability threshold*.

<sup>22</sup> For an interesting account of several experiments done to test various responses to the St Petersburg Paradox, see W. Bottom, R. Bontempo, and D. Holtgrave, 'Experts,

frightening improbabilities, we consider compulsive and not rational. So, the St Petersburg paradox seems sure to stumble against the threshold of each of us, since, for any real number  $n$  that one might pick, the probability that a fair coin would always come up tails is less than  $n$ .

The idea of treating very small probabilities as being practically zero goes back to Buffon in the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> The SLP differs from Buffon's proposal in that: (i) the SLP is person-relative, while Buffon claimed that there was an absolute probability threshold of  $1/10,000$  beyond which smaller probabilities were treated as zero; (ii) the SLP is indexed to significant probable losses (though there may be something like the SLP operative even with mundane decisions); and (iii) the SLP is formulated as a decision-theoretic principle of practical rationality.

The application of the SLP to (25)–(31) goes this way. Proposition (30) is compatible with the SLP, since the probability of winning the game is practically zero. Though one will not necessarily lose, given such odds, a loss is practically certain. Proposition (31), however, need not be a consequence of an affirmation of (30). Proposition (31) follows only if (28) were true; but it is not. A proponent of the notion of an infinite expected utility could hold that:

- 28'. one should be willing to stake anything of a finite utility in order to have a chance at winning something of an infinite utility, only if no principle of rationality, whether epistemic, prudential, or moral, is violated,

and not (28), is the actual entailment of the notion of an infinite utility and the principle of fair costs.<sup>24</sup> Propositions (28') and (30) are compatible, given the SLP. The recognition of the SLP, then, resolves the alleged paradox of the St Petersburg game without resorting to the abandonment of infinite utilities.

One might object that the Canonical version, predicated as it is on a very low probability of God existing, falls prey to the SLP in the same

Novices, and the St Petersburg Paradox: Is One Solution Enough?', *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 2 (1989), 139–47.

<sup>23</sup> See Todhunter, *A History of the Mathematical Theory of Probability*, 346.

<sup>24</sup> Proposition (28') is the Pascalian version of the principle. The St Petersburg version would be:

- 28''. one should be willing to stake anything of a finite utility in order to have a play in a game with an infinite expected utility, only if no principle of rationality, whether prudential epistemic, or moral, is violated.

Like (28'), (28'') is compatible with (30) given the SLP.

way that the St Petersburg paradox does. The Canonical Wager, even with its infinite expected utility, is a bad bet. The Canonical Wager either falls prey to the St Petersburg paradox, or it violates the SLP. Either way, there is good reason to reject the Canonical Wager.

	God exists	$\sim$ (God exists)
Wager for	F1	F2
Wager against	F3	F4

*Fig. 4.1.*

This objection may succeed. But then it may not. It depends upon the values assigned to the outcomes of theistic belief and non-theistic belief within a naturalistic world. To see this consider a decision matrix (Fig. 4.1). F1 is assigned  $\infty$ , while F3 carries some finite value. If  $F2 > F4$ , then the Canonical version does not violate the SLP, even if  $P(\text{God exists}) \ll 1/2$ . On the other hand, if  $F4 > F2$  (and especially if  $F4 \gg F2$ ), then the Canonical Wager would violate the SLP. The SLP is operative whenever a significant net loss is all but certain. The values assigned to F2 and F4, then, are important. Assigned one way, the SLP is violated; assigned another it is not. If (9) and (11) are well supported, that is reason to think that the Canonical Wager need not violate the SLP.

## 5. THE WAGER AND STANDARD DECISION THEORY

What sense can be made of the idea of an infinite utility and, further, can the standard axiomatic decision-theoretic constructions accommodate infinite utilities? The key to understanding Pascal's contention that theistic belief provides, if true, an infinite utility is to remember that, according to one widely accepted version of Christian theology, heaven is an endless, sublime existence each succeeding moment of which is as saturated in happiness as each preceding one. The idea, then, consists of at least two elements: that there is an endless succession of moments of existence, and, given the special nature of the moments of existence involved, that there is no point of diminishing marginal utility. The

value of such an infinitely long and profoundly happy existence is of a magnitude infinitely greater than that of an earthly life. It would be an outcome that is incommensurably greater than any finite good. Is this idea of an infinite utility compatible with standard axiomatic systems of Bayesian decision theory?

It is not. Standard constructions of decision theory require that expectation is bounded and, as a consequence, cannot accommodate infinite utilities.<sup>25</sup> As Edward McClennen points out, the Monotonicity axiom of the Luce and Raiffa axiomatization implies that, for two gambles, such that one prefers outcome  $O1$  to outcome  $O2$  and  $Pr(p) > Pr(q)$ , where gamble 1 =  $[O1, 1 - p; O2, p]$  and gamble 2 =  $[O1, 1 - q; O2, q]$ , one must prefer gamble 1 over gamble 2.<sup>26</sup> Notice, however, the disruption that results from introducing infinite utilities: if the utility of  $O1$  is infinite, then  $EU(\text{gamble 1}) = \infty = EU(\text{gamble 2})$ . So, the agent must be indifferent between gamble 1 and gamble 2, since, according to the Expectation rule, an agent must be indifferent between gambles that have identical expected utilities. The introduction of infinite utilities results, therefore, in the agent violating either the Monotonicity axiom or the Expectation rule.<sup>27</sup>

The problem can be extended. Any plausibility enjoyed by the Expectation rule is grounded on the axioms of the standard constructions of decision theory. If one rejects the standard constructions, what reason is there for thinking that the Expectation rule is an appropriate guide when deliberating under conditions of risk? This question is especially acute when the decision involves a single-case bet, as is the case with whether God exists. More generally, is the incompatibility of standard decision theory and infinite utilities an intractable problem for the Pascalian?

The Pascalian might respond that, for one thing, there is no construction of decision theory that is without controversy.<sup>28</sup> And, indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that theories constructed for finite utilities,

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Jeffrey, *The Logic of Decision*, 150–63; and see Michael Resnik, *Choices: An Introduction to Decision Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 108.

<sup>26</sup> See Edward McClennen, 'Pascal's Wager and Finite Decision Theory', in J. Jordan (ed.), *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 123–31.

<sup>27</sup> See R. D. Luce and H. Raiffa, *Games and Decisions* (New York: Wiley, 1957), 28.

<sup>28</sup> For a powerful critique of the standard axiomatic constructions, quite apart from any Pascalian consideration, see Edward McClennen, *Rationality and Dynamic Choice: Foundational Explorations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

the standard sort, cannot accommodate infinite ones, an unusual sort. Moreover, remembering that the Wager is protean, the Pascalian can point out that rational decisions can be framed independently of the standard axiomatic theories, especially since the Pascalian can present the Wager in any of its several versions, neither being limited to any one version of the Wager nor, apart from the idea of an infinite utility, dependent upon any controversial decision-theoretic principles.

If the Pascalian chooses the strategy of abandoning the bulwark of standard decision theory and opts to strike out on her own, while still employing the Canonical Wager, she will need to supply a reason for thinking that the Expectation rule, outside the Bayesian framework of standard decision theory, is rationally mandated. The prospects of so doing do not appear especially bright, since even the Law of Large Numbers will not provide a rational mandate for using the Expectation rule independent of the decision-theoretic framework, since the Wager is, in a significant sense, a single-case bet.

Even if it is true that supporting the rational propriety of employing the Expectation rule outside the standard constructions is not an insurmountable task, it is such a formidable task that the Pascalian would be well advised to jettison the idea of an infinite utility and all transfinite versions of the Wager, and to retain only finite versions of the Wager. Would this revision prove a bane to all significant uses of the Wager?

Without infinite utilities, probability becomes a much more important factor in a decision. Indeed, as Mougin and Sober point out, when employing only finite utilities, it follows that: *If  $P(G) < 1$ , then  $EU(\text{theism}) > EU(\text{atheism})$  if and only if  $P(G \& P) > P(D)$ .*<sup>29</sup> Where  $G$  is *God exists*, and  $D$  is some *deviant theology such that atheists are rewarded and theists are punished after death*, and  $P$  is *Pascalian theology*. But, in the Canonical version, the probability of  $G$  is taken to be extremely low, and, as a consequence,  $P(G \& P)$  will also be low, even if  $P(P)$  is quite high. So, it is possible that  $P(G \& P) < P(D)$ , even when  $P(P)$  is quite high and  $P(D)$  is low. Mougin and Sober conclude from this that the Wager fails as a prudential argument, if only finite utilities are employed.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Gregory Mougin and Elliott Sober, 'Betting against Pascal's Wager', *Notis*, 28/3 (1994), 386. This claim holds, of course, only if the utility of theism equals that of atheism.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 391.

Wagers using the Expectation rule and employing only finite utilities escape this objection if any one of three conditions obtain. If an enormous but finite utility is assigned to the occurrence of theistic afterlife, then, while it is true that  $EU(\textit{atheism}) > EU(\textit{theism})$  if  $P(\sim G) \gg P(G)$ , it will still be true that  $EU(\textit{theism}) > EU(\textit{atheism})$  if  $P(G) = P(\sim G)$ , or if  $\sim(P(\sim G) \gg P(G))$ , where the symbol  $X \gg Y$  represents *X is vastly greater than Y*.<sup>31</sup>

What does it mean to say that  $P(G) = P(\sim G)$ ? The relevant sense here is that  $G$  and  $\sim G$  are taken to be equiprobable:  $1 - P(G) = 0.5$ . Clearly enough in this case, what might be called ‘epistemic ambiguity’, the EU of believing that God exists dominates that of disbelief.

A second relevant situation is that of complete uncertainty, a situation in which no determinate probability assignment is made regarding  $G$ . The probability of  $G$  is taken to be indeterminate. If one takes the probability-values to be indeterminate, then, as long as one accepts that the utility of theism substantially exceeds the utility of atheism in at least one outcome, and in no outcome is worse, a Wager-style argument will prevail, since a weak dominance principle can be employed to yield the result that one should believe.

Furthermore, the greater the utility assigned to  $(G \ \& \ P)$ , relative to its decision-theoretic alternatives, the lower the probability of  $G$  can be and  $EU(G) \gg EU(\sim G)$  yet obtains. This inverse proportion between the utility of theism and its probability accommodates those who hold that the probability of  $\sim G$  is somewhat higher than the probability of  $G$ , as long as they hold that the utility of theism swamps that of *atheism*, such that the difference between the expected utility of *theism* and of *atheism* is still in favor of the former.

The third condition is the values assigned to theistic belief and non-belief in the event of there being no god. If the value of theistic belief exceeds that of non-theistic belief, even in a naturalistic world, then finite Wagers would again escape Mougin and Sober’s objection.

A finite version of the Wager will have, however, a more restricted scope than does a transfinite version. Surveying the possible audiences addressed by the Wager shows this:

<sup>31</sup> Assuming that one holds either that the utility of theism exceeds that of nontheism, or that  $P(D) = 0$ , where  $D$  is a deviant theology, such that *theists are punished and atheists rewarded after death*; or that  $EU(\textit{belief in } EU(\textit{theism})) \gg EU(\textit{belief in } EU(D))$ . Clearly the first disjunct is standard and the second strikes me as plausible as well. The third disjunct is that the expected utility of holding standard beliefs is much greater than holding nonstandard beliefs.

33. *strict theists*: those disposed to believe that  $P(G) = 1$ ;
34. *deep theists*: those disposed to believe that  $1 > P(G) \gg 0.5$ ;
35. *agnostics*: those disposed to believe that  $P(G) \approx P(\sim G)$ ;
36. *deep atheists*: those disposed to believe that  $0.5 \gg P(G) > 0$ ;
37. *strict atheists*: those disposed to believe that  $P(G) = 0$ .<sup>32</sup>

The Wager is superfluous to those described by (33) and (34). The transfinite version of the Wager would be, presumably, credible to any person described by categories (35) and (36). Indeed, a transfinite Wager could even persuade some described as strict atheists. Even though the strict atheist assigns zero probability to God existing, if she allows that believing theistically, even when there is no god, is more beneficial than not doing so, the Canonical Wager weakly dominates. The finite version of the Wager, on the other hand, would be credible to persons described by categories (35), and perhaps to some persons described by (36). Although drawing a precise line here cannot be done, a finite Wager may well be credible to the upper reaches of those described by (36), what we might term 'shallow' atheists, but most of those described by (36) may be beyond the persuasive scope of a finite Wager, since their probability assessments of theism are significantly less than one-half. Not surprisingly perhaps, the number of persons who would find a finite Wager credible is smaller than the number who would find a transfinite version credible, since many of the persons described by (36) are beyond the scope of a finite Wager. It is perhaps worth mentioning an argument made by David Wetsel that Pascal probably aimed his apology not toward hardened unbelievers, but toward dubious or tentative unbelievers.<sup>33</sup> The limitation resulting from our refurbishing of the Wager, if Wetsel is correct, does not stray far from its original foundation.

Still, any argument that could reasonably sway the agnostic and many of the atheistic, if sound, has an apologetically significant use, even if it is not credible to every person. Neither is it extraordinary that an argument should carry certain presuppositions that limit the class of those who find it credible to those who share those presuppositions. No argument regarding a controversial topic can be credible to all persons. So, although a finite Wager may not be credible to all who would find

<sup>32</sup> I ignore the possibility of infinitesimal probability values until the penultimate section of this chapter, and I ignore entirely the complication of probability intervals.

<sup>33</sup> See David Wetsel, *Pascal and Disbelief: Catechesis and Conversion in the Pensées* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1994).

credible a transfinite Wager, this in no way implies that the former lacks a legitimate inferential role nor has any apologetic use.<sup>34</sup>

## 6. A FINITE WAGER?

Although the Canonical Wager has a certain allure—no heed need be paid to the evidence as long as there is some positive probability that God exists—it is an attraction that one should resist, since, in addition to its compatibility with standard axiomatic decision theory, a finite Wager has assets that render it preferable to its transfinite cousin. For instance, the two problems investigated in Chapter 3, the many-gods objection and the many-theologies objection, cannot rear their most potent guises with a finite version of the Wager. The strongest versions of both the many-gods objection and the many-theologies objection depend upon the principle that *infinity multiplied by any finite amount is still infinite*. In order to generate the debilitating embarrassment of Pascalian riches, a proponent of, say, the many-theologies objection contends that, for any theology one picks, whether it is genuine or merely cooked-up, there is some small probability that it succeeds. And, given that infinity multiplied by any finite amount is infinite and that there are an innumerable number of theologies possible, the Pascalian is left with innumerable alternatives recommended by a Wager-style calculus.<sup>35</sup> With the finite version of the Wager, however, there is no infinite utility involved and, consequently, no troubling infinite expected utility to equalize the alternatives. So, even if (F) could be rehabilitated, neither potent version of the objections can arise when the infinite is rejected.<sup>36</sup>

Another asset adhering to a finite Wager is its theological flexibility. Since the notion of an infinite utility, as understood here, entails an endless succession of moments of existence, this is tantamount to saying that the afterlife is everlasting and not timelessly eternal. A transfinite Wager, then, requires that one hold that there is time in heaven, that

<sup>34</sup> Contra Robert Anderson, 'Recent Criticisms and Defenses of Pascal's Wager', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 37/1 (1995), 50.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Duff, 'Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities', 107–9.

<sup>36</sup> While there may be some equiprobable alternatives to Pascalian theism that offer the same expected utility, there would not be an innumerable number of them. Moving to a finite Wager pares the list of possible alternatives to Pascalian theism to a more manageable size.



the afterlife is everlasting and not timelessly eternal. A finite Wager carries no such requirement: the afterlife with it can be either timelessly eternal, or everlasting in nature.

What would replace the 'lazy eight' ( $\infty$ ) in a finite Wager? In Chapter 1 I suggested that a constitutive feature of Pascalian Wagers is that the possible gain or benefit associated with one of the alternatives swamps all the others. This swamping property is usually represented by the 'lazy eight' ( $\infty$ ) but one might represent it in a finite wager as an arbitrarily high finite gain—an amount greater than any amount that we can think of.<sup>37</sup> In a rough way, we could understand the idea of an arbitrarily high finite gain in either of a couple of ways. First, we might understand it as a property adhering to actions or event: action  $a_1$  has an arbitrarily high finite gain just in case, for any action  $a_2$ , there is a time  $t$ , such that, for any time  $t'$  later than  $t$ , the cumulative amount of utility produced by  $a_1$  is greater than that produced by  $a_2$  up to  $t'$ .<sup>38</sup> Think of it like this. The idea of the Christian heaven is that of an unending succession of happy moments of conscious existence, with each moment of existence as happy as each preceding moment. A second way of understanding the idea of an arbitrarily high finite gain is as that value that reaches the utility saturation point of humans, such that no additional utility makes a perceptual difference,<sup>39</sup> just as wealth reaches a point of diminishing marginal utility, and eventually, a point such that any addition makes no measurable real difference, the utility of heaven could be understood to reach the utility saturation point of humans. The utility of heaven has under this understanding the Pascalian property of being better than an earthly good, or gain. While it seems natural to use the lazy eight to represent unbounded good, one could instead employ the idea of an arbitrarily high finite amount, in either sense, to capture the Pascalian idea that any amount of good in this world is exceeded by the good possible in the world to come.

Is a finite version of the Wager robust? Although the answer to this question depends in part on the beliefs and preferences of the agent involved, it is clear that, given standard beliefs and preferences, a finite version of the Wager is as robust as many of our everyday

<sup>37</sup> This idea is due to John Byl, 'On Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities', *Faith and Philosophy*, 11/3 (1994), 467–73.

<sup>38</sup> I owe this formulation to Peter Vallentyne, 'Utilitarianism and Infinite Utility', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 71 (1993), 215.

<sup>39</sup> I owe the idea of a utility saturation point to Alan Hájek. See his 'Wagering War on Pascal's Wager', *Philosophical Review*, 112/1 (2003), 46–7.

prudential decisions that involve an alternative the utility of which, or disutility, swamps the other alternatives. Unless one denies that any such prudential decision is ever prudentially sound, there is no good reason to deny it of a finite wager. For instance, consider a pragmatic argument intended to motivate changes in behavior and technology regarding the issue of global warming. The idea here is that the prospect of global warming brought on by technological pollution carries such an overwhelming bad expected utility that it is prudential, even in the absence of conclusive evidence, to take appropriate steps to forestall that prospect. While we may debate the probabilities involved in this decision, there seems to be nothing objectionable in its decision-theoretic structure. If one denies that deviant theologies carry any significant utility, then a finite version of Pascal's Wager will be robust.<sup>40</sup>

## 7. HYPERREALS TO THE RESCUE?

One response to the foregoing invokes nonstandard decision theories that employ the concepts of infinitesimals and infinimals found in hyperreal number theory. While the employment of transfinite cardinals with standard decision theory produces problems, it has been suggested that these problems might be avoided by embedding a Pascalian Wager in a nonstandard hyperreal context.<sup>41</sup>

Since, as we have seen, neither subtraction nor division is well defined for standard Cantorian infinite cardinals, all sorts of problems arise when calculating with these cardinals. But, one might substitute the concept of a positive infinimal—a number larger than every positive real number—in place of infinity and employ standard mathematical principles in calculating expected utilities.<sup>42</sup> Or again, one might employ infinitesimals—numbers greater than zero but less than any real number—as measurements of probability values. While it is far from clear how one might measure an infinitesimal probability value, their employment would allow a much more fine-grained description of the possible audience of the Wager.

<sup>40</sup> Can any other reason be given for denying that deviant theologies carry a significant utility? Perhaps this: any agent who would punish or reward counter to our standard sense of fairness lacks trustworthiness and is not, thereby, a stable object of utility.

<sup>41</sup> So Jordan Howard Sobel, 'Pascalian Wagers', *Synthese* 108 (1996), 11–61.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* 47–58.

Are hyperreals promising for the Pascalian? Perhaps. But there is reason for caution here. For one thing, the employment of hyperreals necessitates a nonstandard construction of decision theory, since standard constructions are compatible with neither infinimals nor infinitesimals. On this score, it may be better for the Pascalian to forgo talk of hyperreals, as well as the infinite, and rest contentedly with a finite Wager within the standard constructions of decision theory. Second, it is far from clear how one might measure a probability assessment that is less than any real number. Could one really assign an infinitesimal probability? In addition, the introduction of hyperreals is also an introduction of an additional layer of complexity. And that does not portend well for the practicality of a hyperreal Wager. Remember the Wager is not just a theoretical construct, but a pragmatic argument. The Wager is an argument intended for widespread use. But, if hyperreals are introduced and, as a result, standard number theory and standard decision theory no longer suffice, the practicality of the Wager is compromised. Judith Jarvis Thomson has advised in another context that 'it is a good heuristic in philosophy to be suspicious of views that would shock your grocer'.<sup>43</sup> Something like this is probably good advice for the Pascalian. One should be suspicious of any version of the Wager that one's grocer could not employ.

## 8. AS THINGS STAND

The indeterminacy objection fails to show that a Pascalian use of an infinite utility is problematic. The objection does show that standard versions of the Wager involving infinite utilities must be augmented with non-standard decision-theoretic principles. Although this decision-theoretic augmentation renders the Wager argument more complex than Pascal's original formulation, it is hardly reason to think the Wager fallacious. Still, the Pascalian may think it best to surrender talk of the infinite and to employ versions of the Wager that conform to standard decision theory. In any case, if Pascal's Wager fails, it does so because of some problem other than the indeterminacy objection.

<sup>43</sup> Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Press, 1996), 211.

# 5

## Showstoppers?

Not surprisingly, Pascal's Wager generates more than a good share of criticism. Besides the many-gods objection, the charges of immorality, and the various technical objections having to do with the infinite, there are other objections, novel and clever, each with the aim of showing that the Wager fails as a pragmatic argument. In this chapter I examine nine objections, five of recent vintage, four venerable (or at least found in Voltaire, Hume, and Nietzsche). Despite the ingenuity of each, none, I argue, is fatal to Pascal's Wager.

### 1. THE CHARGE OF UNWORTHINESS

In 1734, in one of the earliest objections to the Wager, Voltaire charged that the *Infini rien* passage 'is somewhat indecent and childish. The idea of gaming, of losing or winning, is quite unsuitable to the dignity of the subject.'<sup>1</sup> William James, while discussing the Wager, mentions this objection in a dramatic way:

You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table it is put to its last trumps. Surely Pascal's own personal belief in the masses and holy water had far other springs; and this celebrated page of his is but an argument for others, a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart. We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take peculiar pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> F. M. A. Voltaire, 'Pascal's Thoughts Concerning Religion' (Letter XXV, 1734), in *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1733; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 127.

<sup>2</sup> William James, 'The Will to Believe' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 5–6. Many critics

Pascalian Wagering, according to this objection, is an unworthy defense of faith. It is almost as if there is a kind of moral taint seeping from the baseness of wagering staining faith. Any faith that resorts to the Wager for support, according to this objection, is not worth supporting.

It is hard to take the author of *Candide* seriously here. Is it plausible to hold that representing religious decisions as a wager is unsuitable to the dignity of the subject, but the use of satire against theological positions is suitable to the dignity of the subject? Still the validity of the charge is distinct from the integrity of the plaintiff. Two points are enough to defuse the charge of unworthiness.

First, although I have argued that the Wager is best seen as an argument for theism and not an argument specifically for Christianity, it is still relevant to realize, as Nicholas Rescher points out, that 'the founder of Christianity was himself prepared to invite people to bethink themselves of gains and losses and to compare the costs and benefits of discipleship with the costs and benefits of a worldly life'<sup>3</sup>—for instance, in Matthew 16: 26, 'for what shall it profit a man to gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?' (see also Luke 9: 25, 14: 28–33, 18: 29–30). Pascal is simply pointing out that, if one makes religious decisions in the same manner as other important decisions shrouded in the fog of uncertainty are made, one's choice is not arbitrary but rule governed. Consult reason as best you can (beliefs about probability) and consider your preferences (values and utility assignments) and make the decision accordingly. The second point is this: if we keep in mind that the Wager was intended to motivate persons to begin the journey of faith, a journey, there is reason to believe, which may

of Pascal cite this passage of James and suggest that James is here offering an objection to the Wager. Other commentators (for instance, Leslie Stephen in his 1898 discussion of James's 'The Will to Believe' essay) hold that James's argument is Pascalian. Clearly, either James's presentation of the objection is (i) an endorsement of the objection contra the Wager, or (ii) nothing but a rhetorical mention of the objection, or (iii) James had in mind a distinction that a Pascalian-style argument was problematic when employing other-worldly expectations (as does the Canonical Wager), but was appropriate when employing this-worldly expectations (as does James's own argument). Weighing against (i) and (iii), and in support of (ii), is James's declaration that 'Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then, seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith in masses and holy water complete'. See his 'The Will to Believe', 11. In addition, as is clear on a close reading, James's argument is broadly Pascalian.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Rescher, *Pascal's Wager: A Study of Practical Reasoning in Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 124.

begin self-interested, will eventually become selfless. The alleged taint of unworthiness evaporates.

Jon Elster argues that the venal beginning of the faith journey—the journey motivated by the Wager—taints the selfless terminus of that journey. Even if one's theistic belief now is selfless, it has a history that originated in a selfish decision as a result of Pascalian wagering. So, the selfless genuine belief in God one has now, because it originated in a self-interested adoption of a regime to inculcate genuine theistic belief, is tainted for ever. The selfless belief is guilty by its causal association with a dubious past. As Elster puts it:

Christianity rests on the idea that there is one spectator clever enough to see through any actor, viz. God. Hence Pascal's wager argument must take account of the need to induce a real belief, since faking will not do. Moreover, the fact of God's clairvoyance explains why good works cannot bring about salvation if performed for the sake of salvation. The state of grace is essentially (or at most) a by-product of action. Let me record an objection to the wager argument. What kind of God is it that would be taken in by a genuine belief with a suspect past history—i.e. belief ultimately caused, even if not proximately justified, by instrumental rationality? Pascal's own attack in *Les Provinciales* on Jesuit casuistry shows that he is open to this objection. Here he argues against the Jesuit doctrine of *directing the intention*, i.e. the idea that an action which is blameable when performed on one intention may not be so if performed on another, so that the confessor should direct his attention to the intention behind the behavior rather than to the behaviour itself. The obvious objection is that even if ... one were to succeed in changing the intention, the blameable intention behind the change of intention would contaminate the action that was performed on the new intention. Yet a similar argument would seem to apply to the reasoning behind the wager: how could present belief not be contaminated by the mundane causal origin?<sup>4</sup>

One might object that Elster seems to confuse the past status of something with its present status. While it may be true that one was earlier concerned with theism because of selfish reasons, it does not follow that one is now concerned with theism because of selfish reasons. Even if it is true that one's current belief is the end product of a causal history that has morally dubious beginnings, why is that relevant? The United States originated as a slave-holding republic, but it does

<sup>4</sup> Jon Elster, *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 74–5.

not follow that it is now a slave-holding republic, or that it is forever condemnable as a slave-holding republic. This objection, however, perhaps misses the point of Elster's complaint, which is that a belief motivated by the Wager is a direct causal outcome of what is a corrupt attitude.

Elster's objection, therefore, has traction only if pragmatic reasoning is morally objectionable, whether generally, or in the particular case of inculcating religious belief. But, given the arguments of the second chapter, there is ample reason to refuse the allegation that pragmatic reasoning is objectionable. But, let us ignore the arguments of Chapter 2, and concede for argument's sake that pragmatic reasoning is morally corrupt.

Even with this concession, there is reason to reject Elster's objection. Consider his assertion that a belief that is a direct causal output of a corrupt attitude is itself corrupt. This is dubious. Suppose you were raised with racist beliefs, but later in life, having encountered a persuasive reason to believe that not having racist beliefs is advantageous, you seek to put aside your racism (suppose you met a prospective spouse who will not tolerate your racist beliefs). To do so requires that you take steps to inculcate new attitudes and eradicate old ones. Your reclamation is advanced not from any recognition that racism is immoral but solely from self-interested reasons. Even if it is because of pragmatic reasoning that you have taken steps toward disowning your racist attitudes, you deserve praise and encouragement for your efforts to inculcate new beliefs and attitudes, and not condemnation for your efforts. Even if your effort to replace your racist attitudes flows from a self-interested attitude, it does not follow that you are forever condemnable as a racist. In much the same way, the Wager is a device to initiate first steps along a foreseeable path that eventuates in a selfless destination. And, just as we would not condemn a reformed racist, regardless of the motivation underlying the reformation, neither would it be proper to condemn a Pascalian for an attitude which is itself unobjectionable but is a direct causal product of an alleged objectionable attitude.

Does it matter that an appraisal of the Wager might involve a morally perfect being? It need not. Christian theology holds that humans find themselves in a self-caused state of depravity (whether total or partial), such that we are unable to do as we should. If a morally perfect being exists, it would surely not hold it against one that extraordinary steps must be adopted to overcome one's depraved state. The Jamesian

principle is again relevant—what is arguably important is not the root or causal genesis of one's faith, but the fruit that ultimately grows out of it.

## 2. MERCENARY FAITH?

One might object that a faith supported solely by a pragmatic theistic argument would be a mercenary faith. Genuine religious commitment, however, requires wholeheartedness. Each of the synoptic gospels, for instance, reports that Jesus, when asked the most important commandment, answers: 'you shall love the Lord God, with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind.' This is a clear enjoinder to a steadfast, or wholehearted commitment. A mature believer is deeply committed and stands fast in the faith, even to the extreme of martyrdom. But martyrdom is not a real option for a self-interested commitment, one might object, since the commitment does not run deep enough. Cardinal Newman once remarked that 'many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will martyr himself for a conclusion'. A conclusion arrived at via the pragmatic seems even less likely to generate a deep commitment. In essence, then, this objection claims that pragmatic support is inadequate for theistic belief, since those elements of faith that involve sacrifice run counter to self-interest, and would not be supported by pragmatic considerations. Additionally, support by a pragmatic argument is subject to revision. If more data were to become available indicating that religious commitment is more costly than beneficial, the pragmatic support for theism would evaporate. Consider the Jamesian Wager. If new research were available the results of which seemed unimpeachable and which indicated that atheism generated greater empirical or 'this-world' benefit than theistic commitment, the Jamesian Wager would fail. So, the Pascalian is a kind of ideological mercenary, willing to abandon her Christian commitment to gain an important empirical good for herself. Of course, the infinite expected utility associated with the Canonical Wager is certainly an asset here, since no amount of empirical benefit could outweigh it, but even the Pascalian who endorses it, this objection holds, is in principle willing to sell his allegiance to the highest bidder.

How would a mercenary Christian faith differ from one that is wholehearted? Although not set within a discussion of pragmatic support, we might look to Robert McKim's characterization of tentative religious belief for an answer:



- a. the tentative believer's connection to the Christian community will be looser, more detached, than that of one with a decisive belief;<sup>5</sup>
- b. the tentative believer will question 'some of the more radical biblical injunctions, such as the injunction to care not for the morrow or to love your neighbor as yourself';<sup>6</sup>
- c. the tentative believer 'will be more willing to abandon her position for the sake of some worthwhile and important earthly good for herself and to think it appropriate to do so ...'. So, the tentative believer will abandon her Christian commitment if a better deal should present itself;<sup>7</sup>
- d. 'most martyrs who have died for their faith have been misled ... even the martyrs in our own tradition have been misguided ...'.<sup>8</sup>

These four characterizations of tentative belief also characterize the problematic features allegedly found with a religious commitment supported by a pragmatic argument. In sum, this objection asserts that a faith built on pragmatic support is like a house built on shifting sand.

One answer to this objection is similar to that employed against the previous objection: the journey of faith may begin self-interested and tentative, but will eventually become selfless and wholehearted as one's commitment naturally deepens and matures. As we will see in the next chapter, Pascal held that taking steps to inculcate belief puts one in a new epistemic perspective, from which one is better able to appreciate the evidence in support of Christian theism. If Pascal is right about this, then the charge of a mercenary faith is unfounded.

A second answer rests with an insight provided by William Wainwright.<sup>9</sup> Wainwright points out that one can tentatively commit to an ideology that includes the proposition that one should wholeheartedly accept, or believe, all its central propositions. A tentative belief is still a belief. So, if one tentatively believes  $B_1, B_2, \dots B_n$ , one of which is the belief that one should wholeheartedly accept all of  $B_1, B_2, \dots B_n$ , then one has reason to try to bring it about that she wholeheartedly accepts all of  $B_1, B_2, \dots B_n$ . And, as Wainwright remarks, if this proposal is incoherent or irrational, then one cannot tentatively accept or tentatively

<sup>5</sup> Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 169–70.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 164–5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 204.

<sup>9</sup> William Wainwright, 'Review of Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity by Robert McKim', *Faith and Philosophy*, 20/4 (2003), 504.

believe traditional Christianity. The journey may begin in a tentative way, but it may very well arrive at a destination that is not tentative.

### 3. THE MIGRATION PROBLEM

Employing *G* as *God exists*, *P* as *Pascalian theology*, and *D* as *deviant theology in which theists are punished and atheists are rewarded posthumously*, the Migration Problem contends that if one rejects ( $\sim G \& P$ ) on pragmatic grounds, one can migrate either to ( $G \& P$ ), or to ( $\sim G \& D$ ). While the Wager recommends a migration from ( $\sim G \& P$ ), it does not dictate ( $G \& P$ ) as the terminus of the migration. One might, given certain preferences and beliefs, migrate instead to ( $\sim G \& D$ ). Graham Oppy, for instance, classifies the Wager as a consistency argument—an argument, that is, that asserts that, on the pain of logical contradiction, if one accepts certain propositions, one must also accept a certain other proposition.<sup>10</sup> But, Oppy asserts, ‘the most that a consistency argument can do is to show that I need to revise some of my beliefs—but it alone cannot tell me which beliefs need to be adjusted’.<sup>11</sup> Gregory Mougin and Elliott Sober express the migration problem this way, using *P-theology* for Pascalian theology:

Instead of accepting P-theology on evidential grounds and evaluating G on prudential grounds, why not accept  $\sim G$  on evidential grounds and evaluate the prudential value of continuing to believe P-theology? Pascal asks us to assume a theology and to decide whether to shift from atheism to theism. The new problem is to assume atheism and to decide whether to shift from P-theology to some other theology.<sup>12</sup>

Is the Migration Problem a decisive objection against the Wager? It is fairly clear that it is not. No argument, sound ones included, is credible to all persons, since only those who share the presuppositions of an argument will find its premises rationally persuasive. If a person shares or finds plausible the presuppositions of a particular argument, we can say that the person is *open* to that argument, whether or not the argument is sound, and whether or not the person accepts that

<sup>10</sup> Graham Oppy, ‘On Rescher on Pascal’s Wager’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 30 (1990), 163–6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 164.

<sup>12</sup> Gregory Mougin and Elliott Sober, ‘Betting against the Wager’, *Notûs*, 28/3 (1994), 387.

the argument is sound. The Wager, like all arguments, has syntactic properties, and semantic properties and pragmatic properties, and, as a consequence, the Wager persuades only those of a certain mind. The Migration Problem is unrealistic, since it implies that, unless all persons are open to the Wager, it fails as a pragmatic argument.

Only those who consider  $(G \not\leftrightarrow P)$  a live hypothesis will be open to the Wager. Aliveness is person-relative.<sup>13</sup> A proposition I find alive, you may not. Person-relativity does not, however, imply that anything goes. Nor does it provide a shield against rational scrutiny. If a proposition were obviously false, then for any one to hold that proposition as a live hypothesis is to expose herself to the critical appraisal of others, to a justifiable charge of credulity, or even irrationality. A live hypothesis is a proposition whose adoption would not entail widespread and extensive revisions within one's web of beliefs, and one that, for all one knows, could be true. Whether to become a theist is a live hypothesis for many people, but whether to become, say, a Druid is not. To adopt a Druid theology would entail too many costly revisions in one's beliefs. The extent of belief-revision is a cost properly considered when deciding on pragmatic grounds which alternative to adopt. If A and B are each supported on pragmatic grounds and are supported to the same extent, but adopting A requires less belief-revision than does adopting B, A is the alternative to adopt from a pragmatic point of view.

As long as  $(G \not\leftrightarrow P)$  is a live hypothesis, while  $D$  is not, the Pascalian is well supported by prudential considerations to recommend that one migrate from  $(\sim G \not\leftrightarrow P)$  to  $(G \not\leftrightarrow P)$ . Is  $D$  a live hypothesis for some? Perhaps. But, even if it were, that is no reason to hold that the Wager fails as a pragmatic argument. The adoption of  $(G \not\leftrightarrow P)$ , given that one rejects  $(\sim G \not\leftrightarrow P)$ , does assume a certain set of preferences and beliefs, and, although this is an empirical matter, it is not implausible to consider this set standard in the sense of being widely held, especially in contrast to the set of beliefs and preferences that would render  $D$  a live hypothesis. And, if the set of preferences and beliefs assumed by the Wager is standard, then the Migration Problem is trivial. The Migration Problem does succeed in reminding us that the Wager persuades only those who find its premises and presuppositions persuasive. But this is something true of all arguments about controversial topics. So, the Migration Problem fails, since it imposes an unrealistic demand, and

<sup>13</sup> James invoked the person-relativity of aliveness as a solution to the many-gods objection. See James, 'The Will to Believe', 2–3.

since the set of preferences and beliefs assumed by the Wager is, arguably, standard.

#### 4. THE PROBLEM OF DWINDLING MARKETS

A more interesting objection is found in Alan Hájek's argument that Pascal's Wager fails because, in short, there are persons who assign a vague probability for God's existence.<sup>14</sup> Since the expectation for vague probability intervals are themselves vague, the expectation of believing theistically is vague. Contrary to Pascal, then, rationality does not determine that one must inculcate theistic belief.

A sharp probability is a precise probability assignment by a person to a proposition. Suppose Jones opines that the coin is fair. Her opinion that the probability of heads on the next toss of the coin is  $\frac{1}{2}$  is an example of a sharp probability. In this case there is a single probability function at work. A vague probability is an assignment that is not sharp. Jones's opinion that Davy Crockett died fighting is vague; she is uncertain how he died. Under a model proposed by Bas van Fraassen, Jones's vague opinion is represented not as a single probability function but as a set of probability functions.<sup>15</sup> The probability given to a proposition  $H$  is an interval  $[x, y]$  iff  $[x, y]$  is the smallest interval containing the probabilities assigned to  $H$  by the elements of that set. This set is called a 'representor'. Each function in one's representor agrees with one's opinion, by precisifying that opinion in a coherent way. That is, probability values are distributed over the functions of the representor. Hájek suggests that there is a kind of agnosticism that includes vague probabilities concerning the existence of God, represented by the interval  $[0, x]$ , for some  $x$ . Let us call this kind of agnosticism 'vague agnosticism'. Calculating the expected utility of theistic belief for the vague agnostic requires calculating the expectation for each precisification in the vague agnostic's representor, with  $f_2$ ,  $f_3$ , and  $f_4$  as finite utilities (Fig. 5.1).

If all the precisifications in one's representor carry the same expectation, then the expectation for belief is determinate. If they do not all carry the same expectation, then the expectation itself is vague. With an interval of  $[0, x]$  for God existing, the expected utility of believing

<sup>14</sup> Alan Hájek, 'Objecting Vaguely to Pascal's Wager', *Philosophical Studies*, 98 (2000), 1–16.

<sup>15</sup> Bas van Fraassen, *Laws and Symmetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

	God exists	~ (God exists)
Believe	$\infty$	$f_2$
~ (Believe)	$f_3$	$f_4$

*Fig. 5.1.*

is vague, since the expectation of the zero function is just the value obtained if God does not exist,  $f_2$ . But for every function greater than zero in the representor, the expectation is infinite. So the expectation of believing for the vague agnostic is the two-valued set  $\{\infty, f_2\}$ . The expectation of not believing is vague over the interval:

$$[f_3 \cdot 0 + f_4(1-0), f_3 \cdot x + f_4(1-x)] = [f_4, f_3 \cdot x + f_4(1-x)].$$

When precisifying with positive probabilities, belief is required, but when precisifying with a zero probability, it is not. So, like the strict atheist, the vague agnostic apparently eludes the clutches of Pascal's Wager. Thus, Hájek contends, the Wager fails, since vague agnostics lie beyond its reach.<sup>16</sup> Hájek's contention is that, just as the Wager cannot rationally persuade those who assign a zero probability that God exists, it also cannot rationally persuade those whose probability for God existing have a zero in their probability interval. In effect, the Wager fails even in the modest role of a tie-breaker.

Well, what should we make of the Problem of Dwindling Markets? In one sense not much, since, as already argued in the Chapters 2 and 4, the market share of the Wager is much more limited than is usually thought. In Chapter 4 I argued that strict atheists and a majority of what I called deep atheists (those disposed to believe that  $0.5 \gg P(G) > 0$ ) are beyond the rational reach of the Jamesian Wager. If there are those who assign only an infinitesimal probability to the existence of God—'miserly' atheists—they too would be beyond the reach of the Jamesian Wager. Previously I pointed out that the semantic and syntactic and pragmatic properties of an argument would very likely limit its rational attraction; its market share. However, I did argue in Chapter 4 that agnostics are the primary targets of the Jamesian Wager, so perhaps the debilitating dwindling market is that of agnostics. Has Hájek shown us that there are agnostics beyond the rational reach of the Wager?

<sup>16</sup> So Hájek, 'Objecting Vaguely to Pascal's Wager', 9–10.

Before answering that question, let us note two small initial points. The first is that Hájek mischaracterizes the Wager; and, second, he ignores the various versions of the Wager. Hájek asserts that the first premise is 'rationality requires you to assign positive probability to God's existence'.<sup>17</sup> The Wager is best seen, however, as a kind of consistency argument—if you have certain preferences and certain probability beliefs then, on pain of inconsistency, you are committed to a certain proposition. It is a wager made of straw to formulate it with a categorical premise asserting a positive probability to God existing. Additionally, Pascal's Wager, as we have seen, is protean. There are versions that include probability assignments, and versions that do not. It is worth noting that objections based on probabilities have no impact on versions of the Wager that include no probability assignments.

Enough with the small points. Notice that a probability interval of  $[0, x]$  for any  $x$  other than unity seems odd. How is it that one's probability assessment for God existing is vague, and yet has a precise boundary for some value less than one? Of course, notice the oddity if  $P(\text{God exists}) = [0, 1]$ . If there are persons whose probability assignments about God existing are represented by  $[0, 1]$ , and Bayesianism is correct, then they are for ever assigned to agnosticism, since conditionalization cannot move one from a prior assignment of zero or one. The vague agnostic is for ever precluded from becoming an atheist or a believer. This oddity is only slightly lessened by an interval of  $[0, x]$  for any  $x$  less than unity, since no one with that probability for God existing could convert to belief, and it is exceedingly strange to have a kind of agnosticism from which one might become an atheist, but could not become a theist. Indeed, Craig Duncan suggests that vague agnostics, being so entrenched in their agnosticism that they are immovable and insulated from any conceivable theistic evidence, are dogmatic. And dogmatism, he suggests, is not rationally permissible.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, if there are vague agnostics with an interval of  $[0, 1]$ , then not only would the Wager fail to move them, but no argument in support of atheism could be effectual either, since these vague agnostics cannot be moved to disbelief by any of them. If a dwindling market caused by vague agnosticism is a problem for the Wager, it is probably

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Craig Duncan, 'Do Vague Probabilities Really Scotch Pascal's Wager?', *Philosophical Studies*, 112/3 (2002), 279–90.

a problem for every argument in the philosophy of religion, including arguments for atheism.

Let us ignore this oddity and inquire whether the Wager might yet rationally ensnare even the vague agnostic whose probability that God exists is  $[0, x]$  for some  $x$ . Hájek's argument is that the Wager is ineffectual for any one with a zero in his probability interval for God existing. As he puts it:

Now suppose that your probability for God's existence is vague over the interval  $[0, x]$ , for some  $x$ . If rationality permits this, as I have argued that it does, then rationality does not require you to assign positive probability to God's existence. So premise 1 in the Wager is false.<sup>19</sup>

Has Hájek shown that the Wager is ineffectual for any one whose probability for God existing is the interval  $[0, x]$ ? Certainly not. The Pascalian could respond to Hájek's argument by pointing out that all but one precisification in the vague agnostic's interval requires cultivating theistic belief, so the Wager 'succeeds well enough'. This 'well-enough' response implies that the overwhelming majority of the precisifications in the interval require believing in God—indeed every precisification except one does just that. A clear ratio of many to one it seems. What does it mean to suggest that the Wager succeeds well enough? Think of it like this. Suppose you could choose one of A or B. Choosing A offers a near certain chance of gaining a payoff of, say, \$25.00, while choosing B offers a small chance of receiving nothing, but a very high probability of receiving one million dollars. Even if you are uncertain concerning the distribution of probabilities over the chances involved with B, and uncertain to such a degree that the expectation of choosing B is indeterminate, still B seems the choice to make.

Hájek anticipates this response and seeks to blunt it by cleverly attempting to deny any precisification majority status:

in what sense do the precisifications that give positive probability to God's existence form 'the majority'? True, there are infinitely many such precisifications—indeed, uncountably many. But there are presumably also infinitely many precisifications that give probability zero to God's existence—indeed, uncountably many. For your opinion is vague on other matters as well. Suppose, for definiteness, that your probability for God's existence is vague over the interval  $[0, 1/3]$ , and your probability for there being intelligent life elsewhere in the universe is vague over the interval  $[1/2, 1]$ . Then as far as these constraints

<sup>19</sup> Hájek, 'Objecting Vaguely to Pascal's Wager', 7.

are concerned, among the precisifications of your opinion are the uncountably many probability functions that assign 0 to God's existence, and  $r$  to such life, for each  $r$  in  $[\frac{1}{2}, 1]$ . Why does one uncountable set form the majority, and the other not?<sup>20</sup>

Why indeed? Hájek's response contends that the vague agnostic's representor will contain uncountably many precisifications assigning zero to God exists, since the conjunction of any sharp probability assignment contained within, with that of the vague probability assigned to God exists, will result in a vague probability. That is, suppose a vague agnostic assigns  $\frac{1}{2}$  to the proposition that this coin lands heads. Since  $P(\textit{God exists})$  is vague, and since the existence of God and the coin landing heads are independent, then  $P(\textit{God exists}) \times P(\textit{this coin lands heads}) = P(\textit{God exists} \ \& \ \textit{this coin lands heads})$ , but, since the left-hand side is vague, so too is the right-hand side. And, since this maneuver can be done with any and every sharp probability assigned by the vague agnostic, the vague agnostic will have uncountably many precisifications that assign zero to God existing.

There are two reasons why this response fails. The first is that Hájek's response succeeds only if vague probability is closed under conjunction, and closed under negation. But vague probability cannot be closed under both.<sup>21</sup> If you assign a vague probability to proposition  $p$ , it will follow that you thereby are also vague about not- $p$ . But, if vague probability is also closed under conjunction the following absurdity looms: conjoin  $p$  and not- $p$ , since both are vague, then  $P(p \ \& \ \textit{not-}p)$  would be vague as well. But it is absurd to hold that self-contradictory propositions carry a vague probability. Moreover, it is clear that one cannot gerrymander closure under conjunction such that a sharp assignment conjoined with a vague one results in a vague assignment, but a vague assignment conjoined with a vague assignment results in a sharp assignment. The moral to draw is that the friend of vague probabilities can have closure under negation, or conjunction, but not both. Without both, however, Hájek's response fails.

There is a second reason to reject Hájek's response. By asking 'Why does one uncountable set form the majority, and the other not?', Hájek suggests that there is no relevant difference between the two sets, but there is. There is a significant difference between precisifications in

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 9–10.

<sup>21</sup> I owe this argument to Bas van Fraassen, 'The Agnostic Subtly Probabilified', *Analysis*, 58/3 (1998), 217.



an interval, and precisifications within a representor. If one's vague probability for proposition H is represented by the interval  $[0, \frac{1}{2}]$ , then, clearly enough, there are vastly more precisifications with positive (non-zero) values for H than there are non-positive values for H. Uncountably many more in fact. Now it is true that precisifying every value of H with every value of a proposition J, such that  $[\frac{1}{2}, 1]$  is the vague probability assignment of J, results in uncountably many precisifications with zero for H. But how is that relevant to the ratio of precisifications with positive values to non-positive in the probability interval of H? With regard to that interval,  $[0, \frac{1}{2}]$ , the positive precisifications are the overwhelming majority in the sense that every value but one is positive. The relevant majority is that associated with the proposition itself. Calculating the expected utility for acting on proposition H is done with the probability interval of H, and not with every proposition of which H is a conjunct, for instance, or, with every precisification that assigns a zero for H. So, even if there are uncountably many precisifications containing zero for God existing within a representor, it does not follow that there are uncountably many within the interval for the proposition itself. And, without this latter result, the Pascalian can still contend that the Wager succeeds well enough, since the overwhelming majority of precisifications within the vague agnostic's probability interval for God exists assign a positive probability.

Vague agnostics, like the run-of-the-mill agnostic (one disposed to believe  $P(\textit{God exists}) \approx P(\textit{God does not exist})$ ), we can conclude, are still within the market of the Wager. At least, the Problem of Dwindling Markets from vague probabilities provides us with no good reason to think otherwise.

## 5. THE PROBLEM OF SURPASSABLE SATURATION POINTS

Alan Hájek has contested the validity of Pascalian wagers with a second objection. This objection resuscitates Antony Duff's indeterminacy complaint, conjoining it with two acceptability requirements, resulting, Hájek argues, in a dilemma deadly to any Pascalian wager. According to this objection, any adequate Pascalian wager must conform to two requirements the first of which is what Hájek calls the Requirement of 'Overriding Utility':

The utility of salvation must completely override any of the other utilities that enter into the expected utility calculations, thus rendering irrelevant the exact value of the probability one assigns to God's existence.<sup>22</sup>

The second is the 'Distinguishable Expectations' Requirement: 'We must be able to distinguish in expectation outright wagering for God from ... various mixed strategies ...'.<sup>23</sup>

The Overriding Utility Requirement reflects what we cited in the first chapter as the second of three constitutive properties of Pascalian wagers, the swamping property. We understood the swamping property as a gain that is vastly greater than any of its rivals, even if it is not an infinite gain. Hájek's Overriding Utility Requirement is poorly formulated, since no utility, infinite ones included, will render irrelevant the exact value of the probability one assigns to God's existence. An assignment of probability zero is a bane even for the Canonical Wager. Moreover, it is far from clear why we should think that the Overriding Utility Requirement is a legitimate requirement, as there is abundant textual evidence in the *Pensées* suggesting that Pascal took the probability of God existing, as a measure of the relevant evidence, as no lower than one-half. In addition, the Overriding Utility Requirement with its focus solely on wagers employing the Expectation rule ignores the uncertainty-style wager of Pascal's initial formulation in the *Pensées*. But let us ignore these problems with the requirement of Overriding Utilities and understand it as implying that salvation must be seen as trumping or swamping any 'earthly' good. That is, salvation is 'the best thing possible for you'.<sup>24</sup>

Hájek's second requirement involves the idea of mixed strategies. A mixed strategy is Hájek's term for the recognition that, for any action one picks, there is some positive probability that doing that action will result in wagering for God. And, if there is an infinite utility attached to wagering for God, if God exists, then the expected utility of doing any action that one picks will be infinite. Hájek's mixed strategies are what in Chapter 4 we saw as Antony Duff's indeterminacy objection:

suppose I take no steps to make it more likely that I will come to believe in God. There must still be some probability, however small, that I will nonetheless come to believe in Him ... and that probability is enough to generate an infinite expected value for my actions.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Alan Hájek, 'Wagering War on Pascal's Wager', *Philosophical Review*, 112/1 (2003), 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*                      <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 28.

<sup>25</sup> Antony Duff, 'Pascal's Wager and Infinite Utilities', *Analysis*, 46 (1986), 108.

The second requirement stipulates that a Pascalian defuse mixed strategies. There must be a principled way of distinguishing between the expectation of wagering for God, and the expectation of acting on some random alternative that is utterly unrelated to wagering for God.

As an aside, there are, it seems, at least two ways a Pascalian might attempt a defusing of mixed strategies. The first way employs a theological defuser: an omniscient being would know whether one is engaged in pure wagering (intentionally trying to inculcate belief), or one is engaged in mixed wagering, with mixed wagering being understood as performing actions that are not directly intended, or are not likely to result in theistic belief being inculcated. It is plausible to believe that an omniscient being, if such there is, would prefer pure wagering, and not mixed wagering. A second way of attempting to defuse the problem is by employing the principled rejection of (F):

F. for any proposition  $p$ ,  $\diamond p \supset P(p) > 0$ .

Without (F) the problem of mixed strategies is a nonstarter. Let us return from our aside and back to the objection.

Hájek's objection rests upon the allegation that any formulation of the wager seeking to conform to these two requirements fails. The Overriding Utility Requirement implies that the utility of salvation is so great that no measurable increase follows from adding an additional unit of utility. If this is true of the utility of salvation—what Hájek calls 'reflexivity under addition'—it seems to require infinite utilities. But, if the Overriding Utility Requirement necessitates infinite utilities, then mixed strategies are a problem, since an infinite amount multiplied by a finite amount results in infinity. So, any wager conforming to the Overriding Utility Requirement finds itself in violation of the Distinguishable Expectations Requirement. The Pascalian, Hájek contends, is incapable of satisfying both requirements. This is the dilemma of the two requirements.

Hájek concedes that, if there is a maximum level of utility that humans can appreciate, a utility saturation point, his dilemma is evaded.<sup>26</sup> A 'utility saturation point' is that level of utility at which no further addition makes a perceptual or appreciable difference. But this concession is no balm to the Pascalian, Hájek argues, since, for any saturation point  $p$ , God could have created persons with a higher

<sup>26</sup> Hájek, 'Wagering War on Pascal's Wager', 48–9.

saturation point,  $p + 1$ . For any saturation point one picks, God could have brought about a greater one, so there is no maximum level of utility that humans can, in principle, appreciate. So, even if humans have a saturation point, it is a problem for the Pascalian, Hájek claims, that saturation points are logically surpassable.

The Pascalian, I suspect, will happily accept Hájek's concession and argue that it is a balm by contending that there's a violation of 'Ought implies Can' lurking in Hájek's reasoning. Finite humans will of necessity have some saturation point or other, and, as a consequence, God could not have created humans without a saturation point. It is no objection that God created humans with a certain saturation point, since, if he creates humans at all, they will have a saturation point, nor is it an objection that he did not create the best possible saturation point, since there is not one. No one, deity included, can be faulted for failing to do what is logically impossible. Perhaps there is an acceptability constraint on saturation points if God exists. Perhaps God must create humans with a saturation point set 'high enough'. But, even if that is so, it is far from obvious that our saturation point is not set 'high enough'. Given the 'Ought implies Can' principle, and the well-founded principle that God's omnipotence ranges over the landscape of the logically possible, and not that of the logically impossible, there being a utility saturation point found with humans provides the Pascalian with a way of conforming to both of Hájek's requirements. So, Hájek's objection founders on this dilemma: if every possible human utility saturation point is surpassable, then it is no objection that God did not create humans with an unsurpassable saturation point. If there is an unsurpassable human utility saturation point, it is far from clear that humans lack it. Either way, the problem of surpassable saturation points fails.

## 6. PREDESTINATION AND PASCALIAN WAGERING

Another objection leveled by Voltaire, and recently revived by Jon Elster, is that Pascalian Wagering is odd when conjoined with certain theological doctrines, in particular, Pascal's view of predestination:

Begin, one might say to Pascal, by convincing my reason. It is in my interest, no doubt, that there is a God, but if, in your system, God only came for so few

people, if the small number of the elect is terrifying, if I can do nothing at all by my own efforts, tell me, please, what interest I have in believing you?<sup>27</sup>

Pascal associated with the Jansenists, or, as they called themselves, the 'disciples of St Augustine'.<sup>28</sup> Jansenism was an austere Augustinian movement within Catholicism, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, condemned by Pope Innocent X in 1653, which adhered to a strong view of predestination. Indeed, one might say the Jansenists held a Calvinistic view of predestination. John Calvin (1509–64) presented the doctrine of eternal predestination as

God, by His eternal goodwill, which has no cause outside itself, destined those whom He pleased to salvation, rejecting the rest; those whom He dignified by gratuitous adoption He illumined by His Spirit, so that they receive the life offered in Christ, while others voluntarily disbelieve, so that they remain in darkness destitute of the light of faith.<sup>29</sup>

So, salvation is due in no part to human effort or human merit or human works. It is bestowed not as a reward, but as a gracious gift to the undeserving. Pascal was certainly a Calvinist with regard to predestination:

All men in this corrupt mass being equally worthy of eternal death and the wrath of God, God could with justice abandon them all without mercy to damnation.

And yet it pleases God to choose, elect, and discern from this equally corrupt mass, in which He sees only demerit, a number of men of each sex, age, condition, complexion, from every country and time, in short, of all sorts.

God has distinguished His Elect from the others, for reasons unknown to men and to Angels, by pure mercy, without any merit involved... God, through an absolute and irrevocable will, willed to save His Elect with a purely gratuitous goodness; He abandoned the others to their evil desires, to which He could with perfect justice abandon all men.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Voltaire, 'Pascal's Thoughts Concerning Religion', 127. Jon Elster, 'Pascal and Decision Theory', in N. Hammond (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69–71.

<sup>28</sup> See Ronald Knox, 'Pascal and Jansenism', H. Bloom (ed.), in *Blaise Pascal: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), 7–16. And see Michael Moriarty, 'Grace and Religious Belief in Pascal', in Hammond (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Pascal*, 144–61; Leszek Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and the Spirit of Jansenism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Jan Miel, *Pascal and Theology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1969).

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (1552), trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke & Co., 1961), 58.

<sup>30</sup> Blaise Pascal, 'Écrits sur la grâce', in Miel, *Pascal and Theology*, 205–6.

Although a Catholic in allegiance, Pascal was Calvinistic regarding grace and human will.<sup>31</sup>

Voltaire's complaint is simply that, if predestination were true (as Pascal thought), what point is there in inculcating theistic belief? The Wager argument presupposes that inculcating right belief, via right actions, is sufficient for salvation, but the doctrine of predestination denies that. Indeed, given predestination, inculcating right belief is not even necessary for salvation, since salvation is a gift and not a result of any human work.

Voltaire's complaint here is well taken. It is odd for a proponent of predestination to advise others to take certain steps to gain salvation, all the while believing that no human effort toward gaining salvation is efficacious or even necessary for salvation. But even so, as regards the Wager, this is no objection. The doctrine of predestination is no part of the Wager, and one can endorse and employ the Wager without subscribing to that doctrine. Just as we noted in the first chapter, critics of the Wager often fasten on to Pascal's skeptical aside that 'if there is a God, He is infinitely incomprehensible, since, having no parts nor limits, He has no affinity with us' (W. 680), and claim that, in taking skepticism seriously, there is an insufficient basis of information from which to wager. But the Wager is employable without the radical skepticism suggested by Pascal's comment, and likewise it can be employed without the strong view of predestination held by Pascal as well. The Wager as an argument is distinct from Pascal the arguer. Voltaire's objection may be a sharp *ad hominem* complaint, but, as an objection against the Wager, it is too dull to make an impact.

As an aside, three considerations mitigate the oddness of a predestinarian presenting the Wager. First, according to the Jamesian Wager, there are benefits to be had just by inculcating theistic belief. And, presumably, those benefits are gained even if one is not among the elect:

But what harm will come to you from taking this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, doing good, a sincere and true friend. It is, of course,

<sup>31</sup> See C. C. Webb, *Pascal's Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 96. Pascal did refine the Calvinian idea of irresistible grace and perseverance of the Saints. Calvin had held that God's will to predestine was eternal, while Pascal (and other Jansenists) held that God's will to predestine was made after the Fall of humankind. See Moriarty, 'Grace and Religious Belief in Pascal', 144–61; and Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing*, 21–4. This refinement is problematical, since it implies that God is subject to change.

true; you will not take part in corrupt pleasure, in glory, in the pleasures of high living. But will you not have others? I tell you that you will win thereby in this life ... (L. 680).

If one holds that by inculcating theistic belief one gains in this life, no matter what happens in the next, it makes perfect sense to advise inculcating theistic belief. Second, Calvinists talk of 'promiscuous preaching'. This idea is based in part on Jesus' parable found in Mark 4: 1–20 of a farmer casting seed on various kinds of soil. Some of the seed germinates, some does not. While the farmer is responsible for the casting of the seed, she is not responsible for which seed germinate and which do not. Likewise, if one accepts that there is a biblical injunction to spread the gospel as widely as one can, then implementing various strategies of proselytizing makes sense even when conjoined with the doctrine of predestination. The third mitigating consideration is illustrated by a joke about an old Calvinist in the time of the American colonies traveling to town with a loaded gun. His good neighbor says to him, 'brother why do you travel with a gun? No harm can befall you unless the Lord decides it is your time and permits the Indian arrow to find its mark. Trust the Lord.' 'Aye,' says the old Calvinist, 'I do trust the Lord. The gun is just in case it is the Indian's time.' No predestinarian considers herself infallible. She could be wrong about predestination: perhaps a Semi-Pelagianist view is correct, or Arminianism is correct. Recognizing her own fallibility, and being concerned for others, the predestinarian may well have reason for being a Pascalian and for employing the Wager.

## 7. THE PASCALIAN DIVINE PLAN AND IMPLAUSIBILITY

Richard Swinburne objects that the divine strategy presupposed by the Wager is very implausible;—it is odd, he thinks, that God would have designed the world the way presupposed by the Pascalian—that God would value rational irrationality. As Swinburne puts it:

Pascal is claiming that God has made a world in which a supremely worthwhile goal is to be attained by cultivating an irrational belief (by setting yourself to believe that something is probable when in fact you believe now that it is not).

I find it implausible to suppose that God would have made a world of this character, for the following reason. You can only come to see that arguments such as that of Pascal work, by the careful exercise of reason, and that means not merely by following the steps which Pascal set out but... by following steps to show, for example, that the Christian religion is more probable than any other religious system. If a man just abandoned his rationality, he might draw some very different conclusions from Pascal's Wager from the ones which Pascal wishes him to draw. So, if God values our making Pascalian moves, he values our exercise of reason. It would be odd in the extreme if he then valued our making the final move of acquiring the belief that he exists by denying our reason. ... it is rather unlikely that God has set up a world in which both God rewards belief that he exists highly and the only way to acquire it is on Pascalian-type grounds.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps a fair restatement of Swinburne's argument is that the Wager has dialectical relevance only if one thinks both that the theistic arguments do not show that God probably exists; and that employing the Wager to inculcate theistic belief requires the use of reason. That is, inculcating a belief not supported by the evidence (an irrational belief Swinburne would say) requires the use of reason. But God, Swinburne asserts, would not design a world in which one uses reason to bring about a belief not supported by reason.

Swinburne's objection is built upon the assumption that a person believes that  $p$  only if one believes that  $p$  is more likely than not. So, one can believe that God exists only if one believes that it is probable that God exists. Of course, this assumption is illicit if the inculcation of a belief that one thinks has as much evidence in its favor as arrayed against it is possible. If one can form a belief in  $p$  knowing full well that  $p$  is no more likely than not, then Swinburne's assumption is false. And so it seems, since, even if it is true that believing that  $p$  is *being disposed to feel that p is probably the case*, it does not follow that believing that  $p$  involves *being disposed to feel that p is probably the case based on the evidence at hand*.

Swinburne also assumes that God would not design the world both such that the evidence in support of theism was inconclusive, and that one must use reason to see that it is within one's best interests to inculcate theistic belief. While speculation about theological matters

<sup>32</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 95–6.



is shaky, there is good reason to reject the model championed by Swinburne in favor of the following model: if God exists, we would expect that theistic belief would be in one's best interest, both in this world and in the world to come. And, if God is perfectly good and desires what is best for his creation, we would expect that God would design the world such that there is good reason to acquire theistic belief. Now the Wager has dialectical relevance for those who take the evidence for theism and for atheism to be roughly balanced. Of course, someone may take the evidence to be balanced, even if it is not. Neither using the Wager, nor the Wager itself, implies that there is not good evidence in support of theism (using the Wager does imply that one thinks that the evidence, whether pro or con, is inconclusive). Indeed, it would not be surprising that God has designed the world so that there is both sufficient epistemic reason to believe, and sufficient prudential reason to inculcate theistic belief. While redundant to those who appreciate the evidence in support, the Wager is available as a last-ditch argument to reach those who, for whatever reason, mistakenly believe that the evidence in support of theism is roughly balanced with that in support of atheism. As Pascal put it, 'there is both evidence and obscurity to enlighten some and bewilder others. The evidence, however, is such that it surpasses, or at least equals, the evidence to the contrary' (W. 736). As an aside, it may be worth noting that it would be surprising that God, if he values incompatibilist freedom, would design the world in such a way that the pro-evidence is overwhelming, or conclusive. If God wants persons to come freely to theistic belief, then we would not expect the evidence in favor of theism to overwhelm.

Why is this Pascalian model preferable to Swinburne's model? There are two reasons. First, it emphasizes the goodness of God, by asserting that the design plan accommodates even those who find the evidence lacking, since it is compatible with there being both evidence and prudential reason to believe. Second, Pascal was not a fideist; he did not hold that there is no good evidence in support of theism; that theistic belief was intellectually irrational. Moreover, Pascalian reasoning neither presupposes nor implies that theistic belief is irrational. Swinburne's model, however, requires that Pascalian reasoning imply that theistic belief is intellectually irrational. As we saw in Chapter 2, it implies no such thing.

## 8. THE IMPOTENCE AND CORRUPTION OF OTHERWORLDLINESS

It is widely recognized that David Hume was a thoroughgoing critic of natural religion.<sup>33</sup> The standard seventeenth- and eighteenth-century case for natural religion consisted of an argument intended to show that a supreme being exists—usually the Design argument or the Cosmological argument, and of an argument from miracles, or from fulfilled prophecies meant to show which supreme being it was that existed. As we noted in the first chapter, this two-pronged apologetic approach is found, for example, in William Paley's *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1795) and *Natural Theology* (1802). Much scholarly work has gone into analyzing and criticizing Hume's arguments against natural religion found in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1777), *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), the tenth chapter of his *Enquiry* (1748), and other of his essays. Yet one part of Hume's attack on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century case for natural religion has gone all but unnoticed.<sup>34</sup> Theists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often argued that religious belief provided prudential benefits quite apart from any evidence that God existed. Pascal, of course, is a prime example of this. But so too is Locke, Leibniz, John Craig, John Tillotson, and Paley, all of whom can be cited as expounding this argument, in one form or another, from prudence.<sup>35</sup> Bishop Tillotson, that cleric whose antipapist argument

<sup>33</sup> Natural religion in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries denoted knowledge of the divine that could be had via reason or instinct, independent of any purported special revelation.

<sup>34</sup> Of the two best works on Hume's philosophy of religion, J. C. A. Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1988), and Keith Yandell, *Hume's Inexplicable Mystery: His Views on Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), only the first examines Hume's critique of the argument from prudence at all (see Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 194–203). But Gaskin's treatment of Hume's critique leaves untouched several important elements of the critique.

<sup>35</sup> On Locke, see *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), bk. II, ch. XXI. On Leibniz, see *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. J. Gerhardt (Berlin: Georg Olms Hildesheim, 1960), vol. III. On Craig, see *Theologiae Christianae Principia Mathematica* (London: Typis Johannis Darby and Impensis Timothei Child, 1699), ch. VI. On Paley, see *A View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1795; New York: James Eastburn & Co., 1817), pt. III, ch. VIII.

against transubstantiation provided Hume with an ecumenical argument against miracles, declared that:

to persuade men to believe the principles of natural religion, such as the being of a God; the immortality of the soul; and future rewards after this life; I shall offer these two considerations: first, that it is most reasonable so to do. Secondly, that it is infinitely most prudent. (T. 317–89)

While the argument from prudence was not for Hume a major topic of discussion, he did subject it to a critical scrutiny, finding it, not surprisingly, flawed. To understand Hume's objections, we need to examine Bishop Tillotson's argument from prudence. A concentration on Tillotson is appropriate for three reasons. First, because of an interesting historical connection between him and Hume, Tillotson's sermon 'The Wisdom of Being Religious' (1664) served as Hume's target for much of Dialogue XII in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.<sup>36</sup> Second, even though Tillotson was a major seventeenth-century proponent of the argument from prudence, his arguments have been ignored by modern commentators.<sup>37</sup> Third, Tillotson's argument from prudence is distinct from the Jamesian Wager, and from Pascal's four wagers.

Bishop Tillotson delivered his sermon 'The Wisdom of Being Religious' to the mayor of London in March 1664 and subsequently expanded and published it in May of that same year.<sup>38</sup> This sermon is noteworthy if for no other reason than that it contains a Pascalian Wager that, given the dates involved, is apparently independent of the famous Wager of Pascal. Pascal's *Pensées* were not published until 1670. And, while the *Port Royal Logic* (1662) contained a version of Pascal's Wager that was widely known, Tillotson's Wager is, as we will see, formally different from the *Port Royal Logic* version.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>36</sup> For evidence that Hume wrote Dialogue XII with Tillotson in mind, see my 'Hume, Tillotson, and Dialogue XII', *Hume Studies*, 18/2 (1991), 125–39.

<sup>37</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Hume was aware only of the sermon 'The Wisdom of Being Religious', but that Hume was aware of Tillotson's claims and arguments as found in several of his sermons. 'The Wisdom of Being Religious' is important because (i) it is explicitly mentioned by Hume in his *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* ((1745; repr. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967), 23), so we know that Hume had read this sermon; (ii) it was one of the best known of Tillotson's sermons; and (iii) it contains all the elements of Tillotson's argument from prudence.

<sup>38</sup> T. Birch, 'Life of the Author', in *Works of Tillotson* (London: J. F. Dove, 1820), i, pp. xix–xx. See also L. G. Locke, *Tillotson* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1954).

<sup>39</sup> Tillotson may have been aware of the *Port Royal Logic* version of the Wager through Locke with whom Tillotson was in correspondence. See T. 83.

Tillotson distinguished between speculative atheism and practical atheism. The former denies the existence of God, while the practical atheist, although professing a belief in the existence of God, lives as though there were no god (T. 330). Speculative atheism was unreasonable, Tillotson claimed, because the weight of evidence was clearly on the side of the theist. His argument for this rests on a version of the Cosmological argument. Concerning the imprudence of speculative atheism Tillotson's argument was twofold:

speculative atheism, as it is unreasonable, so is it a most imprudent and uncomfortable opinion: and that upon two accounts. First, because it is against the present interest and happiness of mankind. Secondly, because it is infinitely hazardous and unsafe in the issue. (T. 362)

There are, then, two steps in Tillotson's argument that speculative atheism is imprudent. The first is that atheism is counter to the present good and the second is his version of the Wager.

The claim that atheism is 'against the present interest and happiness of mankind' is ambiguous between two senses. The first sense is that:

38. atheism is detrimental to the interest and happiness of human society.

The second is:

39. atheism is detrimental to the interest and happiness of individuals.

Both senses were recognized by Tillotson since he offered arguments for both in 'The Wisdom of Being Religious', though he concentrates on (39).<sup>40</sup> According to (38), atheism is counter to the social order as a whole. Proposition (39) asserts that atheism is harmful to the interests of particular persons, specifically those who are atheists. Tillotson not only recognized both senses; he also held that (38) implied (39). This is clearly erroneous. It may be true that most persons would suffer harm if the social order as a whole were disrupted, but it does not follow that all persons would be harmed.

Though Tillotson is wrong that (38) implies (39), perhaps he is correct that there is a 'Hobbesian connection' between the two. If (38) involves a widespread disintegration of social order, then (39) would

<sup>40</sup> Tillotson's case for (38) is treated extensively in his sermon 'The Advantage of Religion to Societies', Sermon III, *Works of Tillotson*, i. 409–23.

not be wildly implausible. Given (38), that is, it is likely that individuals would find life 'nasty, brutish, and short'.

Tillotson's argument for (39) rests on the premise that the idea of God is necessary for happiness:

man is not sufficient of himself to his own happiness. He is liable to many evils and miseries which he can neither prevent nor redress ... without the protection and conduct of a superior being, he is secure of nothing that he enjoys in this world ... So that the atheist deprives himself of all the comfort that the apprehensions of a god can give a man ... (T. 362–3)

The idea seems to be this: one can have no sense of well-being without a belief in the providential care of a god. Since God creates humans, as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1648) puts it in answer to question one, 'to enjoy God', one has well-being only if one is rightly related to God. There can be no rest, as Augustine said, until one rests in God. Persons are designed so that a right relation to God is psychologically necessary to one's sense of well-being, since, with no sense of well-being, no peace of mind, one cannot be happy. The speculative atheist forfeits the well-being that accompanies religious belief, Tillotson argues, because the dread of there being a wrathful god always arises. Dread is, Tillotson seems to suggest, a natural accompaniment of atheism, which can only be palliated by theistic belief.<sup>41</sup>

Tillotson recognized that this sort of argument did not prove the existence of God, but it did prove, he thought, the necessity of religious belief for happiness. As he put it, 'so necessary is God to the happiness of mankind, that though there were no god, yet the atheist himself, upon second thoughts, would judge it convenient that the generality of men should believe that there is one' (T. 366).

This last quotation, by the way, is but one of several places in which Tillotson mentions a version of the 'grand lie'. Even if God did not exist, it would be prudentially useful for persons yet to believe that he did.<sup>42</sup> It is not that Tillotson had his doubts; rather, it is that he is so convinced that the idea of God is necessary to happiness that he insists that the idea is useful independently of its truth-value.

<sup>41</sup> In the passage quoted (T. 361–2), Tillotson claims that the atheist will naturally dread a superior being who can defeat one's plans and judge one's actions.

<sup>42</sup> See also Tillotson, 'The Efficacy, Usefulness, and Reasonableness of Divine Faith', Sermon CCXXIII, in *Works of Tillotson*, ix, 258–79. The idea of a grand lie is first found in Plato; see *Republic*, bk. III, pp. 389c, 414d, and bk. V, p. 459d.

Tillotson's argument for (38), while not as fully addressed in this sermon as it is elsewhere, consists in the claim that theistic belief is necessary to the 'quiet and happiness of human society'. If the notion of God were blotted out of the minds of persons, 'mankind would in all probability grow so melancholy and so unruly a thing, that [the atheist] would think it fit in policy to contribute his best endeavors to the restoring of men to their former belief' (T. 368). Civility and social order are dependent upon the virtues that grow out of religious belief.

Propositions (38) and (39) together show, Tillotson thought, that speculative atheism is counter to the present interest and happiness of mankind. This was the first step to show atheism imprudent; the second step in Tillotson's argument consists of his version of the Wager.

Speculative atheism is, in Tillotson's view, prudentially unsafe because the atheist contends against the religious man, that there is no God; but upon strange inequality and odds, for he ventures his eternal interest; whereas the religious man ventures only the loss of his lusts, which it is much better for him to be without, or at the utmost of some temporal convenience ... (T. 369–70)

The strange inequality concerns the stake that is risked. The atheist risks his eternal well-being; the theist, her temporal convenience. Not only are the stakes radically disparate; so too, Tillotson argues, are the odds involved.

Unlike the Canonical Wager, Tillotson's version is not based on the claim that, since the expected utility of theistic belief is infinite, one ought to believe. Tillotson's version claims that it is at worst an even question whether God exists or not. This sort of the Wager is epistemically concerned: if one assigns a probability of roughly one-half to theism and its denial and calculates the prudential weight of each, it follows that one should believe.<sup>43</sup> As Tillotson puts it:

if the arguments for and against a God were equal, and it were an even question whether there were one or not, yet the hazard and danger is so infinitely unequal, that in point of prudence and interest every man were obliged to incline to the affirmative ... for he that acts wisely, and is a thoroughly prudent

<sup>43</sup> Though Tillotson mentions 'odds' and 'hazards', he does not incorporate probability values in his version of the Wager. His Wager is a decision under uncertainty and not a decision under risk. Pascal was the first to formulate the Wager as a decision under risk where the probability-weighted averages of the utility values (the expected utility) determine the right choice.

man, will be provided against all events, and will take care to secure the main chance, whatever happens ... (T. 370)

Tillotson here seems to employ a Maximin principle, according to which one should avoid the worst-case scenario. Although Tillotson recommends theistic belief via a maximin principle, it is clear, even if he did not realize it, that his is a strict dominance argument; theistic belief is preferable to nonbelief no matter how the world turns out.

Tillotson's version of the Wager argument differs from the versions offered by Pascal. The major difference is the inclusion of a disutility value. Despite the widespread belief to the contrary, Pascal does not include hell as part of the Wager. By including an infinite disutility, Tillotson has recourse to a decision-theoretic principle not employed by Pascal, the Maximin.<sup>44</sup>

While perhaps not as inspiring as the later heart-warming sermons of George Whitefield or John Wesley, Tillotson's two-step argument is, if sound, a powerful support for theistic belief.<sup>45</sup>

Commentators on Hume's *Dialogues* usually focus upon the discordant profession of faith made by Philo, and Philo's reduction of theological disputes to mere verbal quibbles in Dialogue XII (*D.* 214, 218). Yet, slightly less than halfway through Dialogue XII, right after Philo has declared his strong disdain for vulgar superstitions, Cleanthes remarks:

my inclination ... lies, I own, a contrary way. Religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals, that we never ought to abandon or neglect it. For if finite and temporary rewards and punishments have so great an effect, as we daily find: How much greater must be expected from such as are infinite and eternal? (*D.* 219–20)

According to Cleanthes, a corrupt religion is better than no religion at all, since religion is a necessary safeguard of morality. There are hopes

<sup>44</sup> Of course, this principle was not stated explicitly until much later. See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>45</sup> The English evangelist George Whitefield in his journal chronicling his preaching tour of the American colonies wrote this about his 24 September 1740 visit to Harvard College: 'The college is scarce as big as one of our least colleges at Oxford; and, as far as I could gather from some who knew the state of it, not far superior to our Universities in piety. Discipline is at a low ebb. Bad books are become fashionable among the tutors and students. Tillotson and Clark are read, instead of Sheppard, Stoddard, and such-like evangelical writers ...' (see *Whitefield's Journals* (1756), ed. William Wale (London: Henry J. Drane, 1938, 463)).

and fears that result only from religious belief that are necessary as motivation for common morality. Reconstructed, Cleanthes' argument runs so:

40. finite rewards and punishments have an influence on behavior proportionate to their respective magnitudes. So,
41. infinite rewards and punishments would also have an influence on behavior proportionate to their magnitudes. And,
42. morality requires a motivation of a magnitude greater than that provided by any finite magnitude. So,
43. religion is necessary to protect morality. And,
44. morality is necessary to the public good. Therefore,
45. religion is necessary to the public good.

In the next several pages (*D.* 220–7), Philo responds to this argument with three objections.<sup>46</sup> The first is that religion has pernicious effects on society via wars, persecutions, fanaticism, intolerance, and, most importantly, the corruption of morality (*D.* 220–4). Second, there is a principle operative in human psychology that renders irrelevant any consideration involving infinite rewards or punishments (*D.* 220–4). And, third, dread and terror rather than happiness are the primary accompaniment of religion (*D.* 224–7).<sup>47</sup> It is clear, I think, that these three points, if true, work well as rebuttals of, respectively, Tillotson's arguments for (38), his Wager, and his argument for (39).

Let us postpone an examination of Philo's first objection and turn to his second objection, that Cleanthes' inference concerning finite and infinite rewards is invalid:

the inference is not just, because finite and temporary rewards and punishments have so great influence, that therefore such as are infinite and eternal must have so much greater. Consider ... the attachment, which we have to present things, and the little concern which we discover for objects so remote and uncertain. (*D.* 220)

<sup>46</sup> I assume that Philo speaks for Hume in this exchange with Cleanthes (*D.* 219–27). Of the three objections asserted by Philo in this exchange, all are asserted elsewhere by Hume. With the first objection, see *The Natural History of Religion* (1757; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), sects. IX and XIV; on the second, see *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), bk. III, pt. ii, sect. vii; and on the third, see *The Natural History of Religion*, sect. X.

<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that Philo's first objection is interrupted by the second and is not completed until after the second is completed.



Philo denies the inference from (40) to (41) by asserting the alleged propensity of persons to prefer an immediate advantage to a long-range greater advantage. Put more formally, Philo endorses the principle that:

HP. the influence of an object O on a subject S is proportionately related to O's proximity to S: the closer O is to S, the more influence O exerts on S; and the more remote O is to S, the less influence O exerts on S.

'Remoteness' in (HP) should be understood as involving not just spatial and temporal remoteness or distance, but uncertainty as well. It is not that a long-range gain is, just because it is long range, uncertain; rather, according to (HP), humans are incorrigibly myopic: persons are incapable of a proper appreciation of their long-range interest. Humans have a weakness to prefer the immediate to the delayed, even if the latter is greater than the former:

Now as everything, that is contiguous to us, either in space or time, strikes upon us with such an idea, it has a proportional effect on the will and passions, and commonly operates with more force than any object, that lies in a more distant and obscure light. Tho' we may be fully convinc'd, that the latter object excels the former, we are not able to regulate our actions by this judgment; but yield to the solicitations of our passions, which always plead in favour of whatever is near and contiguous.<sup>48</sup>

The point of (HP) is that, even if one believed that religious belief offered a future infinite gain, that fact would have little effect on one's behavior. The notion of heaven is just too far in the future, too remote and too uncertain, to influence one's present behavior. Not only is the attraction of heaven diminished by its futurity; its attraction is further diminished by the contrary pull strongly exerted by proximate objects. Given (HP) and the fact that infinite rewards and punishments are quite remote, (41) does not seem to follow from (40). And without this step Cleanthes' argument is invalid.

While Hume does not explicitly apply (HP) to the Wager, the implications of it for the Canonical Wager are obvious: even if the Wager shows that theistic belief is in one's best interest, that fact is practically irrelevant. The notions of an infinite reward and of an infinite punishment are just too remote in time and certainty to have a substantial effect on behavior. A Pascalian Wager would be at most an interesting theoretical argument with no practical effect.

<sup>48</sup> *A Treatise of Human Nature*, bk. III, pt. ii, sect. vii, pp. 534–5.

Philo's third objection to Cleanthes is the claim that 'terror is the primary principle of religion, it is the passion which always predominates in it, and admits but of short intervals of pleasure' (*D.* 225–6). This terror arises out of the religious notions of heaven and hell:

nor is there any state of mind so happy as the calm and equable. But this state it is impossible to support, where a man thinks, that he lies, in such profound darkness and uncertainty, between an eternity of happiness and an eternity of misery. No wonder, that such an opinion disjoins the ordinary frame of the mind, and throws it into the utmost confusion ... gloom and melancholy, so remarkable in all devout people. (*D.* 226)

Theistic belief, with its notions of heaven and hell, is not a source of happiness; it is rather a detriment to happiness. Not only is religion not in the present interest of persons; it is a powerful threat against the present happiness in that terror is always a constant companion of religious belief.

Philo's third objection is easily enough dismissed, since, as we saw in Chapter 3, the evidence indicates that Philo's speculations are false.<sup>49</sup> But what should we make of his other objections? Before any verdict can be rendered on those, we need to consider that Philo charges clerics with an embarrassing 'palpable contradiction':

when divines are declaiming against the common behavior and conduct of the world, they always represent this principle as the strongest imaginable (which indeed it is) and describe almost all human kind as lying under the influence of it, and sunk into the deepest lethargy and unconcern about their religious interests. Yet these same divines, when they refute their speculative antagonists, suppose the motives of religion to be so powerful, that, without them, it were impossible for civil society to subsist; nor are they ashamed of so palpable a contradiction. (*D.* 220–1)

The principle referred to is (HP). The purported contradiction is that theistic belief in general is necessary for social stability and order; and most persons in this civil society do not believe theistically. Both of these claims are found in Tillotson: 'if atheism were the general opinion of the world, it would be infinitely prejudicial to the peace and happiness of human society' (*T.* 361), and 'this is the mystery of atheism, men are

<sup>49</sup> I remind the reader that a study from the University of Minnesota of 3,300 parents of twins found a small but statistically significant correlation (0.07) between religious commitment and happiness. See David Lykken, *Happiness: What Studies on Twins Show us about Nature, Nurture, and the Happiness Set Point* (New York: Golden Books, 1999), 18–19.

wedded to their lusts, and resolved upon a wicked course ...' (T. 369). Ironically, Philo, soon after commenting on the 'palpable contradiction' of certain clerics, offers a palpable gaffe of his own by asserting both (HP) and the claim that religious doctrines tend to extinguish morality (see *D.* 220, 222, 225–6). While (HP) and the claim that religious doctrines extinguish morality are not straightforward denials, they are contraries, since they cannot both be true. Either (HP) is true or it is not. Philo's second objection to Cleanthes implies that it is true, while his first objection (as we shall see presently) implies that it is not. What should we say about Philo's gaffe? While persons are in many contexts myopic, it is clear that long-range, possible rewards and punishments do at least sometimes influence behavior, so (HP) is probably false.<sup>50</sup> And, since Philo's second objection to Cleanthes implies (HP), we can safely dismiss the second objection.

Let us now focus on Philo's first objection that religion corrupts morality.<sup>51</sup> The source of this alleged corruption is the attention granted the idea of an eternal salvation. This idea commands so much attention, Philo remarks, that it is apt to 'extinguish the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness' (*D.* 222). Religion, that is, corrupts morality with its emphasis on nonpareil otherworldly rewards. Philo's charge that a positing of an infinite reward (or an arbitrarily high finite one) extinguishes 'the benevolent affections, and beget a narrow, contracted selfishness' might be seen as a restatement of the objection that Pascalian wagering is immoral. But, since that objection has already been thoroughly vetted and found wanting, let us understand Philo's charge as that otherworldly theologies corrupt morality by generating extremism, and intolerance. This is an important issue, and events of late make the issue even more acute and vivid. Philo's charge is that gazing upon the alleged goods of the next world skews and corrupts our view of this world. Perhaps Philo's first charge is best thought of within a consequentialist framework. If one is obligated to do

<sup>50</sup> There is good reason to think that (HP) is false. Consider the study cited in Chapter 3 (n. 26) conducted by Barro and McCleary, which reported in part that 'Results show that economic growth responds positively to religious beliefs, notably beliefs in hell and heaven ...'. Empirically, then, (HP) does not hold up. See Robert Barro and Rachel McCleary, 'Religion and Economic Growth across Countries', *American Sociological Review*, 68/2 (2003), 760–81.

<sup>51</sup> For a discussion of Hume's claim that religion corrupts morality, see Gerhard Stremlinger, 'Religion a Threat to Morality: An Attempt to Throw Some New Light on Hume's Philosophy of Religion', *Hume Studies*, 15/2 (1989), 277–93. And see Gaskin, *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, 192–208.

that action that renders the world better off than any other action, and if one believes that doing a particular action would result in an infinite gain, then doing that action is obligatory. Moreover, if killing an infidel non-combatant is thought to be a religious duty, the performance of which renders one eligible for an infinite reward, then a ready recipe is in place for a thoroughgoing corruption of morality by a steady attention to otherworldly salvation. Would Pascalian theology because it incorporates the infinite (or at least a finite but nonpareil otherworldly reward) corrupt the morality of its adherents?

Is any theology that posits an otherworldly scheme of rewards or punishments a threat to human morality? This charge deserves a more thorough discussion than can be allotted here. But, as it stands, Philo's charge is an empirical claim, and, by surveying various theologies that promise otherworldly rewards and/or punishments, and surveying the morality of the proponents of those theologies, we have access to a natural experiment testing Philo's charge. This survey of historical examples leads one to conclude that it would be rash to indict every theology that posits otherworldly rewards as corrupting. For instance, think of theologies that both promise otherworldly benefits and mandate pacifism (Quaker theologies, for instance). No one would consider those theologies a threat to morality. It follows that Philo's first objection is false, since there are clear counterexamples. There are theologies that posit otherworldly rewards or punishments, and whose adherents cannot be said to have corrupted moralities. Philo's first objection, then, while perhaps true in some cases, is not true in every case.

What is the relevant difference? Why are some otherworldly theologies corrupting and others not? Allow me two brief (all-too-brief, no doubt) conjectures. Perhaps the conjunction of a consequentialist morality with a theology predicated on the infinite value of afterlife is poisonously corrupting. On the other hand, when coupled with a strict deontological morality, the lure of the infinite is tamped down, and need not corrupt. The troubling ingredient may not be the longing for the otherworldly reward; the culprit may be a maximizing morality. A second conjecture is this. Those theologies that do not recognize a distinction between religious authority and political authority are perhaps more susceptible to abuse and corruption than those theologies that recognize a division between the world and the faith. If everything of value and every good is subservient to the religious, morality may well be corrupted. In any case, as an objection to the Wager, the claim that theologies predicated on the infinite corrupt morality fails.

## 9. THE DECADENCE OF THIS-WORLDLINESS

One final objection is perhaps worth a look. This objection is found in a posthumously published compilation of short writings by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), which, at the risk of committing an anachronism, we might take as directed at any pragmatic argument that cites the advantages of theistic belief in this world among its premises:

Even granted that the Christian faith might not be disprovable, Pascal thinks, nonetheless, that, in view of a fearful possibility that it is true, it is in the highest degree prudent to be a Christian. Today one finds, as a sign of how much Christianity has declined in fearfulness, that other attempt to justify it by saying that even if it were an error, one might yet have during one's life the great advantage and enjoyment of this error—it therefore seems that this faith ought to be maintained precisely for the sake of its tranquilizing effects—not, therefore, from fear of a threatening possibility, rather from fear of a life that has lost one charm. This hedonistic turn, the proof from pleasure, is a symptom of decline: it replaces the proof from strength, from that which overpowers us in the Christian idea, from fear. In fact, with this reinterpretation Christianity is approaching exhaustion: one is content with an opiate Christianity because one has the strength neither to seek, to struggle, to dare, to wish, to stand alone, nor for Pascalism, for this brooding self-contempt, for faith in human unworthiness, for the anguished feeling that one is 'perhaps damned'. But a Christianity intended above all to soothe diseased nerves has really no need for that fearful solution of a 'God on the Cross': which is why Buddhism is silently gaining ground everywhere in Europe.<sup>52</sup>

This passage is numbered 240 in the posthumous compilation entitled *The Will to Power* (1901).

Prior to finessing an objection from this passage, two observations are in order. First, with his talk of 'fearfulness' and the fearful possibility that Christianity is true, Nietzsche misconstrued Pascal's *Wager*, since, as we have seen, Pascal, unlike John Locke or Bishop Tillotson, did not include a maximin version among his wagers. Second, the appeal to temporal advantages or benefits, which Nietzsche mentioned as motivating the Pascalian appeals of his day, have already been found in Pascal's fourth version of the wager. These were not newfangled

<sup>52</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (1901; New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 138–9.

innovations developed in the nineteenth century. Pascal asserted that believing theistically contributed to one's well-being now, and not just in a theistic world to come. If ever there was a Pascalian straw man ready made for easily toppling, Nietzsche in fragment 240 is erecting it.

But what is Nietzsche's objection in fragment 240? Clearly, he finds Pascalian wagering objectionable, but it is not easy to see why he thinks it is objectionable. The passage reads as if it contains a moral objection, perhaps that the proponent of the Wager is rendered morally disreputable by appealing to the advantages in this world of theistic wagering. Or perhaps the objection is that there is a kind of morally problematic decadence involved with the conventional religious commitment of the nineteenth century as opposed to that of the old-time religion of Martin Luther. In any case, since moral objections to Pascalian wagering have been thoroughly vetted in the second chapter and earlier in this chapter, let us seek another way to understand Nietzsche's point in fragment 240.

Perhaps another way of understanding Nietzsche's objection is found in a distinction he draws between Pascal's Wager and 'that other attempt' to justify Christianity by appealing to the advantages of theistic belief in this world. Let us update this distinction by focusing on the Jamesian Wager. Suitably updated, the distinction reads: the payoff in the Canonical Wager could be had only if God exists; but the payoff in the Jamesian wager can be had even if there is no god. So, a theist benefits even if there is no god. But, if that is so, God is no longer required. Christianity is thereby eviscerated by the Jamesian wager, with its emphasis on this world and its neglect of the world to come. Understanding it this way—although, in deference to those with sensitive historical sensibilities, let us admit that we are being very loose and charitable with our understanding<sup>53</sup>—and adding a plausible decision-theoretic principle to Nietzsche's distinction, and directing the focus of the objection to the Jamesian Wager specifically rather than Christianity as a whole, we have:

46. The Jamesian wager recommends belief in God, in part, because of the benefits of theistic belief in this world. But,

<sup>53</sup> For a more historically oriented discussion of fragment 240, see Thomas Thorp and Henri Bifault, 'Nietzsche and Pascal's Wager', *Man and World*, 21 (1988), 261–85. For a general discussion of Nietzsche and Pascal, see Charles Natoli, *Nietzsche and Pascal on Christianity* (New York: Peter Lang Press, 1985).

47. those benefits can be had even if God does not exist.<sup>54</sup> And,
48. it is irrational to do an action  $\alpha$  in order to secure  $x$ , if  $x$  can be secured by a less costly action  $\beta$ .<sup>55</sup> So,
49. believing in God in order to secure benefits in this world is irrational as one can secure those benefits in a less costly manner. Therefore,
50. employing the Jamesian wager is irrational.

Is Nietzsche's objection as presented in argument (46)–(50) sound? Have we at last found a telling objection to the Jamesian Wager? If the objection is sound, then premise (11) of the Jamesian Wager, which asserts that:

theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains

is false. One of the primary assets possessed by the Jamesian Wager over against the Canonical Wager is its incorporation of temporal benefits of theistic wagering into the calculation. With that incorporation the Jamesian Wager weakly dominates. The point of Nietzsche's objection, as formulated here, is to blunt that asset. Since premise (48) is the plausible decision-theoretic principle that we have imported into Nietzsche's objection and since premise (46) will look unobjectionable to any advocate of the Jamesian Wager, our verdict hinges on premises (47) and (49). Are they true or false? Premise (49) asserts that any benefit associated with wagering for God, given the state of naturalism, can be had without inculcating theistic belief. If (49) is true, then, contrary to the Jamesian Wager, there would be no state in which the utility of wagering for God exceeds that of all the other alternatives.<sup>56</sup> Wagering for God would not weakly dominate.

<sup>54</sup> Premise (47) might be revised to read:

47'. those benefits can be had even if one does not believe that God exists.

Replacing (47) with (47'), however, would make no substantial difference for the discussion of Nietzsche's objection.

<sup>55</sup> More fully, we shall understand premise (48) as suitably adorned with the qualifications necessary to refine it, such as:

it is irrational to do a permissible action  $\alpha$  in order to secure  $x$ , if  $x$  can be secured by a less costly but equally permissible action  $\beta$ .

<sup>56</sup> In Chapter 3 the argument was that the Jamesian Wager evades the many-gods objection, even granting principle (F), because a principled decision favoring wagering for God can be made, since the outcomes of wagering for God exceed those of wagering

Premise (49) will be plausible if the benefits in question can be had even if we know that theism is false, but it will be implausible if those benefits can be had only as long as we do not know that theism is false. If theism must be a live possibility for the benefits to obtain, Nietzsche's objection is unsound. The decisive consideration, then, is this: how large a role does hope play in underwriting the benefits referenced in (11)? If hope plays an important role, then (49) is very probably false. Postponing until the next chapter the task of analyzing the concept of hope, and in particular the concept of Christian hope, two observations are relevant. First, hoping for  $x$ , as we shall see in Chapter 6, is incompatible with knowing that  $x$  does not obtain. One can hope for something only if one considers it possible. Second, theistic hope, or more particularly Christian hope, plays an important role in the benefits referenced in (11), as we will see in Chapter 6. If one knew that God very probably does not exist, or that humans very probably do not survive death, then the kind of hope that is important for the benefits referenced in (11) would be unavailable. With these two observations we can conclude that proposition (49) is probably false, and that Nietzsche's objection is probably unsound as well.<sup>57</sup> One important result of examining Nietzsche's objection is that it supplies the Pascalian with a further consideration favoring the Jamesian Wager over the Canonical. The Jamesian Wager, restricted as it is to a tie-breaker function, rests easily with the religiously important attitude of hope. It is far from clear that the Canonical Wager, in its reach for those who think it is very unlikely that God exists, is fully compatible with hope.

for a deviant deity, or wagering for naturalism, even when the best-case outcomes have equal value, and the worst-case outcomes have equal values. The decisive reason was that, as long as the utility associated with wager for God exceeds that of wagering for no deity, and that of wagering for a deviant deity, the impasse caused by the many-gods objection is cleared in favor of the Pascalian. Nietzsche's objection attempts to close that opening.

<sup>57</sup> One interesting question raised by Nietzsche's objection is how one could know that the utility of wagering for God exceeds that of wagering for no deity, if God does not exist. The studies cited in Chapter 3 are not known to measure phenomena in a godless universe, so are they relevant? The brief answer is that the cited studies are measurements in a universe that is religiously ambiguous (a universe known to be neither theistic nor atheistic), and so it is not unreasonable to accept their reliability for a universe that in fact is atheistic but not known to be so.



## 6

# God, Hope, and Evidence

Anselm, echoing Augustine, famously wrote that ‘I do not seek to understand in order to believe but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that I shall not understand unless I believe.’<sup>1</sup> Anselm’s slogan is a prominent landmark along a long tradition within Christianity that contends that a right disposition is necessary to appreciate the truth of theism. This tradition holds that the evidence supports theism but only those rightly disposed can properly assess the evidence. As Augustine put it:

Although understanding lies in the sight of the Eternal, faith nourishes as children are nourished with milk in the cradles of temporal things. Now ‘we walk by faith and not by sight’. Unless we walk by faith, we shall not be able to come to that sight which does not fail but continues through a cleansed understanding uniting us with truth. On account of this principle one said ‘If you will not believe, you shall not continue’, and another said, ‘If you will not believe, you shall not understand’.<sup>2</sup>

With Anselm as a prominent spokesman, let us call this tradition the ‘Anselmian project’. Surprisingly perhaps, Pascal belongs on the roster of participants within this project. This membership is evident with Pascal’s claim:

The prophecies, and even the miracles and proofs of our religion, are of such a nature that they cannot be described as absolutely convincing. But they are also of such a kind that one cannot say that it is unreasonable to believe them. Thus there is both evidence and obscurity to enlighten some and bewilder others. The evidence, however, is such that it surpasses, or at least equals, the evidence to the contrary. Therefore, since it is not reason that can persuade men not to follow it, only concupiscence and malice of heart can do so. Thus there is

<sup>1</sup> ‘Proslogium’, in *Saint Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1968), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson Jr. (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), 45.

sufficient evidence to condemn, but insufficient to convince. Hence it appears that, as regards those who follow it, grace and not reason causes them to do so, and that, as regards those who shun it, concupiscence and not reason causes them to do so. (W. 736)

The evidence is available, but the failure to appreciate it is due, Pascal suggests, to irrational attitudes. The role of the Wager, then, is to move self-interested individuals away from their self-induced blindness and toward a perspective in which they can appreciate the evidence for theism. While the root may be self-interested, disinterested fruit is borne. Understood in this way, the Wager is not a pragmatic trumping of the epistemic, but a means of bridging the chasm between the pragmatic and the epistemic.

This chapter has two tasks. The first is to situate the Wager within the Anselmian project. Is there a plausible case to be made that the Wager fits within this project? There is textual evidence that Pascal intended his Wagers to play a role in this project. More interesting, however, is the dialectical question: is the Wager plausibly employed in this role? The second task involves evaluating pragmatic arguments distinct from the Wager in support of theism, the most famous of these being William James's Will to Believe argument.<sup>3</sup> An interpretation of James's argument is offered that is faithful to the text, and yet distinct from interpretations usually offered of James's argument. A second sort of pragmatic argument in support of theism contends that theistic hope—hoping that God exists—can bear the load of theistic belief. The most interesting example of this kind of pragmatic argument is a posthumous quasi-theistic argument of J. S. Mill that has generally gone unnoticed. Another example is an argument offered by the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher James Beattie (1735–1803), which contends that the consolation flowing from religious belief provides a firewall for theistic belief against skeptical objections. Finally, we shall take a critical look at a Pascalian Wager developed by Jules Lachelier (1832–1918), a French idealist philosopher of the nineteenth century. While Pascal's Wager is the most impressive bloom in the garden of theistic pragmatic arguments, a look at James,

<sup>3</sup> Some might object (or, from my perspective, cavil) that James's argument could not be an argument for theism, since James was himself no theist. It is certainly true that, given the sense of theism employed in the Introduction, James was not, apparently, in that sense a theist. His argument, however, can be used in support of theism, and, given the nature of the evidence cited in Chapter 3 in support of (11), James's argument is arguably used appropriately as support for theism.

Mill, Beattie, and Lachelier shows the flowering of the pragmatic since Pascal's day.

## 1. EVIDENCE AND RIGHT DISPOSITIONS

Let us understand the characteristic claim of the Anselmian project as a conjunction consisting of:

- O. the evidence renders theism more likely than not;
- P. a right disposition is necessary for appreciating the evidence supporting theism.

According to (P), one must believe in order to understand. There is a strong version of (P), and a modest one. The strong version is that only those rightly disposed can grasp the evidence. A right disposition provides access to the evidence—an access closed off for those not rightly situated. So, according to the strong view, there is evidence for theism, but only those rightly disposed have access to that evidence. The modest version is that a right disposition allows one properly to appreciate the evidence. While the evidence is available to all, only those properly situated understand the significance of the evidence. Different perspectives provide different weightings of the evidence.

H. H. Price presents the strong version of (P) in this passage:

there are facts about the world (and very important facts too) which are not accessible to all normal observers ... It might be that in some spheres (though not in the sphere of ordinary sense-perception) the cognitive powers which a person has do depend in some way on the kind of person that he is. ... If we are ourselves very selfish or unkind, there will be facts about the conduct and the emotional attitudes of other persons which we shall not be able to notice. ... when a Theist ... recommends us to cultivate certain moral traits, he does so for three reasons ... The third reason is that unless we acquire certain moral traits, especially charity, he thinks we shall not be capable of having certain sorts of cognitive experiences—experiences which we must have if we are to test for ourselves the adequacy of the world-outlook he is recommending, or even if we are to understand clearly what the world-outlook is.<sup>4</sup>

Price supports (P) by arguing for a wider thesis of which the religious case is but an instance. This wider thesis is something along the lines

<sup>4</sup> H. H. Price, *Belief* (London: Humanities Press, 1969), 472–3.

of there being propositions evidence of which can be had only by first believing and acting upon the proposition. Let us call this thesis 'Price's Thesis': there are propositions evidence in support of which can be had only by believing and acting upon them. Price's primary support comes from morality. Altruistic actions would go unrecognized, he suggests, by the selfish. A selfish person would not recognize the selflessness of another, perhaps taking that conduct as nothing but a surface feature, masking a deep egoism. Perhaps one might argue for Price's Thesis by arguing that recognizing kindness implies recognizing it as a good, grasping its normative force. To say of a kind action that it was but kindness so called, or what some might call 'kindness', is not to recognize kindness. To recognize the actions of another as selfless in these circumstances implies that one should also be selfless in similar circumstances. One cannot consistently recognize that kindness is good, while denying that one has reason to be kind. In the last sentence of the quoted passage, Price mentions the possibility that only those rightly disposed can evaluate theism. This would not be surprising if Price's Thesis is well supported.

Thomas Morris is a recent proponent of the strong version of (P), with his contention that

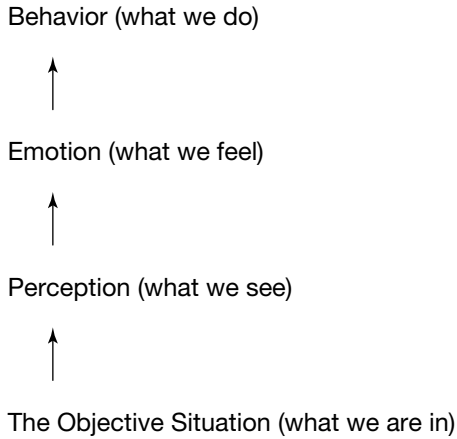
emotions and attitudes can color patterns of perception that either reveal to us or hide from us the ultimate realities all around us ... Pascal was convinced that religious truth is present in the world to be perceived by those who are capable of seeing. The evidence is there to be gathered, if we are prepared for it.<sup>5</sup>

Morris seeks to illustrate this with a chart (Fig. 6.1), which, although simplified, represents the typical relation between the perceiver and the world, with the objective situation largely influencing what one perceives, and affecting what one does.

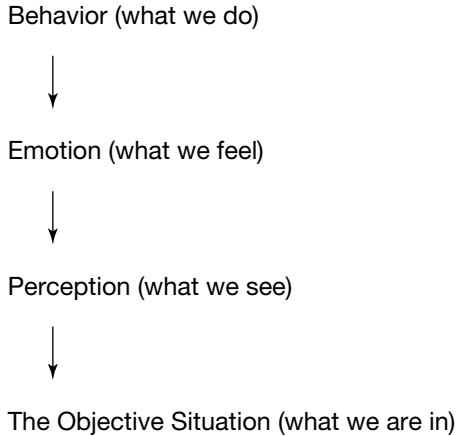
According to Morris, 'things can also work the other way around. Action can create emotion ... And these in turn can open our eyes or blind us to aspects of our objective environment.'<sup>6</sup> For example, think of the training to acquire the skills necessary for employing a stethoscope, and for understanding the significance of what one hears with it. While the medical condition perceived is there, only those with the proper skill and tools will understand that they are hearing a heart arrhythmia.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Morris, 'The Wager and the Evidence', in J. Jordan (ed.), *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

*Fig. 6.1.*

Morris's idea is that, in some cases, the typical model running from objective situation to human behavior is reversed (Fig. 6.2).

*Fig. 6.2.*

Morris's reversed chart is not intended to suggest that our perceptions cause or determine the objective situation. It is intended to illustrate the idea that our perceptions of the objective situation are at times influenced—distorted perhaps, or rendered more reliable—by our

behavior. Construed this way, proposition (P) implies that only those rightly predisposed can grasp important facts. Right disposition might include proper training, or having taken the preparatory steps necessary to acquire the means to perceive what is there. In short, one must first believe in order to know.

The modest version of (P) is found in William James, when he observed:

As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why ... all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for 'the doctrine of the immortal Monroe', all for no reasons worthy of the name.<sup>7</sup>

Further James observes:

Evidentially, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions. There are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair ... pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, the modest version of (P) has been revived in an important book by William Wainwright, in which the Anselmian claim is nicely explained:

Mature religious belief can, and perhaps should, be based on evidence but ... the evidence can be accurately assessed only by men and women who possess the proper moral and spiritual qualifications. This view was once a Christian commonplace; reason is capable of knowing God on the basis of evidence—but only when one's cognitive faculties are rightly disposed.<sup>9</sup>

Wainwright's construal of (P) does not contend that those rightly disposed have access to evidence that is otherwise inaccessible. Rather the claim is that grasping the significance of the evidence in support of theism is influenced by one's passions. As Wainwright puts it, 'the tradition ... places a high value on proofs, arguments, and inferences yet also believes that a properly disposed heart is needed to see their force'.<sup>10</sup> By 'heart' is meant the subjectivity of persons, understood

<sup>7</sup> William James, 'The Will to Believe' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956 (1896)), 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 11.

<sup>9</sup> William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

in the sense of the temperament, needs, concerns, fears, hopes, or passions of a person. The modest version, then, is that, in some cases, one's subjectivity aids in tracking the truth. Perhaps a helpful way to think of this is to think of Bayesian treatments of evidence. Bayesians distinguish between prior probabilities and posterior probabilities, with the former necessary to calculate the latter. Now Bayesianism does not dictate what prior probability assignments one should have; it stipulates how one updates those probability assignments with new evidence. A frequentist might complain that the Bayesian priors are subjective posits with but a minimal contact with reality—where did those priors come from? The modest version would assert that the priors are not whimsical posits. Those rightly disposed will converge in their prior probability assignments, just as they would with their posterior probabilities. Importantly, while the above is illustrative, one should keep in mind that the modest version of (P) involves more than the setting of priors. It also contends that disagreements about relevance, or about the value or weight of various sorts of evidence, or even basic methodological commitments (for instance, whether to search for metaphysical explanations, or to reject them) are influenced by the participants' subjectivity.

Of course, talk of subjectivity or passionate reasoning raises the specter of unreliability. We can lay that specter to rest by realizing that the presence of subjectivity in reasoning is unavoidable and need not entail unreliability:

51. all reasoning includes an element of subjectivity. And,
52. some reasoning is reliable. Therefore,
53. the presence of subjectivity does not entail that reasoning is arbitrary (not reliable).

Of course, while the inference from (51) and (52) to (53) is hardly disputable, it does not demonstrate the truth of the modest view. Even if it is true that the presence of subjectivity does not entail that a particular case of reasoning is unreliable, it does not follow that that reasoning is reliable only when that subjectivity is present. While it may be true that all human reasoning involves subjectivity—how could it not since it involves humans—it does not follow that human subjectivity is necessary for reliable reasoning. If there were intelligent, complex extraterrestrial life, presumably there would also be cases of reliable extraterrestrial reasoning. But, clearly, their reliable reasoning would be due in no part to their being human (though it may be due

to their particular subjectivity). Still, the modest version of (P) carries an important asset over the stronger version—it is less ambitious and, hence, carries a lower exposure to error than does the stronger version.

What can be said in favor of the modest version? Is there reason to think it is even plausible? Wainwright's primary argument for the Anselmian claim is based on disagreements among equally well informed and similarly qualified disputants. This argument is found in Wainwright's comment:

Religious belief seems to depend more directly on the state of one's heart or moral temperament than on evidence. How else explain why two equally intelligent and informed inquirers can arrive at such different assessments of the same evidence. (Compare Richard Swinburne's and J. L. Mackie's evaluations of the evidence for design, for example.)<sup>11</sup>

We might represent this argument as:

54. there are basic disagreements about matters of fact in which there is no objective adjudication available. So,
55. the cause of these basic disagreements is not due to the lack of evidence, intelligence differentials of the disputants, bad faith of the disputants, or lack of philosophical astuteness. But,
56. the subjectivity of the disputants is different. Therefore,
57. it is plausible to hold that the disagreements arise through the differences of subjectivity.

It is important to stipulate that a 'basic disagreement' is a substantial dispute in which the opposing sides are not contraries, but denials. One of the disputants, in other words, must be correct, while the others are incorrect. Jones argues that the evidence makes it more likely than not that Crockett went down fighting, while Smith denies this. In a basic disagreement like this, Smith and Jones cannot both be wrong.

There are two ways that subjectivity might influence reasoning, a negative way and a positive way. The negative way holds that subjectivity (of a sort) blurs or distorts the evidence present to one. One just does not appreciate the evidence one has available because of a blind spot that interferes with a proper grasp of the facts. Theists usually describe this blind spot as the noetic or cognitive effects of sin. Sin is the willful violation or disregard of God's commands, and the distortion resulting from sin is something like wearing spectacles that systematically distort

<sup>11</sup> Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart*, 3.



one's perception of reality. Christianity's first theologian, Paul, wrote in the first chapter of Romans that sin distorted one's mind and morals. The eminent New Testament scholar C. K. Barrett expounds the central claims of the first chapter of Romans as:

God was the creator, and as any artist is known through his creative work, so also is God; at least there is a potential knowledge of God in the things that has made (Rom. 1. 20), even if it remains potential because those who ought to accept it are unwilling to do so on the only terms on which it can be had: they are unwilling to glorify God and give thanks to him (Rom. 1. 21). Instead, they choose to pass by their creator and in his place to worship their fellow creatures. The result is the darkening of their morals and of their minds. Creation goes out of joint as Paul sees most clearly in the perversion of human sexuality, and thought, not only moral but metaphysical thinking, is corrupted (Rom. 1. 19–25).<sup>12</sup>

Pascal is a proponent of the idea that human wrong-doing has noetic effects: 'it is not reason that can persuade men not to follow [the evidence], only concupiscence and malice of heart can do so' (W. 736). Understood this way, a right disposition is one free from the baneful effects of sin ('the malice of heart'). Remove the noetic effects of sin and one's judgment regarding the evidence appreciably changes.

From a naturalistic perspective, one might argue that wishful thinking distorts the believer's judgment—she reads too much into the evidence she has, or she ignores relevant evidence. Faith, in other words, requires bad faith, epistemically speaking, on the part of the believer. An elaborate example of this is Richard Dawkins's contention that religious belief is a 'virus of the mind'.<sup>13</sup> One is religious, according to Dawkins, because one has been infected by a faith meme. A meme is a bit of information that is manifested in behavior and can be copied from one person to another. Like genes, memes are, we are told, self-replicating vehicles, jumping from mind to mind. As Daniel Dennett memorably puts it: 'a scholar is a library's way of reproducing itself.'<sup>14</sup> One catches a meme in much the same manner as one catches a cold, sometimes for good

<sup>12</sup> C. K. Barrett, *On Paul* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 58.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Dawkins, 'Viruses of the Mind', in B. Dahlbohm (ed.), *Dennett and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). While Dawkins's metaphor of religious belief as a kind of contagion is, perhaps, catchy, it is not novel. The first such use is found in Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan, in which he calls Christianity a contagion, probably written in AD 112.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 346.

reasons, sometimes not. Dawkins describes the faith meme as having the following traits:

- M1. the faith meme seems to the person as true, or right, or virtuous, though this conviction in fact owes nothing to evidence or reason;
- M2. the faith meme makes a virtue out of believing in spite of there being no evidence;
- M3. the faith meme encourages intolerant behavior toward those who possess rival faiths;
- M4. the faith meme arises not because of evidence but because of epidemiology: typically, if one has a faith, it is the same as one's parents and as one's grandparents.

Dawkins's meme idea, and his dismissal of faith as a virus of the mind, is an attempt to explain how subjectivity (of a sort) distorts the theist's take on the evidence.

The other way, a positive way, is that subjectivity (of a sort) inclines one to appreciate what she otherwise would not. Again, this positive way can be fitted with a theological spin—one properly appreciates the evidence because of divine grace. God has brought it about, one might say, that the distorting effects of sin are overcome. The spectacles of sin are thrown aside and one sees aright. As the Christian hymn 'Amazing Grace' puts it: 'I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.' Understood this way, a right disposition is a consequence of one's reason or will having been put right, restored to a pristine state.

Proponents of the Anselmian claim typically make use of both the negative and the positive way of understanding the role of subjectivity. The negative effects of sin are cited as an explanation of our default epistemic state, while the positive way is cited as what is possible if one customizes the default by taking steps to remedy the situation (or if grace is received). Suppose that the Anselmian claim, in either its strong or its modest construal, is correct. What implications would that have for the Wager? The most obvious implication is that the Wager would be compatible with Evidentialism, even in its strongest form. If the Wager is properly described as an enabling device prompting persons to situate themselves so as properly to appreciate the evidence, then the Wager is a bridge between the epistemic and the pragmatic, moving persons toward a right disposition. The Wager would have a legitimate epistemic function just as training in microscopic techniques has a legitimate epistemic function of enabling one into a proper position

to evaluate the evidence.<sup>15</sup> As such, the Wager would gain a kind of immunity against most charges of immorality hurled at it, since any accusation of violating the ethics of belief would be unfounded. Finally, the Wager would confer not just pragmatic rationality, but also epistemic rationality upon persons. This last point is important, since, if it were true, the similarity between the Wager and William James's Will to Believe argument would be further strengthened.

## 2. JAMES AND THE WILL TO BELIEVE

The argument presented by William James in his 1896 essay 'The Will to Believe' extends far beyond the issue of the rationality of theistic belief to include various philosophical issues (for instance, whether to embrace determinism or indeterminism), and even matters of practical life. James's argument, in its attack on the agnostic imperative (withhold belief whenever the evidence is insufficient), makes the general epistemological point that

a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.<sup>16</sup>

If James is correct, the agnostic imperative is false.

The foil of James's essay was W. K. Clifford. As we noted earlier, Clifford argued that

if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery.<sup>17</sup>

As we have seen, Clifford presented Evidentialism as an absolute rule of morality: 'it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'<sup>18</sup> If Clifford's rule of morality is

<sup>15</sup> I owe this point to William Wainwright.

<sup>16</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', 28.

<sup>17</sup> W. K. Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief', in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, ii (London: Macmillan, 1879), 185–6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 186.

correct, then any one who believes a proposition that she takes to be less likely than not is, thereby, immoral.

James's primary concern in the 'Will to Believe' essay is to argue that Clifford's rule is irrational. James contends that Clifford's rule is but one intellectual strategy open to us. A proponent of Clifford's rule advises, in effect, that one should avoid error at all costs, and thereby risk the loss of certain truths. But another strategy open to us is to seek truth by any means available, even at the risk of error. James champions the latter via the main argument of the 'Will to Believe' essay:

58. two alternative intellectual strategies are available:
  - Strategy A: risk a loss of truth and a loss of a vital good for the certainty of avoiding error;
  - Strategy B: risk error for a chance at truth and a vital good;
59. Clifford's rule embodies Strategy A. But,
60. Strategy B is preferable because Strategy A would deny us access to certain possible kinds of truth. And,
61. any intellectual strategy that denies access to possible truths is an inadequate strategy.

Therefore,

62. Clifford's rule is unacceptable.

James asserts that 'there are ... cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming'.<sup>19</sup> Among other examples James provides of this particular kind of truth is that of social cooperation:

a social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned.<sup>20</sup>

At the end of his 1895 essay 'Is Life Worth Living?' James wrote: 'Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact.'<sup>21</sup> If James is right that there is a kind of proposition that has as a necessary condition of being true that it is believed, what we might call 'dependent truths', then proposition (60) looks well supported.

<sup>19</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe,' 25.                      <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 24.

<sup>21</sup> William James, 'Is Life Worth Living?' (1896), in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 62.

Of course, accepting proposition (62), and advancing an alternative strategy of seeking truth by any available means, even at the risk of error, does not entail that anything goes. And an important part of James's essay restricts what legitimately might be believed in the absence of adequate evidence.

To facilitate matters I paraphrase eight definitions made by James:

- *Hypothesis*: something that may be believed.
- *Option*: a decision between two hypotheses.
- *Living option*: a decision between two live hypotheses.
- *Live hypothesis*: something that is a real candidate for belief. A hypothesis is live, we might say, for a person just in case that person lacks compelling evidence disconfirming that hypothesis, and the hypothesis has an intuitive appeal for that person.
- *Momentous option*: the option may never again present itself, or the decision cannot be easily reversed, or something of importance hangs on the choice. It is not a trivial matter.
- *Forced option*: the decision cannot be avoided—the consequences of refusing to decide are the same as actually deciding for one of the alternative hypotheses.
- *Genuine option*: one that is living, momentous, and forced.
- *Intellectually open*: neither the evidence nor arguments conclusively decide the issue.

The requirement that an issue or option is intellectually open may be redundant. If the evidence were compelling, or even strongly supportive of, say, hypothesis  $\alpha$ , and you recognized this, it may be that you would find only  $\alpha$  alive. Since you are aware that the evidence strongly supports it, you would not find not- $\alpha$  living. In other words, to say that an option is living may imply that it is intellectually open. Nonetheless, I will proceed as if aliveness and openness are logically distinct notions. Additionally, we might ask whether the property of intellectual openness is to be understood as the evidence is lacking, or as the evidence is in principle lacking. That is, is an option intellectually open when the evidence is indeterminate, or when it is essentially indeterminate? James's argument requires only the former. The lack of adequate evidence is sufficient to render an option intellectually open. If more evidence appears so that one hypothesis is supported, then James's commitment to defeasible Evidentialism is triggered. One acts whenever the evidence dictates.

James's contention is that any hypothesis that is part of a genuine option, and that is intellectually open, may be believed, even in the absence of sufficient evidence. No rule of morality or rationality is violated if one accepts or believes a hypothesis that is genuine and open. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that it is not at all clear that the elaborate notion of genuine option is necessary for James's argument. Suppose you are faced with a pressing decision, perhaps a decision concerned with a medical procedure for a dependant. Further, the decision involves an experimental procedure the efficaciousness of which is a matter of debate among the experts. Clearly, the decision cannot be avoided; to postpone in this case is effectively to decide. Even if the experimental procedure is not a live hypothesis for you, the fact that the decision is forced and the evidence is open seems enough to inoculate you from rational or moral taint when you in fact decide. One might object that, as described, the decision is momentous. But lower the stakes involved in the decision, while maintaining the unavoidability of making a decision that is intellectually open, and you are still free of any moral or rational taint. In other words, perhaps all James needs are the predicates of being forced and being intellectually open to make his case. Simplifying it in this way will lower the argument's exposure to possible objections.

The relevance of all of this to theistic belief, according to James, is as follows:

Religion says essentially two things. ... the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word ... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe [religion's] first affirmation to be true ... The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou* ... We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way.<sup>22</sup>

James asserts that there are two affirmations of religion. By affirmation James means something like an abstract claim, devoid of substantive doctrinal content, that is found in the major religions. The first affirmation is that the best things are the more eternal things, while the second is that we are better off even now if we believe the first affirmation. The first affirmation is particularly puzzling, and we will

<sup>22</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', 25–7.

have to work to make sense of it. A. J. Ayer once remarked that, while Henry James wrote like a philosopher, William James wrote like a novelist. To write like a novelist, I take it, suggests vivid imagery, an ample use of metaphor, and a prose in which clarity is sometimes sacrificed for style. This is no truer than here. James does not assert that the best things are the eternal things; he says that the best things are the *more* eternal things. This odd phrase is found also in James's essay 'Is Life Worth Living?'<sup>23</sup> It is not, apparently, an inadvertent infelicity. He explicates this affirmation with three metaphors and a slogan: 'the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. "Perfection is eternal"—this phrase of Charles Secrétan seems a good way of putting this first affirmation of religion.'<sup>24</sup> Two ideas are suggested by James's explication: sovereignty and perfection. If we understand 'more eternal' as a kind of necessity, or non-contingency, perhaps—odd as it sounds—more real, then perhaps the first affirmation may be understood as asserting that the best things are those things that cannot fail to be sovereign and perfect. This understanding resolves much of the first affirmation's puzzle. The plurality though is still puzzling. We can resolve this puzzle by recognizing that, although he does not explicitly call it a third affirmation, James asserts that 'the more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*.'<sup>25</sup> If we take this as a third affirmation of religion (risking a charge of theistic parochialism by doing so), the possibility that the more eternal things are plural is foreclosed.<sup>26</sup> Monotheism, in other words, and not polytheism is established by the third affirmation. Taken together, then, the first and the third affirmations of religion suggest that the supreme good in the universe is the existence of a personal being that is essentially perfect and sovereign. The second affirmation is that we are better off now by believing in the existence of this perfect being. At least part of the explanation why we would be better off now by believing the first affirmation is that by doing so the possibility of a relationship with this being is established.

<sup>23</sup> James, 'Is Life Worth Living?', 51, 56. Perhaps it is worth noting that James does describe the spiritual forces that have the last word as 'eternal' at the bottom of p. 56.

<sup>24</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', 25. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 27.

<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that James in fact may not have wanted to foreclose the plurality. See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; New York: Modern Library, 1936), 514–15.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) James describes the ‘religious hypothesis’ as having three parts:

- a. the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
- b. union or harmonious relation with the higher universe is our true end;
- c. prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof (whether personal or impersonal) is a process wherein work is really done, and effects are produced in the visible world.<sup>27</sup>

We might harmonize James’s exposition of the ‘religious hypothesis’ in the *Varieties* with that of his ‘Will to Believe’ essay by speculating that proposition (a) from the *Varieties* corresponds to what we have identified as the first and third affirmations of the ‘Will to Believe’ essay, while propositions (b) and (c) of the *Varieties* correspond to the second affirmation.

According to James, just as one is not likely to make friends if one is aloof, likewise one is not likely to become acquainted with a perfect being, if there is such, if one seeks that acquaintance only after sufficient evidence has been gathered. There are possible truths, James claims, belief of which is a necessary condition of obtaining evidence for them. Let us call the class of propositions whose evidence is restricted to those who first believe ‘restricted propositions’. Dependent propositions and restricted propositions are James’s counterexamples to Clifford’s rule. They serve as two examples of the kinds of truths that Clifford’s rule would preclude one from acknowledging. The Cliffordian may be forever cut off from certain kinds of truth.

One might object that James has at best shown that theistic belief is momentous only if God exists. If God does not exist, and, as a consequence, the vital good of eternal life does not obtain, then no vital good is at stake. To answer this objection a Jamesian might focus on what James calls the second affirmation of religion—we are better off even now if we believe—and take that affirmation to include benefits that are available, via pro-belief, even if God does not exist. As we saw in Chapter 3, James suggests that religious belief produces certain psychological benefits:

A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism ... An assurance of safety

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 475.



and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections.<sup>28</sup>

In the context of the Western religious tradition, the second affirmation is expressed, in part, by propositions (9) and (11). Given that theism is intellectually open and that it is part of a genuine option, and given that there are vital goods attached to theistic belief, James says, the hope that it is true is a sufficient reason to believe. In addition, if the requirement of momentous is removed—an option, that is, can be genuine even if not momentous—this objection is easily evaded.

Another objection easily handled is that James's argument presupposes Doxastic Voluntarism—that persons have direct control over their beliefs. Perhaps the most prominent objection along these lines is due to Bernard Williams, who argues, in effect, that it is not possible both to believe that  $p$  and to know that  $p$  is false.<sup>29</sup> If Doxastic Voluntarism were true, however, one could both believe that  $p$  and know that  $p$  is false. Hence, James's argument assumes the impossible. This objection is easily handled because it misses its target completely: while Williams's argument may present a problem for unrestricted Doxastic Voluntarism, it does not present one for James. For one thing, James's proposal is operative only when the evidence is inconclusive, and is not operative when facing adverse evidence. James does not tolerate believing when the evidence is clear that the hypothesis is less likely than not. So, James does not advise bringing about belief in a proposition that one knows is false. For another thing, James's talk of believing this or that hypothesis can be replaced with talk of accepting this or that hypothesis. And, as we saw in the second chapter, whether believing is under our control or not, acceptance surely is.

An objection commonly leveled against James's argument is that 'it constitutes an unrestricted license for wishful thinking ... if our aim is to believe what is true, and not necessarily what we like, James's universal permissiveness will not help us.'<sup>30</sup> That is, *hoping* that a proposition is true is no reason to think that it *is*. This objection is unfair. As we have noted, James does not hold that the falsity of Clifford's rule implies that anything goes. Restricting the relevant permissibility class

<sup>28</sup> James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 475–6.

<sup>29</sup> See Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe', in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 136–51.

<sup>30</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (4th edn., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 60.

to propositions that are intellectually open and part of a genuine option provides ample protection against wishful thinking. Moreover, why think that believing what is true and believing what we like must be mutually exclusive? If the Anselmian claim is correct, then passionate reasoning is, under certain circumstances, a reliable means of acquiring true beliefs. If certain uses of the passions are a reliable means of acquiring true belief, then the wishful thinking charge is as irrelevant as it is as unfair.

More interesting is the objection that:

James knows that the choice between believing and disbelieving is not an excluded middle. Yet, the crux of his argument is that it should be so treated. But you cannot alter a logical truth to harmonize with a practical end.<sup>31</sup>

It is true that believing and disbelieving a proposition are not jointly exhaustive; it is possible to withhold belief. But James's notion of forced option need not require that the option is logically forced; it is enough that the option is practically forced. If an option is unavoidable, if one cannot put it off, it is forced. Why? If putting the decision off, or refusing to make a decision, has the same consequence as does deciding for one of the alternatives, the option is forced. In Article I, Section 7, of the US Constitution, we have an illustration of a forced option in the practical sense for the President:

Every Bill which shall have passed the House of Representatives and the Senate, shall, before it becomes a Law, be presented to the President of the United States; If he approve he shall sign it, but if not he shall return it ... If any Bill shall not be returned by the President within ten days (Sundays excepted) after it shall have been presented to him, the Same shall be a Law, in like Manner as if he had signed it ...

To delay signing or vetoing past the deadline has the same effect as signing the bill and it becomes law, even without explicit executive approval. In like manner, there are options in which withholding belief, or withholding judgment, has the same practical effect as if one disbelieved or decided against (or, as the case may be, if one believed or decided for). So, the fact that James's examples of forced options are not tokens of excluded middle is irrelevant for James's argument. He neither needs nor attempts to alter a logical truth in pursuit of a practical end.

A more significant objection contends that James's argument fails 'to show that one can have a sufficient moral reason for self-inducing an

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 120.

epistemically unsupported belief'.<sup>32</sup> This objection contends that there is a weighty moral duty to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence, and that this duty flows from moral personhood—to be a morally responsible person requires that one have good reasons for each of one's beliefs. But to believe an epistemically unsupported proposition is to violate this duty and is thus, in effect, a denial of one's own personhood.<sup>33</sup> Or think of it another way: as intellectual beings, we have the dual goal of maximizing our stock of (significant) true beliefs and minimizing our stock of false ones. Clifford's rule derives its moral validity, one might contend, from that intellectual goal. And from Clifford's rule flows our duty to believe only those propositions that enjoy adequate evidential support. James's argument would, if operative, thwart our intellectual goal by permitting us to violate Clifford's rule.

Can a morally and intellectually responsible person ever have a moral duty to believe a proposition that lacks adequate evidence, a duty that outweighs the alleged Cliffordian duty of believing only those propositions that enjoy adequate support? As we saw in Chapter 2 the answer is yes. Risking repetition, let us replicate the 'ET' thought experiment of the second chapter. Suppose Clifford is abducted by very powerful and very smart extraterrestrials, who offer him a single chance of salvation for humankind—he must acquire and maintain belief in a proposition that lacks adequate evidential support. Falling back on the tried and true, Clifford points out that no one can just will this belief. The ETs, devilish as always, provide Clifford with a supply of doxastic-producing pills, which will produce the requisite belief for twenty-four hours. It is obvious that Clifford would do no wrong by swallowing a pill, and, hence, knowingly bringing about and maintaining belief in a proposition that is not adequately supported by the evidence. Indeed, Clifford would be wrong *not* to swallow a pill. Moreover, since one is never irrational in doing one's moral duty, not only would Clifford not be immoral; he would not even be irrational in bringing about and maintaining belief in a proposition lacking adequate evidential support. As we argued earlier, given the distinction between having reason to believe a proposition, and having reason to inculcate belief in that proposition, it may be that a particular proposition lacks sufficient

<sup>32</sup> Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 283.

<sup>33</sup> I do not suggest that this brief argument is a complete summary of Gale's detailed objection to James. For a critical exposition and analysis of Gale's argument, see Philip Quinn, 'Gale on a Pragmatic Argument for Religious Belief', *Philo*, 6/1 (2003).

evidential support, but that forming a belief in that proposition is the rational action to perform.

A very interesting and important objection to James's argument is that it falls prey to the very principle it invokes against Clifford:

James writes: 'A rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there would be an irrational rule.' This may sound like sweet reason itself, but a moment's reflection should convince us that it is nothing of the kind. Any rule whatever that restricts belief in any way might conceivably shut us off from some truths.<sup>34</sup>

According to James, Clifford's rule is problematic because, if followed, it would preclude access to restricted propositions and dependent propositions. According to this objection, this alleged flaw of Clifford's rule is true of any epistemic principle. Every epistemic principle that segregates beliefs between the permissible and the impermissible runs the risk of shutting off access to certain possible kinds of truth. James's strategy, then, is just as guilty of the alleged flaw as is Clifford's rule. But an alleged flaw found in every possibility is no flaw. Hence, James's objection to Clifford fails.

This objection is interesting, since it is in one sense true. It is obvious that any rule that restricts belief might shut us off from certain truths. Still, while interesting, this objection is irrelevant as it misses the mark. James's argument is not predicated on the abstract proposition that any rule whatever that restricts belief in any way might conceivably shut us off from some truths. It is predicated on the principle that there are dependent propositions, and there are restricted propositions. His examples of social trust, and acquiring friends, and of social cooperation are intended to mark those kinds in the social realm. If theism were true, then it is very likely that there would be dependent propositions and restricted propositions in the metaphysical realm as well. Clifford's rule would preclude access to any restricted or dependent proposition, whether religious or not. Since James's argument specifies the irrationality of the exclusion by Clifford's rule of dependent and restricted propositions, and not just the abstract possibility of some kind of true belief or other being excluded, it escapes this objection.

<sup>34</sup> Alan Wood, 'W. K. Clifford and the Ethics of Belief', in *Unsettling Obligations: Essays on Reason, Reality and the Ethics of Belief* (Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2002), 24.

William Wainwright argues that James is best seen as part of the Anselmian project. For our purposes, to say that James is properly situated within the Anselmian project implies that James's argument is, at the very least, compatible with propositions (P) and (O). James's employment of restricted and dependent propositions as counterexamples to Clifford might be seen as a way of expressing (P). But then what about (O)? According to it, the evidence renders theism more likely than not. According to James, however, one's passional nature is relevant only in a situation that is intellectually open, and an option is intellectually open only if the relevant evidence is lacking or unclear. So, does not this show that James is not part of the Anselmian project since his Will to Believe argument presupposes not-(O)?

To solve this problem requires drawing a distinction between 'objective' evidence and 'subjective' evidence (or perhaps 'public' evidence and 'private' evidence). Objective evidence is evidence generally available to any well-placed inquirer, while subjective evidence is evidence accessible only by those equipped with certain cognitive attitudes. Subjective evidence, unlike objective evidence, requires a prior pro-belief. Consider dependent propositions and restricted propositions. A dependent proposition is a kind of proposition that has as a necessary condition of truth that it is believed, while restricted propositions are a kind of proposition that requires belief in order to gain or appreciate evidence on their behalf. Dependent propositions and restricted propositions fit under the heading of subjective evidence. According to James the objective evidence for theism is lacking, and its lack is a necessary condition for being a genuine option. So, the property of intellectual openness has to do with objective evidence. But, when the objective evidence and the subjective evidence are both taken in account, (O) obtains. Given an assessment of the objective evidence and the subjective evidence, theism is well supported. So, James's argument does not presuppose not-(O). In fact, read carefully, it is compatible with (O).

Whether James intended his argument to have epistemic consequence as well as pragmatic is debatable. But one need not subscribe to an Originalist hermeneutic to judge that the argument fits the Anselmian project. Suppose, however, that this judgment is incorrect and James's argument is not best seen as part of the Anselmian project. What effect would that have on the interpretation outlined above? Very little. James's argument taken as independent of the Anselmian project would then be best interpreted as contending that pragmatic considerations impact epistemology, and, since this is so, the Cliffordian chasm between

evidence and pragmatic reasons is, at least at times, bridgeable.<sup>35</sup> James's argument is an attack on Clifford's rule, and it is an attack whose strategy is wholly pragmatic. The pragmatic can have epistemic consequence. As stated earlier, James's main thesis in the 'Will to Believe' essay is a general epistemological point: 'a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.'<sup>36</sup> And James employs pragmatic reasons to contend that a Cliffordian epistemic rule is irrational, not just from a pragmatic point of view, but from an epistemic point of view, since that rule would preclude access to truth if the world were different from that presupposed by the Cliffordian rule. James's argument is, no matter which interpretive framework we adopt, a pragmatic argument. But it is also an argument whose riches spill beyond the pragmatic and over into the epistemic.

While I think there is good reason to situate the Wagers of the *Pensées* within the Anselmian project, and some reason to place James's Will to Believe argument there as well, I will not go so far as to claim that the Jamesian Wager should be seen as anything more than a pragmatic argument. This modesty is due to the obvious fact that the Anselmian project is itself extremely controversial and, despite its impressive roster of adherents, very much a minority view among contemporary philosophers. As we have seen, the Jamesian Wager is already exposed to a great number of objections, and it would be imprudent to saddle it with the controversy surrounding the Anselmian project. Still, if the Anselmian project is ever seen as the best explanation of persistent philosophic, or religious, controversy, or if an argument supportive of the Anselmian project were to become widely accepted, the boon to the Wager would be great, since it could then lay claim to the mantle that Pascal intended for it.

### 3. THE TOPOGRAPHY OF HOPE

Concisely described, James's argument is that, when the evidence is silent, our passions and preferences can speak. James's argument can be

<sup>35</sup> This sort of interpretation is found in Henry Jackman, 'Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 35/1 (1999), 1–37.

<sup>36</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', 28.

seen as supporting the propriety of allowing hope to influence certain deliberations and decisions. Hope is a positive attitude directed toward an uncertain state of affairs, that a particular outcome obtain. It is positive because one can hope for something only if one prefers that it obtain. Hope is typically directed toward uncertainties in the future, but one can hope about something in the past. Hope is directed toward an uncertainty because one cannot hope for what one knows to be false. Nor can one hope for what one knows will obtain. One can, however, hope for what one thinks is unlikely. If one believes that an event is very unlikely, hope seems pointless; still one can hope to win the lottery, all the while knowing that it is very unlikely that one will. There are cases in which it would be irrational to hope, but long odds alone do not entail that hope is irrational. It is here at least that hope and belief diverge, since one can hope for something that it would be irrational to believe. While playing the lottery, I can hope to win, but I cannot rationally believe that I will. James Muyskens asserts that one who 'hopes that  $p$  acts as if  $p$  were true'.<sup>37</sup> Hope, he says, issues in action. But this connection cannot be made, since acting on the hope that one will win the lottery is a ready recipe for financial disaster. Hope is focused on a particular outcome obtaining—an outcome that one desires or prefers—and often one acts as if what one hopes for is true. But action does not always follow from hope, since the desired outcome is uncertain.

Hope differs from wishing, since one can know that something is false while wishing it were true. Even knowing that the Cubs lost again, one could still wish that they had won. Hope differs from expectation. One expects something only if one believes it likely. But you can hope for what you know is unlikely. Despair, anxiety, indifference, optimism, and hope are all attitudes one can adopt toward future events. If one expects something good to occur, one is optimistic. Generally speaking, the optimistic person is hopeful. But one can be hopeful without being optimistic. On the other hand, if one expects something bad, one is anxious, perhaps even fearful. But it seems that one can be both anxious and hopeful. One may expect the landfall of the hurricane to be close, but one can hope that it is not. Indifference is adopted toward those events one cares little or nothing about. Despair is the opposite of hope, as one despairs when hopeless. The despairing

<sup>37</sup> James Muyskens, *The Sufficiency of Hope: The Conceptual Foundations of Religion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 17.

person finds himself without hope, looking toward what seems an unpromising future.

Hope, Hume thought, was a passion. But, as J. P. Day pointed out, hope involves not just desiring something, but also estimating a probability.<sup>38</sup> And it is hard to see beliefs about probabilities as parts of emotions. Whether hope is an emotion or not, it plays a significant role in eliciting emotions, including happiness and joy.<sup>39</sup> We said earlier that hope was a positive attitude directed toward an uncertain state of affairs, that a particular outcome obtain. In sum, then, we might note three aspects of hope. The first two are constituents of hope, while the third often flows from hope (a sign or mark of hope, we might say). A hope for *x* includes (i) a desire that *x* occur; (ii) certain beliefs involving *x*, including the beliefs that *x* is possible, and that it is desirable, and that it has such and such a probability of occurring; finally, often but not always, (iii) certain expectations about the future follow from (i) and (ii). These expectations are sometimes sufficient to motivate action; some times they are not. As we will see in Excursus III, a confidence follows from a hope infused with Christian content, as does action.

#### 4. A LICENSE TO HOPE

By the 1860s John Stuart Mill (1806–73) ‘ruled with absolute despotism a large proportion of the so-called educated and thinking men in great Britain’.<sup>40</sup> Despite the hyperbole of the claim, it is true that Mill was a leading public intellectual of the middle period of the Victorian age. So much so that the posthumous publication of his *Three Essays on Religion* (1870) drew not only the expected criticism from the faithful, but also a shocked disappointment from those who expected the ‘saint

<sup>38</sup> J. P. Day, ‘Hope’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6/2 (1969), 89.

<sup>39</sup> The role played by hope in generating and sustaining positive emotions may have significant medical consequences. See Jerome Groopman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness* (New York: Random House, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Seelye Gregory, ‘John Stuart Mill and the Destruction of Theism’, *Princeton Review*, 54 (1878), 409; repr. in A. Sell (ed.), *Mill and Religion: Contemporary Responses to Three Essays on Religion* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1997), 192–7. Alexander Bain is reported to have asked Helen Taylor (the executor of Mill’s estate) for permission to edit ‘Theism’ in order to preserve Mill’s reputation. See Nicholas Capaldi, *John Stuart Mill: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 348.



of rationalism' to argue for agnosticism.<sup>41</sup> Leslie Stephen is said to have 'paced his study in angry surprise' at the appearance of the *Three Essays*, with his wife consoling him by pointing out that 'I always told you John Mill was orthodox'.<sup>42</sup>

The cause of all this consternation is found in the third of the three essays, 'Theism', a short work begun in 1868 and still unfinished when Mill died in 1870. The faithful found 'Theism' objectionable because of Mill's criticism of the standard arguments of natural theology. Mill's objections, by the way, are pedestrian at best—though that is not why the faithful found them objectionable. The disappointment of the other side flowed from Mill's endorsement of a position that can be summed up by the principle that, where the evidence and probabilities yield, there hope can properly take possession. Mill expressed this principle when discussing immortality: 'to any one who feels it conducive either to his satisfaction or to his usefulness to hope for a future state as a possibility, there is no hindrance to his indulging that hope.'<sup>43</sup> Mill was no theist in our sense, arguing in 'Theism' that a belief in a creator of great but limited power was supported by the design argument. But he did hold that upon a quasi-theistic base one could erect a superstructure of hope for a continuation of existence beyond the grave:

Appearances point to the existence of a Being who has great power over us—all the power implied in the creation of the Kosmos, or of its organized beings at least—and of whose goodness we have evidence though not of its being his predominant attribute; and as we do not know the limits either of his power or of his goodness, there is room to hope that both the one and the other may extend to granting us this gift provided that it would really be beneficial to us.<sup>44</sup>

Since we do not know that granting postmortem existence to humans is beyond the capability of the creator, hope is possible. As Mill puts it:

in the regulation of the imagination literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered. Truth is the province of reason, and it is by the cultivation of the rational faculty that provision is made for its being known always, and thought of as often as is required by duty and the circumstances of human life. But

<sup>41</sup> See A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London: W. W. Norton, 1999), 41–52; and his *The Victorians* (London: W. W. Norton, 2003), 108–12; and Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 27.

<sup>42</sup> Reported in Alan Sell, 'Introduction', in Sell (ed.), *Mill and Religion*, p. xvi.

<sup>43</sup> John Stuart Mill, 'Theism', in *Three Essays on Religion* (1870; New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1874), 210.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

when reason is strongly cultivated, the imagination may safely follow its own end, and do its best to make life pleasant and lovely ... On these principles it appears to me that the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible. The beneficial effect of such a hope is far from trifling.<sup>45</sup>

For our purposes the item of interest is Mill's claim that 'any one who feels it conducive either to his satisfaction or to his usefulness to hope for a future state as a possibility, there is no hindrance to his indulging that hope'.<sup>46</sup> This license to hope is issued in part upon pragmatic grounds. It is permissible to hope if and only if:

- L1. for all one knows or justifiably believes, the object of one's hope could obtain; and
- L2. one's hope fits with one's beliefs; and
- L3. one believes that hoping contributes to one's own happiness, or to the well-being of others.

The first condition ensures that one's hope coheres with one's justified beliefs. One is not hoping in the face of evidence, or despite the evidence, as long as one is in compliance with (L1). The second condition (L2) employs the notion of fit, a weaker notion than entailment, but a stronger notion than mere coherence. Mill believed that one could hope for survival of death in part because one is justified in believing in a deity—a deity who may, for all we know, have the power to grant survival. The hope for survival is neither entailed, nor made much more likely than not, by a belief in a deity, Mill thinks. Still, the hope of survival fits with belief in a deity, in the sense that it would not be surprising that there is survival if a deity exists. Indeed, it may be surprising that there would be no survival if a deity exists. Such a hope is a natural fit with such a belief. The third condition, (L3), is straightforwardly pragmatic and restricts hope to those who have goals either of personal happiness or of contributing to the well-being of others. Believing that hope results in the promotion of happiness or well-being is a necessary condition of a permissible hope.

There is little doubt that Mill agreed with Hume that 'the wise man proportions his belief to the evidence' and with Clifford's rule.<sup>47</sup> Mill

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 248–9.      <sup>46</sup> Ibid. 210.

<sup>47</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 110.

was no subjectivist or fideist. But hope and belief are not the same; and the standards for the permissibility of the one differ from the standards of the other. If one believes that the dicta of Hume and Clifford should govern any and all propositional attitudes and not just belief, then it is easy to see why Mill's liberal treatment of hope would disappoint. On the other hand, if one believes that morality consists primarily in the promotion of happiness, propositions (L1)–(L3) are not surprising.

In any case, a noteworthy feature of Mill's treatment of hope is its recognition that hope is distinct from belief. While one may hope for  $x$ , according to Mill, it does not follow that one may believe that  $x$ . Millian religious hope is a thin gruel, unlikely to nourish a robust religious commitment.

## 5. CONSOLATION AND HOPE

In 1770 James Beattie (1735–1803) published a long response to Hume entitled *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth: in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*.<sup>48</sup> The essay was a 300-page best-seller, which, most commentators agree, was in many respects unfair to Hume. As was his wont, Hume never made an effort to answer Beattie in public; in correspondence, however, Hume referred to Beattie as that 'silly bigoted fellow'.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the general weakness of many of his arguments, Beattie does offer an interesting pragmatic objection to Hume's attack on religious belief:

they perhaps have little need, and little relish, for the consolations of religion. But let them know that, in the solitary scenes of life, there is many an honest and tender heart pining with incurable anguish, pierced with the sharpest sting of disappointment, bereft of friends, chilled with poverty, racked with disease, scourged by the oppressor; whom nothing but trust in Providence, and the hope of a future retribution, could preserve from the agonies of despair. And do they, with sacrilegious hands, attempt to violate this last refuge of the miserable, and to rob them of the only comfort that had survived the ravages of the misfortune, malice, and tyranny! Did it ever happen, that the influence of their execrable

<sup>48</sup> James Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth: In Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism*, pt. III, ch. III (1770; New York, 1971), 322–3.

<sup>49</sup> See James Somerville, *The Enigmatic Parting Shot* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1995), 1, 76–94.

tenets disturbed the tranquility of virtuous retirement, deepened the gloom of human distress, or aggravated the horrors of the grave? Is it possible that this may have happened in many instances? Is it probable that this hath happened, or may happen, in one single instance?—ye traitors to human kind, how can ye answer for it to your own hearts?<sup>50</sup>

Beattie argues that Hume's clear cutting of the theistic forest in his attack on the credibility of miracle reports, his criticism of the design argument, and his arguments against postmortem survival resulted in a desolate landscape that does a serious disservice to humankind.

Let us understand desolation as a profound sense of hopelessness and purposelessness. Beattie believed that Christian commitment provided consolation in the form of hope, especially to those suffering or oppressed. His argument might be reconstructed as, there is a person S, such that:

63. theistic hope provides the great good of consolation for S. And,
64. S cannot receive a comparable good from any other source. And,
65. the deprivation of this good is a significant loss for S. So,
66. depriving S of the great good of theistic hope renders S significantly worse off. And,
67. it is wrong to render some one worse off without compensation. So,
68. public atheistic attacks are wrong.

Although Hume never answered Beattie, John Stuart Mill in effect did:

That what is called the consoling nature of an opinion, that is, the pleasure we should have in believing it to be true, can be a ground for believing it, is a doctrine irrational in itself and which would sanction half the mischievous illusions recorded in history or which mislead individual life.<sup>51</sup>

This is an odd objection coming from one who argued in *Utilitarianism* that 'actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness'.<sup>52</sup> If the sole criterion of action is the production of happiness, and if forming a belief is an action, then it is hard to see what utilitarian complaint could be lodged against Beattie's Consolation argument, or at least some

<sup>50</sup> Beattie, *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*, 322–3.

<sup>51</sup> Mill, 'Theism', 204.

<sup>52</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1864; London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1972), 6.

argument very much like it.<sup>53</sup> As it stands, Mill's objection is seriously underdeveloped. It does claim that half humankind's mischievous illusions flow from belief-formation based on consolation. But it is silent regarding the causation of the other half (might the other half flow from a strict compliance to Evidentialism? It is unlikely but we need to know); and it is silent regarding the relative balance between the gain derived from the consoling belief-formation, and the ill derived from it. Does the benefit derived outweigh the loss involved? Without that information, Mill's objection just strikes an odd note, as a complaint about the production of happiness from one who advocated that production as the overriding duty of humankind.

Something very much like Beattie's argument is found in a suggestive passage of John Henry Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, famously known as the 'factory-girl' argument. Newman (1801–90) did not formulate the factory-girl argument as a pragmatic argument, but the argument certainly lends itself to such a formulation:

Montaigne was endowed with a good estate, health, leisure and an easy temper, literary tastes, and a sufficiency of books: he could afford thus to play with life, and the abysses into which it leads us.

Let us take a case in contrast. 'I think', says the poor dying factory-girl in the tale, 'if this should be the end of all, and if all I have been born for is just to work my heart and life away, and to sicken in this dreary place, with those mill-stones in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop and let me have a little piece of quiet, and with the fluff filling my lungs, until I thirst to death for one long deep breath of the clear air, and my mother gone, and I never able to tell her again how I loved her, and of all my troubles.—I think, if this life is the end, and that there is no God to wipe away all tears from all eyes, I could go mad!'

Here is an argument for the immortality of the soul.<sup>54</sup>

This argument lends itself easily to a pragmatic cast, since it is more easily seen as an argument for the hope of immortality than it is as an argument for immortality. If we take this argument as supporting the rational and moral legitimacy of religious hope, rather than as an argument that humans are immortal, then we have an example of an independent pragmatic argument in support of theistic hope. Since

<sup>53</sup> This point is made in David Stove, *On Enlightenment*, ed. R. Kimball (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 34.

<sup>54</sup> J. H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 202.

Christian hope entails a belief in certain propositions, as will be argued in Excursus III, it is a short step from the factory-girl argument in support of the legitimacy of religious hope to a pragmatic argument in support of theistic belief.

Like Mill, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) objected to a defense of religious belief erected upon the consoling nature of the belief. Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* is in part an imaginary dialogue between Freud and a defender of religious belief, an opponent, says Freud, 'who follows my argument with mistrust, and here and there I shall allow him to inject some remarks'.<sup>55</sup> One of those injections is an appeal to religious consolation: 'Countless people find their one consolation in religious doctrines, and can only bear life with their help. You would rob them of their support, without having anything better to give them in exchange.'<sup>56</sup> Freud's answer is that reliance upon religious consolation is unduly risky, since it perpetuates on the individual level a psychological immaturity, and on the social level a cultural immaturity. Men cannot, Freud says, 'remain children forever; they must go out into "hostile life"'.<sup>57</sup>

To make sense of Freud's objection requires knowing that he employs the term 'illusion' in an idiosyncratic way. An illusion in the Freudian sense is a belief that is caused by and in turn satisfies a deep psychological need or longing.<sup>58</sup> Illusions are not held rationally. Illusions stick even in the absence of any supporting evidence. Indeed, according to Freud, they stick even in the face of strong contra-evidence. Illusions could be true, but often they are not. Delusions are false illusions. Religious belief Freud thought was an illusion. While it may have been a beneficial illusion at an earlier time, it no longer is. The religious illusion now, Freud asserted, inhibits scientific progress, and causes psychological neuroses, among its other pernicious effects. Two elements are important here: the claim that theistic belief would be held even in the absence of supporting belief, and the claim that religious belief is now decidedly pernicious. Freud's argument is pragmatic. Theistic belief is not held because of the evidence, and to stand fast in that belief is pernicious, even if at one time doing so was beneficial.

Since Freud's argument is itself pragmatic, he has no principled objection to pragmatic arguments as such. So the dispute boils down to this. The factory-girl pragmatic argument is based on the alleged benefit

<sup>55</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. J. Strachey (1927; New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 21.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 49.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 31.

of consolation provided by theistic hope, while Freud's pragmatic argument alleges that religious hope and belief is a net harm. How to adjudicate? Well, suppose we take the factory girl as making a true claim about herself: that she would go mad without religious hope. Rule (I) is relevant here. Recall that Rule (I) asserts that:

it is rationally and morally permissible to believe a proposition  $p$ , even when the probability of  $p$  is less than one-half, if and only if (I.i) the utility of believing  $p$  is greater than the utility of not believing  $p$ ; and (I.ii) the utility of believing  $p$  is not contingent upon  $p$  being true; and (I.iii) either (a) believing  $p$  provides the only real chance of avoiding or escaping a desperate case situation; or (b) believing  $p$  provides the only real chance of gaining an impressive good.

If one knew oneself well enough to see that hope was necessary for one's sanity, or, less dramatically, for one's basic happiness, the adjudication seems obvious. Since the hope being efficacious does not depend on God existing, and since the hope is necessary for one's basic happiness, the factory girl's hope passes muster with (I). More generally, the issue comes down to proposition (11). Is (11) true? Is it well supported by the evidence? In Chapter 3 we saw that (11) was rendered more likely than not by current research. Given that judgment, and assuming that people find themselves in the condition of the factory girl—hope or despair—and, importantly, assuming that the respective probabilities are equal, although it initially appears a license for wishful thinking, an argument from the consolation of theistic belief to the justification of theistic belief may well be justified.

## 6. THE ABDICATION OF BELIEF

Jules Lachelier championed a version of the Wager that based its case primarily on the empirical benefits of theistic belief, while conceding that theism was very probably false.<sup>59</sup> This version is noteworthy because, like the Jamesian Wager, Lachelier holds that the empirical benefit of theistic belief plays an important role in supporting theistic belief, but,

<sup>59</sup> See Jules Lachelier, 'Notes on Pascal's Wager' (1901), in *The Philosophy of Jules Lachelier*, trans. E. G. Ballard (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 97–111. And see John King-Farlow, 'Lachelier's Idealism—Paradox Redoubled', *Idealistic Studies*, 12 (1982), 72–8.

unlike the Jamesian Wager, Lachelier's Wager assigns a low probability to the existence of God. In Chapter 4 I argued that a finite wager could not rationally persuade those who assigned a low probability to theism. This assertion was based on a commitment to Defeasible Evidentialism, which requires that one conform one's beliefs and acceptances to the evidence, whenever the evidence is decisive. Lachelier's Wager is situated within a context in which it is thought that the evidence is conclusively arrayed against theism. Lachelier, however, thought that the empirical benefits of theistic belief were so great that one was justified in accepting a proposition against which one had strong evidence. While there is good reason to reject Lachelier's Wager, it warrants attention, since it provides an example of a pragmatic argument run wild. The argument presupposes that truth is just one value among many, and, if significant benefits are found among propositions probably false, then perhaps we have reason to adopt the falsehoods and to ignore the truth.

Lachelier was of two minds. Philosophically he was a monistic idealist, which he believed implied pantheism. Religiously, however, he was a devout Catholic, and he believed that Christianity implied metaphysical pluralism, with the creator wholly distinct from the creation. He tried to resolve this tension by arguing that living a life worthy of human dignity required theistic belief. The atheist, Lachelier thought, 'will have lost, by his fault, an infinite sort of happiness and that loss will be for him already an immense misfortune'.<sup>60</sup> Since the loss of faith was an immense misfortune, Lachelier thought, one is permitted to wager that there is something that gives meaning to human existence. Something very much like Lachelier's thought is illustrated by Emily Dickinson's poem 1581, written in 1882:

Those—dying then,  
Knew where they went—  
They went to God's Right Hand—  
That Hand is amputated now  
And God cannot be found—  
The abdication of Belief  
Makes the Behavior small—  
Better an ignis fatuus  
Than no illumine at all—<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in King-Farlow, 'Lachelier's Idealism—Paradox Redoubled', 74–5.

<sup>61</sup> Emily Dickinson, 'Poem 1581' (1882), in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 582.



The loss of faith is too costly, with despair and a trivialization of human activity as its tolls. In book III of *The Republic* Socrates suggests that implementing a just regime may require a noble lie, since those who are ruled may not otherwise submit to the specialization necessary for utopia. The last two lines of Dickinson's poem—better a false light than no illumination at all—is something very much like the noble lie, what we might call the Beneficial Falsehood. A Beneficial Falsehood, we might say, is any proposition for which one has good reason to consider false, yet one accepts, motivated perhaps by certain benefits. The Canonical Wager, in its most extreme form, provides an example of the Beneficial Falsehood, with the motivation flowing from the infinite expected utility. Lachelier's Wager is an argument from strong dominance, with the infinite good of heaven playing a role, but the primary motivating role is reserved for the empirical benefit of theistic belief.

It is far from clear that one can in fact accept a proposition that one considers probably false. There are strong arguments that one cannot believe a proposition for which one has good evidence that it is probably false. But acceptance is not belief. To accept or cause a belief in a proposition that one knows is much more unlikely than not would require covering one's tracks; it would require a great deal of self-deception. But, even if there is a belief-inducing technology available that works even when the known evidence is extremely unfavorable, a commitment to Defeasible Evidentialism, as well as a recognition of rules (I) and (D), preclude employing it—no matter how beneficial the falsehood.<sup>62</sup>

## 7. EXCURSUS III: A THEOLOGY OF HOPE

Three theological virtues are associated with Christian commitment according to Paul, the earliest of the Christian theologians: faith, hope and love.<sup>63</sup> Since love will be found, Paul thinks, even in the world to

<sup>62</sup> Although I have characterized Lachelier's wager as succumbing to the lure of the Beneficial Falsehood, Lachelier himself was a man of great personal integrity. For instance, according to King-Farlow, Lachelier gave up his 'career as a teacher of philosophy because he did not wish to weaken the Catholic ideals of his students. [Lachelier believed] he would be more honest to become an Inspector of Schools and confine his expositions of idealism to hardened professionals.' See King-Farlow, 'Lachelier's Idealism—Paradox Redoubled', 73.

<sup>63</sup> 1 Corinthians 13: 13.

come (while faith and hope will not, as there we will see face to face and not as if in a mirror darkly) Paul declared love the greatest of the three, but for our purposes it is hope that is the most interesting. What is Christian hope? Emil Brunner (1889–1966), the Swiss Reformed theologian, denied that faith, hope, and love were distinct virtues, suggesting instead that the three constitute a ‘threefold totality [that] is related to a basic fact of man’s existence as a human being—every man’s existence is in the three dimensions of time. He lives in the past, in the future, and in the present... Man is the historic being, the being that has his past with him.’<sup>64</sup> Brunner believed that hope, as well as faith and love, flowed out of religious experience. They were the practical consequences of the divine encounter with the human consequences related to human historicity. As he put it, ‘faith is a relation to God’s act of revelation and redemption in the past and... hope is the expectation of what God will do in the future... Love is the way by which God changes our present.’<sup>65</sup> Faith, Brunner holds, is a confident acceptance that one’s religious experience was mediated through Jesus Christ. According to Brunner, ‘faith is a decision in which the stakes are salvation or ruin; it is not a sham decision, where everything has already been decided...’<sup>66</sup> So faith is, in effect, a way of understanding and being related to certain events of the past. Christian love must be understood in the sense of *agape*, a concern that is unmotivated by self-interest, and directed not at the value of the beloved, but at the best interest of the beloved. *Agape* love is a concern for the good of the beloved, which expects no compensation in kind. Hope, Brunner says, is the expectation of good things to come. Christian hope is, in Brunner’s analysis, how the human relates now to the future in the light of the divine revelation.

Christian hope might be best characterized as a confident expectation.<sup>67</sup> It is a confident expectation, since one acts on one’s Christian hopes, living as if it were true. With hope generally, we said that expectations often but not always flow from hope. One respect in which Christian hope is distinct is that the connection between hope and

<sup>64</sup> Emil Brunner, *Faith, Hope and Love* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 12–13.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* 61.

<sup>66</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. O. Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 314–15.

<sup>67</sup> So John Calvin, *Instruction in Faith* (1537), trans. P. T. Fuhrmann (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949), 55–6.

action is firmer. The expectation is assured. This assurance need not be based primarily on one's assessment of the probabilities (though that assessment is not irrelevant), but rather on one's Christian commitment. Christian hope is an eschatological expectation of eternal life and providence. Eternal life means primarily the survival of death via resurrection, while providence we can take as the denial that 'everything that was of value just goes; it is no more, it comes to nothing...'.<sup>68</sup> According to Brunner, Christian hope involves more than personal survival; it involves the redemption of the universe as a whole. This idea can be understood abstractly as the affirmation that the universe is on balance good—that good is victorious over evil. This is a hope that God will bring history to an end and will institute an eternity in which there is no suffering and no anguish. Both of these hopes, the hope for individual resurrection and the hope for a collective redemption, are eschatological in the sense that they are hopes directed not just toward the future, but toward a future in which natural history has ended and eternity has begun. It is important to notice that Christian hope entails a belief in certain theological propositions. One hopes in the Christian sense only if one believes in God. And, as many philosophers and theologians have pointed out, 'belief in' presupposes 'belief that'. One can trust someone only if one believes certain things about the person trusted. While hope as such does not entail belief, Christian hope does seem to entail belief.

The consequences of Christian hope according to Brunner are that life and the universe no longer appear to the Christian as absurd or meaningless. Human life has meaning and value that is not annihilated by death. Christian hope precludes fear and anxiety about the future, and it keeps one from despair. Despair is, Brunner would hold, a denial of Christian faith. Significantly, Albert Camus (1913–60) in his 1955 essay 'The Myth of Sisyphus' held that recognizing absurdity involved living without hope: 'a man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever bound to it. A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future.'<sup>69</sup> To see the universe as absurd precludes hope, especially Christian hope.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Brunner, *Faith, Hope and Love*, 61.

<sup>69</sup> Albert Camus, 'The Myth of Sisyphus', in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. J. O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 31–2.

<sup>70</sup> Hopelessness does not entail despair, Camus thought, since the absurd hero could find joy even in the depths of absurdity.

# 7

## Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God

The foregoing six chapters have presented the case that it is appropriate, morally, intellectually, and theologically, to wager that God exists. Wagering for God we have understood as committing to God, which involves, in part, forming a belief in God on the basis of a pragmatic argument. In particular, the argument has been that within certain defined parameters—think in particular of rules (I) and (D)—the Jamesian Wager provides good reason in support of theistic belief. In compliance with those rules it is permissible, rationally and morally, to induce a belief in God via a pragmatic argument even in the absence of strong evidential support.

There is, however, an interesting objection that denies, in effect, that complying with rules (I) and (D) is enough. According to this objection, if there is no strong evidence available in support of theism, one will thereby have strong evidence in support of atheism, as the absence of strong evidence in support of theism just is strong evidence in support of atheism. Divine silence, this objection asserts, is a loud proclamation that atheism prevails. It is the *coup de grâce* applied to theistic belief, tipping the scales decisively toward skepticism.

### 1. THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

The most remarked-upon version of this objection, which might be called the Divine Hiddenness argument, is due to John Schellenberg.<sup>1</sup> His presentation of the Divine Hiddenness argument runs:

69. If there is a perfectly loving God, all creatures capable of explicit and positively meaningful relationships with God who have

<sup>1</sup> John Schellenberg presents his argument in his important book *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

not freely shut themselves off from God are in a position to participate in such relationships (i.e. are able to do so just by trying). And,

70. no one can be in a position to participate in such relationships without believing that God exists. So,
71. if there is a perfectly loving God, all creatures capable of explicitly and positively meaningful relationship with God who have not shut themselves off from God believe that God exists. And,
72. it is not the case that all creatures capable of explicitly and positively meaningful relationship with God who have not shut themselves off from God believe that God exists; there is nonresistant nonbelief (God is hidden). So,
73. it is not the case that there is a perfectly loving God. And,
74. if God exists, God is perfectly loving. Therefore,
75. it is not the case that God exists.

A key idea of the Divine Hiddenness argument is that a perfectly loving being would desire the best for its beloved. Another key idea is that a deep relationship or friendship with God would constitute a very great good for creatures. So God, if he exists, would desire that each creature enjoy the benefit of a deep friendship with him. Of course, very little is said about what an 'explicit and positively meaningful relationship with God' consists in. And this dearth of detail may be important, as much hangs on what such a relationship would be.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I contend that Schellenberg's argument is unsound. My argument for this judgment proceeds along three paths. The first two paths are but short sketches of two reasons for thinking that the argument is unsound. My third objection is developed in greater detail. It will be useful to begin by noting several assumptions required by the Divine Hiddenness argument, and by presenting the two minor objections.

## 2. THE DIVINE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT

The Divine Hiddenness argument has, like all arguments, assumptions or unstated premisses. One assumption is the proposition that:

- A1. The probability that God exists, given the available supporting evidence, is significantly greater than one-half, if God exists.

<sup>2</sup> I owe this point to Joel Pust.

Importantly, proposition (A1) is supposed to be a necessary truth, a proposition true in all possible circumstances. We might symbolize (A1), using standard notation, and employing as placeholders  $G$  for *God exists*,  $E$  for the *evidence indicating that God exists*, this way:

$$\square[G \supset P(G/E) \gg 0.5]^3$$

Notice that, if (A1) were false, Schellenberg's argument would fail. If it were possible that the probability that God exists, given the available supporting evidence, were equal to one-half, or nearly so, it would not be a necessary truth that that probability had to be significantly higher than one-half if God exists. The denial of (A1) we could symbolize as:

$$\diamond[P(G/E) \approx 0.5 \ \& \ G]$$

Proposition (A1) makes it clear that no middling probability assignment for God is allowed if the Divine Hiddenness argument succeeds.

A second assumption is that Absolute Evidentialism is true. Recall that Absolute Evidentialism asserts:

for all persons  $S$  and propositions  $p$  and times  $t$ ,  $S$  ought to believe that  $p$  at  $t$  if the evidence renders  $p$  more likely than not at  $t$ ; and  $S$  ought not believe that  $p$  if the evidence does not render  $p$  more likely than not at  $t$ .

A famous anecdote involving Bertrand Russell vividly captures the Absolute Evidentialist attitude: having been asked what he would say to God if after death he were to find himself before the divine throne, Russell purportedly answered, not enough evidence God, not enough evidence.<sup>4</sup> That the Divine Hiddenness argument assumes Absolute Evidentialism can be seen by remembering that the argument is erected upon the alleged consequences of the notion of perfect divine love—a love without limits, or defects. According to Schellenberg, God would ensure that each competent creature is exposed to evidence sufficient to generate theistic belief. The level of evidence would be so high that only

<sup>3</sup> The symbol  $P(x/y)$  should be read: the probability of  $x$  given that  $y$  is true. The symbol  $x \gg y$  should be read:  $x$  is significantly greater than  $y$ . The symbol  $x \ll y$  should be read:  $x$  is significantly less than  $y$ . The symbol  $x \vee y$  should be read: either  $x$  or  $y$ . The symbol  $\square(x)$  should be read: it is necessarily true that  $x$ . The symbol  $x \supset y$  should be read: if  $x$  is true, then  $y$  is true.

<sup>4</sup> In his *Mind, Language, and Society: Philosophy in the Real World* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 36–7, John Searle recounts being present when Russell uttered his evidential complaint.

an irresponsible disregard could produce nonbelief. Put another way, Schellenberg's argument requires that each person has strong reason to believe. A Pascalian, of course, would point out that that is what we in fact do have. It is in the interest of each person to form the belief that God exists. Schellenberg does not countenance that response, assuming that the divine insurance would be purely evidentiary and not pragmatic in nature.

A third assumption is that Doxastic Voluntarism is false. Recall that, according to Doxastic Voluntarism, believing is a direct act of the will, with which propositions we believe under our immediate control. A basic action is an action that a person intentionally does, without doing any other basic action. Jones's moving of her finger is a basic action, since she need not perform any other action to accomplish it. Her handing the book from Smith to Brown is not basic, since she must intentionally do several things to accomplish it. According to Doxastic Voluntarism, forming a belief is in some cases a basic action. We can will, directly and voluntarily, what to believe and the beliefs thereby acquired are freely obtained and are not forced upon us. In short, one can believe at will. Schellenberg rightly assumes that Doxastic Voluntarism is false. But, of course, even if Doxastic Voluntarism is false, it does not follow that we have no control over our beliefs. The falsity of Doxastic Voluntarism is compatible with our having indirect or roundabout control over our beliefs. So, while we lack direct control of our beliefs, we do have indirect or roundabout freedom over our beliefs.

A fourth assumption is that God, being perfectly loving, loves universally and equally; that every human is beloved and, as a consequence, is a recipient of equal treatment on the part of God. It is a common claim of theists that God is perfectly good, and by that they mean not just that God perfectly loves, but that God is perfectly just. God's love, then, would have to be calibrated to that degree compatible with the other properties essential to divine perfection. Divine love may not have the consequence Schellenberg assumes if that consequence is incompatible with divine justice. Schellenberg's assumption blithely ignores a venerable theological tradition populated with names like Paul, Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Pascal, which asserts that divine love is constrained by divine justice.<sup>5</sup> In theological terms, this tradition holds that grace is necessary for one to appreciate the evidence in support of

<sup>5</sup> Schellenberg does comment on one aspect of this tradition in his *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*, 74–82.

theism; but, without grace, one will not believe. Grace is a divine gift of which justice precludes a universal distribution. If this tradition were correct, premise (74) would be false as understood in the sense necessary for the validity of the Divine Hiddenness argument.

Briefly, two further assumptions of the Divine Hiddenness argument include:

- A2. either the probability that God exists, given the available supporting evidence, is significantly greater than one-half, or it is significantly less than one-half, given all the relevant evidence.

Symbolized (A2) would read:

$$\square[P(G/E) \gg 0.5 \vee P(G/T) \ll 0.5]$$

where  $T$  stands for the *totality of the relevant evidence*. This assumption draws a distinction between the available evidence and all the evidence. The idea is that, when the evidence pro and con concerning the existence is in parity, the Divine Hiddenness argument provides decisive evidence contra the existence of God. Another assumption is:

- A3. either the probability that God exists, given the available supporting evidence is significantly greater than one-half, or it is significantly lower than one-half, given that evidence.

Symbolized (A3) would read:

$$\square[P(G/E) \gg 0.5 \vee P(G/E) \ll 0.5]$$

The idea of (A3) is that it is not possible that the evidence, pro and con, be in parity. If God exists, the available pro-evidence should be decisively greater than one-half, and, if it is not, then there is decisive con-evidence available.

The first minor objection focuses on premise (70). In support of this premise Schellenberg asserts:

*For the belief that God exists* is obviously and necessarily one of the aforementioned conditions of being in a position to exercise one's capacity for relationship with God—how can I hear God speak to me or consciously experience Divine forgiveness and support or feel grateful to God or experience God's loving presence and respond to it in love and obedience and worship *if I do not believe that there is a God?*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> John Schellenberg, 'What Divine Hiddenness Reveals, or How Weak Theistic Evidence is Strong Atheistic Proof', unpublished typescript.



So, according to (70), belief is required to enjoy a deep relationship or friendship with God. But there is good reason to doubt this. Recall the distinction between belief and acceptance. As we have seen, accepting a proposition, unlike believing, is an action that is characterized, in part, by one's assenting to the proposition, whether one believes it or not.<sup>7</sup> One accepts a proposition when she assents to its truth and employs it as a premise in her deliberations. What is it to believe a proposition? Believing a proposition is *being disposed to feel that it is probably the case*. Belief and acceptance typically converge, but they can diverge, since one can believe a proposition that one does not accept. For example, think of the gambler's fallacy. One might believe that the next toss of the coin will very probably come up tails, since it has been heads on the previous seven tosses. Nevertheless, one ought not to accept that the next toss must come up tails, or that the probability that it will be greater than one-half. Acceptance, unlike believing, is an action that is under our direct control. If one accepts a proposition, one can also act upon it. Acting upon a proposition is behaving as though it were true. And the two-step regimen of accepting a proposition and acting upon it is a common way of inculcating belief in that proposition.

The relevance of this distinction is that one can accept that God exists, even if one does not believe that God exists. Since acceptance is under our direct control, one can choose to accept, even if one cannot choose to believe. Indeed, God, if he exists and perfectly loves, may value acceptance, since God would know that Doxastic Voluntarism is false. Keeping in mind that one way to inculcate a belief is by accepting the proposition and acting upon it, one might think that acceptance is an action that God, if he exists, would value. Of course, much hangs on just what an 'explicit and positively meaningful relationship with God' is. If we anthropomorphize that idea, I suspect we shall have one result; and if we do not I suspect we shall have a different result.<sup>8</sup> In any case I know of no good reason for thinking that, if God were to value acceptance, acceptance would preclude one from a deep relationship with God. If this is correct, premise (70) is false. And, if (70) is false, Schellenberg's argument is unsound. While more needs to be said here, we move on to the second minor objection.

<sup>7</sup> My development of this distinction owes much to the discussion in William Alston, 'Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith', in J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 3–27.

<sup>8</sup> By 'anthropomorphize' I mean taking the relationship with God as being in all relevant respects the same as human relationships.

This objection is directed toward Schellenberg's Absolute Evidentialism. According to Absolute Evidentialism, it is wrong to form beliefs or to preserve beliefs that lack the support of adequate evidence. To inculcate a belief on the basis of a pragmatic argument is wrong, whether morally or cognitively, according to Absolute Evidentialism.

But, as argued in Chapter 2, Absolute Evidentialism cannot be sustained. If Absolute Evidentialism were true, it would be necessarily true. There are, however, possible situations in which taking steps to form or maintain a belief lacking adequate evidence is morally obligatory. And, since no one is irrational in doing her moral duty, Absolute Evidentialism is false. Think of it like this. Suppose you are married, and you have been confronted with evidence that your spouse is a bank robber. Knowing your spouse well, you have reason to believe that your spouse has been mistakenly accused of the crime. Weighing the evidence, pro and con, in as disinterested a manner as you can, you find that you have just about as much reason to doubt your spouse's innocence as you do to affirm it. Although the evidence is balanced, you do not suspend judgment on the matter. Remembering your vow to love and cherish, you take steps to maintain the belief that your spouse is innocent, by continuing to accept the innocence of your spouse. If more con-evidence were to become available, you are prepared to re-evaluate, but, until then and as long as the evidence is at worst balanced, you aspire to honor your vow by maintaining the belief that your spouse is innocent. If Absolute Evidentialism were true, you would be wrong not to disabuse yourself of the belief that your spouse is innocent. But no one could justly charge you with irrationality or with immorality in this circumstance. Absolute Evidentialism is, therefore, false.<sup>9</sup>

Since Absolute Evidentialism is false, no one would be wrong, in certain circumstances, in forming beliefs on the basis of a pragmatic argument. A Pascalian holds that it is permissible to form a theistic belief on the basis of a pragmatic argument when one finds oneself with as much reason to believe as not to believe. If the Pascalian is right, no one lacks overwhelming reason to inculcate theistic belief, since the Jamesian Wager is a dominance argument—depending on how the world turns out, taking steps to form the belief that God exists may be in your best interest, and doing so never renders you worse off than any other action open to you.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Gale formulates a similar argument contra Evidentialism. See his *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 357.

Why is the falsity of Absolute Evidentialism relevant? Schellenberg casually dismisses the response that non-believers are in fact culpable for non-belief. While it is true that the evidentiary situation may be ambiguous, it is manifest that the pragmatic situation is conclusively tilted toward theistic belief. All persons have overwhelmingly good reason to accept that God exists and to inculcate theistic belief. This is a point clear enough for all to see. A common way of trying to elude this point is via an unfounded allegiance to Absolute Evidentialism—an allegiance that proclaims, perhaps arrogantly, not enough evidence God, not enough evidence—despite the fact that there is abundant reason to believe.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. WHY THE DIVINE HIDDENNESS ARGUMENT FAILS

An old joke may aid in developing this objection: a devout Calvinist is trapped on top of his house surrounded by rising flood waters. His neighbor from the north comes by in a canoe and tells the Calvinist to climb in. 'No, I will wait on the succor of the Lord,' he says. Later, as the waters rise, his neighbor from the south floats by in a boat and tells the old man to climb in. 'No, I wait upon God to rescue me,' the old man answers. As the waters rise even higher, a neighbor from the west arrives on a barge and implores the old man to climb aboard. 'No, I wait upon the Lord,' the Calvinist replies again. Soon the old man is swept away by the flood and drowns. Finding himself postmortem before God, the old Calvinist asks God, 'Lord what happened? I faithfully waited for your rescue.' God says to him, 'did you not see the three boats I sent?'

The target of objection three is assumption (A1):

- A1. the probability that God exists, given the available supporting evidence, is significantly greater than one-half, if God exists.

Keep in mind that (A1) is, allegedly, a necessary truth. The only reason Schellenberg provides for thinking that perfect divine love would necessarily ensure that all persons are presented with strong evidence if

<sup>10</sup> Note the distinction between evidence and reason. The former has to do with, roughly, considerations of a proposition being probably true, while the latter has to do with considerations of it being advantageous to form a belief in a proposition.

God exists is an analogy with human parents. It appears that Schellenberg thinks it is obvious that it is impossible both that God exists and that the pro and con evidence is roughly equal. But there is good reason to doubt that this is a necessary truth. To see this, consider what we will call 'the Story':

Suppose God exists and desires that humans choose to enter into a relationship with Him. God desires, that is, that humans accept Him as a vital concern in their lives. Moreover, since belief is a passive state over which one has no direct control, God would not present one with evidence sufficient to elicit theistic-belief, since such 'automatic belief' would not preserve the free choice to align oneself with God. What God values is the initial choice freely to accept, the freedom to choose to align oneself with God, and the effort to try to bring about belief, the free inculcation of belief. God would present reason sufficient to motivate one to choose to accept God, but God would not expose one to strong evidence, since he desires the decision to accept to be as unfettered as possible. Presenting a religiously ambiguous creation God preserves the freedom both of acceptance and of the inculcation of belief.

Suppose it is not clear whether two propositions, P and Q, are logically compatible. One way of showing that they are is to come up with a third proposition, R, which is itself a possible proposition and is consistent with both P and Q, and to conjoin R to P (or to Q). If the conjunction (P & R) entails Q, then the conjunction (P & Q & R) is possible. And, if (P & R & Q) is possible, then so too is (P & Q). And, hence, P and Q are compatible.

In the Story I conjoined the proposition that God exists with various propositions about belief and acceptance and about God valuing free acceptance and the free inculcation of belief. It follows from my conjunction that we would expect the evidence that God exists to be as likely as not. For our purposes, of course, the Story need only be possible. Even if the Story is far-fetched, it is far from inconceivable. Perhaps the Story is false, perhaps it is wildly implausible; it may well be. But, as long as it is not necessarily false, the Story serves its point, since it implies that there could be a situation in which both God exists and the evidence does not render the existence of God significantly greater than one-half. If the Story is possible, (A1) is false:

$$\diamond [P(G/E) \approx 0.5 \ \& \ G] \supset \sim \square [G \supset P(G/E) \gg 0.5]$$

Is the Story possible? Clearly enough it is, since, for one thing, it entails no contradiction. And, if (A1) is false, Schellenberg's argument is unsound.

Why might God value the conjunctive state of affairs of free acceptance and free inculcation? Keeping in mind that it only need be possible that God values these, support for the possibility of that valuation can be gleaned in a couple of ways. The first builds upon the recognition that belief ebbs and flows with one's grasp, whether reliable or not, of the evidence. Perhaps God would value acceptance as a kind of protection for the believer, since one can control one's acceptances, even if one cannot directly control one's beliefs. According to this idea, God, desiring that no one would be harmed by an erosion of belief caused by her grasp, whether reliable or not, of the evidence, provides strong reason to accept even when one does not grasp the available evidence. A second way builds upon what we might call the Celebrity Case:

Suppose you are a rich and famous celebrity. You know that among your entourage are many who associate with you just because you are rich and famous. You seek, however, true friends. You realize that celebrity gets in the way of establishing a deep relationship, as the lure of wealth, power and fame lead people away from you as a person and toward your celebrity. To establish deep friendships requires that you try to find persons ignorant of your celebrity, or indifferent to it, who will like you for who you are, regardless of your celebrity status.

In a situation like this it makes sense for someone to hide her celebrity status, as she seeks friends. What is important is that an appropriate foundation is laid, which will support the superstructure of a deep friendship. As a celebrity might hide that fact about herself, perhaps God has a similar reason to hide certain facts about himself in order that an appropriate foundation might be laid that will support a deep and free relationship.

One might object that there is a big difference between the creator and a celebrity. The celebrity thinks of friendships as a good for herself; while God would not, since it is the good of the creation that is important. Moreover, in the celebrity case, what is hidden are facts about wealth and fame, but with God the fact allegedly hidden would be existence, and how could hiding divine existence be good for God's creatures?

In response to this objection think of a teacher preparing his students for a standardized exam the results of which will determine the student's life chances—admission to the best schools say. While the teacher

should certainly not provide the answers by showing the students a purloined copy of the exam, he should provide the students with three things: enough information to prepare for the exam; the motivation to try their best, and the requisite skills to apply what they have learned in original ways, as opposed to being ‘taught to the test’. He should do this for the good of the students, since otherwise he harms them for life.<sup>11</sup> In like manner a theist could hold that God obscures his existence to preserve the freedom to accept and the freedom to inculcate belief, while at the same time providing enough evidence of his existence such that it is as likely as not, and strong reason to motivate the effort to inculcate saving-belief. Divine Hiddenness could be good for God’s creatures by preserving the dual freedoms of acceptance and inculcation, which are necessary for establishing a deep, free, and genuine relationship.

I suspect that something very much like the story is true. But mentioning that hunch is needlessly extravagant, as truth in this context is overkill. All that is necessary is that the Story is possible, and enough has been said to make manifest that possibility. Since the Story is possible, (A1) is false. And with (A1) false, the argument from Divine Hiddenness is unsound, since premise (70) would be false. Premise (70) asserts:

no one can be in a position to participate in such relationships without believing that God exists.

But, if the Story is possible, it may be that every human is in a position freely to accept that God exists, and freely to take steps to try to bring about the belief that God exists. A deep and meaningful relationship with God may require, for all I know, that the requisite belief is earned through free acceptance and through taking steps to inculcate that belief, rather than just finding oneself saddled it. In any case, since the Story is possible, Schellenberg’s argument is unsound.

If something like the Story is true, religious ambiguity would not be a surprising fact about the universe, even if God exists. As Pascal put it:

The prophecies, and even the miracles and proofs of our religion, are of such a nature that they cannot be described as absolutely convincing. But they are also of such a kind that one cannot say that it is unreasonable to believe them. Thus there is both evidence and obscurity to enlighten some and bewilder others. The evidence, however, is such that it surpasses, or at least equals, the evidence to the contrary. Therefore, since it is not reason that can persuade men not

<sup>11</sup> I owe a variant of the ‘teacher case’ to Doug Stalker.

to follow it, only concupiscence and malice of heart can do so. Thus there is sufficient evidence to condemn, but insufficient to convince. Hence it appears that, as regards those who follow it, grace and not reason causes them to do so, and that, as regards those who shun it, concupiscence and not reason causes them to do so. (W. 736)

Pascal also said about divine hiddenness that 'any religion that does not say that God is hidden is not true, and any religion which does not explain why does not instruct' (K. 424). It may verge on hubris to assume that we might explain Divine Hiddenness, but it is not prideful to conclude that one need not worry about the Divine Hiddenness argument.

#### 4. LIGHTING THE FIRE

Having examined various objections hurled at theistic pragmatic arguments—objections to the validity of these arguments, to the moral propriety of employing them in belief formation, to the rational acceptability of their premises—we have seen that the Jamesian Wager survives intact. This survival, along with an examination of the various reasons in support of the premises of the Jamesian Wager, provides good reason to accept the soundness of that argument:

10. for any person S making a forced decision under uncertainty, if one of the alternatives,  $\alpha$ , has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and the worst outcomes, has only outcomes better than the outcomes of the other alternatives, then S should choose  $\alpha$ . And,
11. theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains. And,
12. the best outcomes of theistic belief are as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and the worst outcomes of theistic belief are no worse than those of the other available alternatives. So,
- 12\*. theism has an outcome as good as the best outcomes of the other available alternatives, and never an outcome worse than the worst outcomes of the other alternatives, and, excluding the best outcomes and the worst outcomes, theism has only

outcomes better than the outcomes of the other alternatives.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore,

C. one should believe in God.

Clearly, (C) follows from (10)–(12\*); and that set of premises is consistent. Is one, therefore, within one's rights in taking the Jamesian Wager as a rational pillar of one's theistic commitment?

As we have seen, no argument, sound ones included, is credible to all persons, since only those who share the presuppositions of an argument will find its premises rationally persuasive. If a person is open to the Jamesian Wager—if he finds the argument's syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic properties plausible—and if the premises of the Jamesian Wager do not contradict any proposition deeply believed by that person, he is within his rights in taking the Jamesian Wager as support for a theistic commitment. Like a castaway lighting a fire in the hope of attracting the attention of any ship or plane that might be passing nearby, the Pascalian nurtures a theistic commitment out of a principled hope of navigating in a world shrouded in the obscuring fog of religious ambiguity, and in the hope of a better world yet to come.

<sup>12</sup> I have included previously implicit premise (12\*) as an explicit part of the presentation of the argument here so as to make clear the structure of the Jamesian argument.



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