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PASCAL ON SELF-CAUSED BELIEF

I

Let me begin with a true story. Years ago, early in my career as a professor of philosophy, I had a fascinating series of conversations with a student whom I will call Peter. He was a bright and incisive senior, with a double major in philosophy and psychology. Raised in a religious family, the son of a Christian minister, he was himself unable to believe. His doubts were too strong. But the odd fact was that he genuinely *wanted* to believe. His religious scepticism deeply troubled him; part of him envied the faith of his parents. How do you go about making yourself believe?, he asked me. How do you go about having the kinds of religious experiences that lead people to faith? These were long and intense conversations, and I was unable (though I tried) to move Peter away from his doubts. So far as I know he is still a sceptic.

I take it that most philosophers or professors of religious studies – especially those who are themselves religious believers – have had conversations like these with students. In many such cases I suspect that the problem is essentially spiritual rather than intellectual in nature. That is, the problem is not usually to be solved by showing the student how to think more clearly or by teaching the student more about the history of philosophy or theology. I also take it that not even Christian philosophers often turn to the resources of their own discipline, i.e. to philosophy, to solve spiritual problems. What I want to do in this paper is see whether one particular item from our tradition, an argument with which philosophers and theologians are familiar, can be of help in cases like those of my friend Peter. I have in mind Pascal's argument about 'taking the holy water and having masses said' at the conclusion of his famous Wager in *Pensées* 233.¹

In the present paper I will first explain what I think Pascal actually claims (his argument has been variously interpreted); then I will consider and respond to three objections that are frequently brought to bear against it; finally, I will ask whether Pascal's argument has any relevance to actual crises of doubt like that of Peter. (If Pascal's argument is sound, it apparently has applications quite unrelated to religious belief, but I will treat it – as Pascal himself does – only in the context of belief in God.)

In the Wager argument, Pascal tries to convince religious unbelievers to

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 83. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the *Pensées* are from Section 233 in Brunschvicg's numeration, the famous *Infini-rien* section, which is found on pp. 79–84 of the Random House edition.

become believers. He does so by arguing on prudential grounds, i.e. he argues that when all the possible gains and losses of belief and unbelief are added up, it is in one's interest to believe. (Throughout this paper I will assume – as Pascal does – that 'x believes in God' entails both 'x believes that God exists' and 'x lives and behaves in a religious manner'.)

After finishing the main part of his Wager argument (with which I will not concern myself here), Pascal addresses himself to the problem of those persons who have been convinced by it, i.e. who would like to believe, but somehow cannot. These are people, he says, 'who would like to attain faith, and do not know the way'; they 'would like to cure [themselves] of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it'. In an often criticized passage, Pascal gives such folk the following advice:

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 are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began: by acting as if they believe, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe, and deaden your acuteness.

Pascal's surprising advice to people who do not believe but who want to believe seems then to be this: learn from those who have already been cured of the malady of unbelief and who have committed their lives and possessions to God; imitate their behaviour; doing so will deaden the acuteness of your doubts, and you will come to believe.

II

Let me turn immediately to the first objection to Pascal's argument. Discussing it will help clarify what he is actually claiming. The criticism usually voiced against Pascal at this point is that our beliefs are not under our control. There is no way that people who do not believe in God can consciously and voluntarily, so to speak, make themselves believe in God. Merely pretending that you believe something that you do not in fact believe will not make you believe it.

Now our beliefs frequently do change, but this is normally because the relevant evidence changes. Perhaps at one time I believe that Jones is a poor conversationalist, but later, after a talk with her, I change my mind. Perhaps at one time I believe that the Buddhist notion of co-dependent origination is incoherent, but later, after a conversation with the professor of Asian philosophy, I change my mind. But it does not seem that we can change our beliefs *just because we want to do so*. Thus David Hume says: 'We may, therefore, conclude, that belief consists merely in a certain feeling or sentiment; in something that depends not on the will, but must arise from certain determinate causes and principles, of which we are not masters.'²

² David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), Appendix, p. 624.

Let us be clear on exactly what Pascal is claiming. Consider a proposition *p* which I do not believe but would like to believe. (Let us assume that I understand *p*.) The question then is: can I come to believe *p* not because of evidence or arguments in favour of *p* but because I *want* to believe *p*, where I want to believe *p* because I understand that it is in my interest to believe *p*? Pascal seems to be suggesting that I can successfully make myself believe *p* as long as four criteria are satisfied:

- (1) The truth or falsity of *p* is not discoverable by reason.
- (2) I strongly desire to believe *p*.
- (3) I understand that belief in *p* is warranted for me because of prudential considerations.
- (4) I act as if I believe *p*.³

Let us call this elaborate claim – the claim that under these conditions I can cause myself to believe a given proposition – ‘Pascal’s doctrine’.⁴

The first criterion of Pascal’s doctrine should be interpreted as meaning that *p* is not the sort of claim for or against which there exists conclusive evidence. This criterion is important because it rules out counter-examples like the following: Suppose an eccentric millionaire who owns an infallible lie detecting machine offers me a million dollars if I can make myself genuinely believe that somewhere hidden in the college gymnasium is a 20 foot tall rhinoceros covered with pink polka dots. I suspect that no matter how hard I tried, I could not make myself believe this proposition. But even if my suspicion is well founded, this has no tendency to refute Pascal’s doctrine. For the fact that there is no such rhinoceros hidden in the gymnasium *is* discoverable by reason (where ‘reason’ is interpreted broadly to include experience as well).

Now what Pascal wants us to believe is the existence of God. And early in the Wager argument he makes clear his view that we possess no conclusive evidence for, or proof of, the existence of God. As he says, God is ‘infinitely incomprehensible’. We are ‘incapable of knowing either what He is or if He is... Reason can decide nothing here’. So the existence of God is something that is undecidable by reason, and so satisfies the first criterion of Pascal’s doctrine.

The second criterion is important because it rules out counter-examples like the following: Suppose an eccentric millionaire with an infallible lie

³ These criteria should be taken as jointly sufficient conditions for my successfully making myself believe *p*. As I interpret Pascal, they are not necessary conditions. Possibly there are many other quite different circumstances in which self-induced belief is possible. The claim here is simply that self-induced belief is possible in any case where the four stated criteria are satisfied.

⁴ Although in this paper I try to interpret *Pensées* 233, it should be pointed out that the central issue to be discussed – whether it is ever possible to cause oneself to believe something – is quite independent of the problems of Pascal scholarship or of the exegesis of *Pensées* 233 – a notoriously difficult passage. Perhaps my interpretation of it is incorrect; perhaps Pascal did not hold what I am calling ‘Pascal’s doctrine’. Even if this much is true (and I do not accept that it is), the issue of the paper remains to be considered.

detecting machine offers me a million dollars if I can make myself genuinely believe that my life will be a miserable and unhappy failure, million dollars or not. Since I have no strong desire (or no desire at all) to believe *that*, the suggested counter-example has no relevance to Pascal's doctrine.

The third criterion is important because it entails that I understand that my believing *p* is warranted. This warrant is prudential rather than evidential, but it is or can be rational warrant nonetheless. (I will not explore here the difficult epistemological issue of the relationship between prudential and evidential warrant.) So Pascal's doctrine has nothing to do with my coming to believe propositions that have little bearing on my own interests, e.g. that Smithson ought not to be elected dog catcher of Yankton, South Dakota. Another point emerges here: since it is rationally warranted for me to believe in God, then clearly what prevents me from believing, and what must be overcome, are non-rational factors.⁵ Pascal calls them passions, by which he seems to mean emotions or dispositions that attract people to worldly things. Unbelief, then, is a matter of habit.

The fourth criterion needs some spelling out. What does it mean to 'act as if you believe *p*'? Fortunately Pascal gives us some illustrations. Where *p* is 'God exists', Pascal says that 'acting as if you believe *p*' means doing things that believers in God do, e.g. having masses said and taking holy water. In other words, I need to change my bad habits, form new dispositions. If I want to cause myself to believe *p* I ought to behave as those who believe *p* behave. Perhaps I could not only attend religious services (as Pascal envisions them doing) but also change my moral behaviour. I could do my best to become (as Pascal says) 'faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful'.

Going beyond Pascal's specific advice, it seems that I could also: associate regularly with believers, commit myself publicly to the religious life, look for evidence that supports the existence of God, have long conversations with intelligent apologists for belief in God, never question or criticize the central claims or practices of religion, look for new interpretations of the evidence that causes me to doubt, read the books of great theologians, etc.⁶ (It should also be pointed out that making selective choices about evidence – to whom to listen, which books to read, what evidence to consider – is something that people do, sometimes unconsciously, in virtually all epistemic situations. Nobody has the time or ability to consider all the relevant evidence.)

Pascal was saying, then, that if these criteria are satisfied, I will (or, perhaps, probably will) come to believe *p*. It is important to note that he was

⁵ The Bertrand Russells of this world will surely disagree with this; lack of evidence (they will say) is what prevents belief. But I will not try to evaluate such a criticism of Pascal's argument since it constitutes a rejection of one of its most important assumptions, namely criterion 1.

⁶ H. H. Price argues convincingly that through measures analogous to this, we are able indirectly to cause ourselves to believe certain propositions. See 'Belief and Will', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume xxviii (London: Harrison and Sons, Ltd., 1954), 1–26.

not saying that I can make myself believe *p* directly (i.e., simply decide to believe *p*). Perhaps Hume was right about that. Pascal was instead saying that under the stated circumstances I can take certain steps that will (indirectly) bring it about that I believe *p*. He did not say how long the process would take. In his advice to have masses said and take holy water he seems perhaps to have been envisioning a process that would take a certain amount of time. It would be surprising if I came sincerely to believe *p* after attending mass once. Perhaps it would take months or years of my 'acting as if I believed' before I genuinely believed. Surely how long it will take and what kind of practices would be required will differ from person to person. But Pascal's doctrine entails that it will (or, perhaps, probably will) happen. Eventually I will come to believe *p*.

I am going to assume that Pascal's doctrine, understood in the nuanced way that I believe he intended, is correct. The question is not strictly or completely a philosophical one, but it does seem that there is good reason to believe it. It is, I believe, a psychological fact about human beings that given the stated conditions we can make ourselves believe a proposition we did not originally believe. Pascal's doctrine seems sensible; to some extent our beliefs are caused by our experiences; and to some extent we can exercise control over the experiences we have. It seems to follow, then, that to some extent our beliefs are under our control.⁷

A final matter must be addressed before proceeding to the second criticism: despite the point made at the end of the third paragraph of this paper, perhaps Pascal's doctrine was meant by him to apply not to *any* proposition but only to *one* proposition, namely, God exists. For Pascal followed Christian tradition in holding that faith is a gift of God rather than the result of human effort.⁸ Perhaps then he envisioned his doctrine working not because of natural or psychological laws about human nature but because of divine activity. God will honour those who truly want to believe and who act on

⁷ Furthermore, Pascal's doctrine seems to find support in the discipline of social psychology. The theory of cognitive dissonance, for example, predicts that people who are committed to a given cognition will try to bolster it and resist evidence against it, even to the extent of changing their own attitude toward it. If they commit themselves to the cognition in a small way – perhaps by playing the role of a committed believer in the cognition, or even by mentally rehearsing arguments in favour of it – this can provide justification for a much larger commitment. So one way of getting people to believe a cognition (quite apart from evidence for or against it) is to get them to make a commitment of it. The psychological point is that if you make a statement of belief that has not been externally justified (e.g. through evidence), you will try to justify it internally by making your attitudes more consistent with it. This is especially true in cases where self-esteem is at stake (we don't like to think of ourselves as liars or scoundrels) or where the inducement offered for making the original commitment was small ('Since I only accepted one dollar for arguing that tuition ought to be raised, it must be the case that I do in fact believe that tuition ought to be raised'). See Elliot Aronson, *The Social Animal*, 3rd edn. (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1980), pp. 99–157; Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo, *Attitudes and Persuasion: Classical and Contemporary Approaches* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1981), pp. 213–53; Charles Kiesler, Barry Collins and Norman Miller, *Attitude Change: a Critical Analysis of Theoretical Approaches* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969), pp. 191–237.

⁸ See *Pensées*, Section 248: 'Faith is different from proof; the one is human, the other is a gift of God ... It is this faith that God himself puts into the heart.'

that desire; God will help them abate their passions and will grant them the gift of faith.

III

Let me now turn to the second criticism of Pascal's doctrine; it is also frequently found in discussions of the Wager argument. The claim is that to follow Pascal's advice, to try to cause myself to come to believe a proposition I do not now believe, is intellectually dishonest; it is to violate the ethics of belief. To pretend that I believe something that I do not in fact believe is a kind of self-deception, a way of lying to myself. J. L. Mackie, for example, admits that Pascal's doctrine is true ('indirect voluntary belief is possible') but argues that to attempt to cause myself to believe in God is 'a hopeful delusion, a self-deception'. He says:

Deliberately to make oneself believe, by such techniques as he suggests – essentially by playing tricks on oneself that are found by experience to work upon people's passions and to give rise to belief in non-rational ways – is to do violence to one's reason and understanding... In deliberately cultivating non-rational belief, one would be suppressing one's critical faculties... To decide to cultivate belief in God, when, epistemically, the odds are n to one against his existing, and n is some large number, is deliberately to reject all rational principles of belief in uncertainty.⁹

But Mackie's criticism is based on a misinterpretation of Pascal. Pascal is not recommending 'non-rational belief'. (I take the term 'non-rational belief' – as Mackie apparently does – to refer to beliefs in propositions that are highly improbable or contrary to the preponderance of available evidence.) In the first place, as we have seen, Pascal's doctrine is only concerned with propositions in which belief is warranted (although that warrant is prudential). In the second place, as we have also seen, Pascal's doctrine is limited to propositions whose truth or falsity is not discoverable by reason. So the doctrine has no relevance to non-rational beliefs like, 'Next winter it will never once rain in Los Angeles', or 'Ted Kennedy will one day be president'. Nor does Pascal anywhere in the Wager argument make any judgement about the odds for or against the proposition 'God exists'. Thus Pascal's doctrine is not even relevant to the question of whether or not one should ever cause oneself to come to believe a proposition against whose truth the odds are n to one (where n is some large number).¹⁰

Nevertheless, the criticism of Pascal's doctrine that we are considering can be formulated quite apart from the error Mackie has made. The criticism will simply say that it is irrational, or intellectually immoral, under *any* circumstances to believe a proposition for prudential reasons alone. (Perhaps this was what Mackie had in mind anyway.) Though not directed specifically

⁹ J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 202.

¹⁰ As already noted, *Pensées* 233 is an obscure text; perhaps Mackie was misled by Pascal's talk about the Wager for God being worthwhile even if there were an infinite number of chances of losing.

against Pascal, this certainly seems the thrust of W. K. Clifford's famous dictum: 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'¹¹

A counter-example might even be suggested: Suppose an eccentric millionaire who owns an infallible lie detecting machine offers me a million dollars if I can make myself genuinely believe that it will rain in Los Angeles on A.D. 25 April 2031. Even if I could make myself believe this proposition – so the objection would run – to do so would be an immoral affront to reason, a violation of the ethics of belief. What I ought to do is simply suspend judgement on the truth or falsity of the proposition till conclusive evidence is available.

Intuitions will doubtless run in various directions at this point. Critics of Pascal will argue that beliefs ought to aim at truth not benefit, and that the benefits of my believing the proposition in question have no bearing whatsoever on its truth and thus on its believability. Defenders of Pascal will argue that prudential considerations rationally justify belief in the proposition that it will rain in Los Angeles on A.D. 25 April 2031.

But fortunately the question of whose intuitions are correct will not turn out to be crucial. A closer look at one of the points Pascal frequently makes in the Wager argument shows how his doctrine can be defended. Note how frequently Pascal insists that wagering for or against God is not optional. 'You must wager', he says, 'it is not optional... you must of necessity choose... you are forced to play.' Pascal even has his imagined interlocutor object against those who wager: 'I blame them for having made, not this choice, but a choice... The true course is not to wager at all.' But Pascal's answer to this is that we are not free not to wager. There are only two options here, 'God is, or He is not'. Whatever you do, even if you decide not to decide, you will be wagering for one option or the other. You cannot not wager.

William James calls this sort of situation a forced option.¹² If an option is a situation where I am asked to choose between two alternatives *x* and *y*, an *avoidable option* is one where it is possible for me to avoid the offered choice by opting for some third alternative *z*. James' example is, 'Either call my theory true or call it false'. This option is avoidable because it is possible for me to decide not to decide whether to call it true or to call it false; I can decide not to call the theory anything at all. A *forced option*, on the other hand, faces a person with a dilemma based on a perfect disjunction; there is no available third alternative. It follows that choice for one of the offered alternatives is unavoidable. James' example is, 'Either accept this truth or

¹¹ W. K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, ed. by Leslie Stephens and Frederick Pollack (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1901), Vol. II, p. 186.

¹² William James, 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 3. The concept of a forced option is spelled out further in Stephen T. Davis, *Faith, Skepticism, and Evidence* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1978), pp. 113–118.

go without it'. Here there is no third alternative because if I decide not to decide, if I decide to remain undecided whether to accept this truth or go without it, I will go without it.

The point is not so much psychological as logical and pragmatic. One *can*, of course, decide not to decide in the case of a forced option, but the consequences will be identical to those that would follow a conscious choice of one of the two alternatives. Suspension of judgement in cases of forced options is, as we might say, psychologically possible but pragmatically impossible. In effect, suspension of judgement constitutes a choice of one of the two alternatives.

Although Pascal did not use the term 'forced option', it is clear that this is precisely what he intended with his language about 'you must wager', etc.¹³ Accordingly, we are now in a position to add a fifth criterion to our earlier analysis of Pascal's doctrine:

- (5) p is one of the alternatives of a forced option.

The addition of this fifth criterion, I believe, successfully defends Pascal's doctrine against the 'ethics of belief' criticism that we have been discussing. For now there is no logical or pragmatic possibility of suspending judgement till conclusive evidence becomes available. And the following seems a reasonable principle: nothing that I am logically or pragmatically prevented from doing (in this case, suspending judgement) am I morally obligated to do. Accordingly, if reason is unable to determine the truth or falsity of p, and if it is in my interest to believe p, and if I can indirectly cause myself to believe p, and if I *must* decide either to believe p or not to believe p, then I am within my intellectual rights in taking steps designed to bring myself to believe p.¹⁴

IV

Let me now turn to the third criticism of Pascal's doctrine. A pointed statement of it is found in William James:

We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted wilfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward.¹⁵

In other words, even if Pascal's doctrine is true (in some situations we can cause ourselves to believe a proposition we do not presently believe), and even if in some cases it would be rational for us to follow Pascal's advice, in

¹³ This point is recognized by Terence Penelhum in his helpful discussion of Pascal's Wager. See pp. 62–75 of his *God and Skepticism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983).

¹⁴ Furthermore, there seems to be no reason why those who try to follow Pascal's doctrine, and who accordingly take steps designed indirectly to cause themselves to come to believe a given proposition, cannot keep an open mind toward future evidence for or against the proposition, should it become available.

¹⁵ James, *op. cit.* p. 6.

the specific case of faith in God the belief that would be produced in us would bear little resemblance to genuine religious faith. Pascal's recommended attitude – a kind of scheming, calculating regard for the potential rewards and punishments of the two possible wagers – seems irreligious. It is the sort of attitude we might recognize in professional gamblers or venture capitalists, but it is quite unlike the faith of genuine believers. For such people undeniably sense the presence of God in their lives; they love God disinterestedly; and they commit themselves wholeheartedly to the service of God and the welfare of others.

But this is a strange criticism. Pascal nowhere says that his is the only or even optimal route to faith. Indeed, in the Wager argument Pascal was clearly formulating a desperate, last ditch appeal to a certain kind of person, namely, a person who is perched precariously on the fence separating belief and unbelief. Perhaps this person's heart inclines her towards religion, but her passions or her intellectual scruples will not allow her to move in that direction. Thus the Port Royal editors of the *Pensées* appended the following incisive note to the beginning of Section III (which contains *Pensées* 233): 'Nearly all that is contained in this chapter is for the use of certain persons who, not being convinced of the proofs of religion, and still less so of the reasons given by atheists for their lack of faith, remain in a state of suspense between faith and atheism.'¹⁶

Similarly, Pascal nowhere says that the inclination toward belief in God that his Wager recommends and the affirmation of the existence of God that his doctrine says we can cause ourselves to make constitute the fullness of religious faith. His hope doubtless was that they might grow into mature religious faith, into the kind of sure sense of the presence of God and disinterested love of God that we see in genuine believers.¹⁷ Will God be pleased by the calculating psychological egoism of the wagerer? In certain cases, perhaps not. We can easily imagine God being displeased by a person who comes to believe in God through Pascal's doctrine and whose faith never goes beyond the stage of shrewd self-regard or bare intellectual assent. But in other cases perhaps God will regard the actions and beliefs produced by the wager as essential first steps toward genuine religious faith. It seems clear that God *does* approve of Pascal's doctrine in those cases (if there are any) where God subsequently grants the gift of faith, i.e. in cases where Pascal's doctrine leads to a mature, strong, and other regarding faith.

Is it possible that the kind of self-induced belief in God that we are considering would be short-lived? or more short-lived than belief produced by evidence? We might be tempted to think so. Suppose there is a person Jones who has succeeded, through the sorts of techniques recommended by

¹⁶ Cited in Jacques Chevalier, *Pascal*, trans. by Lilian A. Clare (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930), p. 243.

¹⁷ This point is made nicely by James Cargile. See 'Pascal's Wager', S. Cahn and D. Shatz (eds.), *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 231.

Pascal, in making himself believe in God. It is easy to imagine Jones later lapsing into doubt. Of course *anybody* who believes in God, or perhaps anybody who believes in *anything*, or perhaps even anybody who believes in anything for *any* reason, can later come to doubt. But people like Jones do seem uniquely subject to this nagging thought: 'The reason that I believe in God is not because it is evident or probable that God exists, but because of a process of self-hypnosis, which is probably not a good reason to believe.'

But, as noted, an enduring faith in God was clearly what Pascal was trying to produce; if Jones' success in producing belief is only temporary, Pascal would doubtless take Jones to be a person for whom his doctrine had failed. What Pascal was presumably envisioning was this: people who follow his advice and indirectly cause themselves to believe in God will later have confirming experiences that will reduce their doubt, strengthen their faith, and lead them to certainty.¹⁸ Perhaps he meant that people who take an initial step toward God will be rewarded by God, for then God will be unmistakably revealed to them through religious experience. When that happens, Pascal's doctrine, and the strategies Pascal recommends, will no longer be needed. Such people will then believe not because they want to believe or because they have (under the right conditions) acted as if they believed, but because they are rationally convinced.

v

Accordingly, Pascal's doctrine can be defended against all three of the objections to it that we have considered. It is possible in some cases for us to cause ourselves to come to believe. In some cases it might be perfectly rational for us to do so. And to do so might well be a religiously appropriate thing for us to do.

Let me return to people like my friend Peter who would like to believe but who cannot. If the problem is – as I assume – typically spiritual rather than intellectual in nature, the question is: Can a piece of philosophical theology like Pascal's Wager ever be helpful in such cases? Should theologians or Christian philosophers ever recommend to people like Peter that they follow Pascal's advice? Let me confess that I would not feel comfortable in so recommending, not at least if Pascal's advice about 'acting as if you believed' were interpreted as a piece of *pretence*. There is something unsavoury about recommending hypocrisy of any sort. So if the advice involved, or were taken involve, trying to fool other people (or even oneself) into thinking that one is a believer, I would be reluctant to give such advice.

Perhaps most theologians and Christian philosophers would be much more likely to suggest (as I *did* suggest to Peter) that such persons: (1) pray for the

¹⁸ Thus Pascal says to those who wager for God: 'At each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognize that you have wagered for something certain...'

gift of faith; (2) strive to find satisfactory answers to the questions that cause them to doubt; and (3) learn to doubt their doubts. But Pascal's advice to take the holy water and have masses said need not be interpreted as a recommendation for hypocrisy. We can envision a religious sceptic (who desperately wants to believe) accepting Pascal's advice – i.e. doing her best to behave as sincerely religious people behave – without trying to fool anyone. She would presumably be honest both with herself and with anyone who asked the relevant questions. She would admit that she does not believe and is trying to find her way to faith. She would candidly say: I am trying to behave as sincere Christians behave because I am hoping to learn how to believe.

If such a person asked me whether she should follow Pascal's advice (interpreted in *this* way), I would say: 'Yes, if you want to do so, you should. Pascal's doctrine is philosophically and theologically sound. But most importantly, you should hope, and pray, that God grant you the gift of faith.'¹⁹

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¹⁹ I would like to thank my colleagues Martin Chemers, John Hick, John Roth and Charles Young, as well as my teaching assistant Alan Scholes, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.