

Religious Ambiguity, Agnosticism, and Prudence

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I. Introduction

Pascal's famous wager for the rationality of belief in God is one of those relatively rare philosophical arguments that has an immediate intuitive appeal to ordinary people.¹ Belief in God just makes sense, the common argument goes. A person has everything to gain and nothing to lose by believing in God. No one can show that God doesn't exist, and if God does exist, it would be stupid to reject belief and miss out on the possibility of eternal life in Heaven.

Here's how a student put it in the context of discussing the meaning of life and Thomas Nagel's well-known essay, "The Absurd." She says, "I do doubt God and I realize the absurdity of my attitude." (Recall Nagel's analysis of the absurd: the disparity between aspiration and reality; the conflict between our seriousness and a point of view from which we can doubt such seriousness and wonder whether anything matters at all.) She continues: "Why not focus on what happens after death? When weighing the consequences of finding my purpose intrinsically or believing in God, even though He might not exist, I would rather go for the latter because only it gives the possibility for an eternity of bliss." Precisely. This is a quintessential expression of the kind of thinking that is at the heart of a pragmatic approach to the question of belief in God. The possible benefits of belief far outweigh any possible negative consequences of believing falsely. So rationality is assumed to be related to an appeal to long-term personal goods.

A closely related but different pragmatic approach is also prevalent in common thinking about the possible benefits that might arise when believing in God. This approach finds its philosophical expression in William James's famous essay, "The Will to Believe," and its ordinary expression in the notion that belief in God helps one to get through life—now. Whereas the Pascalian argument focuses on the possibility of long-term benefits of a true belief that God exists, the Jamesian version asserts that we may be "better off even now" if we believe that God exists, independent of whether it is true that God exists. The benefits may be moral, psychological, or social, and may color our life in a significant and positive sense. Trust, hope, assurance, optimism, fellow feeling—all may naturally be conjoined with belief in God and such feelings and complex emotions are obviously beneficial for living a good life.

There is, however, a minority report that deserves a far wider appreciation than is apparent. Whereas the intuitive appeal of Pascal's wager and Jamesian pragmatic reflections is common and taken to be obvious, it rests on assumptions that ordinary people can quite readily see, upon reflection, to be questionable. A quite different appeal related to pragmatic considerations can be found in germinal form in various places. In the final paragraphs of Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Philo remarks:

It is contrary to common sense to entertain apprehensions or terrors upon account of any opinion whatsoever, or to imagine that we run any risk hereafter, by the freest use of our reason. Such a sentiment implies both an absurdity and an inconsistency. It is an absurdity to believe that the Deity has human passions, and one of the lowest of human passions, a restless appetite for applause. It is an inconsistency to believe that, since the Deity has this human passion, he has not others also; and, in particular, a disregard to the opinions of creatures so much inferior.²

Philo's critique of anthropomorphism questions the way in which we project into the deity less than admirable human characteristics and desires, and then use these projections as the basis for understanding religiously significant attitudes, like worship or appropriate forms of belief. In doing these things, we reduce God "to the low condition of mankind, who are delighted with entreaty, solicitation, presents, and flattery."³ Even worse than such divine vanity is to think that God would punish us if such vain passions were left unmet.

... it depresses the Deity far below the condition of mankind, and represents him as a capricious demon who exercises his power without reason and without humanity! And were that Divine Being disposed to be offended at the vices and follies of silly mortals, who are his own workmanship, it would surely fare with the votaries of most popular superstitions. Nor would any of the human race merit his favor but a very few, the philosophical theists, who entertain or rather indeed endeavor to entertain suitable notions of his divine perfections. As the only persons entitled to his compassion and indulgence would be the philosophical skeptics, a sect almost equally rare, who, from a natural diffidence of their own capacity, suspend or endeavor to suspend all judgment with regard to such sublime and such extraordinary subjects.⁴

Although Philo's remarks arise toward the end of a rather complex philosophical journey in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, his view appeals to the "common sense" nature of his

reflections. Here we have remarks that form the basis for what I will call the “agnostic wager.” Given the bewildering epistemic situation we find ourselves in with regard to questions concerning the existence and nature of God, if we pursue such questions as rationally and as honestly as possible, without self-deception, and we arrive at uncertainty and doubt, it is unlikely that any further pragmatic considerations are relevant for belief acquisition.

Let’s distinguish truth-directed arguments and benefit-directed (pragmatic) arguments.⁵ A truth-directed argument seeks to establish the reasonableness in believing a certain conclusion is true, given the truth or acceptability of the premises. A benefit-directed argument offers reasons for thinking that certain benefits arise if or only if one acquires a particular belief or set of beliefs. The agnostic wager could be put in the following way. If truth-directed arguments aren’t decisive and we suspend belief concerning the existence and nature of God, there is no good pragmatic argument that overrides considerations of truth and that could be the basis for rejecting agnostic suspension of belief and acquiring a positive belief or set of beliefs about the existence and nature of God. Put less abstractly, if God exists, but we don’t know whether God exists, it doesn’t matter whether we believe that God exists. Contrary to what many (most?) people believe, I take this position to be rather obvious, a matter of “common sense,” as Philo asserts, and I believe good consequences would arise if such a belief were more widespread.

In this paper I intend to work out the implications of various facts about the puzzling situation we find ourselves in when we confront the religious ambiguity of the world. Unlike standard evidentialist challenges to religious belief, my view is not that standards of rationality are necessarily violated by religious believers (although this may be the case). My position is that a very common view of the practical consequences of belief in God is wrong, and there are important benefits that arise if we are indifferent to certain kinds of religious truth-claims.

II. Pascal’s Wager

There is a certain irony involved in contrasting Pascal’s wager (or “Pascalian wagering”) with what I will call the agnostic wager, because Pascal’s gambit begins from a standpoint that is agnostic about the existence and nature of God. In the context of religious belief, we usually think that agnosticism involves two kinds of claims: an epistemic claim, that is, a claim about lack of knowledge (or evidence, or justification), and a doxastic claim, or a claim about belief. We don’t know whether God exists because we lack sufficient evidence, therefore we should suspend belief in God, neither affirming nor denying that God exists. Pascal’s wager has an agnostic basis with respect to our initial situation of epistemic uncertainty: “If there is a God, he is infinitely beyond our comprehension, since, having neither parts nor limits, he bears no relation to ourselves. We are

therefore incapable of knowing either what he is, or if he is.”⁶ Either God exists or God does not exist. How do we decide? “Reason cannot decide anything.”⁷ According to Pascal, there is no decisive truth-directed argument available, so the answer is intellectually indeterminate. Unlike the religious agnostic who recommends suspension of belief, Pascal offers his famous wager to support belief in God.

The agnostic says that we can't know that God exists, therefore we should suspend belief about God, neither affirming nor denying God's existence. Pascal argues that we should think prudentially or pragmatically at this point, because the possible consequences of the two choices are crucially relevant when it comes to the option of acquiring belief in God. In James's language, there are vital goods at issue, and like James, Pascal thinks we have to wager; the issue is forced upon us. It is not forced with respect to truth and error, because we can, like the agnostic, suspend belief. By not affirming God's existence, however, either by denying the existence of God or by suspending belief, we run the risk of losing the benefits of belief that may arise if God does exist. As Pascal says, “Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!”⁸ The possible benefits are infinite; the risks are finite. The infinite good of an eternal life of sublime happiness with God is wagered against whatever finite goods might be lost by living in the light of a belief that God does exist. According to Pascal, from the standpoint of the rational decision theorist, as we might say now, the choice between the possibility of infinite goods and the risk of finite goods is, in ordinary parlance, a no-brainer. “That removes all choice: where there is infinity and where there is no infinity of chances of losing against one of winning, there is no scope for wavering, you have to chance everything.”⁹

The audience to whom the wager is addressed is embodied in Pascal's imagined interlocutor whose skepticism acknowledges the intellectual indeterminacy involved, but whose unbelief can't be cured by a supposed good gamble. “I am being forced to wager and I'm not free.... And I am made in such a way that I cannot believe. So what do you want me to do?”¹⁰ This passage raises the interesting question of whether belief is a matter of will, or something that we do. Pascal's skeptic insists that he is in a situation from which he can't extricate himself by merely choosing to believe. Such a belief is out of his control. Pascal apparently agrees, but insists that belief is something that is at least indirectly a matter about which the unbeliever can do something. If belief in God can't be rationally chosen because unbelief is caused by non-rational factors (the “passions”), then the alternative is to act as if such beliefs were true, by forming the kind of habits that believers exhibit.

So concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs of God but on diminishing your passions. You want to find faith and you do not know the way? You want to cure yourself of unbelief and you ask for remedies? Learn from those who have

been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. They are people who know the road you want to follow and have been cured of the affliction of which you want to be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reactions.¹¹

There are a number of important responses to Pascalian wagering, some of which are more closely related to our central concerns than others. Can doubt be cured by forming good religious habits? If we do find ourselves believing as the result of “taking holy water, having masses said, etc.,” would this be real faith, in the sense that believers talk about its nature and importance? In my experience, the resort to gambling on God is more commonly seen as a defensive maneuver enacted by the faithful to preserve the sensibleness of their assent to propositions that they may come to recognize as intellectually ungrounded or difficult to defend. In this case, the wager is not so much the path to real faith as it is a strategy for resisting a skeptical challenge and sustaining belief. As an offensive maneuver, the “as if” quality of whatever belief or faith is developed through forming good habits does seem to be a bit too detached to be the real thing. For our purposes, the important point to note is the difficulty involved in moving from unbelief to belief (or for that matter, from belief to unbelief) simply by being called upon to do something, that is, to choose to believe. If belief is more like something that happens to us and less like something we do, then being held responsible for what we believe is much more puzzling than it first appears, and being punished or rewarded for mere belief is more questionable. At the least, there is a tension in Pascal’s wagering between a recognition of the seemingly involuntary nature of belief, which can only be addressed indirectly, and affirmation of a doxastic goal (not quite “real faith”) that may fall short of what is required for achieving the infinite benefits that he thinks may be available.¹²

The question of belief and the will leads to another important objection that is raised in response to wagering on God. Let’s call this the “virtue objection.” The wager is an expression of prudential reasoning. Pascal appeals to the self-interested doubter who can weigh the relevant possibilities and choose the one that provides the best chances for a favorable outcome. But why should we think that God would eternally reward the self-interested believer and condemn to eternal damnation a truth-seeking person who uses her reason, inquires in an intellectually honest manner, and whose questioning can’t resolve her uncertainty and doubts? Would eternal punishment be just? Perhaps God might reward intellectual virtue, or the disposition to proportion belief to the perceived strength of the evidence. Because Pascal assumes that we don’t know either what God is or if God exists, there seems to be no reason to believe, as Hume’s Philo insists, that God should be saddled with less than admirable human traits that would be the basis for the punishment-reward

structure underlying such wagering. According to the minority report, the God of the wagerer seems petty and vindictive, and undervalues the use of reason in the very creatures who are the result of His (Her?) creative activity. Here are some expressions of the virtue objection. Michael Scriven says:

God is no fool, and if your reasons for belief are the expected gains this argument leads you to expect, He will undoubtedly see you as a hypocrite whose devotion to Him is in no way virtuous but indeed is aimed to extract a reward from Him for something which had inadequate intrinsic meaning for you. So he will punish you.¹³

J.L. Mackie, mirroring Philo's comments about God's supposed "restless appetite for applause," says:

The sort of God required for Pascal is modeled upon a monarch both stupid enough and vain enough to be pleased with self-interested flattery."¹⁴

And in a letter to one of his nephews, Thomas Jefferson expresses related ideas in a way that should be much more widely appreciated in current discussions about the religious views of the American founders.

Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear.... Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others which it will procure for you.¹⁵

The virtue objection contrasts the motives of the truth-seeking doubter and the wagering believer. The criticism claims that it would be unlikely that God would punish the impartial seeker of truth and reward the self-interested wagering believer. A previous question arises here. Pascal recommends that doubt might give way to faith if the doubter lives like the believer, "taking holy water, having masses said, etc." If post-wagering faith were real, if acquiring good religious habits and living piously resulted in not just a faithful life but a living faith, then the believer would not be a "hypocrite," as Scriven argues. Perhaps we should think of such faith in relation to the Aristotelian model of moral virtue. A person may become just by performing just actions, and may come to

think that virtue is its own reward, despite the fact that it also contributes to a good human life for the just person. Terence Penelhum responds to this aspect of the virtue objection by insisting that Pascalian wagering is merely a path to the real thing.

Pascal clearly thinks that real faith is a gift of divine grace and recommends the regular performance of religious duties as a way of dulling the influences of those human passions that obstruct our receptiveness to faith. So it would be foolish to dismiss what he says on the ground that no state of mind controlled by self-interest can be real faith. Pascal never supposes that it could be; he only points out that by rejecting faith, one may well be throwing away one's salvation. If we follow his recommendations, we may end up having the real thing.¹⁶

If we accept Penelhum's defense of Pascal on this issue, we may avoid the unattractive contrast between the disinterested truth-seeking doubter and the self-interested believer, because it may be misleading to say that the goal (epistemic, attitudinal, affective) attained by the wagerer is still internally related to her initial self-regarding motivations. Yet we still have the contrast between the believer and unbeliever. We still confront problems associated with the notion that God would punish the impartial, truth-seeking rational inquirer. If the wagerer ends with the real thing, she might not be self-interested, but the intellectual virtue of the doubting inquirer remains, as well as the situation of ignorance about the basis for assuming that God punishes unbelief and the intuition that it would be unjust for God to punish the rational doubter.

A further problem arises when we think about Pascal's assumption concerning our situation of metaphysical ignorance (or epistemic uncertainty) and the stronger claim that, in principle, the intellect cannot determine whether God is or what God is. Pascal's wagerer has put an end to inquiry because its epistemic goal is intellectually indeterminate, yet his wager proceeds as if a great deal has been determined about what God is (if God exists) and various important doxastic details associated with a particular form of religious belief. Pascal assumes that we are wagering on the possibility that Christianity, and in particular, Roman Catholicism, might be true, despite the fact that reason can't show us what is true. Yet from the standpoint of metaphysical ignorance, how do we narrow the range of relevant religious options in order to engage our will and live as if the option were true? It might be charitable to Pascal to excuse his insistence that we are forced to wager on Roman Catholic theism, on the grounds that we shouldn't expect a seventeenth century European to be as aware of religious diversity as we are. Yet the problem with his wager remains. Let's call this the "diversity objection." (It's sometimes referred to as the "many gods objection.") Pascal's wager

is plagued by the problem of deciding what to wager on from the standpoint of uncertainty or ignorance in a world full of diverse and competing claims about God, his nature, and his purposes.

William James famously but unsuccessfully attempted to deal with this issue by insisting that not all options for religious belief are created equal, at least from a personal point of view. When it comes to the possibility of adopting a religious worldview, some fail to “connect” with us. “A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed.”¹⁷ But what “appeals as a real possibility” to someone is not a claim about the *prima facie* plausibility of a claim, given certain reasons for belief or because some evidence counts for or against the truth of the claim. James’s notion of a “live option” simply refers to some belief that, as a matter of fact, is the basis for action. Deadness and liveness are, we might say, person-relative, and as such tell us nothing about the possible reasons for believing and being willing to act on a belief. Consulting an astrologer when faced with a difficult life situation, or going to a faith-healer rather than a pediatric oncologist when one’s child is diagnosed with cancer, are certainly live options for some, but they may be irrational possibilities nonetheless. As a matter of fact, my neighbor may not be attracted by my own approach to Buddhism or my friend’s decisive assent to Islam, but it’s not clear why the claims of Buddhism or Hinduism or Taoism or Islam should be rejected out of hand because my neighbor’s religious upbringing makes such possible belief systems unattractive or unrealistic or existentially strange. Certainly Buddhism’s denial of a substantial self may seem strange or weird to a person who believes her disembodied self is destined for heaven, and the notion that selves are reborn and may inhabit different physical manifestations may seem quite odd for some. But why should such possibilities be rejected without inquiring into the grounds for believing such things?

Michael Martin offers an alternative account of a live option. “I suggest that James should have said that a live option is one that is not improbable in the light of the available evidence.”¹⁸ James’s pragmatic argument is more nuanced than Pascal’s, but it has similar bones. Religion promises significant benefits. When we are faced with the option to believe and thus to live in the light of these promised benefits, and we cannot determine the truth of religious claims by intellectual inquiry, we should make a “passional decision” and embrace the “religious hypothesis.” But the religion hypothesis is so loose (“The best things are the more eternal things” and “we are better off even now if we believe”¹⁹) and James’s notion of a live option is so relativistic, his approach to the practical issue of the specific content of the wagered belief is no more helpful than Pascal’s. If we accept Martin’s suggestion, then the range of genuine religious options is very much wider than what is proposed by James and Pascal. At the least, the various world religions, with their diverse notions of God (or no God), human nature, and paths to salvation and liberation are all live options. Likewise, since the range of options is so wide, how could one tell that the decision among the various options can’t be decided on “intellectual grounds,” as James says and Pascal agrees, without

having seriously engaged in some inquiry concerning the reasons for various cosmic worldviews? As Martin asks: “How can one tell if one would be better off in this life believing that Christianity or Buddhism is true? And if one makes a choice, which form of Christianity or Buddhism is justified on beneficial grounds?”²⁰ Our discussion of pragmatic arguments has led naturally to problems associated with religious diversity. None of what I’ve said so far suggests that theism is not true, but if it is true, especially in one of the forms with which we are most familiar, its truth must appear in the context of a world that is, as a matter of fact, interpreted in religiously diverse and incompatible ways. And its claims ought to reflect the epistemic situation that persons find themselves in. The promised benefits should reflect the religious ambiguity of the world.

III. Religious Ambiguity

In one sense, our situation may not be significantly different from Pascal’s with respect to the facts associated with religious diversity. Our social world, however, is now globally connected in ways that force upon us an awareness of religious diversity that can’t be easily ignored or dismissed, even by ordinary people whose everyday concerns are more local and parochial. We now live in a world in which the possibilities of mass destruction are more closely related to religious disagreements than to disagreements about social and political arrangements. The different kinds of disagreements don’t exclude one another, of course, since in part the conflict between liberal democracies and the possibility of a theocratic form of social and religious life fuels at least some of the violence and killing. “They” hate us, their Gods are not ours, and the structure of the conflict is replayed over and over in various parts of the world, not simply in disputes between Jihadists and American infidels. Religious diversity isn’t new, but the forced confrontation with this diversity across a wider spectrum of adherents to particular religious traditions is more recent. More people are aware that they don’t believe what we believe, yet it’s not obvious that ordinary people and the religious traditions themselves have carefully thought about the implications of religious diversity. From the inside, they are as committed to their traditions as we are. They may be sincere, intelligent, and largely as influenced by local contexts as we are. So how should we understand their claims and their religious attachments? How should we view our own beliefs in the light of a religiously diverse world? Moreover, how might a God react to our situation (if it makes sense to speak of a God “reacting” at all), if it turns out that the claims of a certain theistic tradition are at least partially true, insofar as the divine reality is a personal being with the attributes of the theistic God?

First, it’s important to note that religious diversity does not entail what I will refer to as “religious ambiguity.” Religious diversity simply refers to the fact that religious traditions make

different and incompatible claims about the existence and nature of God, the origin of the universe, human nature, the human situation, the possibility of salvation or liberation, and so forth.²¹ The existence of rival truth-claims may indicate that there's something inherently puzzling about forming beliefs in this area,²² but the fact of widespread disagreement about religious beliefs is obviously compatible with the fact that some religious claims are true and that some persons have true religious beliefs. Not everyone holds true religious beliefs, since some beliefs that are in fact held are incompatible, but some believers could have true religious beliefs. Who is right? How do we decide? If we say that it's not clear who is right, then our situation in life is characterized by religious ambiguity.

Religious ambiguity has two essential components. First, the world can be interpreted in numerous and incompatible ways; and second, various interpreters (and their interpretations) may violate no standards of rationality when asserting the truth-claims of a particular religious (or anti-religious) worldview. The first aspect of religious ambiguity may be called the diversity component; the second aspect is the epistemic component. The diversity component is rather obvious but its details are important and often overlooked by the ordinary faithful. The epistemic component is controversial and its demonstration would require a lengthy and intimidating intellectual journey (especially for the ordinary person).

Recent discussions of religious ambiguity owe much to John Hick's seminal account in *An Interpretation of Religion*. For Hick, ambiguity is the result of the rise of modern science and the development of a naturalistic understanding of our world. "By the religious ambiguity of the universe I do not mean that it has no definite character but that it is capable from our present human vantage point of being thought and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways."²³ Because modern science developed within a largely theistic and Christian context, the skepticism generated by scientific naturalism has primarily been a-theistic; consequently, Hick examines religious ambiguity in the context of the debate between theism and atheism. Hick not only asserts that the world is religiously ambiguous; he attempts to show it by seriously examining the various arguments that would support these opposing worldviews. Again, the project is not for the faint of heart. Even Hick's noteworthy attempt, which occupies over fifty pages of his book, is relatively sketchy. His conclusion is clear: "The theistic and anti-theistic arguments are all inconclusive, for the special evidences to which they appeal are also capable of being understood in terms of the contrary worldview."²⁴ His conclusion will please neither the rational theist nor the atheist. Their critical examinations of the most sophisticated versions of the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, the design argument, the argument from religious experience, the argument from miracles, the problem of evil, and naturalistic explanations of religious phenomena supposedly leave them with the "disambiguated" universe.²⁵ The question is whether their opponents can be

criticized for failing to fulfill their obligations as rational beings when attempting to support their respective worldviews. And anyone who seriously and systematically examines recent work in the philosophy of religion by theists and atheists alike cannot help but be impressed by the work being produced.²⁶ It takes time, patience, intellectual perseverance, intelligence, and real philosophical talent to work through the various arguments and make some headway. Students of either persuasion can find considerable and powerful support for whatever religious beliefs they happen to hold (theistic or naturalistic) prior to serious philosophical reflection on these issues. Plantinga, Alston, and Swinburne may be right, but Mackie, Rowe, and Michael Martin cannot be accused of failing to live up to their rational obligations (and vice versa). As Terence Penelhum says, "To live in a religiously ambiguous world is to live, then, in a world where a theistic worldview and an atheistic worldview are both rational."²⁷ If the arguments produced by either camp were decisive, then the world would not be religiously ambiguous. If we could prove that the greatest conceivable being exists, or that superfluous evil effectively rules out the existence of an unsurpassably powerful and loving God, then the enigmatic character of our situation would be at least partially removed. (Note how many possible religious disagreements might remain.) Penelhum comments, "But in the absence of such disambiguation, we seem to have to accept that we live in a world that can be interpreted in both of these incompatible ways by rational beings, in which their disagreement is itself subsumable under each of the two worldviews...."²⁸ Moreover, if we are uncertain who is right because inquiry has not taken place within either worldview and we judge the various arguments to be inconclusive, from our point of view, agnosticism seems to be a reasonable provisional stance.

So far we have followed Hick's path toward religious ambiguity, but a deeper sense of ambiguity is suggested by the diversity objection to Pascalian wagering. The world may be interpreted theistically or naturalistically, but Christian theism does not exhaust the possibilities available for a religious interpretation of the world. While containing similarities, the various religious affirmations of a theistic God take diverse and incompatible forms in the great western faiths of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. And the great non-western traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism offer diverse and distinctive religious interpretations of the world. One form of Hinduism (Advaita Vedanta) interprets divine reality (Brahman) as an impersonal metaphysical unity or world essence, whereas Buddhism is often understood to be, at least, a non-theistic interpretation of religious life, and perhaps explicitly atheistic. Some of the fundamental texts of the traditions, such as *The Upanishads*, *The Dhammapada*, or Nagarjuna's *Mulamadhyamikakarika* are, as one scholar puts it (speaking of *The Upanishads*), "Unusually philosophically self-conscious texts."²⁹ John Hick reminds us about divergent belief-systems:

For whilst there are various overlaps between their teachings there are also radical differences: is the divine reality (let us refer to it as the Real) personal or non-personal; if personal, is it unitary or triune; is the universe created, or emanated, or itself eternal; do we live only once on this earth or are we repeatedly reborn? And so on and so on. When the problem of understanding religious plurality is approached through these rival truth-claims it appears particularly intractable.³⁰

Penelhum calls this facet of the ambiguity of our situation its “inter-religious ambiguity.”³¹ To suggest that the great non-western traditions, including Taoism and various forms of Buddhism, are rooted in foundational texts that are deeply philosophical and offer reasons for their respective truth-claims is to affirm the epistemic component of religious ambiguity. No doubt many westerners have been attracted to Buddhism not because of its “mystical” content, but because of its this-worldly and practical approach to the problems of life, as if experience and some sense of non-speculative (empirical) reasonableness could test its fundamental claims. Referring to practitioners of non-western forms of religious life who seek liberation through overcoming of ignorance rather than the grace of salvation, Penelhum says: “In doing all this, the adherent of one of these traditions seems clearly to be following a set of doxastic practices that are clearly rational, and as free from failures of doxastic obligation, as the path of the Jew, Christian, or Muslim.”³²

I should mention briefly a final dimension of religious ambiguity. We might call this intra-religious ambiguity, since adherents to a particular religious tradition might also be differentiated on the basis of diverse beliefs and practices: Protestants and Catholics, Shiites and Sunnis, and so forth. (It is sad that people kill each other because of such differences.)

One of the most interesting recent reflections on the broader notion of religious ambiguity is offered by Robert McKim in *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*. I couldn’t possibly do justice here to McKim’s careful analysis of the hiddenness of God and its implications, but a few comments will be helpful. McKim admits that what he says about ambiguity, “owes much to the work of Terence Penelhum and John Hick,”³³ and his lengthy discussion of God’s hiddenness is a part of the larger issue of religious ambiguity. What does McKim mean by the hiddenness of God? “The central idea is just that it is not clear whether the claims that theists make about God are true; and this applies both to the claim that God exists and to numerous theistic claims about the character, purposes, will, and so forth of God.”³⁴ There are numerous reasons for thinking God is hidden (e.g., people lose their belief in God, many have no awareness of God, numerous theistic explanations of God’s hiddenness seem to affirm it, many theists are preoccupied with proving God’s existence, for many the belief in God is not a live option because of their cultural context, etc.),³⁵ and there are numerous disadvantages of God’s hiddenness. For example, hiddenness makes

belief difficult, yet certain traditions place extreme importance on belief; hiddenness generates uncertainty and disagreement; hiddenness makes it difficult to establish a relationship with God, if God exists, and makes it difficult to respond appropriately to a being worthy of worship; hiddenness promotes social conflict among those who disagree about the nature of God and God's purposes; and hiddenness provides the space within which vulnerable and gullible people may fall prey to religious frauds and authoritarianism.³⁶ Theological and philosophical disputations are full of explanations and denials of God's hiddenness, and McKim's book seriously engages these responses in a sustained examination. Aren't humans defective? Sinful? Doesn't God necessarily transcend human categories? Aren't there goods associated with God's hiddenness? But aren't there obvious goods that would arise if God's existence, nature, and purposes were more clear?

McKim is modest about his contribution to the discussion of religious ambiguity and what it would be like to show that the world is religiously ambiguous. He admits that his treatment of "religious ambiguity and religious diversity" assumes that the world is religiously ambiguous, and to show this would be a "daunting project." "It would need to take into account all of the available evidence for and against the main claims of the various religions."³⁷ The various arguments for and against God's existence would have to be carefully examined. But the range of claims made by religions is quite broad. "And since religions obviously make assertions in numerous other areas, with some not even positing a deity, there would of course be a lot more than that involved in showing that there is ambiguity."³⁸ Given the fact, as I've said, that philosophically talented and sincere people come to different conclusions, for some at least, it's hard to know how the evidence balances out. Each of us must make his own judgment. Is Swinburne's probability argument decisive? Does Rowe's evidential argument from evil show that it is rational to be an atheist? McKim comments: "While the notion that it is hard to know what the evidence adds up to is not the only conceivable explanation of why this is so, it is an excellent candidate for such an explanation. But if it is hard for us to tell what position the balance of evidence supports, our situation is more or less the same as it would be if we knew the evidence to balance out."³⁹ We are involved in an area in which there are numerous conflicting claims, abundant relevant evidence, apparently much of importance at issue, reasons for thinking that humans are prone to bias and error in such matters, and a human history of unresolved and contentious disagreement about these notions. A daunting project indeed! Here's how McKim summarizes his notion of religious ambiguity.

On numerous matters about which the religions purport to speak, there is no proof that one side rather than others is correct, and the available evidence appears not to be overwhelmingly on one side rather than the others. Our experience, both of the world

around us and of our lives, seems to be open to being interpreted in terms of the sets of concepts and categories that are available in different religious traditions. Further, even if some position seems to be supported by rather more evidence than the alternatives, this is so under circumstances in which there is disagreement among conscientious members of many other groups about how to interpret the evidence and under circumstances in which the available evidence is complex.⁴⁰

If the world is religiously ambiguous, or if it is rational to judge, even provisionally, that the world is religiously ambiguous, then this puzzling fact ought to be taken into account when we consider how we hold our own beliefs, the attitude we take toward the religious beliefs of others, and how our plight might be assessed by God, if it turns out that Pascal and his skeptical interlocutor gambled their way to true religious beliefs. Does agnostic bewilderment matter?

IV. The Agnostic Wager

We are now in a better position to formulate the reasoning behind the “common sense” view implicitly or explicitly formulated by Hume, Jefferson, Russell, and many others. Let’s first formulate the argument in a standard manner, and later we can explain it along the lines of Pascalian wagering.

1. If God exists, then it’s not clear (to a reasonable inquirer) whether God exists.
2. If it’s not clear (to a reasonable inquirer) whether God exists, then it’s reasonable to suspend belief about the existence and nature of God.
3. If it’s reasonable to be agnostic about God, then it would be unreasonable for God to require that belief in God is necessary for obtaining long-term or short-term personal benefits.
4. If it’s unreasonable for God to require that belief in God is necessary for obtaining personal benefits, then it would be unjust for God to punish or reward persons merely for beliefs about God.
5. If God exists, then God is neither unreasonable nor unjust.
6. Therefore, if God exists, then (provided we are reasonable inquirers) it doesn’t matter whether we believe that God exists.

The defense of the first premise depends upon the reasonableness of holding that the world is religiously ambiguous. A reasonable inquirer is a truth seeker who looks for the best available

evidence as the basis for forming her beliefs. Like Hick, Penelhum, and McKim, I think it's reasonable to believe the world is religiously ambiguous, although I also admit that it is an extremely demanding project to be able to show this. In my own case (which should count), after over thirty years of studying and teaching philosophy of religion, comparative philosophy, and non-western philosophy and religion, I find these issues no less befuddling or fascinating. Penelhum argues that when we experience "honest bewilderment in the face of a number of plausible options,"⁴¹ "we have a doxastic duty to disambiguate our world if we can."⁴² We should do this by continuing to examine the arguments of natural theology, especially in the light of developments in modern science.⁴³ In one sense I quite agree, and that is why I have sometimes spoken of the "provisional" character of the agnostic stance. From my point of view, however, I'm not optimistic about the future prospects of disambiguation, despite the fact that I still take inquiry seriously. In any case, the issue is whether the appearance of ambiguity at a certain stage of inquiry is or could be reasonable, despite the fact that some other people may judge the balance of the relevant evidence and the strength of the arguments in a way that resolves the ambiguity. Given the facts surrounding religious diversity and inherent difficulties involved, being puzzled is rationally appropriate.

If it is reasonable to judge that the world is religiously ambiguous because the various arguments are inconclusive, then it is appropriate to suspend belief about the existence and nature of God. The defense of this premise has all of the difficulties associated with Hume's assertion that we should proportion the strength our beliefs to the weight of the evidence, or Clifford's famous defense of an "ethics of belief" that requires "sufficient evidence" for warranted belief. No doubt William James is right that there are times in life when we can't wait until all of the evidence is in and we must simply act as if a belief in question is true (or false). No doubt the denial of this Humean principle of reasoning may not be as individually and socially destructive as Clifford maintained. Perhaps we can maintain our autonomy despite the fact that we read *The National Inquirer*. Yet many of our beliefs do attempt to represent the way things are and help us find our way through life. An important prima facie principle of reasonableness is the Humean one. When we are asked about what reality is like ("Do you believe there are intelligent aliens in the universe? Do you believe in the Abominable Snowman?"), we think the epistemically virtuous agent may sometimes answer, "I don't know." Or, "I'm uncertain." We may sometimes find ourselves puzzled in situations where we ought not be, because our uncertainty or ignorance is culpable; but if the world really is religiously ambiguous (or it does seem to be ambiguous), then our puzzlement is something that happens to us as the result of using our reason in ways that would normally be meritorious. It's one thing to fail to keep up with the situation in the Middle East in order to be an informed citizen. It's another to claim to know whether there is a "divine reality," if there is, whether it is "personal or non-personal," and so on. Here the burden is on someone to show why our normal judgments about

epistemic vices (credulity, gullibility, dogmatism, intellectual laziness, prejudice, lack of curiosity, etc.) and epistemic virtues (being unprejudiced or unbiased, being able to impartially weigh the relevant evidence, being a lover and seeker of truth, etc.) shouldn't apply in this area of inquiry. To the extent that believers do attempt to provide reasons for belief this seems to assume not only that reasons for belief are relevant, but that reasons are required. So if we find that arguments aren't decisive, suspension of belief is reasonable.

Premises three and four are so closely related that one might combine them in a single claim, but their separation makes explicit what is assumed in the virtue objection to Pascal's wager. The greatest conceivable being would presumably commend both intellectual and moral virtue. As Jefferson argued, "Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear..."⁴⁴ This is not to say that the believer is always motivated by fear, nor that the believer necessarily eschews the use of reason. It merely acknowledges the religious ambiguity of the world, and assumes that God would not require a rational being to violate an important *prima facie* principle of rationality in this situation of uncertainty. In other words, the desire to seek true beliefs and the motivation to look for the best arguments (since arguments are usually the best way to acquire true beliefs) would be praiseworthy despite the fact that these motives and desires may not always be fulfilled. Fallibility would be expected by an omniscient being.

If we combine premises three and four, it appears that persons who use their reason as best they can and find themselves bewildered by the availability of plausible religious options don't deserve to be punished. There are numerous questions involved in the notion that belief (or a specific set of beliefs) would be necessary (or sufficient) for the purported benefits promised by a particular theistic tradition. First, if the virtue objection to Pascal's wager suggests that the agnostic's use of reason would be praiseworthy, then it would make no moral sense for the greatest conceivable being to punish the person *qua* intellectually virtuous inquirer. Moreover, counterexamples should be easy to find. If there are some self-interested and morally vile believers, mere belief should not get them off the moral hook. Nor does it seem that the short-term benefits associated with ethical and psychological well-being are necessarily allocated to the believers of a specific theistic tradition. The Dalai Lama radiates happiness and well-being, apparently without the benefit of a belief in the theistic God.

It's also clear that the vast majority of persons acquire their religious beliefs from local contexts: upbringing, cultural influences, familiarly accepted holy books, etc. From the inside of these traditions everything feels settled and secure, with no disturbing doubts and uncertainties raised by serious reflection or reasons for belief, religious disagreements, or tensions involved in naturalistic and religious interpretations of the world. If a specific set of religious claims turns out to

be true, and belief in these claims is necessary for long-term benefits (eternal life in heaven), then it is at best a happy accident for many that they reap these eternal rewards. But this view of belief formation and its moral consequences makes no sense when we view it from the perspective of what we would expect from the greatest conceivable being. Millions (billions?) of people would be doomed to eternal punishment on the basis of an accident over which they had no or took no control, because of the causal factors involved.

This line of argumentation has led some to move from exclusivism to inclusivism when thinking about the truth-claims of religious traditions and what is required for achieving the purported goods.⁴⁵ These are categories that contain two kinds of assertion: first, they make a claim about the locus of religious truth; second, they make a claim about what is required for salvation or liberation. An exclusivist religious tradition holds that it alone is the source of religious truth and acceptance of the claims and the way of life it recommends is required for salvation. Exclusivism asserts that the promised benefits (especially long-term) are unavailable to those outside of a particular salvific path. For example, forms of Christianity and specific Christian believers have been and continue to be exclusivist, insofar as belief in Jesus Christ is supposedly necessary for the possibility of salvation. But exclusivism should be morally unsatisfactory to the reflective Christian theist. Echoing the views expressed in the previous paragraph, John Hick says:

We say as Christians that God is the God of universal love, that he is the creator and Father of all mankind, that he wills the ultimate good and salvation of all men. But we also say, traditionally, that the only way to salvation is the Christian way. And yet we know, when we stop to think about it, that the majority of the human race who have lived and died up to the present moment have lived either before Christ or outside the borders of Christendom. Can we then accept the conclusion that the God of love who seeks to save all mankind has nevertheless ordained that men must be saved in such a way that only a small minority can in fact receive this salvation?⁴⁶

This had led some Christians to embrace inclusivism. Inclusivism still retains a dogmatic component, because it claims that a particular religion (here Christianity) is the sole source of religious truth. But it broadens the scope of what is necessary for salvation and what it means to be in the Church or to follow a path that will lead to salvation. The motive for the move to inclusivism is clear, yet as soon as one recognizes the moral problems associated with exclusivist strains of theism, any attempt to retain the dogmatic component of exclusivism seems strained and artificial. For example, if Buddhist religious liberation really counts as a path to salvation, and the claims of Christianity are true, then the possibility of salvation through practicing zazen or other forms of

Buddhist meditation and practice is because of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. Hick explains that Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner hold "that salvation, whenever it occurs, is Christian salvation, and Christians are accordingly those who alone know and preach the source of salvation, namely in the atoning death of Christ."⁴⁷ But this is, according to Hick, a rather "astonishing doctrine," because it holds that Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists participate in "authentic contexts of salvation because Jesus died on the cross."⁴⁸ Speaking as a Christian, Hick describes as "bizarre" the notion that the salvific efficacy of the great world religions depends on the "arbitrary and contrived notion of their dependency upon the death of Christ."⁴⁹ "How are we to make sense of the idea that the salvific power of the Dharma taught five hundred years earlier by the Buddha is a consequence of the death of Jesus in approximately 30 C.E.?"⁵⁰ As soon as exclusivism gives up on the notion that its own tradition is the sole source of salvation, it admits that believing in the truth-claims of its tradition is not necessary for long-term benefits. And if inclusivism believes that adherents of other traditions, like Gandhi or the Dalai Lama, may be as morally serious in their lives and as profoundly committed to their religious practices, it must admit that mere belief is not necessary for long-term or short-term benefits. If we do recognize that adherents to other religious traditions may achieve the kind of ethical and psychological transformation promised by dogmatic religions, then there's no reason to think that God would punish and reward simply on the basis of belief.

At this point a third option may be available to those who sense the tensions involved in rival religious truth-claims and diverse paths to salvation or liberation. Religious pluralism, at least in the way it has been explained and defended by John Hick, attempts to retain the moral atmosphere of inclusivism while denying the dogmatic character of both exclusivism and inclusivism.⁵¹ Hick postulates Divine Reality (God) as the Real in-itself, a religious *Ding an sich* behind the appearances that get conceptualized in the rival truth-claims about God and his nature in the great world religions. According to Hick, the various traditions are authentic culturally and historically significant attempts to grasp the Real via the particular conceptual schemas that constitute the cosmic worldviews of religious traditions. We start with an awareness of rival truth-claims, and wonder how we can know who is right since religions provide incompatible accounts of God, his nature and purposes, and the role of God in the path of self-transformation recommended by a religion. The model provided by Hick's pluralism suggests another way of understanding incompatible truth-claims. Instead of wondering which claims are true and which are false, Hick's model suggests that all are equally true, insofar as each is a partial and incomplete but "valid" attempt to conceptualize the Real. If we assume that such a view is a coherent candidate for handling the problems of religious diversity (and it's not clear that it is), the fourth premise of the agnostic's argument will be supported by such a pluralism. If all of these religions are equally

important yet incomplete attempts to grasp an ultimate transcendent reality that is beyond human concepts, then inter-religious ambiguity has been reaffirmed. Hick's religious pluralism rejects dogmatic attempts to make a particular set of beliefs necessary for long-term benefits. Because the basic structure of his pluralism is Kantian, we have no way to know whether our concepts adequately represent the Real, so we have no way to know whether God is personal or non-personal, a unity or a trinity, a loving Being worthy of worship or an abstract metaphysical essence with which our self must be made identical, etc. Also, plausible naturalistic interpretations of the world are still available; the sufficiency of religious recommendations is uncertain. The upshot of Hick's admirable attempt to do justice to the seriousness and importance of all major religious traditions is to affirm our metaphysical ignorance and admit that the great world religions are equally valuable contexts within which human self-transformation can occur. To say, as Hick does, that "so far as we can tell, no one of the great world religions is salvifically superior to the rest,"⁵² is to deny that any specific religious path is necessary for the purported benefits. (We may also be skeptical whether merely believing certain metaphysical claims, independent of the ethical transformation that is recommended by all traditions, would be sufficient for whatever long-term benefits may be promised.)⁵³

The fifth premise asserts that the greatest conceivable being must respect rationality, know about human nature and the complex epistemic situation persons find themselves in, and respond in a morally appropriate way. The claim that God must be reasonable and just follows from the notion that, if God exists, then God is unsurpassably powerful, knowledgeable, and loving. If this is the case, there's good reason to deny the claims made by exclusivist religions about the purported connections between a privileged set of metaphysical claims concerning God and the promised benefits. The fact that God resembles a person grounds this premise.

The agnostic wager is generated by reflections about the analogy between how we might regard each other's religious disagreements and the use of our reason in religious matters, and how we might expect an infinitely perfect Person to see our situation. If the world is religiously ambiguous, then my attitude toward those who hold different religious beliefs, no religious beliefs, or those who suspend belief about certain kinds of religious claims should be "friendly," as William Rowe has explained the term.⁵⁴ In the context of offering what he believes to be a forceful and persuasive argument for atheism (an argument from superfluous evil in the world), Rowe wonders how he should view the position of a theist. Despite the fact that he believes the theist holds a false belief, he admits that it could be rational for a theist to hold a false belief.⁵⁵ Rowe recommends that atheism should be friendly. As previously mentioned, if we consider the most sophisticated apologetics from the theistic camp and the most sophisticated skeptical arguments from atheists, it should be easier for finite persons to be friendly. Friendliness, as an epistemic claim about justified

belief or rationality, will have moral consequences associated with tolerance and fellow feeling. Religious ambiguity entails, in principle, epistemic friendliness toward some believers and nonbelievers. Other facts concerning what beliefs are and how they are often acquired (especially in religious matters) naturally form the basis for friendliness in a moral sense. The question is whether we should expect an omniscient and infinitely loving being to be friendly in both an epistemic and moral sense, and as friendly as finite persons. The minority report asserts that we should expect this. Hume says as much, in commenting on what reactions we should expect from a deity in response to skeptics who, “from a natural diffidence of their own capacity, suspend or endeavor to suspend all judgment with regard to such sublime and such extraordinary subjects.”⁵⁶ (The deity described by Philo may have been more friendly to philosophical skeptics than Hume was to proponents of “natural religion” in the *Dialogues*.) If God exists, then it is reasonable to believe that God is a Friendly Theist—or so the agnostic wager argues. It is also striking that, in our contemporary world, religions that proclaim the centrality of love and justice generate adherents who have no appreciation of epistemic friendliness and violently reject moral friendliness. Would that they were more like Rowe’s friendly atheist—or an Infinitely Friendly Theist.

To conclude that it doesn’t matter whether we believe that God exists is a short-hand way of denying that belief in God is necessary for the benefits promised by various religions. In principle, given the religious ambiguity of the world, the desires of rational beings, and the nature of God, if God exists, the agnostic concludes that uncertainty and suspension of belief would not merit punishment. Robert McKim’s lengthy examination of God’s hiddenness ends in pretty much the same place.

There is, then, some reason to think that, if God exists, it must not matter greatly to God whether we believe. This applies to belief that God exists, to various standard theistic beliefs about God, such as beliefs about the activities and character of God, and to belief in God. At least that we should hold such beliefs, here and now and under our current circumstances probably does not matter greatly. There is also considerable reason to believe that it is not important that everyone should accept any particular form of theism, such as Judaism or Islam. If it were very important that we should accept theism or any particular form of theism, our circumstances probably would be more conducive to it.⁵⁷

Finally, should we think that the agnostic’s reasoning could be put in the form of a wager, like Pascal’s reasoning? Pascal’s wager is normally put in the form of a decision matrix in which the possibilities (God exists, God doesn’t exist, I believe God exists, I believe God does not exist) are examined in the light of their possible utility values. Pascalian wagering may seem plausible as long

as the possibility of infinite reward or punishment appears in the matrix under the category “God exists.” Even a small probability of infinite reward supposedly swamps any possible finite utilities that might be available. All of the arguments so far reinforce the original objections to such wagering. We not only do not know whether God will reward only theists, or some types of theists, or gambling theists; we have very good reasons for thinking this is not the case. The agnostic wager takes the possibilities of infinite goods and losses out of the decision matrix, thus leaving us with the evaluation of this-worldly promises and recommendations, or what we have called the possible short-term benefits of various forms of life, religious and otherwise. Thus the agnostic is content to follow the inquiry where it leads, without fear of long-term bad consequences, confident that, as Philo insisted, it is “contrary to common sense to entertain apprehensions or terrors upon account of any opinion whatsoever, or to imagine that we run any risk hereafter, by the freest use of our reason.”⁵⁸

V. Consequences

To appreciate the religious diversity of the world is simply to be aware of the religious differences that characterize the human situation. The affirmation of religious ambiguity is a way of coming to see one’s own religious attachments against the background of diverse, incompatible, but equally reasonable ways of interpreting the world, whether religiously or naturalistically. What are the consequences of our ability to step back from our immediate religious attachments (or skeptical beliefs), appreciate the inscrutable character of the world or God or Brahman or the Tao, and revel in the mystifying character of God’s ways, if God exists? I think the inevitable effect is “dilution” of belief, to borrow a term from Penelhum. But I think this is a positive consequence, or might lead to further good moral consequences. In responding to Hick’s religious pluralism, Penelhum says that there is a significant “difficulty” that arises when one interprets other religious traditions as equally important contexts for religious self-transformation. Hick’s interpretation

...is bound to have the effect of diluting the commitment adherents who accept it have to their own faith. If I come to think that the tradition I adhere to has rational grounds, but that it is paralleled in this respect by other traditions that can account for it in their own terms as it can account for them, this second-order realization can hardly fail to affect the degree and manner of my participation. Indeed, to some extent this realization is intended to reduce the need to proselytize among other postaxial traditions and to explain the relative lack of success of missionary attempts to do so. But the sorts of reasons that can lead to this

consequence are also the sorts of reasons that cannot fail to suggest that my own faith commitment may have no more ultimate validity than its competitors suggest it has.⁵⁹

The agnostic wager, like Hick's pluralism, has a leveling effect which undermines the dogmatic tendencies of certain religious traditions (as well as a certain kind of evangelical atheism, I would assume). The second-order realization that the world might be reasonably interpreted in various religious or naturalistic ways should undermine exclusivist sentiments concerning first-order commitments. I'm unsure what this would be like for those who proclaim the ultimate significance of a particular "faith," since inner commitment mediated by such as second-order awareness is, at the least, an obscure phenomenological datum. But if we measure our commitments by the willingness to act on them, an externally generated awareness of religious ambiguity would seem naturally to produce a moral attitude quite contrary to religious attitudes that have produced so much mayhem in our world. If we come to believe that our God must look equally favorably on others who interpret the world quite differently, then we must admit that it doesn't ultimately matter whether our faith is sustained in the particular form in which it was acquired, or whether the belief-system that sets us apart from others is, in fact, so very important. Hick's second-order theory of religion or the agnostic's second-order realization of uncertainty and religious ambiguity would stress commonness of purpose rather than difference in metaphysical beliefs. Likewise, since exclusivist sentiments are often filtered through holy books that are claimed to be the word of God, or the sole source of religious truth, dilution might very well force one to focus on the moral similarities, not metaphysical dissimilarities, found in various scriptural texts. Dilution might naturally lead to moral arguments based on shared moral principles and ideals rather than appeals to isolated passages in some privileged text.

The agnostic wager, like Hick's interpretation of religion, broadens one's perspective and broadens one's appreciation for the possible moral and intellectual seriousness of other human beings, whether they are religious believers or naturalistic skeptics. For Hick, what matters most in the various religious traditions is the possibility of providing contexts within which humans can radically transform themselves by orienting themselves to the Real in ways prescribed by a particular religion. In the end, however, he sees this transformation as a move from being self-centered to being centered on or oriented toward the Real (Divine Reality), a centeredness that is psychologically significant but can only be appreciated and evaluated in terms of the observable behaviors associated with ethical transformation. All of the great post-axial religions "agree in giving a central and normative role to the unselfish regard for others that we call love or compassion."⁶⁰ If our only way to test the efficacy of the various claims about salvation or liberation is to observe the lives of those

who adhere to these traditions, then “we have no good reason to believe that any one of the great religious traditions has proved itself to be more productive of love/compassion than another.”⁶¹

Hick steadfastly but somewhat surprisingly follows the implications of his interpretation of religion, yet he doesn't go far enough. Having stressed the moral unity of diverse religions and having explained away the problems of incompatible truth-claims by offering the pluralistic hypothesis (the ultimate transcendent reality as incompletely and diversely schematized in different religions), how does Hick handle other kinds of doctrinal conflicts? Religions also differ with regard to “metaphysical beliefs which cohere with although they are not exclusively linked to a particular conception of the ultimate”⁶² (e.g., How was the universe created? Or, Are persons reincarnated?) and historical questions. Historical questions must be put to the test of scholarly inquiry and the weight of historical evidence, but in the end, the benefits promised by religions don't depend on having true historical beliefs. “It is evidently not necessary for salvation to have correct historical information.”⁶³ This conclusion echoes Hick's Buddhist sentiments concerning the unimportance of having true beliefs about certain kinds of metaphysical beliefs. The surprise is that Hick explicitly refers to the Buddha's famous comments about certain kinds of questions, referred to as “undetermined questions” or “undeclared questions” (*Avyata*).⁶⁴ The Buddha is asked: Is the world eternal? Are the “life force” (mind) and “body” (brain) “different” (separate)? Does the “Tathagata” (the enlightened person) exist after death? The Buddha refused to answer such questions, in part because one might very well die and not satisfactorily answer them. But the deeper reason why the Buddha refuses to declare answers to such questions is that answering these questions is simply irrelevant for religious life. Religious life concerns ethical and psychological transformation, and it does not depend on having true beliefs about the eternity of the world, the relation of mind and brain, the ultimate destiny of the enlightened person (or the existence of God, I might add). The Buddha says: “For what reason are these undeclared by me? Because these are not useful in attaining the goal; they are not fundamental to the religious life and do not lead to aversion, dispassion, cessation, peace, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and Nibbana – for these reasons, these are not declared by me.”⁶⁵

Hick agrees with these Buddhist sentiments concerning the unimportance of metaphysical speculation. He asserts that we can't have knowledge about such admittedly interesting yet salvifically unimportant metaphysical issues. “And the same is true, I suggest, of the entire range of metaphysical issues about which the religions dispute. They are of intense interest...but are not matters concerning which absolute dogmas are appropriate. Still less is it appropriate to maintain that salvation depends upon accepting some one particular opinion or dogma.”⁶⁶ Yet Hick does not extend these Buddhist views to the most basic kind of doctrinal conflict among religions, that is, incompatible claims about Divine Reality, including whether there is an incomprehensible ultimate

transcendent reality at all. It is striking that he favorably refers to the founder of the religion (Buddhism) which seems to best fit his stress on the centrality of this-worldly ethical and psychological transformation but awkwardly or inconsistently exemplifies Hick's notion that religions make claims about God or a Divine Reality or the "Real in itself." It is clear in very many early Buddhist discourses that the question of God, in a theistic sense, just doesn't matter to the Buddha, nor should it matter for Hick, given the inscrutable character of the Divine. And such Buddhist reflections reinforce the line of reasoning that is central to this paper. If God exists, presumably God's compassion extends at least as far as the compassionate finite person, the historical Buddha, and to the finite persons who follow and have followed Buddha's recommendations.

Finally, the consequences of agnostic wagering might be quite compelling for certain kinds of religious doubters and skeptics who experience some degree of guilt or fear in the face of their doubts and questions. I've known a number of unbelieving parents who hedge their bets when it comes to their children and are wracked by bad faith. At least they can preserve the possible long-term benefits of belief for their children by sending them to Sunday school or talking to them about Jesus. They need not worry, nor should they think that Pascal and James are wiser than Hume or Russell or the Buddha. Better to encourage their children to inquire, to seek the best arguments across the vast spectrum of claims and recommendations about the best forms of human life (which may also require experimentation in different paths), and to show them why belief in God just doesn't matter.

Notes

¹ In this paper I'll usually use the term "God" to refer to the theistic interpretation of divine reality. The theistic idea of God maintains that God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, eternal, and the creator of the universe. Insofar as God is eternal consciousness with such attributes, the God of the great monotheistic religious traditions is an infinite person. There are many other conceptions of God. We might distinguish the use of "God" in a narrow and in a broad sense. In a narrow sense I will use the term to refer to the God of theism. In a broad sense, the term could refer to other possible interpretations of divine reality. The central argument in the paper concerns reflections on whether belief in theism is necessary for long-term personal benefits. For an informative and philosophically insightful examination of diverse accounts of the divine attributes, see Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, eds., *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963). The "Introduction" is especially helpful.

² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989) 88.

³ Hume 88.

⁴ Hume 88. Bertrand Russell echoes Philo's views when he responds to the question, "Are you never afraid of God's judgment in denying Him?" Russell responds: "Most certainly not. I also deny Zeus and Jupiter and Odin and Brahma, but this causes me no qualms. I observe that a very large portion of the human race does not believe in God and suffers no visible punishment in consequence. And if there were a God, I think it very unlikely that He would have such an uneasy vanity as to be offended by those who doubt his existence." See "What is an Agnostic?" in *Russell on Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 45.

⁵ See Jeffrey Jordan's discussion of "Pragmatic Arguments," in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 352-359.

⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 153.

⁷ Pascal 153.

⁸ Pascal 154.

⁹ Pascal 154. For more complex interpretations of Pascal's wager, see *Gambling on God: Essays on Pascal's Wager*, ed. Jeff Jordan (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994). The essays by Ian Hacking, "The Logic of Pascal's Wager," and Philip Quinn, "Moral Objections to Pascalian Wagering," are especially interesting.

¹⁰ Pascal 155.

¹¹ Pascal 155-56.

¹² My point here is merely to suggest that one of the assumptions involved in wagering on God would need much more attention than is assumed by the ordinary person. For a clear discussion, see Terence Penelhum, *Reason and Religious Faith* (Boulder: Westview, 1995) 39-62.

¹³ Michael Scriven, *Primary Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 151.

¹⁴ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1982) 203.

¹⁵ Thomas Jefferson, "To Peter Carr," in *The Essential Jefferson*, ed. Jean M. Yarbrough (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006) 162-63.

¹⁶ Penelhum 88-89.

¹⁷ William James, "The Will to Believe," in *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Albury Castell (New York: Hafner P, 1948) 89.

¹⁸ Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990) 241.

¹⁹ James 105.

²⁰ Martin 241.

²¹ I assume here a realist interpretation of religious claims.

²² See Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), especially Chapter 7.

²³ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 73.

²⁴ Hick 12.

²⁵ “Disambiguation” is a term used by Penelhum in *Reason and Religious Faith*.

²⁶ For example, see: Terry Meithe and Anthony Flew, *Does God Exist? A Believer and an Atheist Debate* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); J.P. Moreland and Kai Nielsen, *Does God Exist? The Debate between Theists and Atheists* (Buffalo: Prometheus 1993); William Lane Craig and Quentin Smith, *Theism, Atheism and Big Bang Cosmology* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1995); J.J.C. Smart and J.J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996); William Lane Craig and Walter Sinott-Armstrong, *God? A Debate Between a Christian and an Atheist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004); Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Plantinga and Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1983); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 2004); William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991); Richard Swinburne, *Is There a God?* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996); J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1982); Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990); J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993); Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); and Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and The Future of Reason* (New York: W.W Norton, 2005).

²⁷ Penelhum 113. Penelhum offers this conclusion after an extended discussion of what he calls the “Basic Belief Apologetic” associated with the work of Alvin Plantinga and William Alston. Both challenge the evidentialist model of the rationality of religious belief by claiming that “religious beliefs can be rational without being held through inference from other beliefs” (Penelhum 94). According to Plantinga, religious beliefs may be “properly basic,” on a par with those beliefs that classical foundationalism maintains as basic and as grounds for other rational inferences. Penelhum believes that the success of at least one of the traditional arguments of natural theology is crucial for “disambiguating” the universe, but at this time, Penelhum believes that the Basic Belief Apologetic, as a defensive strategy, has been successful in showing that appeals to certain kinds of religious experiences, suitably filtered through sophisticated criticisms of foundationalism, satisfy standards of rationality. He says this:

The proponents of the Basic Belief Apologetic may have shown that the foundationalist demand for external validation of theism does not have to be met before belief in God is

rational. But the fact of our world's ambiguity shows that there is very good reason for hoping that such external validation is available. It shows that however we may feel ourselves to be emancipated from the demands of classical foundationalism, the need for a successful natural theology does not vanish with the advent of that heady freedom. For without natural theology there is no way beyond a situation in which adherents of opposed belief systems peer over their defenses at one another and explain one another away. (Penelhum 136)

²⁸ Penelhum 114.

²⁹ Joel Kupperman, *Classic Asian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 19. Kupperman's book is one of the most clear and helpful available accounts of eight classic Asian texts.

³⁰ John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, eds. Phillip Quinn and Kevin Meeker (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 54.

³¹ Penelhum 122.

³² Penelhum 118.

³³ McKim 256, fn 20.

³⁴ McKim 6.

³⁵ McKim 10-12.

³⁶ McKim 12-14.

³⁷ McKim 23.

³⁸ McKim 23.

³⁹ McKim 24.

⁴⁰ McKim 24.

⁴¹ Penelhum 131.

⁴² Penelhum 133.

⁴³ Penelhum 137-40.

⁴⁴ See note 15 above.

⁴⁵ Hick's categories have been the subject of wide-ranging discussion. *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, eds. Quinn and Meeker, is a useful collection of recent work. For clear accounts of key issues, see William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth /Thomson Learning, 2001) 161-71), and Peterson, Hasker, Reichenback, and Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 259-78.

⁴⁶ John Hick, *God and The Universe of Faiths* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1973) 122.

⁴⁷ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 64-65.

⁴⁸ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 65.

⁴⁹ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 65.

⁵⁰ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 65.

⁵¹ See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, Part Four. Hick's article, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," offers a tidy account of his religious pluralism.

⁵² Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 58.

⁵³ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 56-58. Hick stresses the fact that all major religions require ethical transformation as a movement away from self-centeredness or egoism.

⁵⁴ William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 39-41.

⁵⁵ It's plain that theists, agnostics, or atheists need not be rational in holding their beliefs. The claim is merely that they can be. Perhaps one group tends to be more rational than the others, but that's not relevant here. Rowe uses a central example to explain how a person could be convinced that he is rationally justified in holding some belief yet also believe that someone else could be rationally justified in believing the opposite.

Suppose your friends see you off on a flight to Hawaii. Hours after take-off they learn that your plane has gone down at sea. After a twenty-four hour search, no survivors have been found. Under these circumstances they are rationally justified in believing that you have perished. But it is hardly rational for you to believe this, as you bob up and down in your life vest, wondering why the search planes have failed to spot you. (Rowe 40)

There's nothing mysterious about Rowe's notion of rationality here, with which I agree. While in some cases both believers and nonbelievers may have access to the same bodies of evidence (for example, scientific claims about the Big Bang, empirical facts that support evolution, physicists' descriptions of quantum indeterminacy, everyday experiences that support the principle of sufficient reason, historical claims about the Holocaust), in many cases persons may have different bodies of evidence. As Rowe says, a theist "might appeal to certain aspects of religious experience, perhaps even his own experience" (40). Even where people have similar or the same bodies of evidence, they may weigh them or apply them in a distinctive manner. Rowe says, a theist "might try to justify theism as a plausible theory in terms of which we can account for a variety of phenomena" (40). It would be a mistake to believe that the paradigm case of disagreement between the theist and the atheist arises when they have access to the same evidence but arrive at different conclusions. I

would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for insightful comments that helped clarify this issue, as well as comments that helped sharpen the Agnostic Wager.

⁵⁶ See note 4 above.

⁵⁷ McKim 113.

⁵⁸ See note 2 above.

⁵⁹ Penelhum 122.

⁶⁰ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 56.

⁶¹ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 58.

⁶² Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 61.

⁶³ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 63.

⁶⁴ See John Holder, ed. and trans., *Early Buddhist Discourses* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006) 95-100.

⁶⁵ Holder 99.

⁶⁶ Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," 62.

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