

Faith, Belief and Religious Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of the conceptual relations among faith, belief and religious experience. The paper argues that neither faith in general nor religious faith, in particular, can be viewed plausibly as a form of irrational belief, that is, as belief that is unresponsive to reason. On the contrary, the paper argues that religious faith is prompted by certain kinds of perceptual and affective experiences and that the religious faith that is inspired by those experiences grounds dispositions, disciplines and patterns of behavior that are authentic expressions of faith. Religious belief formalizes religious faith, which, in its turn, is reinforced by the authentic practices that religious experience inspires.

Natural science also involves a kind faith, as the empirical data gathered by natural science are always presupposed in principle to be intelligible to the human mind. More precisely, natural science rests upon the faith that whatever is true of nature can be discovered by the scientific method and that whatever can be discovered by the scientific method is true. Religious belief is properly contrasted with other forms of belief, especially scientific belief, but the paper argues that after all, religious belief is similar to other forms of belief in that it too is an implicit attempt to systematize and rationalize the experiences that ultimately ground it. The thinkers to whom this paper is especially indebted include Descartes, Pascal, Newton, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Robert Adams.

INTRODUCTION

It now appears that the prevailing view (P.V.) among sophisticated philosophers is that religious faith is a form of *irrational belief*. This paper argues against P.V. in two ways: First, that faith is not a form of belief, even though it is true that religious faith is necessarily connected to beliefs. Second, religious faith need not be irrational; in other words, it is not contrary to reason, which prompts a further, obvious question: Is it possible for religious faith to be *reasonable*; that is, *justified* on a basis that is responsive to reason? This paper argues for an affirmative answer to that question.

What is Faith?

There are two principal grammatical constructions by which faith is stated or expressed; 'Faith in' and 'faith that.' It is obvious that we cannot intelligibly claim that we have faith in God even though we believe that God does not exist. Further, we cannot have faith that God will do this or that for us if we do not believe that God exists or if we believe that God does not take an interest in us. Even so, it does not follow faith is a form of belief. This is the type of point Descartes makes to Arnauld when Descartes points out that every right triangle can be inscribed in a circle, so that (a) its longest

side is the diameter of the circle and (b) its opposing vertex is on the circumference of the circle; even so Descartes observes, geometrical constructions satisfying (a) and (b) do not *express* the essence (viz. reveal the identity) of right triangles. (Descartes/Cottingham *et al.* trans, 1984, orig. 1, pp. 142,159) In other words, necessary connections must be distinguished from identities.

If faith is not a type of belief, what is it? Faith is a virtue;¹ indeed, it is one of the principal theological virtues. The nexus of concepts in which faith rests includes courage (which faith enables), hope (which faith grounds), charity (which faith requires), and humility (which makes way for faith). Virtues even more closely associated with faith, include faithfulness, trustworthiness, devotion, commitment, and loyalty. These are often called “virtues of fidelity” and are associated with “duties of fidelity.” (W.D.Ross, 1988/orig. 1930, p21f.) But, allowing that faith is a virtue does not answer the obvious questions: Just how should ‘faith’ be construed in phrases like ‘faith in’ and especially ‘faith that.’ To get ahead of ourselves, the answer that I shall develop is that both ‘faith in’ and ‘faith that’ should be construed as *commitments* to beliefs, and I shall argue that commitments to belief generally occur: not merely in religious discourse but in scientific discourse as well.

Faith is not only a religious concept. One can have faith in a colleague (for example, to respect authorship), or faith that a lover will be true, or faith that an institution will not cynically benefit from good work and then refuse to reward it. But what makes faith a virtue? As Foot observes, a virtue is what is beneficial to ourselves or others, which is to say that it is what makes living well possible. (Foot, 2002/1976, p. 3) It is impossible to *live well* without faith, as though one could reveal new ideas to a colleague who would steal them, or could share intimacies with a lover who would scorn them, or could motivate oneself to devote oneself to an institution that would benefit from good work without rewarding it. I think that it is right to say that everyone who lives well lives on the basis of faith in something; the question is not whether or not faith is necessary but rather in what should faith be reposed. Of course, that does not in itself show that faith is reasonably reposed in religious institutions or even in God.

¹ In drawing the distinction between belief and faith I have been influenced by Robert Adams, who has reminded us that faith is a virtue. (Robert Adams, 1984, pp. 9 – 2) However Adams analysis is directed to Christians and explores in depth the question of the way in which unbelief and failure of faith should be viewed within an explicitly Christian context. (Robert Adams, 1984, p. 2) My concern with faith is broader. I am concerned with the question of whether religious faith of any kind can ever be justified on a reasonable basis. Religious faith involves *commitment*; I am concerned to show that the commitment it requires can be reasonable.

What Stands in the Way of Religious Faith?

Many people find themselves taking a combative view when it comes to the justification of religious faith and especially faith in God. Unbelievers often seem to seem to challenge God in this way: “God: Prove your existence; show *me* that you exist, and I’ll be the first to kneel down before you, to obey you and to worship you. As it is, however, I have no assurance of your existence; you seem to me to be a mere chimera, a fiction raised up by wishful thinking. Others offer prayers and claim that their prayers have been answered; I too earnestly beseech your help and guidance, *but* I find myself merely talking to the wall.”

Pascal considers this objection, and his advice to the unbeliever is:

True ... But at least learn from your inability to believe. ... So concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs of God but by diminishing [the abatement of, my reading] your passions. [There] are people who know the road you want to follow, and who have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally [my emphasis] make you believe, quite naturally and according to your animal reactions – “But this is what I am afraid of.” – And why? What have you to lose? (Pascal/Levi, 1995, orig. 1670, p. 155)

The crucial step is obvious; Pascal is instructing the unbeliever that “naturally, and according ... to your animal reactions,” you will be led to believe; but just how can that happen? Pascal appears to suggest by the word “naturally” that it is by our nature that we shall come to believe if only we expose ourselves to religious experience, acting as if we believe: But is it really in our nature to believe in God? What about those who earnestly pray and yet believe that their prayers fall upon the deaf ears of the wall before them? What can Pascal possibly have in mind when he reproaches unbelievers and demands the abatement of their passions when it seems to them that satisfying their passions is the only tangible good in a life overwhelmed by contingencies, except, of course, for death, which is not a mere contingency but actually is inevitable?

Pascal is clearly writing at this point in *Pensées* to sophisticates who would have thought that he himself had made a bad bargain in trading the pleasant Parisian life² of a celebrated mathematician for the dreary life of a mystic or a recluse. Indeed, why should anyone who is doing well in the world want to believe a doctrine that would surely require sacrifices of “goods” that

² Indeed Levi reports that Pascal spends the years from 1652 – 4 working on mathematics and mixing “socially” with duc de Roanez and with Méré. (Levi, 1995, p. xlv)

others do not have but surely crave? Moreover, even if we do suppose that Pascal's likely readers are genuinely eager for religion, how are we to explain Pascal's advice to follow the example of those who merely "act as if they believe," and to participate in rituals that must surely appear to unbelievers as merely ritualistic; that is, as highly structured social practices that are followed routinely, even mindlessly? Doesn't Pascal have any better advice than that?

I am afraid not; how could he? The problem is not with Pascal but rather with the predispositions of his readership. Religious experience can be intense, but its intensity will be felt only by those who already accept its validity, and that is exactly what Pascal's unbelievers do not accept, or rather cannot accept. Be that as it may, Pascal does imply that rituals are more than ancient practices that are ritualistically performed. It is clear that there are two forms of religious experience: private and public. In the Wager passage, Pascal is drawing out attention to public religious experience. Private religious experience involves exactly what Pascal's unbeliever cannot access. Those experiences involve direct access to the sacred, the holy; to that which is not social but rather purely personal. Paradigmatic private religious experiences are the sort that is attributed to St. Teresa of Avila. (Bulfinch /Butler, p. 243ff.) Taking holy water and having masses "said" might be (though of course, need not be) ritualistic, but there are other many other forms of public religious experience that turn one's attention from the familiar and worldly to the remote and holy. Those experiences involve the most precious elements of culture, like poetry, the visual arts, and music, all of which are essentially public forms of religious experience. These forms are not overlooked by Pascal, but reference to them is covert. Perhaps that is what is contained in the Wager passage by the word "etc."

T.S. Eliot, who was troubled by what he regarded as the insouciant disregard of Original Sin by the Unitarian Church of his childhood, was converted to "Christianity" when he beheld the Pieta in the Basilica of St. Peter. (T.S.Eliot/Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden, eds., 1912, p. 147) One cannot help but think, that the conversion might well have owed much, if not as much, to the Basilica itself as it did to the Pieta. Other great metaphysical poets (especially of the 16th and 17th centuries) focus attention on the sacred, and sometimes on how difficult it can be to give up or even separate the temporal from the eternal. Indeed, Eliot illustrates the point by a passage that he takes from Donne's beloved "Extasie."

O you, wherein, they say Souls rest,

Till they descend pure heavenly fires
Shall lustful and corrupt desires
With your immortal seed be blest?

(Eliot/Schuchard, 1993/1926, p. 115)

Donne was not the first to note the difficulties, emotional and rational, that arise in sorting out the sensual from the spiritual, and to suggest that the discipline that reason enforces upon feeling is something to be valued rather than regretted. It is very important that sometimes our attention is turned to the sacred *by* the horrific, as in Picasso's great self-portraits that were painted in 1972, shortly before his death April 1973, and which unmistakably show what it means to confront the abyss: dying, hopeless and alone. Above all, there is music; for example sacred music from chant and the polyphonic music of Palestrina to the great masses of the Baroque and Classical eras that liberate from the desultory and the mind-numbing routine of daily life.

Besides sacred music, our attention is fixed not only upon art but also by what it imitates, by what draws us away from the familiar and especially from the petty, the cynical and the sentimental. In the *Republic*, Plato emphasizes the importance of astronomy to spiritual life because astronomy draws our attention to the "craftsman" of the magnificent heavens. (Plato, Jowett, trans., 1953, §530a, p. 394). The impact of Plato's prose, great as it is, is dwarfed by contemporary astrophysical images. There is, for example, a spectacular image taken by the cameras of Cassini-Huygens: Saturn is in the foreground, and little, blue Earth and its bright, white moon are in the background. It is impossible to view the image without yielding to the sublime and grand. (Incidentally, the image is the only photographic image to capture Saturn, Earth, and its moon in one frame; Cassini-Huygens, 2013, image 229) The experience is also moving in another way; it is truly humbling to see at the click of a mouse an image for which Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Einstein and countless others labored so hard, but never saw and could barely have imagined. *Humility*, which can be quickened by science as well as religion, is a *virtue of both*.

It may sound melodramatic, but perhaps it is not going too far to say that when a culture rejects its public religious experiences, it loses its "soul." Some, like the Council of Trent, have rightly complained that religious icons are so powerful and beloved that they can become objects of worship, in other words, idols.³ Rather than drawing attention to the genuinely sacred, which is

³ See (Mountford, 2011, pp. 11 – 54) for a discussion of this issue in a contemporary context. Also see (Mountford especially p 20f.), with respect to Richard Dawkins' famous contention that however sublime Beethoven's late

worthy of worship, they become substitutions for the sacred. It is a valid complaint; yet, it is not meant to be an indictment of culture, but rather of the misuse of culture and even the perversion of worship. Indeed, there have been worries from the beginning about worshipping the means to the end rather than the end itself. The Roman Catholic Church only reluctantly agreed to the introduction of polyphonic music when Palestrina convinced the authorities that its beauty need not draw attention from the divine.⁴ Perhaps one might venture the thought, without offending, that certain, especially zealous Protestants went too far in enforcing the simplicity of worship by sacrificing great religious artifacts.

I imagine that if Pascal were to read all this, he would be the first to say that religious experience *doesn't prove* anything, and indeed, it does not. But Pascal does not claim to prove anything himself; he seeks only to appeal to unbelievers. Although religious experience does not prove anything, it nevertheless stimulates faith along with faith's fellow virtues. These are not merely the virtues of acting *as if a belief* is true, as though conceding that the faithful act is mere pretense; on the contrary, the theological virtues dispose us to act from the very emotions that religious belief would claim to validate. Yet it is not belief that validates the emotions but rather *feelings* that arouse faith. The beliefs that are presupposed by faith are then embraced *because faith cannot be coherently connected to reality unless the beliefs that faith presuppose are true*. Religious experience temporally precedes faith, and faith temporally precedes the belief that faith presupposes and to which it is necessarily connected. In other words, faith *temporally* precedes belief, but belief is presupposed by and hence *logically* precedes faith. That is how it is possible for them to be inextricably connected and yet distinct, and why it is so easy and natural to conflate the two.

quartets and Shakespeare's sonnets are, they prove the existence only of Beethoven and Shakespeare, not of God. (Dawkins, 2006, p. 86). For sure, they do not *prove*, the existence of God, but I say that they draw our attention to God and arouse feelings that prompt and promote *faith* in God. If this seems disappointing, it should not. Art and nature do not *prove* the existence of God, they *reveal* God; just as Evil is revealed by looking directly into its dreadful face; as, for example, at those who have delighted in mercilessly inflicting pain and death upon the helpless and the innocent. It is no more difficult to believe that God exists than to be believe that Evil exists. Without God, it is difficult to believe that evil is more than the repugnant, whether idiosyncratic or cultural.

⁴ It has been argued that in works like *Mass of Pope Marcellus* Palestrina saved polyphonic such from the conservative injunctions of the Council of Trent, who sought to sustain the "purity" of homophonic chant and thereby the "genuineness" of worship. Some claim, however, that Palestrina's role in promoting polyphonic music has been exaggerated, and that if anyone deserves credit for saving music from the austere declaration of the Council of Trent it was Jacobus de Kerle. (Grout, 1960, p. 237 ff.) In any case, there can be no doubt that it is Palestrina who convinced many, then and now, that polyphonic music need not distract from worship, but actually intensifies it.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND METAPHOR

So far, I have presented a conceptual *analysis* of faith and belief, but can it really be that the faith simulated by religious feeling actually is *true*? More broadly, can a mere *feeling* be a valid indication of truth? To say that feeling can be an indication of truth is as close to secular “heresy” as a contemporary philosopher can get, which might be because *feeling* is often associated with hunches or intuitions, especially pretentious intuitions. It is worth remembering, however, that Hume himself, perhaps the ultimate critical thinker, claims that *moral approbation* is a pleasant *feeling* that is aroused by, points to and actually is “good.” (Hume, Norton, and Norton, 2011/1740, ll.10 – 18, 312, p. 303; Selby-Bigge, 1978, p 417) Of course, some philosophers, like Snare, conclude that Hume must have been a non-cognitivist (who claims that putative moral claims merely express feelings) or else an anti-realist (who believes that moral terms do not designate real properties). (Snare, 1991, p. 33) Snare’s reading of Hume, I think even he would agree, *presupposes* rather than substantiates the claim that a feeling *cannot* indicate a truth. Of course, feeling can go wrong, but so can reason.

To be sure, the metaphor “points to” has invited trenchant criticism by 20th and 21st-century philosophers, and its not so cordial invitation was accepted by Wittgenstein in his “Lecture on Ethics,” which was delivered at Cambridge University in 1929. In the 1929 lecture Wittgenstein argues for a form of non-cognitivism in ethics, and in the course of his argument, he takes up religion. This paper is not familiar to many, so perhaps it will be helpful to reproduce the salient passage:

Now all religious terms seem ... to be used as similes or allegorically. For when we speak of God and that he sees everything and when we kneel and pray to him all our terms and actions seem to be parts of a great and elaborate allegory which represents him as a human being of great power whose grace we try to win, etc., etc. But this allegory also describes the experience which I have just referred to. For the first of them is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world, and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this way described by the phrase that God disproves of our conduct. Thus, in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be a simile for something. And if I can describe a fact using a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and simply to state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be nonsense. (Wittgenstein/Cahn and Haber, 1195/1929, p. 85)

Despite the fact that Wittgenstein appears to (relentlessly) assault both cognitive ethics and

religion in his “Lecture on Ethics,” it is extremely significant that he ends his lecture with these words about the tendency of mind that draws us to visions of absolute goodness and of God: “it is a tendency of the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.” (Wittgenstein/Cahn and Haber, 1195/1929, p. 86) That Wittgenstein would not have ridiculed the tendency of the mind to salve life’s wounds is hardly surprising, if only because Wittgenstein was a kind person who had an avuncular toleration of human weakness; but that he could not help *respecting* that tendency *deeply* says something quite different, which is that he saw that there is something precious in the tendency to seek the absolute, that is, God.

According to the present analysis, religious experience arouses faith and faith presupposes belief. So, religious experiences arouse faith in God, but that faith presupposes beliefs, which is to say, facts, for examples, that God exists, that he takes an interest in us, protects us, and judges us. Yet Wittgenstein claims that these supposed beliefs are not *beliefs* at all because there are no facts for them to describe. One might complain that Wittgenstein’s argument is circular, for he denies that there are true religious beliefs because they could only be expressed in similes that are similes for nothing inasmuch as there are no facts for those similes “to be for.” But what makes Wittgenstein so sure of that? Of course, we cannot *physically identify* the objects (facts) that religion contemplates because the ultimate objects of religious contemplation are not physical. If we disagree about a matter of fact, for example whether there are goats on Mount Everest, we can examine the mountain to settle the issue. But we cannot “settle” issues about what is beyond nature. So our similes about God are not similes for anything that we can *examine physically*⁵ either together or alone. Wittgenstein apparently thinks that this shows that religious beliefs are inherently irrational or at least unreasonable.

Indeed, it must be conceded that many religious beliefs *arguably* are unreasonable and even irrational. For example, people determined to read scripture literally often find themselves in the position of denying what nearly everyone else deems obvious. Those denying the possibility of evolution on the basis of their reading of *Genesis* risk the appearance of irrational belief if only because they apparently are unwilling to respond to (or even to examine) evidence that suggests

⁵ Some might claim that it is possible to obtain physical evidence for facts about the supernatural. Did not Mary Magdalene and the travelers on the road to Emmaus see the resurrected Jesus? Well perhaps so, but then the *visual* experience would not be *purely physical*. Yes, seeing the *appearance* of the resurrected Jesus might be physical, but the image could have been *of* the resurrected Jesus only if it was the image of something with a supernatural component, and the supernatural component is just what cannot be seen, *physically*.

that human beings evolved from other primates -- and not merely thousands of years ago but hundreds of thousands of years ago. Even if people are willing to examine the evidence for the evolutionary hypothesis, they may fail to examine it cogently. The resulting belief might be responsive to reason but might not be proportioned to the evidence. Those who deny the validity of carbon dating might be open to the criticism of unreasonableness because there is strong theoretical and empirical evidence for carbon dating. I think that examples like this have tended to reinforce the suspicion that religion must always give way to science. The argument is familiar: The only facts are those that are natural (that is, pertain to nature) and the only access that we have to those facts is scientific, and therefore no reasonable person can entertain the hypothesis that religious similes and metaphors point to truth if only because there cannot be facts that validate those similes and metaphors. That seems to be Wittgenstein's argument.

I believe, contrary to the Wittgenstein of 1929⁶ that the burden that natural science is asked to bear in this argument against religion is almost unbearable. It is worth observing that natural science had made some spectacular errors of its own, for example when it dogmatically asserted for centuries that the sun revolves around the earth. As a matter of fact, in the third century, BCE Aristarchus argued that the earth revolves around the sun, but his argument was ignored, apparently because Eudoxus and Callippus had convinced the scientific world that the movable heavenly bodies revolve around the earth in concentric spheres.⁷ (Cohen, 1983, pp. 25 – 27). What makes the rejection of Aristarchus's view unreasonable is not that its dismissal contradicts our view, but rather that Aristarchus's view wasn't even given a chance at the time; in other words, the rejection of it was not responsive to reason. Suppose, however, that some ancient scientists, unbeknownst to us, did examine the evidence for Aristarchus's theory, but failed to acknowledge its obvious implications for the established theory that originated with Eudoxus. In that case, the rejection of Aristarchus's view would have been based upon an error, and so it would have been a mistake of reason (or, better, in reasoning), although it would not have been a failure that was completely unresponsive to reason.

It is important to remember that scientists at the time *might have been right* to reject

⁶ It should be noted, as is well known, that in Wittgenstein's later life, he expresses sympathy for religion and the "form of life" that it exemplifies.

⁷ Those who urge that ancient scientists were not "real" scientists because they did not observe carefully or employ mathematical modelling really should take a look at Eudoxus's writing (as preserved by Aristotle). (Lloyd, 1970, pp.86 – 94)

Aristarchus's theory. It might have been that the reasons *for* Aristarchus's view simply weren't strong enough to supplant Eudoxus's earlier theory. The fact that Aristotle had also offered a comprehensive (unfortunately false) theory of terrestrial and celestial motion that supported Eudoxus would also have been a reason to hold to the established theory even in the face of conflicting evidence. It is frequently the case that new theories are ultimately discredited and that suitably modified, established theories prevail in the end. No one really *knew* at the time which, if either, of the two theories about the movable "stars" would actually prevail in the long run. As Quine famously urges, it is cautious, indeed wise, to maintain essential, core theoretical beliefs of established theories at the expense of peripheral beliefs in responding to "recalcitrant" experiences. (Quine, 1972/1954, pp. 42 - 6)

Science, particularly Aristotelian science, has sometimes tried too hard to defend the implications of its theories, with catastrophic results, but it would be ridiculous to claim that the failures of science show that it has never been successful. Similarly, the fact that religion has sometimes overextended itself does not prove that it cannot grasp anything at all. In fact, Newton himself affirms the possibility that God intervened directly in the formation of the universe. For example, he writes in *Optics*, Query 31 (Newton/Thayer, 1953, orig, 1730, p. 175) that "all these things considered" [*concerning the inertial and gravitational forces that are essential to the maintenance of our solar system and in fact the whole physical universe – my insertion*] it seems 'probable' in the beginning that *God* formed matter in ways that are "conducive to the end for which matter was created." Here "probable" is not used in its usual, modern scientific (that is, statistical) sense. Although Newton acknowledges the possibility of the direct intervention of God in nature, he insists that hypotheses about God's intervention are not "scientific," even though they are ultimately necessary to understanding the direction of nature. In other words, although the direct intervention of God in nature is a not a legitimate *scientific* hypothesis, Newton acknowledges that it may nevertheless be true. This point comes out again in the General Scholium to the *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. There Newton concedes that he has not been able to discover the "cause of gravity from phenomena." He states that he has framed no "hypotheses," although he thinks that the constitution of the universe is ultimately determined by the will of God. Newton refrains from forming that hypothesis because "no hypothesis, whether of metaphysical or physical, whether of occult qualities or mechanical, has a place in 'experimental philosophy,' which is to say in *natural science*. (Newton/Thayer, 1954/1689, p. 45)

What shall we now say about Wittgenstein's argument? In the first place, it successfully casts doubts upon the claim that the metaphors and similes of religion describe facts of nature, but it must also be admitted that science too has made mistakes, far more than is possible to detail here. So, the fact that religion has undeniably fallen into error doesn't show that everything it has to say is incorrect. More importantly, religion is primarily about sacred and holy; about what is apart from nature. The fact that religion does not compete successfully with natural science when it comes to nature shows nothing at all about the main subject of religion, the sacred and the holy. Furthermore, as previously suggested, Wittgenstein's claim that there is nothing for religion to be about because there aren't any non-natural facts, merely *presupposes* that what religion claims to be about *cannot* exist. This, it seems, is a dogmatic assertion rather than an argument.⁸ So, let us set aside the issue of religion's success when it comes to natural facts, and focus on the main point.

What is Religious Commitment?

Religious experience arouses feeling, and feelings, in turn, arouse faith, which presupposes beliefs. The beliefs that faith presupposes, like the existence of God, are surely not *proved* to be true by feelings. Yet, those commitments, I claim, are rational; that is, they are commitments that are responsive to reason. Suppose that feelings accompanying St Teresa's religious experiences aroused her faith in a caring God. That implies a commitment to the belief that a caring God exists. But if St. Teresa believed on independent grounds that it is impossible for a caring God to exist, then her commitment to caring God would have been unreasonable, and it would obviously have been impossible for her to sustain the commitment on a rational basis. So, faith is obviously responsive to reason at least in this way: Anyone who thinks on independent grounds that the beliefs presupposed by faith are false will find it impossible to sustain faith on a *rational* basis.

This, I believe, helps in understanding Pascal's Wager. The Wager is sometimes criticized because merely acting as if one believes in God cannot be real faith in God, and surely that is true.

⁸ Wittgenstein himself would have argued that it is only by confronting public objects, objects accessible to all, that we can learn to use language that actually refers to a variety of entities. So, if we cannot all confront the same objects of religious discourse, we cannot, according to the Wittgenstein of 1929, learn what religious terms mean that purportedly refer to entities like God. The argument appears to presuppose that it would be impossible, say, for Peter and Paul to know that they were referring to the same thing by "God", even though the language that they used implies that they thought that they knew the referents of religious terms perfectly well and certainly believed that they were each talking about the *same* thing. Indeed do any of us really think that when we talk about biblical teaching we are all really talking about *different* things? It would be odd, to say the least, that a work of thousands of pages covering thousands of years should have been read over the millennia by thousands of people who didn't have any idea at all about what the text asserted it because the text didn't assert anything at all.

Acting as if one believes is not the same thing as a *commitment*, and that fact alone should convince us that Pascal never meant to claim (nor in fact did he ever claim) that acting as if one believes in God counts as faith in God. Acting as if one believes in God is a *first step in a process that might lead to genuine faith*.

What then is *religious commitment*? I want to begin by considering Kierkegaard's teaching about this. It is perhaps needless to argue that Kierkegaard's teaching is open to a variety of interpretations. My goal here is not to do scholarly work on Kierkegaard, but rather to make use of his teaching for this paper. So, I make no claim for the accuracy of my reading of Kierkegaard, although I do believe that my interpretation of him is recognizably Kierkegaardian, and I certainly am indebted to him for it.

For Kierkegaard, the problem of commitment is essentially a problem of the relation of the self to itself. The primary influence on Kierkegaard is Hegel, and the most important of Hegel's texts for our purposes is *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly the fourth and sixth sections. In the fourth section, Hegel argues that the dynamic of the relation between master and slave is far more complicated than it may seem. As the slave comes to recognize his subjugation to the master, the master becomes objectified by the slave as an enemy who must be defeated. The way to defeat the master is to make the master dependent upon the slave. The master, sensing that the slave has successfully objectified his (the master's) subservient relation, senses that his dependency upon the slave will ultimately lead to his ruin. That insight results in further attempts at control, and therefore to further resentment, and finally to conflict and a new "synthesis." (Hegel/, Miller, A.V., 1977/18097, pp. 111-19.)

Kierkegaard sees the relation of the individual to the self, the I/I, as the relation of master to slave. The relation is complicated by its *dynamics*. The self is never at rest, but always becoming. The *objectified* self, the master, is the past self, which holds the future self hostage. The past *limits* what can be chosen now. The encumbrances of the past include mistakes in living, entrenched beliefs as well as obstacles imposed by age. The future self tries but cannot liberate itself from the past, because each act of liberation immediately becomes absorbed into a past self. That is why it is that for Kierkegaard *commitment* is always on-going. A commitment cannot be made for all time because the self that makes the commitment vanishes instant by instant, and a renewed self immediately finds the commitment among the legacies of the past. For Kierkegaard, a commitment

to God is a commitment made *anew* at each moment, and at each moment the commitment can be undermined by new information, new doubts, new temptations, and by new fears. (Kierkegaard, 1964/1846, p.74 – 86)

The underlying logic of commitment applies not only to God but also to daily life; in fact, the notion of commitment is even more tenuous in the commotion of the everyday than it is to God. That is because God, if God exists, will not go away, but the goods of everyday life might go away. So continuing commitments to mundane objects can be undone not only because they come to be deemed to be unworthy but also because their objects might die, or be lost or stolen. Faith that God exists is the commitment to the belief that God exists, and it is a virtue because it enables us to do well in life; or more cautiously, it is a virtue in those whom it enables to well. *But can faith so conceived as a commitment to a belief actually be rational? Further, if it is rational, is it ever reasonable?* There are two issues. First, precisely what does it mean to have a *commitment to a belief*? Secondly, what makes a commitment to a belief reasonable?

Is Commitment to Religious Belief Reasonable?

*One has a commitment to a belief when one bases a significant part of one's life and projects of on the truth of that belief.*⁹ Faith is always a commitment that is vulnerable because it always involves uncertainty. Faith in a friend or a lover or an institution can be undermined by worries about whether or not the faith is well-placed; that is, whether the beliefs it presupposes are really true. Those doubts, in significant matters, are ever-present. That is why it is that faith has to be continually renewed. There are two sides to the renewal process. The first we have already examined in some detail. Faith is aroused by religious experiences. Some are public, although what we *make* of those public experiences certainly is a personal matter. Some experiences, those in the solitude of prayer, are obviously private. These are the sources of the experiences that arouse religious feeling and lead to the affirmation and reaffirmation of religious belief. As we have observed, religious faith is reasonable only if the beliefs that are presupposed by it are reasonable. Hence *doubts need to be confronted*. Doubt, of course, has many sources, but perhaps they can be divided into two classes: metaphysical and moral. Metaphysical doubt is the doubt about the reasonableness of religion's central tenets; for example, that God exists and/or that God takes an interest in us. Moral doubt

⁹ Here I am using 'project' in the sense of Bernard Williams. One's project in life defines one's identity; that is, it is an answer to the question: Who or what am I? (Williams/Cahn and Haber, 1970,1995, p.p. 634-46, especially 642; Williams, 2002 pp. 195 -8)

arises because for many people it is difficult to reconcile the existence of God, or at least of a personal God worthy of worship, with the existence of natural and moral evil. We now confront these sources of doubt, and in this way try to show that religion can be reasonable

The success of natural science has often been thought to have the effect of undermining religion. If we believe that the only way to know about nature is by natural science and if we believe that the only thing that is real is nature, then it will almost certainly appear to be unreasonable to have faith in God. God is surely not a natural object, and even if God were a natural object, it is difficult to see what natural science would have to say about him. At the end of the Enlightenment, during the period of the hard determinism of Laplace and d'Holbach, it was difficult to see just what role God could have to play in the world, although as we have observed, Newton himself did not consider himself above appeals to God. Every event, Enlightenment determinists taught, is not only preceded by but also is also *necessitated* by its antecedent, proximate cause. Even the deliverances of our will, which may appear to be free, are actually caused by antecedent, proximate physical events. The choices of the apparently free will must, therefore, be illusory, because whatever we have decided to do must have been antecedently determined, and *appear* to be free *only because we did not know advance what we had already been determined to choose*. It was surely natural for people who were captivated by beliefs of this sort to think that religion is just a sham.¹⁰

Many knowledgeable people today apparently believe that religious belief is now vulnerable to assault by natural science just as it was two hundred years ago; but this, I shall argue, surely is not the case. In the first place, 21st-century natural science is not deterministic. We now admit that there is genuine indeterminism in nature, for example in the phenomenon of beta decay (of radioactive particles). Also, we acknowledge the impossibility of determining the locations of certain "particles," like electrons. This is the famous Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Some philosophers of science think that the correct response to this phenomenon is simply to deny that subatomic particles have location. Others who are more cautious are content to allow that particles have location but concede that determining their locations are beyond the reach of scientific experiment and observation. We are also told that much of the universe is inaccessible to us; large

¹⁰ At the end of the Enlightenment, during the early period of the French Revolution, many intellectuals in fact did publicly state and act upon the conclusion that religion is just a sham, a device designed to placate an abused population with promises of a rewarding afterlife in exchange for a natural life of servitude. That is why it was that at the beginning of the Revolution in France the lands of the Roman Catholic Church were confiscated and the Church itself was disenfranchised, that is, deprived of all political authority.

swaths on the Murkowski space/time diagram are beyond our ken. Even more unsettling, we now take EPR (Einstein-Podolski-Rosen Hypothesis) seriously; in essence that there can be causal connections that are in principle impossible to trace. Indeed, it is natural to wonder just how confident we can be on *scientific* grounds of the existence of causal connections that are impossible to trace.¹¹ These worries suggest that perhaps Enlightenment enthusiasm for natural science went far too far, yet I do not mean to imply that any of these new developments devalue the superb accomplishments of natural science and mathematics of our or any era. Surely the progress of natural science is among the very greatest triumphs of the human mind. The point is that although it may be true that nothing can actually be *known* about nature by human reason except by natural science; it also appears, at least at this time, that even natural science cannot know everything that is true about nature.

Yet this is just the beginning. Even the classical physics that mesmerized d’Holbach and Laplace raises certain questions that were not adequately addressed at the time or even now. For example, a fundamental concept of classical dynamics is *instantaneous velocity*. As an object accelerates (increases in velocity) as it descends to Earth. It seems obvious that at each instant of the descent the object has *some* velocity. Indeed, instantaneous velocity is the velocity of the object at an *instant*. Surely velocity is to be found by dividing change in distance by change in time. But at any given *point* there isn’t a change in time. In other words $\Delta t = 0$. Hence, $\Delta s/\Delta t$ is undefined. This ignores the more complicated case, where acceleration itself measurably *increases*. In that case, the rise in velocity over time is not linear, but rather exponential. Yet, at every instant, whether acceleration is constant or increasing, a descending object must have some velocity. After all, a descending object is not motionless. Dealing with these issues involves differential calculus, but differential calculus treats instantaneous events as “limits,” not as intervals or even instants. Of course, no one would dream of arguing that Newtonian dynamics merely “points to” phenomena that cannot be defined (or more, cautiously properly defined) and therefore that instantaneous velocity cannot even be a simile as there isn’t a fact for which it could be a simile.

There another point as well, which takes us beyond classical physics in an interesting way. It is the concept of *the present state of the universe*. The concept of the present state of the universe

¹¹ For a useful introductory discussion of these issues: see (The editors of Scientific American, “Einstein,” pp. 32 – 34 and Powell, 2115, pp. 60 -67; for a more sophisticated, challenging analysis see, Maudlin, 2011.)

is impossible to define even given the theory of light that was developed by the end of the 19th century. The present state of the universe would be the state of each object at a given time, for example, at *this* very moment. But this state is obviously unknowable by us finite creatures. When we observe objects, the state we observe is always a *prior* state, because it takes time for electromagnetic radiation to reach us. Leaving aside complications of Relativity Theory (much less Quantum Mechanics), it is obvious that no finite creature (who lives and dies) will ever be able to gather the data necessary to describe the universe at any temporal point. If the whole universe as the union of all its temporal states, it is clear that universe is inconceivable by us. But what could it be other than the union of its temporal states? Of course, this does not prove that a transcendental object, like God, could not describe the universe at every instant and thus conceive the whole universe, but those who reject the “God-hypothesis” are not in position to appeal to God, and it is more than a bit awkward to define the whole universe as what would God conceive the if only God did exist. Of course, this objection does not apply to Newton because for him the idea of God is *conceptually* prior to the idea of nature,¹² although defense of that claim must be left for another paper. In any case, seems to me to be impossibly difficult to see how there can be any *objective* understanding of nature unless there is a transcendent point, an Archimedean point, from which nature can be viewed as a *totality*. There are other worries.

As is common knowledge, the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter is π . Yet, π is a transcendental number, which means that its decimal expansion is an infinite, non-repeating sequence; in other words, an infinite, non-repeating random ordered set. Set theory deals with those sets and hence transcendental numbers by the Axiom of Choice, which simply postulates the *existence* of the required sets. In practical matters, like astronomy or engineering, there is a need to perform calculations involving π . For example, we would rely upon an approximation of π if we needed to know precisely how to machine a stainless steel cylinder with a certain diameter. But every *approximation* of π is a *rational* number whereas π is a transcendental number. The identification of a transcendental number with a rational number is a contradiction; yet only those

¹² By “conceptually” prior I mean that which cannot be conceived without that thing which is conceptually prior to it. So, if God is conceptually prior to nature, nature (taken as a whole) cannot be conceived without God. That is because there would be no perspective that transcends nature from which all nature can be viewed a whole. Of course, some may argue that nature can be viewed as a totality from within; but that would be rather like a creature confined to the inside of a sphere imagining how the sphere would look from the outside without being able to make sense of the distinction between the outside and inside of a sphere. This argument is obviously inspired by and indebted to Kant’s First Antinomy of Reason. (Kant, Kemp-Smith, trans., 1929/1787, p. 396ff.)

who have actually lost their minds or are just perverse will conclude on that basis that engineering is “irrational” or “unreasonable,” and consequently that no confidence should be placed in it¹³

The history of science has taught us that sometimes phenomena that we did not understand involve forces that we had not yet detected. We did not know how the fiery sun was possible in the absence of oxygen until we discovered and understood nuclear forces. But how do we know at a particular time that there *are* undetected (or perhaps undetectable) forces that would explain what is now inexplicable? The presupposition that *human* cognitive machinery is adequate to the discovery of all that is necessary to unravel the mysteries of the universe is a working assumption (fair enough), but hardly a belief substantiated by actual evidence.

The point of these examples is not to tear down, but rather to point out merely that it just isn't true, even on the most charitable interpretations, that physics can produce a complete, accurate description of nature. Indeed, if the arguments of the Enlightenment for a deterministic understanding of nature were not even convincing at the time, how much weaker they now appear. Now, we find that the micro-universe (consisting of subatomic “particles,” strings and quarks) does not look much like mid-sized world of rocks, elephants and plants. The mid-sized world, in turn, does not look like the macro-world of dark holes, galactic collisions, and event-horizons. This should not be not be surprising. Perhaps it is reasonable to suppose that evolution favored creatures whose perceptual and conceptual capacities facilitate interaction with the mid-sized objects that populate our quiet nook in the cosmos, a nook that is mercifully tucked away near the tip of a spiral

¹³ If the language of mathematics and natural science can befuddle us, the language of religion can be even more perplexing. Although this paper does not focus on any particular religion, Christianity itself provides us with examples of theology that are couched in mysterious *philosophical* categories. The notions of substance and identity (drawn principally from Aristotle and the Hellenistic period) are good examples. On this philosophical theory, the Holy Trinity is supposedly constituted by three *substances*, God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They are all distinct and yet all one and the same – giving the appearance, to say the least, of contradiction! Perhaps, however, we could try an *attributivist* rather than a *substantivist* reading in approaching the problem of the Trinity. What more is meant by all the Aristotelian jargon than that there is a category of reality, an attribute, the divine (in contrast, for examples, to the material, the mental, the moral, the mathematical, the fictional), which according to Christianity, is manifested in three ways: By Jesus, who is what the divine looks like in a person, by the Spirit, which is how the divine feels within us and by the Father, which is how the divine is conceived when likened to Plato's “craftsman,” who gave form to matter and brought order out of chaos? Perhaps if doctrine were stated in this way, the principal idea of the Christian religion would be more “intuitive.” In any case even the most orthodox of Christians, who insist upon the traditional, substantivist reading of scripture, might be willing to concede that an attributivist approach could be useful, as a heuristic device, in making the ultimate statement of Christian faith more accessible to the novice who is foundering in the midst of doctrinal puzzles. Perhaps an *attributivist* reading of the “divine” might even play the functional role in Christian theology that, say, the limit of a function plays in dynamics.

galaxy that is not in “immediate” danger of colliding with its nearest neighbor, Andromeda. Why should we suppose that those very cognitive capacities, which evolved under special, favorable circumstances, should be adequate to understand *everything* in nature, even more, or less inaccessible micro and macro phenomena? And if we cannot thoroughly understand *nature* by the use of our perceptual and conceptual organs, what reason could we have concluding that there can be *no reality beyond* what *we* can detect and analyze? If natural science cannot *define nature*, why should we expect it to *define reality*? *Philosophy and popular culture* generally are given to enthusiasms and therefore seem to claim much more for scientific advances than do incomparably more knowledgeable scientists, like Newton. Like religion, *natural science is based upon a commitment to a belief*. It is the (reasonable) belief that *its method* is the best way to discover truths *about nature*; and *that not only has it been the best method, but it will continue to be the best method*. Even if nature refuses to yield up all its tightly held secrets to science; it undeniably reveals many. The reasonableness of our faith in natural science is not even minimally disturbed even though it involves commitments that it cannot irrefragably justify and concepts that it cannot always make completely understandable. The same, I suggest, goes for religious faith.

That religious faith should allow itself to be undermined or even intimidated by natural science appears (to me at least) to be an important mistake; however there is a *second*, much more important way in which religious faith can be undermined, and that is by the *existence of evil*. By evil I mean what it has always meant in the history of Western philosophy: natural as well as moral evil. Especially threatening examples of *natural* evil are the sufferings and deaths of children and disasters that turn the healthy and strong to the sickly and weak. Some find *moral* evil even more disconcerting; that is the evil that cruelly turns the innocent, weak and oppressed into helpless victims. In modern times, those are the evils of Nazism, its imitators, and current successors; in ancient times; the evil of a Domitian or an Elagabalus. How, can one possibility have faith, a *commitment to the belief that there is a beneficent God who takes an interest in us*, in the face of tragedies and atrocities? Many find themselves unsatisfied by the standard arguments, best articulated in Leibniz’s grand theodicy, where he argues this possible world is better for a free will that sometimes turns bad than it would be in a world without free choice. Even more disturbing is the other gnawing worry, which is that God surely could have done better when it comes to natural evil. Leibniz argues, perhaps implausibly, that natural evil in the world is outweighed by the natural good we find even in unintelligent creatures, which I suppose are creatures like bacteria that

oxygenate the earth or plants that maintain the CO₂/O₂ cycle. Devastating earthquakes and volcanoes are necessary to produce the dry land that rises above the oceans. Yet all this is cold comfort to those who suffer and watch loved ones perish as nature lurches from one disaster to the next. Nothing that I could say in defense of Leibniz will fully defeat doubts about his arguments; indeed, if Leibniz couldn't convince the world of the cogency of his arguments, I certainly cannot. (Leibniz, trans. Wiener, pp. 509-11, 1951/1710)

Perhaps I can raise a different, legitimate question about doubts raised by natural evil, which is that it might be a serious mistake for us to assume that *the entire universe should be ordered* by what *we think* is good *for us* or even by what really is good for *us*. Humility has often been claimed by the faithful to be a distinctively religious virtue, and perhaps it is; however, it is also a virtue reason and of natural science. But what does “humility” really mean? Surely it is not exaggerated self-deprecation that insincerely denies its accomplishments or cowardice that surrenders legitimate interests to bullies. *Humility* is a deeper *epistemological and moral virtue*. Humility lies in the notion that *human beings* might not be equipped to take the measure of creation, either with respect to what is known or what is good. Why should the universe be organized to cater to our desires, much less to our wishes? Why should it be set up to flatter our curiosity? It is implausible to suggest that all that there is to be known will eventually be known by *human reason*, relying as we do on perceptual and conceptual powers that hastily developed on a planet in a benign solar system. *It is ironic that those who hail natural science because it relieved humans of the conceit that Earth is at the center of the universe, designed especially for human beings; now insist that human reason should be the arbiter of all disputes not only about nature but also about reality itself.*

Religion and science both involve faith, commitment to beliefs. The beliefs to which we are committed are uncertain – even the commitments made by natural science. But the commitments of each are responsive to reason. If we believe that our reason can with sufficient probability undermine the beliefs that faith presupposes, then faith will be undermined. On the other hand, if, unlike ancient sophists like Protagoras, we believe that “man” is not the measure of all things, then the situation is quite different. Perhaps then reason does not rule out the reasonableness of those who seek religious faith. Indeed, what is there to lose by seeking faith? Pascal says just a few meaningless pleasures; and what is there to gain? At the very least, an admirable life and the respect of mankind. (Pascal, 1995/1670, p. 136.) Much the same can be said for natural science. Suppose

that the methods of natural science will never reveal all nature's secrets and that some of its suppositions are unintuitive or even paradoxical. Shall be then abandoned natural science? Were we to abandon natural science, as many *extreme subjectivists* now demand, we would surely give up much that is admirable: In exchange for what? *In exchange for nothing at all!*

CONCLUSION

After all this, what has been shown? Religious faith is not a form of *irrational belief*. In the first place, faith is not belief at all, even though it is true that religious faith is necessarily connected to beliefs. Second, religious *belief* need not be irrational, even though some insist that it is. *In other words, P.V. is false.*

More than that: Religious faith can be *reasonable*. Faith is a commitment to a belief, generally the belief that God exists. Commitment to the belief that God exists is a *virtue* because it enables those who have it to live well. It is *reasonable* to make a commitment to a belief, provided that it is not contrary to reason, and that it enables one to live (or to think) well. In fact, Pascal's Wager claims that a commitment to religious belief is reasonable just because it allows us to live well. That is how it is that faith returns more than it demands and why it is that the virtue of faith is reasonable.

As we have seen, some will argue that religious belief is not plausible because it is at war with science. This paper argues that at this time in the history of science, the beliefs that religious faith presuppose are not undermined, indeed not even threatened, by natural science. The paper argues that the current claims *for* science must be thoughtful and cautious. It may even be that the idea of God is *conceptually prior* to some of the notions of natural science, like the totality of the universe where that totality is conceived as the union of all its "present" states. What appeared indisputable two hundred and forty years ago, on the eve of the French Revolution, now does not seem even plausible. The reasonable conclusion to draw now about science now is that it is very likely that the epistemological equipment of human beings is simply inadequate to comprehend fully the universe in which we live, despite the fact that scientific progress has been nothing less than stupendous. Hegel was certainly right in claiming that the greatest mystery is how it is possible for matter to be *conscious* of itself. (Hegel, Hegel Translation Group, 1985/1807, p. 2ff.) Hegel would surely agree, the claim that the human reason is the arbiter of all things true and good appears to be a re-worked version of the cruder androcentric views of Eudoxus and Aristotle according to

which Earth is at the center of it all.

None of this is meant even to hint at unworthiness among those who reject religious faith. Each person responds on the basis of a unique set of experiences to the contingencies of life and the certainty of death. It is nevertheless worth asking just what it is that differentiates those to whom faith comes so easily and those who reject it out of fear of disappointment or even repugnance. The answer according to this paper lies in our reactions to *religious experience*. Here I leave us where we began; with metaphor. Imagine an impressionist painting of an autumnal landscape. The ground is covered by colorful leaves. Among those leaves is a beautiful person clothed in motley autumnal colors. Some people look at the painting and see a person in the leaves, but others just see piles of leaves. The trick, as you know, is to relax; not to focus intently; to let the image of a person emerge from the leaves; to allow the contour of the leaves to reveal the beauty that lies beneath them. Those who merely count pixels, plot their relations to each other and wrap it all up in the equations of statistical analysis just might not ever see the person in the leaves. Perhaps they will not even see the leaves; maybe not even collections of colorful dots; perhaps just colorful dots. This is the right metaphor for religious experience, which enables those suitably disposed to receive faith. Those who focus too intently on the details of mundane life, even the details of physical theory, might never experience the *feelings* that prompt and continually reinforce faith by revealing the divine in the temporal, which perhaps is just to say what was said long ago, that the heart too can see, hear and feel, and thereby come to have “reasons that reason does not know.” (Pascal/Levi, 1995/1670, p. 158.)

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