Research Article

The Wager Renewed: Believing in God is Good for You

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Abstract | Not all of our reasons for belief are epistemic in nature. Some of our reasons for belief are prudential in the sense that believing a certain thing advances our personal goals. When it comes to belief in God, the most famous formulation of a prudential reason for belief is Pascal's Wager. And although Pascal's Wager fails, its failure is instructive. Pascal's Wager fails because it relies on unjustified assumptions about what happens in the afterlife to those who believe in God verses those who do not. A renewed wager can avoid this difficulty by relying solely on well-documented differences between those who believe in God verses those who do not. Social scientists have put together an impressive set of data that shows that theists do better in terms of happiness, health, longevity, interpersonal relationships, and charitable giving. Hence, most people have a strong reason to believe in God regardless of the evidence.

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1. Reasons and Belief in God

Believing in God is good for you, and so you have a reason to believe in God.[1] This is so despite any reason you may have for thinking that it's true that God exists. The upshot is that it might be rational to be a theist even if you lack evidence for theism.

Most of us want to be rational. At a minimum, rationality requires us to adopt what appear to be the best means of achieving our goals. One way of cashing this out is in terms of reasons: the rational person is the one who does what she has best reason to do at any given time.

Reasons can be sorted into two types. *Epistemic reasons* are reasons that advance the goal of attaining the truth. Most people have such a goal; we want our beliefs about the world to match up to the way the world really is. For example, you have an epistemic reason to believe that you are reading a philosophy paper right now. *Non-epistemic* reasons are reasons that advance some other, non-truth-related goal. One species of non-epistemic reasons are *prudential reasons*.[2] A prudential reason is a reason that advances one's personal interests other than truth. For example, if you are like most people, you have a prudential reason to eat food every day. Doing so advances your interest in staying alive, being healthy, etc.

Often reasons are aimed at actions. If your immediate goal is to quench your thirst, you have a reason to get a glass of water. But reasons can also be aimed at cognitive states of affairs like believing or knowing. If you want to attend your friend's party, you have a reason to gain accurate beliefs about where she lives. And while it may be obvious that we can have *epistemic* reasons for belief, we can also have *prudential* reasons for belief. The placebo effect provides an easy contemporary example. In many cases, the patient's belief in the efficacy of a drug or a treatment actually improves the odds of achieving the desired result. If you believe that the pill you've been given will relieve your headache, it becomes more likely that the pill will relieve

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your headache. Or consider another example prominent in the literature, this one from William James:

> …often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the result come true*. Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to *believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled. (James 1912, 59)

Even if you don't have evidence that you can make the leap, it is in your best interest to believe that you can make the leap, for this belief maximizes your chances of doing so. The lesson is that beliefs advance goals other than the goal of getting to the truth.

In the case of God, most of the philosophical debate has surrounded *epistemic* reasons for belief. Theists offer epistemic reasons for theistic belief, i.e. reasons to think that it is true that God exists. These reasons include things like the cosmological argument, the argument from design, appeals to religious experience, etc. Similarly, atheists offer epistemic reasons for atheistic belief, i.e. reasons to think that it is false that God exists. These reasons include things like the argument from evil, the argument from divine hiddenness, etc. In both cases the respective philosophers attempt to gather evidence for the belief that God exists or does not.

However, there have been several attempts at a *prudential* reason for theistic belief. The most famous of these is probably Pascal's Wager.[3] The wager purportedly offers us a prudential reason to adopt the belief that God exists apart from any truth-related goals we might have. It is widely (but not universally) conceded that Pascal's Wager is a failure. It fails because there is little support for the crucial assumptions the Wager makes about the afterlife. We have no reliable information about how theistic belief (or its absence) makes the afterlife better (or worse).

On the other hand, we do have reliable information about how theistic belief (or its absence) makes the *present* life better (or worse). This information has been provided over the past thirty years by social scientists and provides the raw materials for the defense of a renewed wager. The gist is that belief in God advances many of our goals regardless of whether there is an afterlife. Hence we have a prudential reason to believe in God.

2. The Failure of Pascal's Wager

Understanding the failure of Pascal's Wager is useful for appreciating the force of the renewed wager. 'Pascal's Wager' refers to a family of arguments that are united by invoking facts about the afterlife to conclude that we have prudential reasons to believe in God (see Jordan 2006). The arguments are inspired by the work of Blaise Pascal who includes a number of disjointed claims about the value of belief in God in a collection of writings published as *The Pensées*. While there are many permutations of the argument, the most basic form presents us with a utility calculus. In terms of options for belief in God, there are only two possibilities: either believe in God or do not. Similarly, in terms of the existence of God, there are only two possibilities: either God exists or does not. Adding expected outcomes to each possible combination yields the following utility calculus:

	God exists	God does not exist
Believe that God exists	Gain of infinite afterlife goods & wash of present goods	Wash of present goods
Do not believe that God exists	Loss of infinite afterlife goods & wash of present goods	Wash of present goods

Figure 1: Pascal's Wager

If it turns out that God exists, the wager assumes that believers will receive an infinite reward in the afterlife for so believing whereas non-believers will at best miss out on these afterlife goods and at worst receive an infinite punishment. If it turns out that God does not exist, believers are no worse off than non-believers and vice-versa. It's a wash. This is because Pascal, and most of his contemporary defenders, assume that the goals of believers and non-believers are secured roughly equally on the assumption that there is no God. In other words, the real benefits to believing in God come only after our death. (This is the assumption that will be challenged in the next section.) The conclusion of the argument is that since most people

have a goal of receiving benefits and avoiding setbacks, most people have a prudential reason to believe in God.

Various philosophers have argued for more nuanced versions of the wager (see Jordan 1994 and 2006). For example, perhaps the rewards for believing are not infinite but merely very great or perhaps there is only a finite punishment or no punishment at all for non-believers on the assumption that God exists. But the essence of the argument remains the same: the goals of believers are advanced in the afterlife whereas the goals of non-believers are thwarted in the afterlife.

There are many objections to Pascal's Wager. Aside from a few technical objections, the most damning objections are all aimed at the expected outcomes assumed by the utility calculus. How can we know that *only* those who believe in God will receive the goods available in the afterlife? The wager provides no evidence whatsoever for the crucial value assignments. There are many, many other options. Perhaps God provides all people with an equally good afterlife. Perhaps all people are annihilated at death, and there is no afterlife. Perhaps God provides morally good people with a good afterlife and morally bad people with a bad afterlife regardless of whether they believe in him. Perhaps God punishes those who believe in him for selfish gain but rewards those who believe in him for more genuine reasons. It seems that only those embedded in a religious tradition could have any reason to make the value assignments Pascal suggests. In other words, to have good reason to think that the value assignments are actual, one would have to rely on divine revelation, religious experience, etc. But if you already believe in divine revelation, there is obviously no point in constructing a prudential argument for the existence of God!

The defender of Pascal's Wager might retreat. Even if we can't show that the value assignments are *actual*, it is clearly *possible* (in the epistemic sense) that God exists and is as described by some of Pascal's contemporaries. Suppose it is true that God would reward only believers while damning all non-believers. Does this give us reason to believe?

No. That's because this retreat to what is *possible* rather than what is *actual* opens the wager up to a new, more devastating objection known as the Many-Gods Objection. Even though we should grant that it is possible that God exists and is as described by some of Pascal's contemporaries, it is also possible (in the epistemic sense) that God exists and is as described by universalists (those who think that God provides all people with an equally good afterlife). Furthermore, it is possible that some demi-god exist who punishes people who believe in God and rewards people who disbelieve in God. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

The gist is that Pascal's Wager succeeds only if there is good reason to think that the value outcomes in the utility calculus are *actual* outcomes and not merely *possible* outcomes. But since the value outcomes are based solely on what happens in the afterlife, these outcomes are almost impossible to defend without recourse to resources available to theists. We are simply not in a strong epistemic position to determine what happens to us when we die. Pascal's Wager relies on assumptions that we are not entitled to make and hence is a failure.

Some will not find the foregoing dismissal of Pascal's Wager convincing. Very well. While the conclusion of the next section is more important on the assumption that Pascal's Wager fails, it does not require it. The thesis of this paper is that we have a reason to believe in God independent of whether Pascal's Wager fails. Defenders of Pascal's Wager can accept the next argument as a supplement to Pascal rather than a replacement.

3. The Wager Renewed

The weakness of Pascal's Wager is that it makes assumptions that are not justifiable. This is because the goods to be secured and the evils to be avoided occur solely in the afterlife, and we have no strong evidence to suggest that theists do better in the afterlife than non-theists. However, not all wager-type arguments must share this defect. If there were any kind of evidence that suggests that theists do better than non-theists in *this* life, that evidence would provide the material for a renewed wager. This section presents just such a case.

Like Pascal's, the renewed wager assumes only two possibilities when it comes to belief in God: either one believes that God exists or one does not. Furthermore, the renewed wager grants that God either exists or does not. So the rows and columns are the same as the classic form of Pascal's Wager. However, the

outcomes are very different. Whereas Pascal's Wager makes assumptions about the rewards and punishments due to believers and non-believers in the afterlife, the renewed wager is agnostic on this issue. Perhaps believers will secure certain goods in the afterlife on the assumption that God exists, but perhaps not. Instead, the renewed wager posits only goods for which there is evidence, namely those goods that can be catalogued and tracked in the present life. Call these 'present-life goods'. So, in essence, the utility calculus of Pascal's Wager is reversed: it is the existence of God that is yields either a wash or an inscrutable value assignment. If God does not exist and there is no afterlife, then the case is clearly in the benefit of the believers. The renewed wager looks like this:

	God exists	God does not exist
Believe that God exists	Gain of present-life goods and ?	Gain of present-life goods
Do not believe that God exists	Loss of present-life goods and ?	Loss of present-life goods

Figure 2: The Renewed Wager

The gist of the renewed wager is that theists do better than non-theists regardless of whether or not God exists.

But since we cannot ascribe any utility or disutility to the existence of God (hence the question marks in figure 2), how can we know which decision is better? The answer is that inscrutable outcomes cannot weigh in our decision—we are equally in the dark as to whether belief in God is better or worse for us in the event that God exists. If defenders of Pascal's Wager are correct, believers will do better in the afterlife. But that point is not required for the renewed wager to convincingly show that we have a prudential reason to believe in God.

Like Pascal's Wager, the renewed wager must have defensible value assignments for the utility calculus. But unlike Pascal's Wager, the renewed wager can enlist empirical data to bolster its assignments. Here is a perfect example of how scientific conclusions can impact philosophical reasoning. Social scientists have done interesting and wide-ranging work over the last 30 plus years on the benefits and costs associated with religious belief and practice. The emerging picture clearly indicates that believing in God often advances many of our most important life goals. And if this is true, then (*ceteris paribus*) theists are in a better position to achieve certain present-life goods than their non-theistic counterparts.

To make this case, I need to identify widely-held goals that are easier to meet given theism rather than non-theism. In this case, the burden is easily met. Here are five important goals that are easier for the religious to achieve than their secular counterparts.

3.1 Happiness

It almost goes without saying that we want to be happy. In this category, theists pass with flying colors. For example, national Gallup poll shows that spiritual commitment co-varies with life satisfaction:

> Those in our surveys who fit our category of "highly spiritually committed" … are more satisfied with their lot in life than are those who are less spiritually committed—and far happier. A total of 68 percent of the highly spiritually committed say they are "very happy," compared to 46 percent of the moderately spiritually committed, 39 percent of the moderately uncommitted, and 30 percent of the highly uncommitted. (Gallup 1985, 169)

It is striking that those who are highly spiritually committed are more than twice as likely to be very happy with their lives as those who describe themselves as highly uncommitted. Furthermore, the correlation between religion and happiness or well-being is not confined to this single study but is quite robust. A meta-analysis of over 100 such studies concludes that more than 80% of the studies indicate a positive correlation between religion and well-being (Koenig 1998).

While there are various competing explanations for this increase in happiness, one wide-ranging empirical study of religion notes that "…to the extent that religion is an intrinsic end in itself, it is likely to be perceived as an important source of personal freedom. It is a joy; it provides freedom from existential doubt and fear," (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993, 224). In fact, the authors go further to conclude that "religion can provide a new vision that transforms a life racked with doubt, contradiction, and despair into one of purpose, contentment and joy," (Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993, 371).

One might respond to this evidence by making the point that perceived well-being or contentment or subjective happiness does not equate with *true* happi-

ness which is something closer to Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*. However, even if contentment is not identical with a more robust sense of well-being, it surely counts for something. We want to be content with our lives even if contentment is merely a necessary condition for happiness rather than a sufficient one.

3.2 Health

The February 23, 2009 cover story for *Time Magazine* is entitled "How Faith Can Heal." The fact that such a story is mainstream is indicative of the amount of research out there supporting a link between religion and health outcomes. A few examples will suffice to represent this body of research. There is a positive correlation between religious belief and favorable health outcomes such as lower rates of heart-attacks (Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001) and better coping with cancer (Laubmeier, Zakowski, and Bair 2004) and (Lutz, Kremer, and Ironson 2011).

Not only does religion affect our physical health, but it affects mental health as well. In fact, in 2011 the *Journal of Behavior Medicine* devoted an entire issue to exploring this connection. Numerous studies have shown that regular attendance at church services is a strong deterrent for depression (Miller, Warner, Wickramaratne, and Weissman 1997; Norton, et al. 2008) as is regular time in prayer (Perez et al. 2011).

In fact, when it comes to psychological health, religious activity is associated with lower rates of a wide-range of psychological ills like phobias (Kendler et al. 2003). There is a positive correlation between religiosity and proper adjustment (Kristeller, Sheets, Johnson, and Frank 2011). Finally, those who frequently attend religious services are not only less likely to be depressed or phobic but are more likely to be optimistic and report positive social support (Schnall et al. 2012).

3.3 Longevity

Not only do most people want to be healthy, but most want to maximize their longevity. We want our lives to be as long and as full as possible. Once again, the religious have the upside. For example, in a study of suicide among the elderly, participation in religious activities reduces the odds of suicide considerably even after controlling for things like sex, race, marital status, age, and frequency of social contact (Nisbet, Duberstein, Conwell, and Seidlitz 2000). Similar results have been produced for the rates of suicide among young people (Donahue and Benson 1995). The religious are also less likely to die of cancer (Oman, Kurata, Strawbridge, and Cohen 2005).

And the religious are not just more likely to avoid suicide and cancer—they are more likely to outlive their non-religious counterparts in general (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, and Ellison 1999). A recent meta-analysis of 42 individual studies on this issue concludes that people involved in a religion were significantly more likely to be alive at follow up (McCullough et al. 2000).

3.4 Interpersonal Relationships

Believing in God doesn't just affect one's health and longevity. It also positively boosts the quality of various interpersonal relationships. Most studies in this area have focused on marital relations. For example, weekly attendance at church services reduces the odds that a couple will be involved in domestic violence by about half (Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson 1997). Additionally, couples who attend religious services regularly are about 2.4 times less likely to get divorced than those who avoid religious services altogether (Call and Heaton 1997).

Now one might object that the best explanation for this data is simply that religious people are less likely to avail themselves of a divorce to end an unhappy relationship. But the data do not bear this out. For example, General Social Surveys in the US have shown that rates of adultery also co-vary with the rates of religious participation. About 12% of those who participate in religious worship weekly or more have also participated in adultery whereas this goes up to 17% for those who worship greater than monthly, 20.6% for those who worship less than monthly, and almost 25% for those who never worship (Fagan and Nagai 2006). In other words, weekly religious participation reduces the odds of adultery by more than half. Furthermore, when couples attend religious services on a weekly basis, they are more likely to report that they are happy with the quality of their marriage (Wilcox and Nock 2006). So it's not just that religious people stay together because they do not see divorce as a live option. They are happier and less likely to seek sex outside of their committed relationships.

3.5 Charitable Giving

Suppose you think that we ought to help others less fortunate than ourselves and you want to develop a virtue of charity in your life. What should you do to meet that goal? Take classes in ethics? Probably not—recent studies have shown that those who study ethics professionally are no more likely than average to be courteous (Schwitzgebel, Rust, Huang, Moore, and Coates 2012), vote (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2010), or respond to student emails. Additionally, those who study ethics professionally are just as likely to free-ride at conferences by not paying the required registration fees (Schwitzgebel 2013) and more likely to steal books from the library! (Schwitzgebel 2009).

Instead of studying ethics, one of the best things one can do is become involved in a religion. As the Gallup poll from the 1980's concludes, people who describe themselves as "spiritually committed" are:

> …far more involved in charitable activities than are their counterparts. A total of 46 percent of the highly spiritually committed say they are presently working among the poor, the infirm, and the elderly, compared to 36 percent of the moderately committed, 28 percent of the moderately uncommitted, and 22 percent of the highly uncommitted. (Gallup 1985, 170)

Recent work by Arthur C. Brooks bears this out. Even after controlling for age, income, ethnicity, marriage-status, and education, it turns out that regular church attendance correlates with being 21% more likely to have made a charitable donation during the past year and volunteering on average 6.4 more occasions (Brooks 2007, 35.). Daily prayer to God is correlated with being 30% more likely to give money to charity. In fact, religious involvement is a more important indicator for charity than political affiliation. The following chart displays average annual household charitable donations sorted by religious and political affiliation (Brooks 2007):

	Conservative	Liberal
Religious	$2,367	$2,130
Non-religious	$661	$789

Figure 3: Charitable Giving by Household

While the difference between conservatives and liberals is insignificant, the charitable difference between those who practice a religion and their secular counterparts is clear.

One might object that these findings only show that religious people are more likely to contribute to their own, dogmatic religious institutions. But again, the data do not bear this out. Religious giving swamps nonreligious giving even to secular causes like the United Way or giving to family and friends (Brooks 2007, 38). The religious are also more likely to donate blood, volunteer, and give directions to those who are lost (Brooks 2007).

The overall conclusion of this section is straightforward. The religious life is likely to make you happier, healthier (in both mind and body), live longer, strengthen your relationships with others, and more charitable. If a person has these things as goals for her life, than this person thereby has good reason to believe in God.

4. Objections & Three Calls for Future Research

This paper argues that most people have a good reason to believe in God regardless of whether they have evidence that God exists. This is because most people have goals that include being happy, healthy, charitable and so on. Since believing in God advances these goals, most people have a reason to believe in God. There are many ways one can reject this line of reasoning, but most of the objections fail. What follows is a sampling of objections ordered from least to most persuasive.

4.1 Objection

But it's not worth it to believe something that's false even if we get something out of it! Whatever happiness we would derive from theism would be undermined by its falsity. We would be setting ourselves up for "inauthentic happiness."[4]

Reply: First of all, it's not obvious that theism is false. Philosophers disagree, with many tending toward agnosticism. And interestingly, what might be the best argument for atheism—the argument from divine hiddenness—presupposes that belief in God is a very good thing (so good that God would guarantee that

we all have it). Belief in God is supposed to be such a good thing because it's a necessary condition for something even greater: a relationship with God (you don't have relationships with people you don't think exist). This raises a dilemma: if it IS a good thing to believe in God, then the main case of this paper succeeds. If it is NOT a good thing to believe in God, then this undercuts one of the strongest argument for atheism and makes it even less likely that we could know that theism is false.

Second, and more importantly, while believing truly is an important goal for most people, it would be surprising if it were a supreme, all-trumping goal for most people. It is more plausible that the goal of believing truly is an instrumental goal: we want true beliefs about the world because, *ceteris paribus*, we have a better shot at attaining our goals when we believe truly. But just as believing falsely that we will recover from an illness might be more important to achieving the goal of recovery, so, too, might believing in God without certainty or even good evidence be more important to achieving our life goals. In other words, sometimes it's worth risking a false belief to get what we want in life. So while we may concede that, other things being equal, happiness based on a true belief is better than happiness based on a false belief, it is also true that happiness based on a false belief is better than missing out on important life goods entirely.

4.2 Objection

But belief in God isn't a necessary condition for securing each of these goods! After all, it's possible for an atheist to be happy, healthy, etc.

Reply: Two things should be noted in reply. First, at least some studies suggest that the most plausible secular alternatives don't have the same positive effects (e.g. Acevedo, Ellison, and Xu 2014). Second, even if these studies were misguided, one might simply concede the objection but insist that it is irrelevant. The point of this paper is not to argue that belief in God is a *necessary* condition for meeting these goals. Instead, the point is that belief in God improves one's odds of meeting these goals. It's possible for a smoker to live to 100. It's possible for a high-school educated person to earn six figures a year. But this doesn't prevent us from saying that we each have a reason not to smoke or a reason to go to college. Similarly, while it's possible for a non-theist to secure the aforementioned goods, the odds go up considerably with the adoption of religion.

4.3 Objection

You've got the direction of causation backward! It's not that being religious causes us to be happy but that being happy causes us to be religious.[5]

Reply: As Hume makes annoyingly clear, the best we can do is find correlations between empirical phenomena. The findings cited in §3 do the same by noting correlations between religiousity and various empirical outcomes. It is then left to our best theories of the world to impose a causal direction on the correlations that we find. In some cases, the direction should be pretty obvious: for many people, religious practice begins long before adultery is a possibility. In other cases, the direction is more difficult to discern. In these cases, the experts in the field are best positioned to make this judgment, and many conclude that it's the religious life that causes the various outcomes and not the other way around.

However, it should be granted that there may well be a common cause that could explain some of the correlations between religiousity and various positive outcomes. For instance, perhaps there is some common cause that explains both why certain couples attend church regularly and why those same couples are resistant to having sex outside of their marriage. This is the first call for further research: might there be a common cause that explains many of the correlations invoked in §3?

4.4 Objection

But this is simply a *pro-tanto* case for religious belief! A fair assessment of the utility calculus would also include the negatives that come with religious belief.

Reply: Two things should be said in response. First, even if it's true that religious belief comes with a cadre of negative consequences, this paper would still show that most people have a strong reason to believe in God regardless of the evidence. This is weaker than the conclusion that most people have an *all-things-considered* reason to believe in God regardless of the evidence. It is consistent with this weaker thesis that there are also reasons against belief in God. One cannot refute the claim that most people have a

reason to go to college by pointing out that there are also some reasons against going to college.

Second, for present purposes, it is enough to note that there is little reason to think that belief in God impedes our personal goals in ways relevant to this case. There is simply not the clear, careful empirical evidence tying belief in God to negative outcomes. For example, consider the conclusion of a meta-analysis published by panelists for the National Institute of Healthcare Research:

> The vast majority of studies report that religion has salubrious effects on health. Indeed, beyond case-reports and samples of fewer than 10 people, we have found no evidence that religion can harm health in representative samples of community residents or in systematically sampled clinical populations….We believe that the state of the evidence probably reflects reality… the dominant pattern is one in which religious involvement either has no effect or has positive effects on health. (George et al. 2000, 110).

Instead of solid empirical evidence, the case for the harms of religion amounts to anecdotes or question-begging vignettes. Here are three of the standard examples:

- Religious belief makes us intolerant. If this were true, perhaps the value of being religious would be countered by the disvalue of being religious in way that would undermine the case of this paper. However, the common stereotype doesn't hold up to rigorous empirical investigation. For instance, it actually turns out that people who are spiritually committed are *more* likely to be tolerant of other people and races (Gallup 1985, 169).
- Religious belief makes us intellectually dishonest. The idea here is that if you are a theist you've somehow committed an intellectual *faux pas* or failed to recognize the world for what it is or built your life around a lie. Since it's bad to do these things, the value of religious belief is swamped by the disvalue of religious belief. The problem with this objection is that it obviously begs the question. The religious believer could offer precisely the same objection to the atheist.
- Religious belief hurts others. One could call this "the Crusade objection" since the Crusades are often offered as examples of how religion can harm others, but we could include the inquisition, the destruction of native peoples across the globe, 9/11 and many, many more.[6] The central problem with all such historical citations is two-fold. First, in all the cases that I have reviewed, if it is a religious belief that is causing the harm, it is not the belief that God exists but some auxiliary belief like 'God wants me to kill the heathens' that is efficacious. But this is irrelevant for my purposes. The argument of this paper is certainly not that it is in our best interest to hold EVERY religious belief. I have focused on theistic belief and theistic religious practices. Second, despite protests to the contrary, it is implausible that religious belief is efficacious in many of the hackneyed examples on offer. Take the Crusades as an example. It is more plausible that the Crusades were caused by greed and knowledge of trade routes rather than religion no matter what the Crusaders themselves thought. Similarly, it is more plausible that the recent war in Iraq was caused by greed and knowledge of oil reserves rather than for freedom and democracy no matter what the soldiers themselves thought.

So at best this objection represents a second call for further research: are there ways in which belief in God (as opposed to other religious beliefs) significantly impairs our ability to achieve important goals? If so, let's develop rigorous empirical evidence to that end.

4.5 Objection

But even if it's true that belief in God is good for us, no one can control his own beliefs. It's not like after reading this paper I can just decide to believe in God since I have a reason to do so. So what's the point?

Reply: It is true that no one has direct voluntary control over what he believes. We cannot simply gain and lose beliefs as a matter of sheer willpower. But, of course, that's true for many of the things that are good for us. We cannot simply gain and lose weight as a matter of sheer willpower even though it's good for us to be in a certain weight range.

What we can control in both cases are our actions. In the case of weight, we can exercise and eat healthy foods. Doing so may or may not result in the outcome we want, but it's the best we can do. In the case of religious belief, we can engage in religious practices and

think carefully about religious propositions. Doing so may or may not result in the outcome we want, but it's the best we can do.[7]

4.6 Objection

But it's not *belief* in God that matters but the *practice* of a religion that matters!

Reply: Three things may be said in response to this objection. First, theistic belief may well be a necessary condition for many of religious practices. It's difficult to see how participation in the Eucharist could have the same kind of psycho-somatic effect on believers and non-believers. Second, all of the empirical studies cited in §3 of the paper were done in the United States where the overwhelming majority of religious people are theists. So the data collected so far seems to track theistic belief just as well as it tracks religious practice.

But, third, it should be granted that there is something important about this objection. Social scientists vary widely in what they measure. Some look for actual belief in God. Others characterize their measurements as spiritual commitment, religious participation, or religiosity (whatever that is). These are not all the same thing. It might turn out that what is really important is religious *practice* instead of religious *belief*. For example, Lim and Putnam 2010 concludes that religiosity boosts life satisfaction only when coupled with the social networking that occurs in regular religious services.

Further, even if it turns out that it is religious *belief* that matters as opposed to religious practice, this might not be belief in *God*. The content of the belief will surely be relevant for the health outcome. For example, Ironson 2011 distinguishes between belief in a forgiving God vs. belief in a judgmental God when it comes to the progression of HIV. This final objection highlights a third call for further research: do the benefits described in §3 co-vary with religious *belief* (if so, which ones?) or religious *practice* (if so, which ones?)?[8] And while such research might undermine the thesis of this paper that belief in God is good for you, it would still be an interesting conclusion if a renewed wager could show that we have strong prudential reasons to *practice* a religion, even if it didn't go as far as belief in God.

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Endnotes

1. I use 'God' in the traditional sense as a maximally honorific title describing the most perfect being possible.
2. Not all non-epistemic reasons need be prudential. For example, I may have a reason to feed my children even if it doesn't advance my own personal goals. One might counter that even this instance DOES advance my goal of wanting my children to live. If we expand 'personal goal' to include this sort of thing, then it turns out that ALL reasons are prudential reasons. This won't affect the substance of the argument in this paper.
3. While addressing Pascal's version of a pragmatic argument is sufficient for this paper, two others should be noted. First is a historical version from William James (1912). An exegesis of James' argument is unnecessary for two reasons. First, it's not clear that James' pragmantic arguments are substantively different than those offered by Pascal. This is because, like Pascal, James focuses on what he calls "things eternal." If the idea is that we have a reason to believe in God because of what happens to us in the afterlife, then the critique offered of Pascal in §2 will apply to James *mutatis mutandis*. Second, at some points James seems to indicate that believing in God is good for us in the present-life. If so, his argument is importantly different from Pascal's. However, he provides little to no reason for thinking that theistic belief is good for us in this life. On this reading, §3 of this paper compliments James' pragmatic argument by enlisting recent findings from social science to bolster the crucial premise. Thanks to J. Caleb Clanton for flagging the need to make this clear. Second is a contemporary take on both Pascal and James by philosopher Jeff Jordan (2006). Jordan's book is the best exegesis and defense on the market. While he spends most of his book defending Pascal, he also attempts to defend a Jamesian version of the wager. The project in this paper differs from both arguments defended by Jordan because it is critical of even re-vamped versions of Pascal's wager and because it avoids the epistemic balance and live option requirements of James' wager.
4. For example, Sumner 1996 argues against the value of happiness that is based on a lie.
5. Thanks to [removed for blind review] for pressing this point.
6. For a typical case, see Christopher Hitchens book *God is Not Great*, in particular chapter four.
7. This advice parallels that given by Pascal who anticipates the "no-control-over-belief objection" to his original wager. Here is Pascal's advice:
   Endeavour then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness. (Pascal 1958, 68)
8. I say 'further research' since at least some of this work has begun. For example, George *et al.* 2000 reviews existing studies and draws some careful distinctions between spirituality and religion and also among variance sorts of spiritual/religious domains like participation vs. belief.