



Believing for Benefit: Notes on Pascal and James

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In his book, *War-Time Santa Claus*, Stephen Leacock tells about one Christmas eve when he asked a group of children if they believed in Santa Claus. The smallest children unhesitatingly said they did. The older ones only shook their heads. Several little girls smiled sadly, but said nothing. One future scientist proclaimed, "I know who it is." But the most outspoken of all, with an eye for gain, declared boldly, "I believe in it all; I can believe anything."¹

Can we believe *anything*, as long as it is beneficial to us? Typically, the reasons we give for our beliefs involve some kind of evidence—either logical, cosmological, or experiential. But can the *benefits* of believing provide the evidence that is needed to justify believing? Is prudentialism—the stance that relies on practical benefits as the basis for belief—a valid religious position? Are practical reasons for faith credible? If not, are believers who claim to find such benefit psychologically unbalanced?

Some critics of religion charge that unchecked opportunism in religion can lead to serious cognitive disorders. Prudentialists are believers who "cultivate their phantasy, because it enables them to float away into a cuckooland of dreams unchecked by any hard, grim facts."² Urged on by their desires, overbelievers are said to affirm more than the facts warrant. Unlike most people, they require no evidence in order to make judgments about truth and falsity. Focusing attention on benefits alone, they are trapped in a bog of self-serving wishes where they are unable to distinguish truth from fiction. Their beliefs, composed mostly of wish-fulfillment, are seen as illusions, in some cases so improbable as to be delusions.³ The fanciful fabrica-

¹Cited in A. K. Adams, *Home Book of Humorous Quotations* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1969) 58.

²H. N. Wieman, *Religious Experience and Scientific Method* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1926) 314.

³Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor, 1953) 54.

tion of a world based on desires alone opens the door to all kinds of intellectual and psychological problems.

These charges against prudential religion deserve a response. Is it possible to show that practical reasons are good reasons for belief, that those believers who cite benefits in defense of their faith are not necessarily suspended in an unreal world of subjective longing? In order to explore this question, I will look at the pertinent writings of two important religious prudentialists, Blaise Pascal and William James. With that material as an "exhibit," I will suggest that an appeal to practical reasons is not always a sign of a theologically or psychologically unhealthy faith.

I. PASCAL'S *PENSÉES*

Pascal's *Pensées* (1657-1658) constitute a long, rationally persuasive collection of "fragments" meant to lead the reader to faith.⁴ Pascal effectively describes the foolishness and vanity of human nature—busying itself with trifles while ignoring the urgent matter of eternal destiny. The human is like the poor chap in prison who ignores his sentence by playing games (200). At the same time, reason is little help in the search for certainty. While "the dignity of man consists in thought" (365), "reason is always deceived by fickle shadows" (72). The thinking person is therefore suspended between faith and doubt: "Seeing too much to deny and too little to be sure, I am in a state to be pitied" (229). Pascal unleashes his full pessimism about human nature in a telling passage: "What a chimera then is man! What a novelty! What a monster, what a chaos, what a contradiction, what a prodigy! Judge of all things, imbecile worm of the earth; depository of truth, a sink of uncertainty and error; the pride and the refuse of the universe!" (434).

Pascal seems to think that there are some factors in favor of belief. There are certain "proofs," such as prophecies and miracles, that might make a case for Christianity (290, 563, 705, 807). Reason, he implies, should be at least one way among others to arrive at religious belief (245, 282, 284). However, the proofs are not generally convincing; more often than not they do not lead to faith (542, 563, 577). Nor is reason reliable, because of human corruption (460, 555, 561). The primary and secure access to God, therefore, is not reason but the heart. "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know" (277). The way to God is not so much through the mind as through the feelings. "It is the heart which experiences God and not the reason" (278). In our natural knowledge, we intuit first principles from the heart; similarly in theology we know God by revelation and inspiration. It is not possible to prove these first principles, only submit to them (282). When we do, God sends knowledge of himself through Jesus Christ (546). Far from being an embarrassment, this heart-felt faith means that "none is so happy as a true Christian, nor so reasonable, virtuous or amiable" (540).

Pascal is perhaps best known in the world of religious thought for his formation of the so-called "wager" (233). In a compact statement, Pascal quickly moves through four major points. First, he establishes that, since

⁴Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958). All references in this article will be to Fragment numbers in this edition.

wagering is unavoidable, reason is not offended at the necessity of making a choice. Christians do not give reasons for their faith, inasmuch as they can know neither the nature nor the existence of God. But how is the nonbeliever to respond to religious belief that is unsupported by proofs? Either God exists or God does not. It is impossible to avoid the issue. To withhold judgment is to make a choice. However, "your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose."

Second, so far as the good or happiness is concerned, choosing to believe that God exists is superior to choosing to believe that God does not exist. In choosing to believe in God, one gains "an infinity of an infinitely happy life" in exchange for one finite life. Even if the odds are poor (one chance in an infinite number of chances, for instance) wagering on God's existence is worth it in view of the gain. Since the odds are not altogether against faith, and the goal is not

infinitely uncertain, “there is no time to hesitate, you must give all.”

Third, if the wager argument isn’t persuasive, Pascal advises self-conditioning. If one can’t travel the rational path Pascal has laid out, then disbelief is a matter of disposition. “Endeavor then to convince yourself not by an increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions.” Act *as if* you believe by doing holy things, and eventually this will enable you to believe.

Finally, wagering on the side of faith will bring happiness in *this* life. “You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful.” By choosing to believe, and beginning to live the life of a believer, “you will at last recognize that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.”

II. JAMES’ “WILL TO BELIEVE”

In his address, “The Will to Believe” (1896), James begins where Pascal left off.⁵ James notes our natural objections to Pascal’s calculated belief. To create belief simply out of the will, he says, is silly and vile. Science does not operate on the basis of preference or sentiment. As one defender of scientific method argued, to will belief without evidence is to desecrate the religious enterprise: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”⁶

James’ essay is a response to this criticism. As a “sermon” intended to justify our right to adopt a believing attitude, it is made up of several points. First, James notes that we do not follow the rule of evidence in all areas of our life. In the realm of personal action, for instance, we often act without sufficient evidence. In matters of morality or values, we usually proceed without sensible proof. Similarly, in the realm of personal relations, we act in faith without waiting for evidence. James concludes, “In truths dependent

⁵William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1912). All quotations by James cited here are from this edition.

⁶*Ibid.*, 8. Here James quotes W. K. Clifford’s famous statement from his *Lectures and Essays*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1879) 186.

on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing.”⁷

James carries this observation one step further with the claim that even in the alleged impassioned search for truth we do not always let evidence be our guide. Those very scientists or empiricists who decry passion, preference, and will in their allegiance to an “objective” method are following a passion of their own. Their approach is a preference, an a-rational belief unsupported by the evidence. They have chosen rationalism and empiricism because they *need* those methods. They have rejected passion and will because they have no use for those realities. In this behavior they are as dogmatic as the popes who decree religious truth. They are idolaters who worship the god reason at the great altar of verification. “When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts and courage, and wait—acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were not true—till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may

have raked in enough evidence—this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave.”⁸

It is not merely that the critics of willful belief get caught in their own game. To opt for their style is also to choose the losing side of the contest. James argues not only that the scientific outlook is a choice one makes, just as religion is a choice, but that the choice in favor of science and against religion is a bad one. To be sure, in the scientific realm it is proper to be skeptical, to withhold assent until there is sufficient evidence; but this style cannot apply in the religious realm. The religious hypothesis is such that we are wise to pay attention to it and choose it. James describes three characteristics of the religious option that make it worthy of our consideration.

First, the religious hypothesis (the hypothesis that God exists) poses an option that is momentous. What we choose to believe on this matter will decide our earthly and our eternal fate. Unlike options in science, where very little of our personal life is at stake, the religious option is vitally important to us.

Second, the religious hypothesis is a living hypothesis. That is, it is possibly true. We do not entertain outright superstitions or falsehoods. When we choose to believe, we are declaring ourselves on a matter that has not been decisively settled one way or the other.

Third, and most important, the religious option requires a choice. We cannot avoid deciding whether or not God exists. In the scientific realm we can remain skeptical, withholding assent until we are satisfied. But in the religious realm we must act on the data we have. Those who would put off deciding, and deciding favorably, do so at peril to their souls. Not to choose for fear of being duped is to be duped already. It is to give up the “sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side.” It is to risk losing the truth

⁷Ibid., 25.

⁸Ibid., 29-30.

and losing the good. Surely, with so much to gain, it is better to choose on the basis of a hope that religion is true rather than to act from fear that it may be false. Given the extremely high stakes in the gamble, “an intellectualism that holds back our will is absurd.” Therefore, faced with the issue of which passion to follow, that of science or that of religion, James argues that the reasonable choice is the religious proposal.

III. BELIEVING FOR BENEFIT

Pascal and James provide valuable insights for evaluating the intellectual and psychological health of religious prudentialists. Their writings suggest several considerations in defense of believing for benefit. Two minor points and one major argument emerge from their efforts.

First, Pascal and James claim that, given the religious needs of human nature, it is not the prudentialist who acts foolishly by believing, but the skeptic who withholds belief. Of course, it is foolish for a scientist to believe statements about the natural world without supporting evidence. However, religion is not a science. Religious affirmations are not the kind of propositions that stand or fall according to scientific evidence. At the same time, the claims of religion are more important to us personally than the claims of science. They concern matters of

life, death, and eternity toward which we cannot be indifferent. Pascal eloquently describes the misery of human beings without faith: We want to know God and be assured of the promise of heaven. But we are disabled seekers, distracted and ill-equipped. We display a longing for peace and happiness that reason seems unable to satisfy. However, faith can satisfy that basic need. Therefore, it would be foolish not to believe. James and Pascal form two sides of the same coin on this point. James argues that to withhold faith is to risk *losing* the only chance one has to be on the winning side. Pascal argues that to choose to believe is to *gain* the possibility of an ultimate eternal victory. In sum, the religious option is momentous. As the key to an infinity of infinite happiness, it matters to us vitally. It is not the one who grasps that key in faith who is acting stupidly, but the non-believer who fails to seize opportunity. It is not the one who acts as if religion were true who is foolish, but the one who goes about acting as if it were *not* true.

In the second place, both Pascal and James make a case for the wisdom of believing by appealing to the benefits that accrue both in this life and the next. Critics of prudential religion point out the potentially harmful effects of wishing a world into existence. In the process, one may miss out on real help, miscalculate the value of this life, and deny the only actual pleasures available to humanity.⁹ Pascal and James argue the contrary: that choosing in favor of the religious option is more helpful than harmful to the believer. It puts the believer in line for an eternal life of happiness. It may be far more harmful to the soul to disbelieve than to believe, for then one risks losing the only chance for an infinitely happy life. Furthermore, even if one loses out on eternal life, and that is a possibility in the nature

⁹Michael Martin, "Pascal's Wager as an Argument for Not Believing in God," *Religious Studies* 19 (1983) 57-64.

of the wager, the person of faith still wins in this life. Commitment to religion provides hope, guidance, and peace of mind in this life. Overbelief can inspire people to acts of courage and compassion that might otherwise be unattainable—a very important dynamic when considering the morality of prudential religion. In these ways, the religious option is more "cost-effective" than any of its alternatives (e.g., nihilism, hedonism), all of which also demand a high price in mental, emotional, and physical payment. On balance, while the believer may lose by betting on God, he or she doesn't lose as much as the non-believer.¹⁰

Third, and most important, Pascal and James argue that to choose faith is no offense to reason. According to their writings, the charge that prudentialists are anti-rational cannot be sustained. For one thing, while both believe that reason is not much help in matters religious, neither dismisses reason as an enemy of religion. Pascal muses over the folly and sinfulness of the total person, not just the reason. In fact, Pascal honors reason when he suggests that since religion is an open option, reason is not offended by choosing belief. James makes the same point in his description of the religious option as "live." This is a position sometimes echoed today by apologists who argue that, since religious propositions have not been shown to be false, they constitute a reasonable choice.¹¹ Surely, there is some sense to this. If evidence were plentiful—either supporting or discrediting religion—matters of practical benefit would be superfluous. However, it is just the indeterminateness of religious claims that allows other factors to enter in, without reason taking offense.

At the same time, Pascal and James address the charge that prudential religion pays too

much attention to subjective desires. Pascal reminds us that subjective concerns color all judgments, e.g., the choice of first principles in natural knowledge. James points out that, in following personal preferences and prejudices, scientists and empiricists who make statements about the natural world are acting as dogmatically as those church leaders who decree religious truth. They have not escaped subjectivism, only exchanged the God of religion for the god of scientism. Although perhaps overdrawn, these counter-criticisms make a valuable point. A purely “objective” stance is not possible even for scientists and philosophers. On fundamentals, rationalists operate with a “faith” as much as do religionists. The basic position from which anyone views the world is a premise that is not rationally defensible.¹² This means that religionists are no more guilty of subjectivism than rationalists. If the so-called “objective” pursuits of rationalists are tainted with subjectivity, a religion that includes personal whims seems hardly more careless. Prudentialists ought not be singled out and faulted for something that is an unavoidable part of all our thinking and knowing.

Finally, both Pascal and James decry the “abuse” of religion, but not

¹⁰Geoffrey Brown, “A Defense of Pascal’s Wager,” *Religious Studies* 20 (1984) 467-468.

¹¹Terence Penelhum, “Pascal’s Wager,” *The Journal of Religion* 44 (1964) 201-209.

¹²Basil Mitchell, “Faith and Reason: A False Antithesis,” *Religious Studies* 16 (1980) 137; Dean Martin, “On Certainty and Religious Belief,” *Religious Studies* 20 (1984) 593-613; James Ross, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1969) 98-104.

its responsible “use” by its devotees. While supporting prudential elements in religion, they give no license to reckless dilettantes who overuse the beneficial aspects of faith. Both assume that the person who chooses to believe will support that choice with a whole spectrum of religious practices. They describe a believer for whom practical reasons for faith surface as only one group in a whole sea of considerations. This expression of responsible religious practice that accompanies a concern for personal benefit is an important mark in favor of prudential religion. In fact, believers typically lodge their attention to benefits within the context of “faith”—a complex of religious ingredients that includes doctrine, rituals, and affiliation with a religious fellowship. In terms of priorities, a believer is seldom a prudentialist first and a disciple second.¹³ Rather, believers make certain claims about reality (dogma), engage in certain kinds of behavior (worship), and participate in particular groups (church) primarily because of the intrinsic value of those things, and only secondarily with an eye to the benefits they bring. Indeed, in some cases these dimensions of faith may prove *dysfunctional*. Religious faith, in all its dimensions, is the brick and mortar that fills in the framework of prudential religion, enabling that religion to attain its fullest and most formidable shape.

IV. CONCLUSION

Because of its close association with subjective desires, prudential religion could easily catch a bad case of irresponsible overbelief; this would be an “intellectual misdemeanor” that no reasonable person would allow.¹⁴ Believing for benefit *can* lead to cognitive and psychological aberration. On the other hand, the presence of personal, subjective factors in coming to certain beliefs does not automatically make those beliefs untenable. While desire may distort our perception, it is unlikely that we can believe without it. Belief in God is at least psychological,

i.e., it must be part of our psychic makeup of needs and wants or it is not *our* belief. It would not interest us otherwise. But this does not mean that our belief is necessarily false or unhealthy. Our religious desires do not absolutely discredit our religious faith. “A real God may certainly correspond to the wish for God.”¹⁵

Pascal and James help us to appreciate the complexity in the human quest for God. They expose the existential reality of the human condition. They show us the misery and the grandeur of human beings who want to know God, but seem unable to find the needed evidence. They underscore the pathos of a world that does not guarantee faith, and yet is empty without it. At the same time, they show us the human person who thinks about God

¹³C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury, 1961) 54, and *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955) 231; Elizabeth Maclaren, *The Nature of Belief* (New York: Hawthorn, 1976) 34.

¹⁴Freud, *Future of an Illusion*, 56.

¹⁵Hans Küng, *Freud and the Problem of God* (New Haven: Yale University, 1979) 78. See also Maclaren, *Nature of Belief*, chap. 6; D. Z. Phillips, *Religion without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976) 98; Seelye Bixler, *Religion in the Philosophy of William James* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1926) 96; and Alasdair MacIntyre, “Sigmund Freud,” *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1967) 3.251.

and entertains visions of eternity. This person has a mind and a heart, a yearning for truth and an equally insistent need for God and eternal happiness. Without giving up reason, Pascal and James elevate the place of passion in the human equation. They listen to the wishes, hopes, and dreams that come from the soul of humanity in its struggle for meaning. Most importantly, they argue that it makes a certain kind of sense to consider practical reasons in coming to a decision about the existence of God, heaven, and other ultimate matters. Since the truth about transcendence and the next life cannot be resolved by reason, it is legitimate to turn to the heart. Once embraced, faith can then present certain considerations to strengthen its stance. Practical reasons do not sink the ship of faith, but rather hold it up in the midst of storms of skepticism and doubt.