Pascal's Wager: Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God, by Jeff
Jordan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 227. H/b £35.00.

Over the past decade and a half or so, Jeff Jordan has emerged as a leading
thinker on Pascal's Wager, authoring numerous articles on the subject, and
editing an important and highly influential anthology on the wager (*Gambling
on God*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994). Thus it is greatly to be
welcomed that Jordan has now collected his ideas on Pascal's Wager into a uni-
fied treatise defending the rational legitimacy of belief in God for pragmatic
reasons—that is, for reasons that stem not from evidence, but from the bene-
ficial consequences of holding a particular belief. Overall, Jordan's treatise is an
impressive work. It is clearly written, very often original, concise and yet still
comprehensive in its scope and sources. That said, its main argument has sig-
nificant shortcomings, as I will go on to describe.

The book comprises seven chapters. In chapter one Jordan describes various
forms Pascal's Wager may take. He also introduces the reader to what he calls
'the Jamesian Wager', which he locates in William James's famous essay 'The
Will to Believe'. Like Pascal's argument, this is a pragmatic argument for belief
in God. However, it is of a much more modest sort, inasmuch as it focuses only
on the this-worldly benefits of theistic belief, and inasmuch as it only comes
into play when the evidence for and against God's existence is evenly matched.
A central goal of Jordan's book is to defend this Jamesian wager.

Chapter two backs away from a narrow focus on belief in God to take up
some general issues in the ethics of belief—in particular, the alleged incom-
patibility of evidentialism (the view that rational belief should follow the evi-
dence) and pragmatic reasons for belief. Against this, Jordan maintains that
pragmatic reasons for belief are in fact compatible with a non-absolutist and
more plausible form of evidentialism, which he calls 'defeasible evidentialism'.

In chapters three to five Jordan returns to the narrower topic of pragmatic
arguments for belief in God specifically; here he replies to many well-known
objections to such arguments. Chapter three considers the famous 'many gods'
objection, which points out that in using his wager in support of the Christian
god, Pascal simply ignores other deities such as Allah, Brahman, and so on.
Including these possibilities in a decision matrix means that the wager no
longer gives determinate advice as to what to believe. Chapter four responds to
philosophers who object to the use of infinite utilities. Chapter five considers a
hodgepodge of remaining objections, made by thinkers ranging from Voltaire
to the contemporary philosopher Alan Hájek. It is in these chapters, I think,
that Jordan best displays his fertile philosophical imagination and his impres-
sive command of the voluminous literature on the wager. (He seems to have
read everything ever written on it.)

Chapter six focuses on the importance of hope. Here Jordan offers an inter-
esting interpretation and defense of William James's famous argument for the
legitimacy of religious belief rooted in the passion of hope.

Finally, chapter seven attempts to refute John Schellenberg's well-known 'Divine Hiddenness' argument against God's existence, according to which the absence of decisive evidence *for* God's existence is itself decisive evidence *against* God's existence.

Having provided a brief overview of the book, I now turn to a consideration of what I judge to be its strengths and weaknesses. One strength I take to lie in Jordan's originality and boldness when discussing objections to the wager rooted in the technical details of decision theory. For instance, a number of well-known objections work by adducing very small possibilities designed to cause problems for the rational choice equations central to the wager. For example: is it not possible there is a 'sidewalk god' who grants salvation to those who refuse to step on sidewalk cracks? Or: why go to church in the hope of coming to believe in God, when it is possible that a dissolute life will one day precipitate a genuine religious conversion experience that suffices for salvation? According to the standard objections, these unlikely occurrences still have positive probability simply in virtue of being logically possible; as such, when these probabilities are multiplied by the infinite utility of salvation, it turns out that acts such as avoiding sidewalk cracks or leading a dissolute life have the same infinite expected utility as Pascal's recommended act of attending Mass.

Jordan's bold response is two-fold. First, he plausibly argues (p. 104) that when faced by a number of acts each of which have infinite expected utility, then other things equal it is rational to perform the act most likely to bring about the pay-off. Second, in an interesting stretch of argument (pp. 77–82), Jordan argues against the assumption that all logically possible propositions have positive probability. It is logically possible, Jordan notes, that 'human beings do not exist' and 'I had no parents' are true propositions; but he argues that despite this, it is rational to assign these propositions zero probability. Likewise, he says, we can consign the sidewalk god and other made-up deities to probabilistic oblivion and remove them from the decision matrix, thereby leaving in place only the gods of actual religions (Allah, Brahman, etc.). Jordan concedes that the wager does not single out which god among these to believe in. He argues, however, that rationality demands that a person adopt one or another of these religions, as opposed to atheism or agnosticism; as such, Jordan concludes that the wager still has an 'ecumenical use' (p. 84).

This is a provocative argument, and it is tempting to agree with Jordan's conclusion that not all logically possible propositions rationally warrant positive probability. However, even if Jordan is right that not all logically possible propositions rationally warrant positive probability, a version of the many gods objection still threatens Jordan's ecumenical use of Pascal's Wager. Consider, for instance, a 'deviant deity' (Jordan's phrase, p. 87) who rewards religious sceptics with salvation while denying salvation to religious believers. Jordan wishes to lump such a god together with the sidewalk god, a 'cockroach god', and so on, and assign them all zero probability. This, however, assumes

that there is no case whatsoever to be made for such a deviant god, which we might alternatively call a 'sceptic-loving god'. On the contrary: if (as Jordan himself concedes) there is no decisive evidence for any sort of god, then might not a deity who equipped humans with reason look more favourably on sceptics who use their epistemic reason well and refuse to believe in any god absent such evidence? Such a divine policy is hardly as unreasonable as a policy of looking favourably on people who avoid stepping on sidewalk cracks and cockroaches.

It is true that a sceptic-loving god is not very probable. But I have no confidence that any more probability attaches to, say, a traditional Christian god who allegedly (and very unfairly, given the absence of decisive evidence!) grants salvation only to religious believers—and what is more, who allegedly is distinctly-three-persons-yet-one in nature, who allegedly assumed human form and sacrificed himself to atone for humans' sins (or worse yet, for humanity's Original Sin), and who allegedly left his revelation in a work containing verses that (among other things) describe acts of divinely-sanctioned genocide, verses that tolerate slavery, and verses that portray women as rightly subordinate to men. Each sort of god, the sceptic-loving god and the traditional Christian god, seems about as improbable as the other to me. Hence I see no warrant for assigning *zero* probability to the sceptic-loving god, but *positive* probability to the Christian god, as Jordan does in his rebuttal to the many gods objection.

It is important to note, however, that while the many gods objection just described takes aim at pragmatic wagers that lay stress on the infinite utility of salvation, Jordan himself refuses to rest his pragmatic case for religious belief exclusively on considerations of salvation. Indeed, he portrays the *this*-worldly 'Jamesian wager' as superior to Pascal's wager. Inasmuch as defending this Jamesian wager is one of Jordan's central goals in his book, and inasmuch as this defense is one of the book's most interesting and original elements, it is worth briefly considering his case for this wager.

Key to the Jamesian wager is what Jordan calls the 'Next Best Thing' rule (pp. 14 f.). According to this rule of rational choice, if in a case of decision under uncertainty, option *x* has a best case outcome at least as good as all rival options' best case outcomes, and a worst case outcome at least as good as all rival options' worst case outcomes, and moreover, *x* has better outcomes than its rivals in all other cases, then it is rational to choose *x*. This rule gives the Jamesian wager an extra measure of resilience. For suppose we include in the decision matrix, in addition to a standard god who rewards religious belief, the possibility of a deviant god who saves only non-believers. Then religious belief and non-belief are tied when it comes to their best and worst case outcomes (that is, salvation and loss of salvation, respectively). Thus, Pascal's Wager is silent. But the Jamesian wager is not, for according to the Next Best Thing rule, we should examine which option carries greater expected value in the case where no god of any sort exists—a case that Jordan labels 'naturalism'. And,

claims Jordan, religious belief clearly comes out ahead in the case of naturalism; he encapsulates this claim in a premiss he cites frequently, which reads 'theistic belief has an outcome better than the other available alternatives if naturalism obtains' (p. 28). In defense of this claim Jordan cites recent social scientific studies that purport to show that religious believers are on average happier and healthier than non-believers (pp. 90–4).

I believe Jordan is right that the Jamesian wager is more plausible than Pascal's. However, for several reasons I strongly doubt whether in the final analysis it ought to command our allegiance, at least in the current form in which Jordan defends it. First, by Jordan's own admission the Jamesian wager has rational force only in the case of an evidential tie between arguments for and against God's existence. Jordan judges it reasonable to believe such a tie obtains (p. 110), but many readers will surely dissent from this. Second, while I would not be surprised if some forms of religious belief do turn out to have health and happiness benefits, the research claiming this has been challenged by some prominent scientists (see for example Richard P. Sloan, *Blind Faith: The Unholy Alliance of Religion and Medicine*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006).

Third, and more fundamentally, the value theory used by Jordan's Jamesian wager is questionable. In his discussion of personal happiness, for example, Jordan does not sufficiently consider the possibility that happiness rooted in false belief is less valuable for that reason. However, this question matters greatly in the context of the Jamesian Wager. For although the Jamesian wagerer is not sure whether God exists or whether naturalism obtains, he asserts that should naturalism in fact be the case, and his religious beliefs thereby be false, the happiness that those beliefs generate for him is just as valuable as the happiness of the non-believer—and moreover, is greater in quantity, so that the scales tip in favour of religious belief. However, this argument assumes that a person's feelings of happiness do not significantly drop in value on account of their stemming from false beliefs. Such an assumption surely needs defending. After all, even if the fact of falsity is not known to the believer, the believer's happiness, being based on falsehood, is arguably less *authentic* than the happiness of the non-believer, and as such, makes less of a contribution to a person's well-being. (The thesis that well-being consists in authentic happiness is given a book-length defense in L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.) Jordan's failure to address this issue strikes me as a significant oversight.

Moreover, a fourth difficulty looms. This stems from Jordan's rather blithe dismissal of the possibility that religious belief might lead to greater societal harms (war, intolerance, apathy about this-worldly suffering, etc.) than non-belief (pp. 94 f.). Jordan claims, rightly, that social science has not shown that religious belief generates more societal harm than non-belief. However, even though this 'more-harm-than-good' thesis has not been *proven* true, it is still surely a *possibility*, and one that surely deserves more consideration than Jor-

dan offers it. In particular, given that the Jamesian wager is, by Jordan's own lights, a case of decision under uncertainty, such a possibility deserves inclusion in the relevant decision matrix. However, doing this would mean that Jordan could no longer call theistic belief superior in all this-worldly outcomes, as the Next Best Thing rule requires him to do.

I believe these objections reveal Jordan's defense of the Jamesian wager to be significantly incomplete at best. I hasten to add, however, that although I was not persuaded by Jordan's overall defense of pragmatic belief in God, I found his arguments always to be challenging and thought-provoking. For philosophers (advanced undergraduates and up) who wish to discover the state of the art as regards thinking on Pascal's Wager and related pragmatic arguments for belief in God, this is the place to start.

Philosophy and Religion   CRAIG DUNCAN
Ithaca College
953 Danby Road
Ithaca, NY 14850
USA

The Enlargement of Life: Moral Imagination at Work, by John Kekes. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. xi + 256. H/b $29.95.

The Enlargement of Life seeks among other things to enlarge ethics. The model of ethical judgement most in vogue has focused on moments when an agent has to make a specific decision about something that often can be described briefly. Who the agent is, and how she or he got into that situation, frequently may be regarded as not relevant. What we need is a decision procedure. Typically it should be one that anyone could use. Major ethical theories, such as Kantian ethics and utilitarianism, have centered on the search for a valid decision procedure.

Here is an alternative model. Decisions in specific cases of course are important in ethics. But what is most central, it can be maintained, is the kind of person we enable ourselves to become. Plato and Aristotle regarded this as basic, and a similar view can be found in most classical Indian and Chinese philosophy.

John Kekes clearly accepts this classical model. But he wants to examine closely something that often receives less detailed attention than he provides. This is how someone who would like to be a different (and perhaps better) sort of person should go about it.

The setting for this question frequently is this. Someone who has arrived at a certain sort of character comes to think that revisions would make either the experienced quality of life or its moral quality (or both) better. Clearly (as Hume pointed out in his essay 'The Sceptic') sheer will power is not in itself a