

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 5, Theistic Proofs, Part 4, Pragmatic Justification Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 5, Theistic Proofs, Part 4, Pragmatic Justification, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Spiegel's lecture explores pragmatic justifications for theistic belief, contrasting them with evidence-based arguments. He examines **Clifford's Principle** regarding belief on sufficient evidence and introduces **Pascal's Wager**, which argues for the practical rationality of believing in God due to the potential for infinite reward versus finite loss. The discussion then moves to **William James's "Will to Believe"** essay, which posits that in certain "living, forced, and momentous" choices where evidence is inconclusive, our "passionate nature" can legitimately decide belief. James contends that **faith is unavoidable**, citing fundamental beliefs lacking conclusive proof, suggesting that theistic faith can be a practically beneficial commitment alongside other necessary faith commitments.

**2. 16 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 5 – Double click
icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Theology → Apologetics → Philosophy of Religion).**



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3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 5, Theistic Proofs, Part 4, Pragmatic Justification

Briefing Document: Pragmatic Justification of Theistic Belief

Overview:

This briefing document summarizes the main themes and arguments presented by Dr. Jim Spiegel in Session 5, Part 4 of his Philosophy of Religion lectures, focusing on the pragmatic justification of theistic belief. Dr. Spiegel explores arguments that suggest believing in God is practically wise or rational, irrespective of conclusive evidence for or against God's existence. He examines William Clifford's principle against believing on insufficient evidence, followed by a detailed analysis of Pascal's Wager and William James's "Will to Believe."

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Introduction to Pragmatic Justifications:

- Dr. Spiegel introduces the concept of pragmatic arguments for theistic belief as distinct from evidence-based arguments (empirical or a priori).
- Pragmatic arguments focus on the practical wisdom or rationality of believing in God and living accordingly, regardless of the strength of evidence.
- The session will cover the ideas of William Clifford, Blaise Pascal, and William James.

2. William Clifford's Principle:

- Clifford argued for a moral responsibility concerning our beliefs, stating, **"it's always wrong everywhere and that anyone should believe anything on insufficient evidence."**
- This principle suggests a duty to only believe based on sufficient evidence, which many religious skeptics used to critique theism.
- However, Clifford's Principle faces the objection of being potentially self-refuting: **"is there really sufficient evidence to believe in Clifford's Principle? What kind of evidence could one give for Clifford's Principle?"**
- Dr. Spiegel notes that some scholars argue religious belief can be rational for non-evidential, i.e., pragmatic, reasons.

3. Pascal's Wager:

- Pascal, a 17th-century mathematician and philosopher, developed the "wager argument" in his work *Pensées*.
- The wager addresses the situation where evidence for God's existence is inconclusive. Pascal argues that one must "make a wager" on whether God exists or not.
- He presents a cost-benefit analysis:
- **Believing in God (and being right):** Infinite gain (eternal bliss in heaven).
- **Believing in God (and being wrong):** Mild inconvenience in this life.
- **Not believing in God (and being wrong):** Infinite loss (eternal unhappiness).
- **Not believing in God (and being right):** Only a little extra fun in this life.
- Pascal concludes that "**the rational move, the prudentially or pragmatically rational move, is clearly to wager on God.**"
- Dr. Spiegel uses the analogy of a two-horse race with vastly different payouts to illustrate the logic of the wager.

4. Objections to Pascal's Wager and Lycan & Schlesinger's Replies:

- **Objection 1: Belief is not under our control.** One cannot simply choose to believe.
- **Reply:** Lycan and Schlesinger argue that beliefs, especially religious beliefs, can be indirectly influenced over time through practices like "**behavior therapy**," as suggested by William James (e.g., attending church, praying, reading scriptures).
- **Objection 2: The wager is cynical and mercenary.** God would not reward insincere belief motivated by self-interest.
- **Reply:** Lycan and Schlesinger suggest that one can "**eventually... become a more sincere believer**" through these practices, moving beyond the initial mercenary motivation to genuine love and gratitude for God.
- **Objection 3: The probability of God's existence is not 50%.** Many argue atheism is more likely.

- **Reply:** Lycan and Schlesinger contend that the infinite payoff in the theistic scenario outweighs even a low probability of God's existence, similar to betting on a long shot with a massive reward.
- **Objection 4: The "many gods" objection.** Which God should one wager on among numerous religious traditions?
- **Reply:** Lycan and Schlesinger suggest considering:
 - Empirical and historical evidence to rule out less credible traditions.
 - The nature of the afterlife payoff in different religions (some may not be desirable).
 - The level of tolerance of different religious traditions towards other beliefs. They suggest focusing on more "**intolerant**" traditions regarding belief for the sake of the wager.
 - Cultural and personal upbringing as potential starting points for the wager.

5. William James and the "Will to Believe":

- William James, a late 19th-century psychologist and religious studies scholar, argued that reason is not the sole determinant in forming beliefs; the "will" also plays a crucial role in many cases.
- He distinguishes between different types of choices:
- **Living vs. Dead:** Whether the options have emotive appeal to the chooser. Religious belief is a living option for many.
- **Forced vs. Avoidable:** Whether the choice can be evaded by not choosing. James argues that the question of God is a forced choice, as agnosticism or skepticism is also a stance.
- **Momentous vs. Trivial:** Whether the choice is important. Belief in God is considered a momentous choice.
- When faced with a "**genuine option**" that is living, forced, and momentous, and cannot be decided on intellectual grounds (due to indecisive evidence), James argues that "**our passionate nature not only lawfully may but must decide an option between propositions.**"

- He counters the objection that we should only assent to truths conclusively supported by reason (Clifford's principle) by stating that such a rule could prevent us from acknowledging certain truths that require a degree of faith.

6. The Unavoidability of Faith:

- James argues that faith is unavoidable in many aspects of life, religious or not.
- He provides examples of fundamental beliefs that lack conclusive evidence but are still held on faith:
- The law of causality ("**There is not sufficient evidence for us to conclude that every effect has a cause.**")
- The uniformity of nature and the sun rising tomorrow.
- The belief that one is awake and not dreaming.
- The existence of other minds ("**It is 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.**")
- Dr. Spiegel concludes that even hardcore atheists hold numerous "**faith commitments.**"
- Therefore, since faith is a basic part of the human condition necessary for navigating the world, "**why not seriously consider faith in God as yet another faith commitment that one can make that has very practical benefits?**"

Conclusion:

Dr. Spiegel's lecture explores the pragmatic justifications for theistic belief, contrasting them with evidence-based approaches. He meticulously examines Clifford's principle, Pascal's Wager (including common objections and defenses), and William James's "Will to Believe." The session culminates in the argument that faith is an unavoidable aspect of human life, suggesting that religious faith can be considered a viable and potentially beneficial faith commitment.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 5, Theistic Proofs, Part 4, Pragmatic Justification

Pragmatic Justification of Theistic Belief

Quiz:

1. According to William Clifford, what fundamental responsibility do rational beings have regarding their beliefs, and what principle did he propose to guide this responsibility?
2. Explain the central idea behind Pascal's Wager. What are the potential outcomes of believing and not believing in God, according to Pascal?
3. What is one common objection to Pascal's Wager regarding the controllability of belief, and how do Lycan and Schlesinger respond to this objection?
4. Describe the "many gods" objection to Pascal's Wager. What factors do Lycan and Schlesinger suggest considering when addressing this objection?
5. According to William James, what are the three key characteristics of a genuine option, and how does he categorize the "religious hypothesis" based on these characteristics?
6. What is Clifford's principle regarding the acceptance of truths, and what is James's counter-argument concerning the potential limitations of strictly adhering to this principle?
7. Provide two examples of fundamental beliefs that David Hume argued are accepted on "animal faith" rather than conclusive evidence.
8. Explain James's assertion that "faith is unavoidable." Provide two examples, aside from Hume's, to support this claim.
9. In the context of pragmatic justifications, how does the concept of "behavior therapy," as suggested by William James, relate to the formation of religious belief?
10. How do Lycan and Schlesinger address the objection that Pascal's Wager is cynical and mercenary?

Answer Key:

1. Clifford claimed that rational beings have a moral responsibility with regard to their beliefs. He proposed Clifford's Principle, which states that it is always wrong, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.
2. Pascal's Wager argues that even if the evidence for God's existence is inconclusive, it is practically rational to believe in God. The potential outcomes are infinite happiness in heaven if God exists and one believes, mild inconvenience if one believes and God does not, infinite unhappiness in hell if God exists and one does not believe, and a little extra fun if one does not believe and God does not exist.
3. A common objection is that beliefs are not under our conscious control, meaning we cannot simply choose to believe something. Lycan and Schlesinger respond by suggesting that beliefs, including religious belief, can be indirectly influenced over time through practices like behavior therapy (as proposed by James).
4. The "many gods" objection points out that there are numerous possible deities and religious traditions, making it unclear which one to wager on. Lycan and Schlesinger suggest considering empirical/historical evidence to rule out some traditions, examining the nature of the afterlife in different traditions, and considering the level of tolerance within each tradition.
5. According to James, a genuine option is living (has emotive appeal), forced (cannot be avoided by not choosing), and momentous (significant consequences). He categorizes the religious hypothesis as living, forced, and momentous.
6. Clifford's principle states that one should only grant assent to truths conclusively supported by reason and sufficient evidence. James counters that strictly adhering to this rule might prevent us from acknowledging certain kinds of truths for which we may never have conclusive evidence, suggesting that it's sometimes acceptable to believe without adequate evidence.
7. David Hume argued that belief in the law of causality (every effect has a cause) and the uniformity of nature (the future will resemble the past) are accepted on "animal faith" because we lack conclusive evidence for them.
8. James asserts that faith is unavoidable because even in everyday life and in the pursuit of knowledge, we hold fundamental beliefs without conclusive proof. Examples include the belief that one is awake and not dreaming, and the belief that other people have minds.

9. James suggested that engaging in religious practices like going to church, praying, and reading scriptures can indirectly lead to sincere belief over time, even if one doesn't initially possess that belief. This is analogous to "behavior therapy," where actions can influence beliefs.
10. Lycan and Schlesinger address this objection by arguing that even if the initial motivation for belief is based on the potential rewards, individuals can grow into a more sincere faith and develop a genuine love and gratitude for God over time, moving beyond the purely mercenary aspect.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Critically analyze William Clifford's principle that it is always wrong to believe anything on insufficient evidence. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of this principle, and consider the arguments presented against it in the source material.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness and philosophical soundness of Pascal's Wager as a justification for theistic belief. Consider the various objections raised against the wager and the responses provided by Lycan and Schlesinger.
3. Compare and contrast Pascal's Wager and William James's "will to believe" as pragmatic justifications for religious belief. What are the key differences in their approaches, and what are the underlying assumptions of each argument?
4. Discuss William James's argument that faith is an unavoidable aspect of human life, providing examples from the source material and your own understanding. How does this claim serve as a basis for his pragmatic defense of religious belief?
5. Consider the ethical implications of pragmatic justifications for theistic belief. Is it morally acceptable to believe in God primarily for the potential benefits, as suggested by Pascal and James? Explore the potential criticisms and defenses of such an approach.

Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Pragmatic Justification:** An argument that theistic belief is rational or wise based on its practical benefits or consequences, rather than solely on empirical or logical evidence.
- **Clifford's Principle:** The assertion that it is always wrong, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.
- **Self-Refuting:** An idea or statement that contradicts itself or undermines its own validity.
- **Pascal's Wager:** An argument suggesting that it is rational to believe in God because the potential gain (eternal happiness) outweighs the potential loss (mild inconvenience), even if the probability of God's existence is uncertain.
- **Behavior Therapy:** A method of influencing beliefs indirectly through actions and practices.
- **The Many Gods Objection:** An argument against Pascal's Wager that points out the existence of numerous possible deities and religious traditions, making it unclear which one to wager on.
- **Will to Believe:** William James's argument that in certain "genuine options" (living, forced, and momentous) where evidence is indecisive, individuals have a right to let their passionate nature influence their beliefs.
- **Living Option:** A choice where both alternatives have emotive appeal or relevance to the individual.
- **Forced Option:** A choice where all possible alternatives are presented, and there is no neutral or avoidable option.
- **Momentous Option:** A choice with significant and potentially life-altering consequences.
- **Animal Faith:** David Hume's concept referring to fundamental beliefs that humans hold instinctively and are necessary for navigating the world, but which lack conclusive rational justification.
- **Uniformity of Nature:** The belief that the laws and regularities of nature will continue to operate in the future as they have in the past.
- **Law of Causality:** The principle that every event or effect has a cause.

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 5, Theistic Proofs, Part 4, Pragmatic Justification, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Pragmatic Justification of Theistic Belief: An FAQ

1. What is a pragmatic justification for theistic belief, and how does it differ from evidence-based arguments for God's existence? Pragmatic justifications for theistic belief argue that believing in God is practically wise or rational regardless of the strength of evidence for or against God's existence. Unlike evidence-based arguments (such as cosmological, teleological, or ontological arguments) that aim to provide proof or strong reasons to believe in God based on empirical or conceptual evidence, pragmatic arguments focus on the potential benefits or advantages of holding theistic beliefs. They suggest that even if the evidence is inconclusive, it might be rational or prudent to believe in God due to the potential positive outcomes or avoidance of negative consequences.

2. What is Clifford's Principle, and why do some argue it poses a challenge to religious belief? Clifford's Principle, proposed by William Clifford, states that it is always wrong for anyone, anywhere, to believe anything on insufficient evidence. This principle asserts a moral responsibility regarding our beliefs, suggesting that rationality requires sufficient evidence for all that we accept as true. Many religious skeptics, including Clifford himself, argued that theistic belief inherently violates this principle because they believe there is insufficient evidence to support the existence of God. Therefore, according to Clifford's Principle, religious belief would always be irrational and morally wrong.

3. What is Pascal's Wager, and what are the main outcomes Pascal considers in his argument? Pascal's Wager is a pragmatic argument for belief in God based on the potential outcomes of belief and disbelief, especially in the face of inconclusive evidence. Pascal argues that since one cannot definitively know whether God exists or not, one must "wager" by choosing to either believe or not believe. He outlines four possible scenarios: * Believing in God, and God exists: Infinite gain (eternal bliss). * Believing in God, and God does not exist: Minor loss (some inconveniences in life). * Not believing in God, and God exists: Infinite loss (eternal unhappiness). * Not believing in God, and God does not exist: Minor gain (some extra worldly pleasures). Given these potential outcomes, Pascal argues that it is pragmatically rational to wager on God, as the potential gain is infinite and the potential loss is finite, while the opposite holds true for not believing.

4. What are some common objections to Pascal's Wager, and how have proponents like Lycan and Schlesinger responded to them? Several objections have been raised against Pascal's Wager. One is that belief is not voluntary; we cannot simply choose to believe something. Lycan and Schlesinger respond by suggesting that while immediate belief might not be controllable, we can indirectly influence our beliefs through practices like engaging in religious behaviors and communities, which may lead to genuine belief over time. Another objection is that the wager is cynical and mercenary, and that God would not reward such self-interested belief. Lycan and Schlesinger argue that even if the initial motivation is self-interest, sincere love and gratitude towards God can develop as one comes to believe. A further objection concerns the low probability of theism. Lycan and Schlesinger contend that even with a low probability, the infinite payoff still makes wagering on God the rational choice. Finally, the "many gods" objection points out that Pascal's Wager doesn't specify which God to believe in. Their response includes considering empirical evidence, the nature of the afterlife in different religions, and the tolerance levels of various faiths to narrow down the options.

5. According to William James, what are the characteristics of a "genuine option," and how does he apply this to the question of religious belief? William James argues that a "genuine option" is one that is living (appeals to our emotive nature), forced (unavoidable; not choosing is itself a choice), and momentous (significant consequences are at stake). He contends that the religious hypothesis presents just such a genuine option. It is living because the question of God's existence matters deeply to many. It is forced because agnosticism or disbelief is also a stance with implications. It is momentous due to the potential eternal consequences.

6. How does James respond to the objection that we should only believe in truths that are conclusively supported by evidence? James acknowledges this objection, often associated with Clifford's Principle, but argues that in the case of genuine options that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds alone, our "passionate nature" has a right, and even a duty, to decide. He suggests that rigidly adhering to a principle of only believing with conclusive evidence could prevent us from acknowledging certain truths, especially those that might require some initial faith or commitment to discover. He implies that in some domains, particularly those involving personal relationships or existential questions, waiting for absolute proof might lead us to miss out on potentially valuable truths.

7. What does James mean by saying that "faith is unavoidable," and what examples does he provide to support this claim? James argues that faith, in the sense of believing without conclusive proof, is a fundamental aspect of human existence, extending beyond religious belief. He provides several examples: * Belief in the law of causality (every effect has a cause). * Belief in the uniformity of nature (the future will resemble the past; the sun will rise tomorrow). * Belief that one is currently awake and not dreaming. * Belief that other people have minds, thoughts, and feelings like our own. He contends that none of these fundamental beliefs can be proven with absolute certainty or sufficient evidence, yet we rely on them to navigate the world. Therefore, since faith is already an intrinsic part of human life, it is reasonable to consider religious faith as another potential faith commitment, especially if it offers practical benefits.

8. How does the recognition that "faith is unavoidable" lead to a pragmatic justification for considering theistic belief, according to the source? If fundamental aspects of our lives and understanding of the world already rely on faith commitments, then the objection that religious belief is wrong due to a lack of conclusive evidence becomes less potent. Since we are already creatures who operate based on faith in various domains, it becomes reasonable to consider whether making a faith commitment to theistic belief could be practically beneficial. William James suggests that given the potential positive outcomes associated with religious belief (as also highlighted in Pascal's Wager), and given that faith is already unavoidable, seriously considering faith in God as another faith commitment with potential practical advantages is a justifiable position.