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Religion and Secular Utility: Happiness, Truth, and Pragmatic Arguments for Theistic Belief

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Abstract

This article explores ''pragmatic arguments'' for theistic belief – that is, arguments for believing in God that appeal, not to evidence in favor of God's existence, but rather to alleged practical benefits that come from belief in God. Central to this exploration is a consideration of Jeff Jordan's recent defense of ''the Jamesian wager,'' which portrays itself as building on the case for belief presented in William James's essay ''The Will to Believe.'' According to Jordan, religious belief creates significant gains in this-worldly happiness (i.e. gains in ''secular utility,'' I shall say), and provided the individual does not have decisive evidence against God's existence, these gains give the individual sufficient reason to strive to believe in God. In its exploration of this argument, the article presents an overview of recent social scientific work on the this-worldly effects of religious belief. It canvases several challenges to pragmatic arguments, namely, a challenge according to which happiness rooted in false belief is worth less than that rooted in truth, a perfectionistic challenge alleging that one should strive for personal excellence rather than happiness, and a challenge alleging that any happiness gains of religious belief are outweighed by the potential harms brought about by religious belief.

Recent years have seen the emergence of much fascinating social scientific research into the causes and consequences of religious beliefs of various types. Prominent examples of this research include Ronald Ingleheart and Pippa Norris's global study finding a correlation between religious belief and ''existential insecurity'' (the more vulnerable people of a given country are to health threats and financial threats, the higher the level of religiosity those people exhibit) (Ingleheart and Norris 2004); Harold Koenig, Michael McCullough and David Larson's massive study linking religious belief with favorable health outcomes, such as lower rates of heart attacks (Koenig et al. 2001); and David Sloan Wilson's evolutionary account of religious belief, which stresses religion's utility for producing feelings of group cohesion and solidarity (Wilson 2002; cf. Haidt 2007, 2012). These studies suggest that religious belief has a good deal of ''secular utility'' – that is, that it has significant beneficial consequences for human happiness in this life (as opposed to the afterlife). Not unexpectedly, defenders of religious belief have pointed approvingly to some of these studies: if religious belief enhances one's happiness in this life, these defenders ask, is that not a sufficiently good reason for attempting to inculcate religious belief in oneself – or to hang on to it, if one already possesses it? Examining such defenses of religious belief is the subject of this essay.

In fact it is a complex question, and in order to make exploring this question a more manageable task, I will begin by exploring a recent, sophisticated defense of religious belief on pragmatic grounds, namely, Jeff Jordan's defense of (what he calls) ''the Jamesian wager.'' The name is an allusion to William James's famous paper, ''The Will to Believe'' (James 1956), which defends the legitimacy of religious belief on account of its ability to

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improve one's life in this world. Jordan presents himself as working in the Jamesian tradition, and indeed, Jordan is currently one of the leading philosophical defenders of pragmatic arguments for theistic belief. Moreover, the Jamesian wager is the centerpiece of Jordan's recent book-length study of pragmatic arguments for theistic belief (Jordan 2006).[1] Thus, it is a good test case for exploring the strengths and weaknesses of pragmatic arguments that stress religion's secular utility.[2]

1. Pascal vs. James

Jordan judges the Jamesian wager to be more convincing in the final analysis than Pascal's much better-known wager, which defends religious belief as a rational bet to make given the chance that it leads to infinite happiness in the next life. While Jordan is keen to defend Pascal's wager against what he considers to be the most important objections, he recognizes that many critics judge these objections to be fatal to wager. In particular, many philosophers invoke the so-called "Many Gods" objection against Pascal. These critics (e.g., Mackie 1982, p. 203; and Martin 1983) note that as long as there is some chance that a "*deviant God*" exists who punishes religious believers (for being too credulous, say) and who rewards skeptics (for their carefulness of belief, say), then *non-belief* carries a chance of infinite happiness, just as religious belief carries a chance of infinite happiness in the case of a more traditional god. The result is that Pascal's wager ends in a stalemate in terms of expected utility, since *both* belief and non-belief each carry a chance of gaining salvation and a risk of losing salvation.

In the decision matrix in Figure 1 below, for instance, f_t and f_n represent the finite quantities of this-worldly happiness associated with theism and non-theism (i.e., agnosticism or atheism) in the naturalistic case where there is no god of any kind. Being finite, however, these quantities are swamped into irrelevance by the infinite quantities of afterlife happiness involved in the supernatural cases where a god exists. Indeed, so long as each supernatural case has *some* positive probability in its favor (a plausible assumption, since according to standard decision theory, every logically possible proposition should be assigned a non-zero probability), it turns out that when computed in the standard fashion, the expected utilities of both theism and non-theism equal $\infty - \infty$. Since this a mathematically indeterminate expression, the wager fails to recommend theism as rationally preferable to non-theism.[3]

Although Jordan is not himself convinced by the Many Gods objection (see his lengthy reply to it on pp. 73–101), he considers a chief advantage of the Jamesian wager to lie in its ability to escape the stalemate that results from adding a "deviant God" to the Pascalian decision matrix. The Jamesian wager breaks the otherworldly tie between a deviant and traditional God by invoking the beneficial *this-worldly* consequences of traditional religious belief; according to Jordan, these benefits tip the decision-theoretic balance back in favor of religious belief. In essence, we shall see that Jordan argues we should adopt theism because $f_t > f_n$.

Figure 1.

	Naturalism (no god exists)	A traditional god exists	A deviant god exists
Adopt theism	f_t	∞	$-\infty$
Adopt non-theism	f_n	$-\infty$	∞

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Before exploring in more detail this argument of Jordan's, though, let me note another important difference between the Pascalian and Jamesian wagers. According to Jordan, the Jamesian wager applies only if a very specific condition obtains, namely, only if the arguments for and against God's existence are fairly balanced in rational force, so that there is roughly an evidential tie. Thus, Jordan can endorse a pragmatic argument for theistic belief while at the same time endorsing a moderate form of evidentialism.[4] As a result, the Jamesian wager is quite different from the version of Pascal's wager that is now canonical in the literature, according to which one ought to inculcate theistic belief in oneself even if there is a *strong preponderance of evidence against* God's existence. Of course, whether Jordan is right to claim that there is an evidential tie between arguments for and against God's existence is itself a large question. I doubt that a majority of contemporary philosophers would agree with this claim of his, but for the sake of argument I will in this essay assume that an evidential tie holds. One benefit of this approach is that it allows us to sidestep much of the debate over the strengths and weaknesses of evidentialism as an epistemological or ethical doctrine, and instead to focus on less well explored aspects of pragmatic arguments for religious belief.[5]

2. The Jamesian Wager

Jordan formulates his Jamesian wager by proposing a new rule of rational choice, which he calls the "Next Best Thing" rule (pp. 14–5). The rule is meant to apply to cases of decision under uncertainty; according to this rule, if in a case of uncertainty some option x has a *worst case outcome* at least as good as all rival options' worst case outcomes, and a *best case outcome* at least as good as all rival options' best case outcomes, and furthermore, x has better outcomes than its rivals in all other cases, then it is rational to choose x. In other words, in a case where options are tied at the best and worst extremes, but one option is superior in all middle ranges, the Next Best Thing rule says to choose that option.

This is quite relevant, for as we have seen, the inclusion of a deviant God into the relevant decision matrix (Figure 1 above) results in a decision-theoretic tie at the extremes (namely, ∞ and $-\infty$). Rather than end the argument there, however, the Next Best Thing rule directs us to examine middle range values by examining which option, religious belief or non-belief, carries greater expected value in *this world*. In other words, we are to compare the finite values f_t and f_n in the matrix. And this comparison, Jordan argues, reveals that religious belief is clearly superior – that is, that $f_t > f_n$ – even in the naturalistic case where there is no God. Jordan summarizes this claim in a premise he refers back to frequently; according to this premise "theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains" (p. 28). I will henceforth refer to this premise as THIN (Theists = Happier In Naturalism, that is, theists are happier than non-theists even in the case of naturalism). If THIN is true, then the Next Best Thing rule singles out theism as rationally preferable to non-theism, and the Jamesian wager has succeeded.[6]

In defense of the crucial THIN premise, Jordan cites recent social scientific research on religious belief (pp. 90–4). An especially influential compendium of such research is Koenig et al. 2001, which claims that religious believers are on average happier and healthier than non-believers. According to their meta-analysis of studies of religious belief and happiness, for instance, 80% of such studies have found at least one significant, positive correlation between the two variables (Koenig et al. 2001, p. 117). On the subject of health, their meta-analysis reports that frequent religious attendance (at least once a week)

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is associated with a 25–33% decrease in mortality during follow-up periods from 5 to 28 years (the length of the follow-up varying from study to study) (Koenig et al. 2001, pp. 322–30).

For the sake of argument, I will follow Jordan in trusting the results of these social scientific studies. The reader should be aware, though, that these studies have recently been subjected to a vigorous, book-length critique by a prominent scientist (Sloan 2006), which raises serious methodological concerns about the research, such as failures to account for confounding variables as well disturbing evidence of researchers making post-study changes in hypotheses to match the data. I will set aside these empirical controversies for present purposes, however, in order to explore several possible philosophical objections to the Jamesian wager, as well as possible replies to these objections.

3. The Value of Fantastical Happiness

3.1. THE THREAT OF A ''FANTASY DISCOUNT''

One possible philosophical objection arises from doubts about the theory of prudential value – that is, the theory of personal well-being/happiness – used by Jordan. The nearest Jordan comes to defining happiness occurs on p. 90, where he writes:

> To get a grip on this complex issue [of happiness] 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.

While Jordan shies away from identifying happiness with feelings of life satisfaction (he says only that happiness ''correlates'' with these), he uses such feelings as a proxy for happiness in his defense of the Jamesian wager: theists' allegedly higher levels of life satisfaction, along with longer life spans, are the chief pragmatic reasons to become a theist.

At this point, however, the defender of the pragmatic argument for religious belief must confront a critic who argues that the prudential worth of feelings of happiness is diminished when those feelings stem from false beliefs. In saying this the critic needn't be declaring that theism is false; in fact, the critic I am imagining is in no position to declare this since, as noted above, for purposes of this article we have granted Jordan's supposition that there is an evidential tie between the arguments for and against God's existence. However, it is consistent with this supposition that theism may in fact be false, and we have seen that Jordan himself recognizes this in his key premise THIN (Theists = Happier in Naturalism). Hence, any full evaluation of the Jamesian wager must confront the important question: if theists' beliefs are in fact false, do the feelings of happiness rooted in those beliefs lose any of their worth on account of this falsity?

Some special terminology will enable a more precise statement of this question. I will henceforth refer to feelings of happiness that stem from false beliefs as ''fantastical happiness,'' and to feelings of happiness that stem from true beliefs as ''realistic happiness.'' The key question, I submit, is whether a sophisticated value theory will *discount* the prudential value of fantastical happiness, owing to its fantastical nature, and if so, to what extent. In other words, if we take two feelings of happiness quantitatively equal in terms of felt pleasure (as measured by the Benthamite dimensions of intensity, duration, etc.), where one feeling is fantastical in nature and the other realistic, is it the case

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that the latter contributes more to a person's well-being than the former, other things equal?

There are powerful arguments against purely subjective accounts of happiness, that is, against accounts that insist only subjective feelings of satisfaction matter for happiness, regardless of whether they make any contact with reality. Most famously, there is Robert Nozick's famous "experience machine" thought experiment, in which a machine exists that can produce for you a lifetime of illusory, happy experiences that you will forever mistake for reality. Should you step into such a machine? Nozick judges you should not (Nozick 1974, pp. 42–5). Or consider Thomas Nagel's example of a man who derives feelings of happiness from people who he believes are friends, but who in fact ridicule him behind his back at every turn without him ever knowing (Nagel 1979, p. 4). Are we really to judge that this treachery makes him no less well off at all, owing to his ignorance?

In response, Jordan may reply that unlike Nozick, who stipulates that the beliefs one acquires in an experience machine are false, the Jamesian wagerer by contrast does not know whether a belief in God is true or false. Thus, unlike those who would urge us to step into the experience machine, the Jamesian wagerer is *not* knowingly embracing falsehood. This is right, but it does not let Jordan off the critic's hook, for two reasons. First, the negative conclusion of the experience machine thought experiment does not depend entirely on the fact that those who enter the machine are knowingly embracing falsehood. For instance, it is easy to imagine a variation of the thought experiment in which a person is hooked up to the machine while asleep without her knowing it; as a result, she happily lives out the rest of her life in the machine with no way of ever recognizing she is in it. How should we regard such a person's feelings of happiness? I suggest that the same conclusion stands as in the original thought experiment: the feelings of happiness experienced in the machine are of less prudential value on account of their being rooted in falsehood rather than reality, despite the fact that the individual is not to blame for having false beliefs. (It is worth noting too that Nagel's example of the person secretly betrayed by false friends is, without need for modification, already an example of someone not knowingly embracing false beliefs.) Thus, should the Jamesian wagerer's theistic beliefs turn out to be false through no fault of his or her own, the critic can still insist that we should judge the prudential value of any felt happiness to be reduced on account of its stemming from falsehood.

There is a second reason that feelings of happiness rooted in false belief are a problem for the Jamesian wager, even despite the supposition of an evidential tie for and against God's existence. This is because by Jordan's own admission, recall, the key test case for the Jamesian wager is the case of "naturalism" – Jordan's word for the state of affairs in which no god of any sort exists. The case of naturalism is key, I earlier explained, because the two supernatural cases considered in the decision matrix in Figure 1 – namely, the case of a god who rewards religious belief and a god who rewards non-belief – lead to exactly opposite outcomes in terms of salvation, and hence to a decision-theoretic tie. As a result, the case of naturalism is *the* crucial tie-breaking case. Hence the importance of Jordan's own key premise THIN, noted earlier, which explicitly asserts that "theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains" (p. 28). This means that even though the Jamesian wagerer is not knowingly embracing falsehood, the Jamesian wagerer is doing something uncomfortably close to this. For in order to break the decision-theoretic tie regarding salvation he or she is looking to feelings of this-worldly happiness produced by religious belief *in the case of naturalism* and deeming them to be valuable, despite the fact that these feelings stem ultimately from

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beliefs that are acknowledged to be false on the hypothesis of naturalism. (In terms of Figure 1 above, the Jamesian wagerer is saying that theism is preferable to non-theism because $f_t > f_n$, even though in this naturalistic case the happiness that makes f_t greater than f_n is happiness that is rooted in falsehood.)

In other words, the Jamesian wagerer's attitude can be summarized as follows: ''Given the evidential tie, I do not know whether my religious beliefs are true or false, but even if they are in fact false, they still generate more happiness in this world for me than non-theism would, and that is reason enough to keep my religious beliefs.'' Hence, the Jamesian wagerer, despite his or her official judgment that an evidential tie obtains regarding God's existence, is all the same committed to asserting the positive value of feelings of happiness that are rooted in false belief.

This fact is quite significant, for inasmuch as the Jamesian wager looks to fantastical happiness to tip the scales in favor of religious belief, it follows that a sizeable enough discount – call it the ''fantasy discount'' – threatens to doom the wager.[7] After all, even if, prior to any fantasy discount, the *quantity* (and hence, the *prima facie* value) of religious believers' fantastical happiness is greater than the quantity of non-believers' realistic happiness, it may be that in terms of prudential *value*, the non-believer's sort of happiness in fact outweighs the believer's sort once a plausible discount owing to falsehood is assessed against the believer – that is, once a plausible fantasy discount is assessed against the portion of the believer's happiness that stems from his or her theistic beliefs. In such an event, the Next Best Thing rule would instruct the Jamesian wagerer to choose, not theistic belief, but non-belief – exactly the opposite of Jordan's desired result!

Moreover, this non-theistic result can follow even when the discounting function in question assumes a modest form. All that is required is that the fantasy discount lower the positive prudential value of the fantastical happiness by enough to wipe out the initial, prima facie advantage this happiness enjoyed in quantity. Hence, given that Jordan's conclusion regarding the happiness advantage of theistic belief over non-belief is a *modest* one (''With regard to happiness, then, there is sufficient evidence that believing theistically outranks not believing, *at least slightly*'' (p. 91; emphasis added)), it follows that the fantasy discount likewise may need only be slight in order to push the Jamesian wager into an endorsement of non-belief.

Mathematically, this idea can be represented as follows. Let d = the fantasy discount (e.g., letting $d = 0.20$ would represent a discount of a 20% loss in value) and let H_R be the portion of the believer's happiness that stems from his religious beliefs, that is, the happiness in his life that is causally closely linked to the presence of those beliefs. (Note that H_R is less than f_t in the matrix in Table 1 above, since f_t represents *all* of the believer's this-worldly happiness, and the believer's religious beliefs are surely not responsible for *every* bit of his happiness. In other words, $f_t = H_R + x$, where x is the portion of the person's happiness causally unrelated to religious belief.) Using these symbols, the *prudential value* of the happiness stemming from religious beliefs is equivalent to $(1-d)H_R$. The risk to Jordan's argument is that this drop in the prudential value of H_R could suffice to push the prudential value of f_t below the prudential value of f_n (the variable in Figure 1 that represents the this-worldly happiness of the non-theist). In this case the Next Best Thing rule will endorse non-theism.

Admittedly, some pragmatic defenders of religious belief might think it a peculiarity of Jordan's particular version of the Jamesian wager that it makes *naturalism* the deciding test case for the rational preferability (or not) of theism over non-theism. Thus it is worth briefly mentioning in passing an *alternative form* of the Jamesian wager, according to which the infinite happiness gains and losses in the afterlife should simply be ignored (perhaps

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on the grounds that the nature of the afterlife is wholly unknowable, or perhaps on the grounds that the afterlife possibilities of the traditional and deviant gods "cancel each other out" somehow). Instead, this alternative form of the wager focuses exclusively on the finite this-worldly happiness of believers and non-believers in *both* the case of naturalism and the case of theism. (By contrast, Jordan's wager *ignores* this-worldly happiness in the case of theism, since in that case a person's finite this-worldy happiness is swamped into irrelevance by the existence of infinite happiness in the afterlife.) In this alternative wager, the religious believer's this-worldly happiness *in the case of theism* would be subject to *no* fantasy discount, since in that case his happiness would not stem from false beliefs. Thus (computing expected value in the standard rational choice way) the expected value of the portion of the theist's happiness that stems from religion would be $p_n(1-d)H_R + p_tH_R$, where p_n and p_t are the probabilities, respectively, of naturalism and theism obtaining. (I am here being charitable toward the Jamesian wagerer and for simplicity's sake ignoring the possibility of a "deviant god" such as the one that occurs in Figure 1.) Since for the sake of argument we have assumed that there is an evidential tie between naturalism and theism, it is natural to assume that $p_n = p_t = ½$. After some substitution and simple algebraic manipulation, it can be shown that the expected value of theistic belief is thus equivalent to $(1-½d)$ H_R. This is quite similar in structure to the result obtained in the previous paragraph using Jordan's wager, with the only different (albeit an important one) being that the discount rate is cut in half.

However, although the fantasy discount is half as potent in this alternative form of the wager as it is in Jordan's form of the wager, note that the fantasy discount is still a non-zero positive number. As such, a suitably large value for *d* still risks making the prudential value of the theist's overall happiness worth less than the prudential value of the non-theist's overall happiness, which in turn would entail the rational preferability of non-theism over theism. Thus, this alternative form of the wager must still confront the issue of whether and to what extent a fantasy discount is appropriate.

Note that a theist might attempt to defuse this issue by alleging a parity between theism and non-theism, on the grounds that the *non-theist's* happiness must also be assessed a fantasy discount in the case of *theism*, since in this case her non-theistic beliefs will be false. This will indeed be the case for an atheist who, say, derives much of her this-worldly happiness from participating in "organized atheism" (e.g., forms of atheistic advocacy, say). However, most atheists are not like this; they typically do not derive a significant portion of their happiness from their atheism, just as people who do not believe in leprechauns do not typically derive happiness from their anti-leprechaun beliefs, say. Moreover, since *agnostics* do not believe in the non-existence of God, but rather suspend judgment on the issue, it is not clear how *their* happiness could stem from false belief in the case of theism; they are immune to a fantasy discount altogether. The basic upshot, then, of the alternative form of the Jamesian wager is the following: with a significantly high value for the fantasy discount *d*, this alternative form of the wager will recommend that one avoid rooting one's happiness in either theistic or atheistic belief. I take that upshot to be a defeat for a Jamesian argument for religious belief.

3.2. INAUTHENTIC HAPPINESS?

We have seen how a high enough fantasy discount would threaten both Jordan's Jamesian wager and an alternative form of the Jamesian wager. But is there any reason to endorse a fantasy discount, beyond the thought experiments of Nozick and Nagel we have already seen? Plausibly, yes, for the relevance of belief's truth value *per se* to personal

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well-being is acknowledged by leading theorists of personal well-being. For example, although G. E. Moore and James Griffin do not explicitly call for a fantasy ''discount,'' their brief remarks about the positive value of personal experiences rooted in true belief are consistent with such a discount (Griffin 1986, p. 9; Moore 1993, pp. 244–7 (sections 118–9)). More explicitly, L. W. Sumner has written a book-length treatise defending a conception of well-being as ''authentic happiness.'' On this conception, happiness (which Sumner understands as felt satisfaction with one's life) maximally contributes to a person's well-being provided it meets both an information requirement and an autonomy requirement (Sumner 1996, p. 172).[8] Significant for our purposes is the fact that the information requirement identifies happiness rooted in false belief as inauthentic, and thus typically of less value to one's well-being.[9] It is true that owing to a general stance of anti-paternalism, Sumner himself is reluctant to declare that each ''victim'' of fantastical happiness is rationally required to discount the prudential value of fantastical happiness. For example, in a case of discovering that some past happiness that one enjoyed was rooted in false belief, Sumner wishes to let one determine the appropriate (retrospective) discount oneself (Sumner 1996, pp. 160–1). If Sumner is right, this variability complicates the objection to the Jamesian wager based on a fantasy discount but does not defeat it. The threat arises so long as individuals will typically choose some significant number for the discount.

Indeed, I suggest that there is another potential problem, beyond merely failing to meet Sumner's information requirement, with the sort of happiness valued by the Jamesian wager – a problem, moreover, that once again stems from a conception of authentic happiness like Sumner's. For consider that the happiness-producing religious beliefs recommended by Jordan's Jamesian wager are not just false in the relevant case of naturalism; they are also willfully self-induced by the wagerer – and what is more, willfully self-induced *in order to* gain access to the feelings of happiness in question. We might say that the feelings in question are willfully manufactured by agent himself. This *artificiality* arguably puts these feelings in tension with Sumner's ideal of authenticity, and thus there is a danger that a theory of well-being like Sumner's will recommend discounting such feelings' value.

To see this danger, consider a man – let's call him ''Twenty-First Century Al'' – who possesses some evidence that he *is* related to, and just as much evidence that he is *not* related to, the first king of England, Alfred the Great. In other words, Twenty-First Century Al is in an evidential tie. However, finding the prospect of this illustrious heritage to be a source of personal esteem, inspiration, and satisfaction – that is, a source of feelings of happiness – Al mentally assents to the proposition that he is a descendent of Alfred, and acts on the assumption it is true (say, by going on treks to historical sites associated with Alfred, immersing himself in Alfredian lore, filling his house with Alfredian memorabilia, seeking out others who believe themselves to be descendents of Alfred, and so on). Eventually, he comes genuinely to believe he is a descendent of Alfred. This two-step process, of (i) assenting to a proposition and then (ii) acting on the assumption it is true, is the ''belief-inducing technology'' that Jordan himself recommends by way of producing theistic belief in oneself over a span of time (p. 56). It is the use of this ''technology'' that I suggest creates the worry of artificiality, and hence, inauthenticity. For suppose we agree to say that a belief that p ''naturally arises'' in a person who judges that the preponderance of evidence favors p. This makes it sensible to say that by severing the link between a proposition and the evidence for it, Jordan's ''technology'' produces unnatural – that is, artificial – beliefs, opening space for a critic to allege that Al's happiness fails to be properly authentic.

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Perhaps, though, the critic's negative reaction to Al stems more from the silliness of Al's project than from a worry that it may be grounded in false and/or artificially manufactured beliefs. Even if Al *knew* himself to be related to Alfred the Great, for instance, we might still question whether he has reason to find so much happiness in this fact. So let us consider a second example. In the climax of the 2003 movie *Secondhand Lions*, the character of Hub (played by Robert Duvall) presents to Walter, a 12-year old boy in his care, a speech he calls his "what-every-boy-needs-to-know-about-being-a-man speech." During this speech, Hub makes the following remarkable claims:

> Sometimes the things that may or may not be true are the things a man needs to believe in the most. That people are basically good; that honor, courage, and virtue mean everything; that power and money, money and power mean nothing; that good always triumphs over evil; and I want you to remember this, that love... true love never dies. You remember that, boy. You remember that. Doesn't matter if it's true or not. You see, a man should believe in those things, because those are the things worth believing in.[10]

Let's imagine that Walter, whose troubled childhood probably makes some of these claims seem unlikely, takes Hub's speech to heart. As a result, he begins to assent to these claims and act on the assumption that they are true (Jordan's "belief producing technology," again). To make the case more similar to organized religion, let us imagine that Walter becomes active in a local "Optimist Club,"[11] taking part in regular meetings, reciting optimists' creeds, associating with another known optimists, and the like. In other words, Walter makes Hub's claims central, organizing principles of his life. And let us imagine that this enhances his happiness. This does seem less disreputable than Al's project, but I am not sure Walter's project sidesteps all worries about the resulting happiness being artificially manufactured rather than authentic in Sumner's sense. At the very least, this is a topic deserving further exploration.

3.3. AVOIDING THE FANTASY DISCOUNT? RELIGION AS MEDICINE, RELIGION AS COMMUNITY

The preceding paragraphs articulated a worry about manufactured happiness. One might put this point by saying that to the extent that one willfully induces beliefs in oneself in order to gain the happiness occasioned by those beliefs, then to that extent one is making a drug of one's faculty of belief. As such, the critic might allege that even though Jordan explicitly turns his back on Marx (p. 94), he unwittingly, and ironically, comes close to endorsing religion as the "opium of the people" (Marx 1977, p. 64). However, it is not always wrong to take drugs – certainly not when one is sick, for instance – and here the alleged *health benefits* of religious belief mentioned earlier are relevant. We might say that within a pragmatic argument that emphasizes health benefits, religion is still akin to a drug, but akin to a *therapeutic* drug rather than a *recreational* drug. Let us refer a form of the wager that emphasizes objective health benefits (such as a reduced rate of heart disease and the like), as opposed to higher levels of reported life satisfaction, as "the health-based Jamesian wager."[12] This is a potentially stronger form of the Jamesian wager. After all, it is one thing to focus on feelings of happiness and endorse religion as the opium of the people; by contrast, it seems at least a bit less scandalous to endorse religion as, say, the Lipitor of the people! (Lipitor is a common cholesterol-reducing drug; indeed, it is the world's best-selling drug.[13])

The health-based wager's focus on the alleged health benefits of religion, then, may help to blunt the worries raised in the previous sub-sections regarding whether a discount is to be applied to fantastical happiness. For if a person's religious beliefs lead to better

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health, this may enable him or her to continue to experience sources of realistic happiness (feelings of happiness that stem from intimate relationships, career success, worthwhile hobbies, etc.) longer and more robustly than he or she otherwise would. Personally, I cannot see any justification for discounting the value of *these* further feelings of realistic happiness simply on account of their causal dependence, of an indirect kind, on false religious beliefs. The falsehood seems too distant in the causal chain, so to speak, to generate a discount.

At this point, however, an empirical question arises. For we must ask why, if in fact religious belief leads to health benefits, it has this effect. After all, if the health benefits are due simply to a healthy life style or to a supportive social network, then these benefits are potentially available to non-believers too. Thus, if religious beliefs have a health advantage that is inaccessible to non-believers, it must lie elsewhere – say, on account of the feelings of comfort and confidence that such beliefs generate. How large of a health effect *these* feelings generate, however, would be hard to measure and distinguish from the confounding variables just mentioned (healthy life styles and supportive social networks). I am not aware of social scientific studies that deliberately try to isolate this effect.

This empirical worry, however, is hardly the end of the story, for the defender of religious belief can argue that religious belief is useful in motivating persons to adopt healthy life styles and create supportive social networks. Moreover, the mention of social networks in particular allows the Jamesian wagerer to mount a line of defense complementary to the health-based defense just considered. This complementary defense points, not to religion's alleged utility in promoting the good of health, but rather to its alleged special efficacy in promoting the good of human community. Indeed, the connection between religious belief and community is a common theme in social scientific reflection on religion, going back at least as far as Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 1995).

To the extent that shared religious belief facilitates the formation and maintenance of community, it follows that religious belief – as it was with health – will be indirectly productive of happiness, and such happiness will be more potentially resistant to a fantasy discount than happiness produced more directly by such belief. After all, supposing that deep and enduring friendships are forged in the religious community, say, should we really in the case of naturalism discount the value of the happiness that these friendships produce, simply because the friendships originate in a community whose organizing beliefs are false? Were the happiness in question to consist exclusively in shared participation in religious rituals, say, the threat of a fantasy discount would arise. But regarding more multi-dimensional relationships that arise in a religious community, I believe the happiness these generate will be more resistant to a fantasy discount.

Of course, a similar issue arises in this case as it did in the case of health: just as non-believers can lead healthy lifestyles, so too can non-believers take part in happiness-generating forms of community. To strengthen this defense of the Jamesian wager, what needs to be shown is that religious communities enjoy advantages that secular communities lack. And indeed, the social scientist Jonathan Haidt (Haidt 2012) makes some suggestive arguments in this vein, building on the work of anthropologists David Sloan Wilson (Wilson 2002) and Richard Sosis (Sosis 2000), both of whom have explored the relationship between religious belief and community. Sosis's studies are particularly relevant in the current context. He studied the longevity of two hundred communes founded in America in the nineteenth century and found that 20 years after their founding, only 6% of the secular communes still existed, compared to 39% of religious communes that still existed. Sosis found that the best predictor of a religious commune's longevity lay in the depth of

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the sacrifices demanded: ironically, the more difficult the demanded behavior was (e.g., giving up alcohol and tobacco, fasting, etc.), the greater were the commune's survival odds. The shared sacrifices apparently fostered trust among participants and thereby constrained divisive behavior. In secular communities, however, there was no correlation between sacrifice and survival. Sosis explained this discrepancy on the grounds that ''sacralized'' sacrifices are not faced with the challenge of justifying themselves in cost-benefit terms, unlike the sacrifices demanded in secular communities.

Summing up this research, Haidt writes: ''Irrational beliefs can sometimes help the group function more rationally, particularly when those beliefs rest upon the Sanctity foundation. Sacredness binds people together, and then blinds them to the arbitrariness of the practice'' (Haidt 2012, p. 256). Moreover, Haidt goes further by speculating that religion's role in facilitating strong communities may have led evolution to select for religiosity:

> If religious behavior had consequences for individuals and for groups, in a way that was stable over a few millennia, then there was almost certainly some degree of gene-culture coevolution for righteous minds that believe in god and then used those gods to create moral communities (Haidt 2012, p. 263).

Haidt then notes the consequence of humans being hard-wired for religiosity. If humans are hard-wired in this way, he writes,

> …then we cannot expect people to abandon religion so easily… Asking people to give up all forms of sacralized belonging might be like asking people to give up the Earth and live in colonies orbiting the moon. It can be done, but it would take a great deal of careful engineering, and even after ten generations, the descendants of those colonists might find themselves with inchoate longings for gravity and greenery (Haidt 2012, p. 264).

It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the truth of this claim of Haidt's. Instead, let me simply note that (as with any naturalistic claim) no normative conclusion follows straightaway from Haidt's claim even if it is true. In particular, if Haidt is right that human psychology evolved to favor religious forms of community, this does not by itself defeat the idea that the resulting happiness ought to be subject to a fantasy discount; it might entail instead that humans are evolutionarily predisposed to experience a form of discounted happiness. Instead, the key question is whether the apparent religious advantage in community building, along with the oftentimes indirect role played by false belief in producing the community-related happiness, are enough to offset the countervailing force of a fantasy discount. This question deserves further exploration by both supporters and opponents of the Jamesian wager.

4. Perfectionism and Self-Respect: Challenges to the Authority of Happiness

Even supposing for the sake of argument that the health-based and community-based forms of the Jamesian Wager survive a challenge rooted in the threat of fantasy discount, the Jamesian wager still faces an objection on other normative grounds. For even if religious belief were to increase a person's expected happiness, it would be premature to conclude that this person has *reason all-told* to inculcate religious belief in himself or herself. Such a conclusion would be premature, since we must first confront the question of the reason-giving force of personal happiness. After all, reasons that stem from one's own happiness are not always reasons with overriding force. Most obviously, *morality* can demand that one accept sacrifices of personal happiness; I will address this issue in the

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next section of this essay. Additionally, *perfectionist* ideals of human excellence can recommend sacrifices of happiness.[14] Climbing a mountain or pursuing an artistic vision or tending to a sick relative is not always good for one's health. And this leads to a possible criticism of the Jamesian wager.

Return to the case of Twenty-First Century Al, and suppose that people's beliefs in an illustrious heritage were statistically linked to gains in health (owing to a comforting boost in self-esteem, say). Would that genuinely give Al adequate reason, all-things-considered, to induce in himself the belief that he is related to Alfred the Great? Even if it turns out that we ought not to discount the genuine contribution to Al's well-being made by any increase in health that stems indirectly from his genealogical beliefs, we can surely wonder whether his life now displays less human *excellence* inasmuch as he is willing to pursue a central project of his life by manufacturing beliefs that on his own admission are *just as likely as not* to be a fantasy. Does not human excellence require that one value staying in touch with reality more than Al apparently does? Surely the same worry ought to apply to the religious believer. If so, then a complete argument for the Jamesian wager would either have to rebut this perfectionist objection or argue that the gain in expected well-being occasioned by religious belief ought to trump the loss of excellence that concomitantly occurs.

A related argument alleges an incompatibility between, on the one hand, happiness derived from evidentially unsupported belief, and on the other hand, *self-respect*. For instance, in a strongly worded critique of Jamesian-style pragmatic arguments, Allen Wood argues that

> Self-respect imposes on us the duty to direct our lives in accordance with our rational capacities. When it comes to belief, our chief capacity is the ability to weigh the evidence and apportion our belief to it. Letting wishes or social conformity or self-deceptive aspirations to self-approval interfere with the exercise of this capacity is an abdication of our responsibility to govern our own lives through our own reason, and displays a lack of respect we owe ourselves as autonomous beings with human dignity.[15]

Note the appeal in this passage to human *dignity* as the ground of self-respect itself. Explaining this grounding further, Wood writes:

> I start from the idea that each of us has good reason to regard ourselves as having a certain value, a value entitling us to self-respect. This is what Kant meant in saying that humanity in my own person is an end in itself; and what Mill meant in speaking of the sense of dignity that belongs to the good of every human being.[16]

Moreover, while Wood does not himself explicitly draw the connection, our earlier discussion of the *manufactured* nature of pragmatically-generated beliefs suggests a supportive line of Kantian argument: the fact that belief has in a sense been artificially produced by Jordan's recommended "technology" (assenting to the propositions in question and acting on the assumption of them being true) exposes the believer to the charge that in manipulating his faculties of belief he is treating his humanity (i.e., his rational capacities) as a *mere means* or tool for his happiness, in violation of Kant's famous Categorical Imperative.

However, it is possible for the supporter of the Jamesian wager to argue that inculcating religious belief in oneself makes one more virtuous or excellent in other ways – it leads one to donate more to charity, or it strengthens one's commitment to monogamy, say – so that *overall* one comes out ahead on perfectionistic criteria even on the assumption that one exhibits less excellence in the particular matter of belief formation. I will not explore this line of argument (which perhaps we should call "perfectionistic

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consequentialism"[17]), except to note briefly that the empirical evidence pertaining to religion's effects on moral behavior is complex.

An oft-noted datum, for instance, is the correlation between religious belief and greater charitable giving. Yet even here the picture is complicated, since some recent research suggests that much of the increase in charitable giving is due primarily to a concern to maintain a favorable reputation among one's religious peers. In a recent and wide-ranging meta-analysis published in *Science*, for instance, Ara Norenzayan and Azim F. Sharif sum up their findings as follows: "The preponderance of evidence points to religious prosociality being a bounded phenomenon. Religion's association with prosociality is most evident when the situation calls for maintaining a favorable social reputation within the ingroup" (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008, p. 62). Moreover, the authors go on to note that "the 'dark-side' of within group cooperation is between-group competition and conflict" (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008, p. 62) – presumably, they have religious intolerance in mind – and they also note that "there are many examples of modern, large, cooperative, and not very religious societies (such as those in Western and Northern Europe), that nonetheless, retain a great degree of intragroup trust and cooperation" (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008, p. 62; cf. Zuckerman 2008).

On the other hand, and in a more philosophical vein, Kelly James Clark and Andrew Samuel argue over the course of a recent article that "theism provides a better motivation for rationally self-interested persons to be moral" (Clark and Samuel 2011, pp. 157ff.). Rather than explore their argument in detail here I will simply note that John Stuart Mill would not think very highly of Clark and Samuel's view of morality. In his essay "Utility of Religion," for instance, Mill complains that the self-interested motives which religion supplies for being good (such as reward in the next life) are not genuinely moral motives, which should be selfless. Additionally, he worries that religious revelation and even natural religion contain many immoral elements that are difficult to ignore without doing violence to one's cognitive faculties:

> It is, no doubt, possible (and there are many instances of it) to worship with the devotion either Deity, that of Nature or of the Gospel, without any perversion of the moral sentiments: but this must be by fixing the attention exclusively on what is beautiful and beneficent in the precepts and spirit of the Gospel and in the dispensations of Nature, and putting all that is the reverse as entirely aside as if it did not exist. Accordingly, this simple and innocent faith can only, as I have said, co-exist with a torpid and inactive state of the speculative faculties. For a person of exercised intellect, there is no way of attaining anything equivalent to it, save by sophistication and perversion, either of the understanding or of the conscience. It may almost always be said both of sects and of individuals, who derive their morality from religion, that the better logicians they are, the worse moralists (Mill 2009, pp. 133–4).

5. The Harms of Religious Belief?

Mill's worry about immorality in religious teachings points to another important possible objection to the Jamesian Wager. This objection points to the possibility, not of moral mistreatment of oneself (in the form of a lack of self-respect or a lack of personal excellence), but rather of wrongful harms to others. Namely, this objection proceeds by alleging important harms caused by religious belief, and argues that even if religious belief produces well-being gains for many believers, these may well be outweighed by such harms. A reasonable list of potential harms of religious belief would include religiously-motivated war and terrorism, religious bigotry, misogyny, homophobia, apathy about

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this-worldly suffering, anti-intellectualism, support for authoritarian politicians, prudish judgmentalism, rigid orthodoxy in place of human individuality, and an excessive zeal for moral condemnation and retributive punishment.[18] Moreover, religion can cause harm even at the *personal* level by giving rise to excessive feelings of guilt, a disabling fear of hell, rigid orthodoxy of thought, sexual repression, a puritanical aversion to pleasure, acceptance of subordinate gender roles, anxiety at the unknown, and so on.

One possible response to this objection is to insist that the Jamesian wager is a purely prudential wager, and as such, only the personal harms just listed are relevant; this response would then go on to insist that the personal harms are on balance outweighed by the personal benefits of theistic belief. However, this possible response is off limits to Jordan, for Jordan's own thesis is that *all things considered*, one has reason to inculcate religious belief in oneself, and he defends the notion of ''all things considered rationality'' – which adjudicates conflicts between epistemic, prudential, and moral reasons – against charges that the notion is incoherent (pp. 61–3). As a result, possible *social* benefits and harms are indeed relevant to Jordan's Jamesian wager, since they are relevant to the question of whether, all things considered, one ought to inculcate theistic belief in oneself.

In any case, Jordan has a better response available to him than the off limits response of insisting that the wager is purely prudential. This better response has two steps. First, Jordan can argue that it is only particular *types* of religious belief that lead to the social and personal harms in question, namely, the dogmatic and exclusionary types of religious belief. Second, Jordan can argue that exclusionary and dogmatic belief is forbidden by the Jamesian wager's respect for rationality (as shown by its insistence on the need for an evidential tie before approving of pragmatic belief). Thus, Jordan can respond by labeling his favored form of religious belief as ''non-dogmatic theism.'' Let us refer to a decision matrix with options labeled in this way as the *Non-Dogmatic Matrix*. In essence, Jordan can claim that the Non-Dogmatic Matrix avoids the issue of the social and personal harms of religion. With these harms out of the way, he can then claim that the Next Best Thing rule favors non-dogmatic theism on account of its pragmatic benefits.

However, an appeal to the Non-Dogmatic Matrix in turn faces at least two potential objections. Briefly, the first objection alleges that even non-dogmatic religious belief ''aids and abets'' dogmatic religious belief; the second objection alleges that a shift to non-dogmatic religious belief may sacrifice some of the health- and community-related benefits of religious belief that Jordan touts.

The first objection arises from the fact, we might say, that Jordan recommends ''believing beyond the evidence'' (my phrase; by it I mean that he recommends believing in a proposition that does not enjoy a preponderance of evidence in its favor). It is true that Jordan does not recommend ''believing *against* the evidence'' (as he would if he recommended belief in God even when the preponderance of evidence leans against this); indeed, he counsels against such belief (see pp. 47–53). However, the worry still arises that Jordan's weakening of the link between evidence and belief will have the problematic effect of ''aiding and abetting'' dogmatic religious belief. After all, encouraging belief on the basis of faith – that is, belief beyond the evidence – can have the effect, whether intended or not, of discouraging critical rational thought in others. (These others may not bother to distinguish believing beyond the evidence, of which Jordan approves, from believing against the evidence, of which Jordan disapproves.) This in turn can help to create a faith-friendly cultural milieu in which it is easier for uncritical dogmas to flourish and gain adherents.

A defender of Jordan might at this point reply with an analogy: ''A society such as our own, in which social drinking of alcohol is culturally legitimate, will probably produce

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more alcoholics than a society whose dominant cultural norms disapprove of any use of alcohol. However, we do not typically blame moderate social drinkers for creating a cultural milieu in which alcoholism can flourish.[19] Likewise, within the Non-Dogmatic Matrix we should not list as a possible outcome of moderate theism the social harm of creating a cultural milieu in which dogmatism can flourish. It is unfair to blame non-dogmatic theism for the irresponsible behavior of dogmatic theists, just as it would be unfair to blame moderate social drinkers for the irresponsible behavior of alcohol abusers.'' This is a potentially strong reply, in my judgment. It is worth noting, however, that to include these considerations of responsibility in an argument for theistic belief is to depart significantly from the consequentialist framework employed by decision theory and, in turn, by the Jamesian wager. How such a departure ought to proceed is a question deserving of further exploration.

There is a second, and more troubling, potential problem with the strategy of appealing to the Non-Dogmatic Matrix to avoid the issue of the potential harms of religion. It is this: even if this strategy is right to claim that it is chiefly dogmatism that produces the social harms of religious belief, by the same token it may be that it is dogmatism, alas, that produces many of the health-related and community-related benefits of religious belief mentioned earlier. Suppose, for instance, that these benefits stem mainly from the comfort and confident hope that religious belief provides, as well as from the secure attachments between people that firmly-held beliefs can facilitate. If so, it may in turn be the case that the more immune to doubt one's faith is, the more comfort, confident hope, and *espirit de corp*s one derives from it, and thus the more pronounced are its secular benefits. The social scientific studies relied on by Jordan (e.g., Koenig et al. 2001), however, do not attempt to distinguish between dogmatic and non-dogmatic belief.

By contrast, some careful social scientific research *does* try to distinguish these forms of belief; it finds greater health benefits associated with religious certainty as opposed to more open-ended types of religious belief. Important research conducted by C. D. Batson, P. A. Schoenrade, and W. L. Ventis, for instance, distinguishes a ''quest'' dimension of religious belief and an ''intrinsic end'' dimension, a distinction that approximates the non-dogmatic / dogmatic distinction employed above (the idea being, roughly, that the quest dimension values most the *seeking* of answers, whereas the intrinsic end dimension values the *possession* of answers). These researchers conclude that

> The intrinsic end dimension is *positively associated with reports of* (i) *greater absence of illness,* (ii) more appropriate social behavior, (iii) *greater freedom from worry (but not guilt)*, (iv) greater personal competence and control, and (v) greater unification and organization, but not with (vi) greater self-acceptance or (vii) greater open-mindedness and flexibility. The quest dimension is positively associated with (i) greater open-mindedness and flexibility and, possibly, with (ii) greater personal competence and control and (iii) greater self-acceptance, but *not with* (iv) *greater absence of illness or* (v) *greater freedom from worry* (Batson et al. 1993, pp. 290–1; emphasis added).

In short, it may well be that in rejecting dogmatism, and thereby avoiding the potential social harms of religious belief, one also sacrifices many significant potential health benefits. Thus, in escaping a moral objection to the Jamesian wager rooted in potential social harms Jordan risks undercutting the wager itself.

Moreover, a related epistemological problem looms. For recall that one of the conditions of application of the Jamesian wager is that an evidential tie obtains between theism and atheism (p. 110). Jordan defines ''theism'' as follows: ''*Theism* is the proposition that *God exists*. *God* we will understand as that individual, if any, who is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect'' (p. 1; emphasis in the original). In other words, Jordan's

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theism is the belief that the god of natural theology exists. However, even following Jordan and supposing for the sake of argument that the philosophical arguments for and against this sort of divine individual are evenly balanced, we must ask whether bare belief in ''natural religion'' is enough to bring with it the pragmatic health and happiness benefits that the Jamesian wager emphasizes.

The social scientific evidence mentioned above suggests reasons for doubt. To the extent that the health benefits of religious belief come from devoutly immersing oneself within the richly detailed ritual, worship, community, and lifestyle of a ''revealed religion'' – Christianity, say – then the Jamesian wagerer must wager on behalf of a revealed religion. Given his claim that the Jamesian wager is used only in the case of an evidential tie, however, Jordan is thereby committed to claiming that the evidence for and against the truth of a particular revealed religion is evenly matched. To put it mildly, that is a *much* stronger claim than the corresponding claim regarding the god of natural theology – and hence, much less plausible.

6. A Brief Note on Context

The previous sections' objections to pragmatic arguments are meant to suggest issues deserving of further research; they are not put forward as positively entailing that religious belief is always both morally and prudentially impermissible, all things considered. I do not claim to have shown this, and I doubt whether it is even true. I suspect such permissions will depend, in a much more nuanced way than the Jamesian wager envisions, on a host of contextual features that vary from individual to individual. I leave the task of exploring such contextual features to another day; let me here simply adduce two points, one positive and one negative, by way of suggesting what I have in mind. The positive point is this: if inculcating religious faith represents the best chance of bringing a person back from the brink of suicide, say, or from a life-ruining addiction, then surely such an individual has sufficient reason all-told to adopt a religious faith, at least until the dangers have significantly abated.[20]

The negative point asks about the source of the suffering that leads individuals to seek consolation in religion. Does this suffering stem from injustices prevailing in the individuals' society, so that religion is, in Marx's famous words, ''the sigh of the oppressed creature'' (Marx 1977, p. 64; cf. Ingleheart and Norris 2004, *passim*)? If so, then even if consoling religious belief should turn out to be pragmatically justified as a coping mechanism in the face of grievous injustice, the critic of pragmatic belief can argue that it is only a temporary, second-best response in the given context; the best response is for citizens to change the context by collectively removing the injustices that are the source of such suffering. To rebut this line of argument, the defender of pragmatic belief will need to argue that sufficient suffering is inherent in the human condition (and thus cannot be removed even by a just social order), so that a form of the wager less dependent on social context remains sound.

Conclusion

In essence, then, this essay is a plea for complexity: the question of whether one has reason all-told to inculcate religious belief in oneself is complicated. Whether there is genuinely epistemic parity between theism and atheism, whether (and to what extent) the prudential value of happiness rooted directly or indirectly in false belief is to be discounted, how the prudential value of happiness combines with self-respect and

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perfectionist values as well as moral values, and to what extent the fine-grained details of context are relevant – these are questions deserving of further exploration by philosophers of religion.

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Short Biography

Craig Duncan is Associate Professor in the Philosophy and Religion Department of Ithaca College. He has previously published articles in *The Philosophical Review* and *Philosophical Studies* and is the co-author (with Tibor Machan) of *Libertarianism: For and Against* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005). He specializes in the areas of ethics, political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion.

Notes

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[1] Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent parenthetical page references will be to this work.
[2] One important essay on religion and secular utility that I will *not* examine in any detail (apart from a passing reference toward the end of this article) is John Stuart Mill's ''Utility of Religion'' (Mill 2009). This neglect is partly so that I may focus on recent work on the subject, but also partly because Mill himself would not think highly of pragmatic arguments for religious belief that appeal to the believer's personal benefits. For Mill, the main utility (if any) of religion that is worth considering is its utility in helping individuals *transcend* their selfishness and focus impartially on human well-being as a whole. The thrust of Mill's essay is that a secular ''Religion of Humanity'' is capable of performing this task as well as traditional forms of religion. A passage from the first paragraph of the essay will suffice to indicate the general regard in which Mill holds pragmatic arguments for religious belief: ''The utility of religion did not need to be asserted until the arguments for its truth had in a great measure ceased to convince… An argument for the utility of religion is an appeal to unbelievers, to induce them to practise a well meant hypocrisy, or to semi-believers to make them avert their eyes from what might possibly shake their unstable belief, or finally to persons in general to abstain from expressing any doubts they may feel, since a fabric of immense importance to mankind is so insecure at its foundations, that men must hold their breath in its neighbourhood for fear of blowing it down'' (Mill 2009, 105).
[3] For more on the Many Gods objection to Pascal's Wager, and possible replies to this objection, see Duncan 2007, section 5.
[4] Jordan calls the form of evidentialism he accepts ''defeasible evidentialism.'' Briefly, he wants to permit pragmatic belief that p in cases where belief that p confers some benefit and the evidence for and against p is evenly balanced or indeterminate. However, when the evidence determinately favors *not-p*, then according to Jordan, we are *not* to believe that p unless we are in an ''extreme case.'' As an example of an extreme case, Jordan describes an alpine hiker whose life depends on making an unlikely leap across a wide chasm. According to Jordan, since a belief in his ability to make the leap will enhance the hiker's odds of success, he is justified in forming such a belief if he can. (For Jordan's discussion of these issues, see pp. 37–53.)
[5] For a valuable recent overview of evidentialism and the ethics of belief, see Chignell 2010.
[6] Jordan presents his Jamesian wager as ''ecumenical'' (p. 84); it instructs one to believe in *some* established form of religion, he says, but it is up to the individual wagerer whether to choose Christianity, Islam, etc.
[7] This potential objection to Jordan's wager is mentioned (but not explored) on p. 1085 of my brief review of Jordan's book (Duncan 2008).
[8] Regarding the autonomy requirement, Sumner argues that a person's judgments of life satisfaction, to be constitutive of well-being, should not be distorted by an adaptation to oppression, exploitation, indoctrination, or other ''autonomy-subverting mechanisms'' (Sumner 1996, pp. 167–71). Although this requirement is indeed relevant to

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the question of religious belief's contribution to individual well-being (think for instance of religious indoctrination), it is not a topic I will pursue here.

[9] In a recent and already influential study of happiness, Daniel Haybron indicates his support for Sumner's authenticity requirement; see Haybron 2008, pp. 183–5.

[10] Quoted at http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0327137/quotes.

[11] The homepage of Optimist International (http://www.optimist.org/) claims to have over 2900 member associations within its umbrella. Since such clubs are primarily aimed at children, imagine a variant that comprises both adults and children.

[12] For a discussion of religious believers' rates of heart disease, see Koenig et al. 2001, pp. 231–49.

[13] Peter Loftis, ''Pfizer Lipitor Patent Reissue Rejected,'' *The Wall Street Journal* (August 16, 2007), available at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118730255664700229.html.

[14] It is common to distinguish individual perfection (i.e., human excellence) from individual well-being. See for instance Kant 1996, pp. 517–20 (pp. 385–8, vol. 6, in the Prussian Academy Edition pagination); Sumner 1996, p. 19; and Hurka 1993, p. 17. (But see Toner 2006 for a critique of this distinction. Needless to say, the less distinction there is between human excellence and human well-being – so that lower excellence *ipso facto* entails lower well-being – the more problems there are for the Jamesian wager.)

[15] Wood 2008, p. 19; cf. p. 14. Note that in this article Wood also appeals to a perfectionist argument – for instance, when he writes that ''[I]t is pleasant and consoling to believe… that there is a beneficent Providence and a reward in Heaven, and that good – as it pleases you to define it – will ultimately triumph over evil… But to hoodwink yourself into such beliefs is to sell yourself short. You should be ashamed to deal with your human predicament in such a cowardly way'' (Wood 2008, pp. 18–9).

[16] Wood 2008, p. 18.

[17] Perfectionism can take consquentialist or deontological forms (see for instance Wall 2012, especially section 2.1). Needless to say, a *deontological* perfectionist will not favor embracing a form of non-excellence on the grounds that this leads to more overall excellence, any more than he or she will, say, favour one's betraying a friend in a case where (for some fortuitous reason) this would lead one to be a better friend to several other persons.

[18] The recent popular movement known as ''The New Atheism'' highlights what it takes to be the harms of religion. For instance, Richard Dawkins argues for the harmfulness of religious belief in Dawkins 2006, especially Chapters 8–9.

[19] Charles Dickens once argued against temperance laws on exactly these grounds. Imagining a drunken reprobate whom he calls Sloggins, Dickens sarcastically describes the temperance argument as follows: ''Because Sloggins abuses, nobody shall use. There is habitual drunkenness in the house of Sloggins, and therefore there shall not be temperate enjoyment in the house of Moderation'' (Dickens 1857, p. 220). Dickens calls the principle of since-some-abuse-none-shall-use ''lunatic in its absurdity'' (Dickens 1855, p. 4).

[20] Note that in making these claims I am not thereby necessarily endorsing Jordan's ''defeasible evidentialism'' (see footnote 4). Instead, these claims of mine are consistent with what might be called ''strong evidentialism,'' which would forbid believing that p when p lacks a preponderance of evidence in its favor, in all cases except ''extreme cases'' where especially grave utilities are at stake. (''Strong evidentialism'' is to be distinguished from ''absolute evidentialism,'' say, which would forbid believing that p when p lacks a preponderance of evidence in its favor, in all cases whatsoever.) The cases of suicide and life-ruining addiction would count as ''extreme cases.''

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