

# **Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 5, Theistic Arguments, Part 4, The Pragmatic Justification of Theistic Belief**

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 5, Theistic Arguments, Part 4, The Pragmatic Justification of Theistic Belief.

Okay, so far, we've looked at a number of arguments for God that are evidence-based, whether we're talking about empirical evidence or, in the case of the ontological argument, kind of a priori evidence or conceptual evidence for God.

There's another category of arguments for theistic belief, which are more pragmatic or prudential in nature, which argue that whatever the situation is with regard to evidence for and against God, it is a practically wise or rational thing to believe in God and to live one's life premised on that belief. So, we'll look at a couple of these pragmatic justifications for theistic belief. So, let's begin by considering a claim made by a late 19th-century thinker named William Clifford.

He claimed that just as we have moral responsibilities in terms of our conduct, we have moral responsibilities with regard to our beliefs. And so, he proposed a basic guideline for thinking about what sorts of beliefs are rational and morally responsible. So, he presented this principle, which has come to be known as Clifford's Principle, that it's always wrong everywhere and that anyone should believe anything on insufficient evidence.

That's a basic duty and responsibility that you and I have as rational beings, according to William Clifford, to only believe the things that we believe based on sufficient evidence. So, is this principle correct? Now, at first blush, it seems to be a completely rational principle and something that we should all strive to abide by. Yeah, who doesn't want to have their beliefs based on good evidence? And maybe that should be the standard for all of our beliefs.

Now, many religious skeptics, including Clifford, thought that if we affirm this is a basic principle of rational belief, you have to have sufficient evidence for all of your beliefs, and that is going to create problems for the religious believer. So, he and many other religious skeptics based their critiques of theism on this principle and insisted that belief in God is always irrational because there's always insufficient evidence for believing in God. However, a number of scholars have challenged Clifford's Principle on the grounds that it's actually self-refuting.

And in this sense, is there really sufficient evidence to believe in Clifford's Principle? What kind of evidence could one give for Clifford's Principle? Is there sufficient evidence to believe that one should always, and in every case, only believe on the basis of sufficient evidence? So, the irony is that maybe Clifford's Principle doesn't even satisfy its own demand. And I think there's something to that objection. Others have tried to show that religious belief may be rational; in particular, religious belief may be rational for non-evidential or pragmatic reasons.

And two of those thinkers are Blaise Pascal and William James. And we'll talk about Pascal first. He was a mathematician who lived in the 17th century who died very young while he was actually in the process of putting together what would have been a magnum opus of apologetics.

He had assembled hundreds of pages of notes, extremely intriguing and insightful observations that he was making about all sorts of aspects of human nature generally, as well as religious belief. When he died, those papers and notes were collected, and they were entitled *Thoughts, Pulse of Pascal*. In his *Pulse*, at one point, he develops what has become known as the wager argument for belief in God.

So, he begins by noting that it may appear, you know, to a person that the evidence for God is really not conclusive either way, right? If it's indecisive, if it's inconclusive, say if it looks like 50% likely that there's a God, there's some evidence, but there's also some evidence against God, right? You've got these arguments we've talked about; the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments may provide some evidence for God. And you've got the problem of evil, the problem of divine hiddenness, things that we can't explain that seem to provide counter-evidence. What if we're just unable to conclude either way whether God exists? What shall we do? In that case, Pascal says, you need to make a wager, right? You need to place your bet.

Are you going to place your bet on the God horse or the not God horse? Well, one of those is going to win in the end. Either there's a God, or there's not. According to Pascal, the rational move, the prudentially or pragmatically rational move, is clearly to wager on God.

Now, since either God exists or God does not exist, and we may believe that he does or that he doesn't exist, we have four possibilities here that I'm representing with a table here. We can believe that God exists and can be right or wrong. If you believe that God exists and presumably live accordingly, he seems to be taking that for granted, that if you firmly believe or commit yourself to this belief, then you're going to live in a way that is God-honoring, so far as you can understand what that means.

If you believe that God exists and God does exist, then what will follow for you in the next life is an eternal life of bliss in heaven, so infinite happiness. That's the

consequence. That's the outcome, the blessed condition of those who believe and are right about it regarding the existence of God.

Or you could believe that God exists, and it turns out that you're wrong. What's the consequence there if God does not exist? Well, in the end, when you die, your consciousness ends. You no longer are in being.

You disappear, and your life is completely over. What's the consequence, then, all things considered? Well, you've experienced some mild inconvenience, really. You've lived your life in a way that's aimed at being God-honoring.

You've resisted certain temptations. You've avoided, you know, say, a promiscuous lifestyle sexually. You have avoided getting involved in, say, hard drugs or overindulging in certain pleasures, including times when maybe you wanted to.

And so you have been inconvenienced, but only mildly. Let's disregard the fact that you can actually have a lot of health benefits from living with a certain amount of self-control you wouldn't otherwise live with. So, let's grant that there's a mild inconvenience that goes with believing in God, and that's kind of the net loss as far as it goes for the religious believer who turns out to be wrong.

Well, now let's consider the outcomes, the two possible outcomes if we go with atheism and disbelieve in the existence of God. If we turn out to be wrong in that case, what's the consequence? Well, we experience infinite unhappiness. We end up in the afterlife, and since we disregarded God, we land in hell and whatever that involves.

It goes on for who knows how long, maybe forever, even if it's just a long, long time. It's a horrible, extreme kind of loss and extreme unhappiness. But if we don't believe that God exists and we turn out to be right, what have we gained? Only a little extra fun.

Then again, some of that might be harmful, but let's grant for the sake of argument that there was at least a little bit of net gain that you might have had by being an atheist and being right about it. So, what you end up with comparing these two options, being a theist or being an atheist and living accordingly in each case, is if you're a theist, you've got infinite gain and only a little bit of loss, you know, if you're right or wrong, respectively. As an atheist, being right or wrong means only a little extra fun if you're right but infinite or extreme loss if you're wrong.

So, it's comparable to someone going to the racetrack and betting on a two-horse race, and one of them is going off at a million to one odds, and you can win two million dollars by betting two dollars on that horse, the god horse. If it comes in as a

winner, you're only going to lose two bucks if that horse loses. The other horse, you have to bet a million dollars to win two dollars.

That's the atheism horse. So, which of those two horses are you going to bet on if, you know, they seem equally likely to win? You'd be a fool to bet on the atheism horse. You've got to bet on the god horse.

You can get millions of dollars just by betting a couple of bucks. So, that's the basic logic here with the wager, according to Pascal. It is prudentially wise.

It's pragmatically rational to wager on God and believe and follow God as well as you can in this life, given the respective payoffs. Now, there are a couple of philosophers, William Lycan and, I think, Arthur Schlesinger, who wrote an article about 25 years ago called *You Bet Your Life, Pascal's Wager Defended* and they consider a number of objections and replies to those in a way I think it's helpful and insightful. These objections are pretty standard complaints regarding Pascal's wager.

One of them is that my beliefs are not under my control. I can't just decide to believe something. If I told you I would give you a million dollars, if you could believe right now that I am not holding up a hand, even though you have an incentive to the tune of a million dollars to believe otherwise, you can't just bring yourself to disbelieve that I'm holding up a hand when I'm actually doing it and you see that.

So, you don't have control over that belief. It forms in you like so many other things that we believe. We find ourselves believing independently of our will.

Sometimes we say, well, I'd like to believe that, but I can't because the evidence is against it. And that's kind of to confess the fact that our beliefs are not under our control. And isn't Pascal asking us to control our beliefs in a certain way? And isn't that impossible? So, that's unreasonable.

Well, Lycan and Schlesinger point out that in the long run, our beliefs are, at least, many of our beliefs, and Pascal and others and Lycan and Schlesinger would say that even belief in God is something that is subject to our control. We can use what they call behavior therapy, as William James proposed. This is kind of a paraphrase, but at one point, James, referring to religious belief, said, go to church, go to mass, pray, read the scriptures, and behold, sincere belief will come and stupefy your scruples.

Eventually, you will believe. So, even though I can't change my particular belief right now, say that the person sitting next to me is wearing a green shirt. I can't just change that.

I can, over time, change certain orientations on all sorts of beliefs. So, suppose I tell you that a year from now, I'm going to give \$50,000 to anybody I know who is a very committed lover of jazz music. Suppose you're not into jazz.

You're more into classic rock or country music. You're not into jazz, but if you heard that offer, I'm going to give anybody \$50,000 if next year at this time, they can honestly say that they're really into jazz and that they love jazz. What might you reasonably do? Probably go out and start buying some Dave Brubeck and John Coltrane and Miles Davis and all sorts of great jazz music and just start listening and learning about jazz, reading books about jazz, listening to all sorts of jazz classics, and developing a taste for it such that a year from now, you can honestly say, yeah, I really do like jazz.

At first, I wasn't into it, but the more I learned about it, the more I listened, which developed a real taste in me, and now I can honestly say I love jazz. I'll take the \$50,000 check now, please. That would be a kind of behavior therapy that would be analogous to the sort of thing that Lycan and Schlesinger suggested.

Start going to church, read the scriptures, start praying to the God that might be there, even if you're uncertain, and see if genuine belief doesn't begin to form. So, in that way, your beliefs about God may be indirectly under your control, even if they're not something you can just change at a moment's notice. Another objection is that the wager is cynical and mercenary, that God would not reward someone on Judgment Day if their belief and commitment to him were based just on a bare wager and the kind of mercenary desire to have a pleasant eternal existence rather than a genuine love for God.

Lycan and Schlesinger address this in a way that's similar to the way they handled the last objection, that we can develop and grow into something more sincere than what was our original disposition when it comes to belief. You will eventually, they say, leave your cynicism, at least as is possible, and become a more sincere believer to the point where it isn't just about getting that eternal payoff. You really sincerely love God and are grateful to God because now you genuinely believe that he is there and that he has given you the life that you have and all sorts of blessings.

So that's how they handled that objection. Another objection is that the way that Pascal lays this out in terms of 50% likelihood, or that's pretty much equally likely, is not that God exists, that that doesn't reflect the actual situation. The evidence is actually not, you know, it isn't an equal probability.

It's more likely that there is no God. In fact, many would say it's highly likely that atheism is true. Maybe it's only a 10 or 15% chance that theism is true, according to some skeptics.

How does that affect this argument? Lycan and Schlesinger say that it doesn't change things because we're talking about an infinite payoff here. So again, think about the two-horse race. Maybe one horse is going off at 10 to 1 odds.

Or let me change that. Maybe one horse is significantly faster than the other horse. Even if that's the case, maybe the atheism horse is an underdog or, in this case, an under-horse in terms of skill or speed.

Maybe the jockey is not as good as the atheist horse. You would still want to bet on the God horse because the payoff is going to be a million dollars. So even if it's a slower horse, and that would be, in this case, kind of accounting for the less evidence on the side of theism, you would still bet on that because the payoff, if that horse wins, is so much greater.

And then there's the many gods objection. There are innumerable possible deities. How do we know which god is any more probable than thousands of others? So you've got all these different world religions, 10 or 12 major world religions, and then all sorts of minor sects.

Which one do we subscribe to or begin to commit ourselves to in terms of the religious tradition we want to go with? Lycan and Schlesinger propose that we consider a number of factors here. We can certainly look into empirical, especially historical, considerations that might rule out some religious traditions as, you know, objectively less respectable or whose god is less likely to be real. So that could maybe whittle down our serious options to just a few major religious traditions.

Also, they recommend looking at the details of the respective payoffs. According to some religious traditions, the afterlife is not necessarily desirable, such as in at least certain forms of Buddhism.

We should also consider tolerance. Certain religious traditions are inclusivist or pluralistic, like Hinduism, which is highly tolerant in terms of the belief commitments of religious adherence. Whereas certain other religious traditions like Islam and Christianity are much more intolerant in terms of who's going to make it to heaven, you know, depending on the beliefs that they hold.

So those would be the ones that we would need to pay the closest attention to and take most seriously. So, we might be able to whittle it down to a couple of major forms of theism. But in any case, to a small number of religious traditions and then make our choice there.

Or maybe make that choice in light of where we find ourselves culturally or the religious tradition in which we've been raised. So even that, think about it, it's going

to create a kind of wager in itself, which of the theistic traditions you choose. You know, among those that are most intolerant of wayward belief.

So that's Pascal's wager, and there are some arguments for and against it, as considered by Lycan and Schlesinger. Moving on then to what's called the will to believe, as William James calls it. This is an interesting approach to the question of the practicality of religious belief.

William James lived mostly in the late 19th century. He was actually trained as a physician and went on to be a leading scholar in what we call the field of psychology. He wrote two volumes, *Principles of Ethics*, which was a standard text in psychology for decades.

And as his scholarly career went on, he became more and more interested in religious studies. And he ended up delivering the Gifford Lectures, I think about 1900 or 1901, on the varieties of religious experience, which were collected into a book by that title. And it's the best, most fascinating, intriguing book I've ever read on religious experience.

It's a standard in the field. But he became more and more sympathetic to religious belief, even though he was originally a pretty rigorous empiricist. He became more and more sympathetic to religious beliefs.

The work that he did in developing these lectures for his Gifford Lectures was key for him in developing more sympathy for religious belief. But in an essay, he wrote earlier called *The Will to Believe*, he talks about the fact that it isn't just reason that is involved in a kind of review of the evidence when it comes to the formation of beliefs. It isn't even the case that it should just be reason alone.

The will is involved and ought to be involved in many cases in terms of what we believe. So, he makes a couple of distinctions regarding the nature of the choices that we make. He says a choice may be living or dead.

You can distinguish between living or dead choices, depending on whether a particular set of options has emotive appeal to the chooser. A choice may be forced or avoidable. Here, he's talking about whether the choice can be avoided or evaded by not choosing at all.

Somebody asks if you would like cake or pie for dessert. I don't want dessert. So that's not a forced choice. It's an avoidable choice.

Choices may be momentous or trivial, and that has to do with whether a given choice is important. It is a very momentous choice for most of us and whether or not we're

going to buy a house. It's not really a momentous choice, though, as to what color we're going to paint our bedroom in the house that we buy.

So now, let's ask about the religious hypothesis or belief in God. What kind of choice is that? What sort of options does the religious hypothesis present to us? Well, when it comes to belief in God, it certainly has emotive appeal. It matters to all of us whether or not God exists.

It is momentous when you think about the implications of whether God exists in each of our lives. That's momentous. That's not trivial.

And thirdly, it's a forced choice. A forced decision or choice to not make a decision regarding God is, in a sense, to make a decision. To put off the question is to basically remain in the position of agnosticism or maybe atheism.

To be a skeptic is to remain against religious belief. So, the religious hypothesis is it's living, it's forced, and it's momentous. But what do we do if the evidence seems indecisive? What if the evidence doesn't lead us definitively in one direction or the other? Either towards or away from religious commitment.

What do we do? There, James says that our passionate nature not only lawfully may but must decide an option between propositions whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds. So, our passionate nature may and even must decide. And that's appropriate, according to James, when it comes to options like the religious hypothesis that are living, forced, and momentous.

Some object, but mustn't we grant our assent only to those truths that are conclusively supported by reasons? And that would be the objection that William Clifford and the like would press against William James here. Only assent should be granted to truths that are conclusively supported by evidence. One should always believe only those things that are supported by sufficient evidence.

Clifford's principle we talked about. James's reply here is that a rule of thinking would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truths. If those truths were true, there would be an irrational rule. If we're talking about the pursuit of truth, then our guidelines for the pursuit of truth can't be such that if we follow those guidelines, we would be blinded to certain truths.

So that's what he's talking about here. And that because there are certain truths that we have because of our nature as human beings and our limited purview, we're not going to have, even if those are actual truths, we're never going to have enough evidence to believe them. Then, that suggests that it must be okay in some cases to believe without adequate evidence.



So that's James's point there. The more overarching point here is that faith is unavoidable. Whether that faith is religious or not, there are all sorts of things that we believe in a fundamental way, such as faith commitments, and there is no conclusive evidence for them.

There is not sufficient evidence for us to conclude that every effect has a cause. This is a basic belief in the law of causality. The 18th-century philosopher David Hume demonstrated conclusively that we cannot prove or have adequate evidence to believe that every effect is necessarily connected to its cause.

Hume's conclusion is that we believe in causality, in necessary connections between causes and effects, or whatever we believe about causality, on the basis of animal faith, not on the basis of conclusive evidence. He also made that point regarding the belief in the uniformity of nature, that the sun will rise tomorrow. We all believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, that there will even be a tomorrow.

We all believe this, but we don't have conclusive evidence for it. Nor do we have conclusive evidence for the belief that one is awake right now and not dreaming. How do you know that the external world really exists, that your senses are generally reliable in telling you that there's an external world and that you're awake right now? Those are articles of faith.

We take it for granted that at any given moment, we're awake, that we are awake, and that we're not having a very vivid dream. Some people say, well, I can tell the difference because this is just so much more clear and vivid. Well, so was that nightmare you were having last night, and you awoke in a cold sweat because you were so terrified because you were dreaming that some intruder had broken into the house and was threatening you and your family.

You were so relieved that it was a dream. In the context of that dream, you were quite convinced it was real. You wouldn't have been so terrified.

So that's an article of faith as well. Even our belief is that other people have minds, their own thoughts and feelings, just as we do. You believe that other people have thoughts and feelings like you do when you have never been inside their head.

You've never experienced what they experience, assuming they have their own private experiences. Assuming the rest of us aren't all automatons who've been programmed to respond to you in certain ways. The only thoughts and feelings you have ever experienced directly are your own.

When it comes to other people's thoughts and feelings, you assume that they're real. Maybe you say, well I have an analogical kind of grounds for believing in that

because my own thoughts and feelings are associated with my own behaviors in a way that suggests that other people have their own thoughts and feelings because they have similar behaviors. But there you're reasoning from one case to eight billion cases, and that's a very poor inductive argument.

And yet the analogical argument for other minds does seem to be the strongest one available, as bad as it is. So, it's somewhat of a howler in the field of philosophy that no one has conclusively proven. No one has been able to conclusively demonstrate that there are minds other than one's own. It is an article of faith.

That's the point here, which is that you have all of these very fat faith commitments. Whether or not you have any religious beliefs, if you're a hardcore atheist who says, no, I only believe on the basis of sense experience, I don't believe there's a God or anything supernatural, I'm not a person of faith. The fact is you are a person of faith because you believe on faith that effects have causes, that nature is uniform, that the sun will rise tomorrow, the laws of nature will continue to hold into the future as they have in the past, that your senses are generally reliable, that you're awake now and not dreaming, and that other people have minds.

Those are all faith commitments. So, you cannot avoid faith. And I think that's one of the things that William James kind of grew into this realization that as much as in the beginning he wanted to be a kind of hardcore empiricist, no, you can't avoid faith commitments believing things that we can't prove scientifically or otherwise.

It looks like faith is just a basic part of the human condition, and we are creatures who are just bound to have faith commitments. Even just to get along in the world, you have to be a person of faith. So why not seriously consider faith in God as yet another faith commitment that one can make that has very practical benefits?

So that's our discussion of the pragmatic justifications of belief.

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