

## Chapter 29

### Prudence and Belief in God

We have found no good reason to believe that God exists. We have examined cosmological arguments that God exists, ontological arguments, arguments to design, and arguments from religious experience. Each argument we looked at turned out to be seriously flawed. None of them, we concluded, gives us even a little bit of reason to believe that God exists.

We must not be dogmatic, of course. Perhaps there is a sound argument that God exists of which we are unaware. Perhaps one or another of the arguments we examined is itself actually sound; perhaps, that is, our analysis or criticism of one of these arguments is flawed. Still, anyone who accepts the criticisms of the arguments we have examined, who lacks another argument she believes sound, and yet who believes that God exists, must admit that she believes that God exists without reason to believe that God exists.

She must admit that she believes without *epistemic* reason for believing. An epistemic reason for believing something is a reason that bears on the question whether that something is true. Epistemic reasons, though, are not the only sort of reasons one could have for believing something. That one is made happy by believing something, for instance, is a reason to believe it, though it is not a reason that bears on whether that thing is true. We can call such reasons reasons of prudence. A reason to believe something might have to do not with whether that thing is true, but rather whether it is good for us to believe it. In this chapter we will consider the possibility that it is prudent to believe that God exists, even if one has no good argument to show that God exists.

Consider Sally. Sally has examined many arguments that God exists and has found none that goes any distance at all toward showing that He does. Sally might even strongly doubt that God exists. She might, for instance, be worried that the concept of God is incoherent, or she might suspect that the pain and suffering found in this world speaks against the idea that God exists. Were Sally to believe that God exists, then, Sally would believe that God exists in violation of her epistemic standards. Could Sally do well nonetheless to believe that God exists?

#### *1. Wagering on God*

Sally thinks that to be God, a being must be omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly just and loving. But she also believes that God, if God exists, rewards with infinite bliss all and only those who sincerely believe that He exists and punishes with eternal damnation all and only those who do not sincerely believe that He exists. Sally, we are supposing, has no good epistemic reason to believe that God exists. Indeed, given her worries about the coherence of the concept of God and her suspicion that the existence of God is inconsistent with the pain and suffering found in the world, Sally has some epistemic reason to think that God does not exist. Nonetheless, Sally should believe that God exists. Sally has a very strong prudential reason to believe that God exists, a reason stronger than her epistemic reasons for not believing. Or so at least goes one powerful argument.

According to this argument, Sally, whether she believes that God exists or doesn't, has made a bet. Believing that God exists, on the one hand, is to wager that one will reap the reward of infinite bliss or, at least, avoid the penalty of eternal damnation. Not believing that God exists, on the other hand, is to wager that the rewards and penalties one can receive in this life are all the rewards and penalties there are. There are, then, four and only four possibilities:

- 1) Sally believes that God exists, and God does exist and He rewards believers while punishing unbelievers, in which case Sally, at her death, wins infinite bliss (and avoids eternal damnation).
- 2) Sally believes that God exists, but he does not, in which case Sally, at her death, is no more.
- 3) Sally does not believe that God exists, but God does exist and He rewards believers while punishing unbelievers, in which case Sally, at her death, goes to Hell for all eternity.
- 4) Sally does not believe that God exists, and He does not exist, in which case Sally, at her death, is no more.

If God does not exist, Sally, at her death, whether she believed God exists or not, is no more. She reaps no reward on dying and incurs no penalty. On the other hand, if God does exist, then Sally really ought to believe that He exists, in order to avoid eternal damnation if not to enjoy infinite bliss. Thus, Sally ought to believe that God exists, even if she has good epistemic reason to think that He doesn't.

We are now familiar with the basic argument that Sally, and anyone relevantly like her, ought to believe that God exists, even should she or they think, perhaps on good grounds, that it is extremely unlikely that God exists. (The argument is called Pascal's Wager, after its author, Blaise Pascal, who lived from 1623 to 1662. Pascal, a devout Catholic, was a mathematician, physicist, and inventor, as well as a religious philosopher. The Wager is found in a collection of thoughts entitled *Pensées*, culled from Pascal's notebooks and published posthumously in 1670.) The basic idea is that in order either to gain a magnificent reward or to avoid a horrible punishment, Sally ought to believe that God exists. If she is right, she wins everything; if she is wrong, she loses little.

If Sally is a hopeful person, the basic idea is similar to the idea behind buying what you need in order to succeed at something. Going to school might cost time and money and effort, but if going to school is necessary to getting the job you want, then it makes sense to spend the time, money, and effort needed to go to school. This can be true even though it is far from guaranteed that at the end of your school career you will get the job for which you have been studying. The wise person makes sacrifices in order to reap important rewards, even when there is a chance that the sacrifice will turn out to be for nothing. So, if Sally is a hopeful person, then it is wise of her to believe that God exists in order that she might fulfil her hopes, even though she realizes that God well might not exist.

If, though, Sally is a fearful person, the basic idea is similar to the idea behind buying insurance. It costs money to buy insurance, money that could be used for things one enjoys. If, in the end, what you insure is not destroyed, damaged, or lost, you have paid that money and got nothing in return. On the other hand, if you don't insure it and it is harmed, that harm is a terrible cost to you. The wise person, then, buys insurance, even though, likely, that which she insures will never come to harm. So, if Sally is a fearful person, then it is wise of her to believe that God exists in order that she will escape hell, even though she realizes that hell might not exist.

It is wise of Sally to believe that God exists, either from hope of heaven or out of fear of hell. That's the basic idea. Now let us complicate things.

1) A wise person makes sacrifices in order to reap rewards, but only given that she deems it somewhat likely that those sacrifices will earn her those rewards. Likewise, a wise person buys insurance in order to protect herself against loss, but only given that she deems it at least somewhat likely that harm will befall what she is insuring. It's foolish, that is, to sacrifice for something you're really unlikely to get, and it's foolish to insure against a disaster that is highly unlikely ever to occur. Sally, we said, thinks that the chance God exists is really, really, *really* low. Since wisdom counsels one to ignore rewards or penalties that are really, really, *really* unlikely to come your way, Sally should ignore both the prospect of heaven and the threat of hell.

Wisdom does indeed counsel one to ignore rewards and penalties that are extremely unlikely to come one's way—except, though, when those rewards or penalties are breathtakingly great. Sally thinks it possible that she will go to heaven after she dies or go to hell. Going to heaven is infinitely wonderful, going to hell is infinitely terrible. Given the nature of the reward and penalty on offer, wisdom says to make sacrifices and to buy insurance, even though it is really, really, *really* unlikely that one will either reap the reward or pay the penalty.

2) Sally might actually lose a lot by believing that God exists. The argument as presented above says that Sally loses little by believing that God exists, but that could be wrong.

It would make sense for Sally to wager just a little on the unlikely prospect that by believing that God exists she will gain heaven and avoid hell, but if Sally has to stake a lot to bet that God exists, then, given that it is unlikely that God exists, she would be wise instead not to believe that God exists.

“How might Sally have to stake a lot to believe that God exists?” one asks. “Sally with the belief that God exists is pretty much the same as Sally without the belief that God exists. It costs her little to wager that God exists.”

In fact, Sally must put up her entire earthly life to bet that God exists. Whether this is a lot to stake depends on Sally and her life. Consider: to believe that God exists isn't to have just one more belief among all one's other beliefs. To believe that God exists—to believe sincerely that God exists—is immediately to love and to worship God as the source and point of one's life and of all existence. To love God is to care to do God's bidding, whatever one deems God's bidding to be. To love God is to seek with all one's heart to live a Godly life. To care to do God's bidding is, in part, to refrain from seeking and enjoying noxious pleasures, glory, and good living (in Pascal's words). Now, then, Sally could well be attached to noxious pleasures, glory, and good living; Sally might enjoy immensely, beyond anything else she could enjoy (in this world), the noxious pleasures, glory, and good living of a godless life. If she does, then Sally would be giving up everything she finds good and fun were she to believe that God exists. Wagering that God exists would be, for Sally, to pay everything she has.

For another person, of course, wagering that God exists might not require paying much, for that person might already have little or no use for noxious pleasures, glory, and good living. But if one has use for them, then giving them up is a serious cost. Sally, let us say, has great use for them. Sally sees that were she to come to believe sincerely that God exists, she would lose everything that she presently loves and enjoys. All that she loves subtracted either from

what she wins if God exists or from nothing if God doesn't exist means, one might think, that it is not wise of her to bet that God exists.

Is this right? It seems not. After all, infinite bliss minus all the goods Sally would lose in this life were she to lead a godly life still is equal to infinite bliss. And infinite misery plus all the goods she can gain in this life still is equal to infinite misery. No matter how attached she is to the things belief in God would cause her to abandon, that loss is nothing in view of the infinite good she gains and the infinite bad she avoids if God exists.

Religious people would, of course, urge a further point on Sally. Yes, they agree, from Sally's point of view, as Sally is now, being religious looks horrible. But once Sally gets religion, they add, being religious won't look horrible at all. On the contrary. Being religious, from the point of view of one who *is* religious, looks great. It is easy and fun and satisfying for the religious to be religious. Religious people might appear in the eyes of the nonreligious to be living lives of sacrifice, but the religious do not experience their lives as lives of sacrifice at all.

Whether the religious are right about this or not, still, from Sally's point of view right now, to be religious would be to pay a large price. Yet, according to Pascal's argument, whatever the price Sally would be paying were she to believe that God exists, it is wise of her to pay that price. No finite price is too high to pay to attain infinite heaven or to avoid infinite hell.

This point, that anything finite is as nothing in face of the infinite, isn't the end of the matter, though. We will come back to the question what Sally loses later.

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We've added two complications to the basic argument of Pascal's wager. We've added: 1) that Sally thinks it is extremely unlikely that God exists and rewards and punishes on the basis of whether one believes he exists; 2) that Sally is very much attached to the life she lives now and realizes that she would be sacrificing all of what she enjoys and loves were she to live a godly life instead. The argument of the wager, then, with these complications added, is this: Though Sally believes the risk of going to hell and the chance of going to heaven are both minuscule, and though for her the sacrifices involved in living a godly life are terrifically high, still, because the reward of heaven and the penalty of hell are each infinitely great, Sally would do well to attempt to believe sincerely that God exists. She would be foolish to postpone for a moment the attempt to believe sincerely that God exists, for the prospect of infinite torment, no matter how unlikely, is something she should avoid at any cost.

Do you think it possible (even if unlikely) that God exists and punishes nonbelievers with eternal damnation? If you do, then you are wise to attempt to inculcate in yourself the sincere belief that God exists. If you do think it *possible* that God exists, then you are wise to believe He exists—even if, like Sally, you think that the chance He exists is really, really, *really* low and you realize that the sacrifices you would make in giving up your ungodly life are very great.

Pascal's wager, you might complain, is an offensive and sickening mousetrap of an argument. You grant a couple of seemingly reasonable premises, and before you know it you have been bullied into accepting religion. But that an argument is ugly and its conclusion repellent is not evidence that that argument is flawed or its conclusion false. If you want to avoid the conclusion, perhaps you must simply deny that the concept of God is at all the concept of a being that could exist. Perhaps only the person who thinks that God's existence is

impossible can escape springing on himself the conclusion of the wager, for only such a person has not taken the cheese.

## 2. *A first set of objections*

Five common objections to the wager argument can be answered fairly easily, I think.

1) *I'm not going to bet!* The objection here is that one will not take the cheese—and, thereby, will not spring the trap—simply by not betting. One can remain agnostic, neither affirming nor denying the existence of God.

God, recall, rewards all and only those who believe sincerely that He exists; and He punishes all others—He punishes nonbelievers with eternal damnation. There is just one way to be a sincere believer; there are many ways to be a nonbeliever. One need not be an atheist, a person who denies that God exists, in order to be a nonbeliever. To be an agnostic, for instance, a person who has no opinion on the matter, is to be a nonbeliever. Thus, one cannot refuse to bet. Either one is a sincere believer and, thereby, is wagering that God exists, or one is not a sincere believer and, thereby, is wagering that God does not exist. There is no possibility of declining the bet. (And, again, only the atheist who thinks God does not exist because He could not exist is wise to wager that God does not exist.)

2) *Belief is not under the control of our wills.* We do not have the ability to choose what to believe. We cannot believe at will. Since we cannot be wise to do that which we cannot do, we are neither wise nor foolish to believe what we do regarding God's existence. If we believe that God does not exist, we are not foolish to believe so, even if our believing so puts us at risk of infinite suffering.

It might be true that belief is not directly under the control of our wills, at least not usually. But the objection is beside the point, for the conclusion of the wager is that we are wise to do something that is under the control of our wills to do, namely, to inculcate in ourselves the sincere belief that God exists. We cannot believe that God exists by will just like that, but we can do by will just like that many things that might well increase the chance that we acquire the sincere belief that God exists. We can, for instance, associate with religious people and avoid doubters. We can take holy water and have masses said. We can, in short, live as though we believe. By living as though we believe we might eventually find that indeed we do believe. We might come to find belief natural and not believing strange and incomprehensible.

We might wonder how we could ever have doubted that God exists. Of course, we might always fail to instil in ourselves the belief that God exists, no matter how hard we try. Still, it is possible for us to set out to believe that God exists and to realize our end. Thus, that belief is not under the control of our will is no objection to the claim that we are foolish not to try to believe that God exists.

3) *God would not accept as a true believer someone who comes to belief through wagering.* We wager that God exists in order to reap a reward or to avoid a penalty. But that means that we are attempting to believe that God exists for selfish or, at least, self-concerned reasons, reasons of our own advantage. We are not doing so out of love of God. We are, then, coming to religion the wrong way. Thus, God will not accept us as sincere believers. Ironically, our attempt to look out for ourselves will land us in worse than hot water.

This objection confuses two separate concerns, the means and the ends. The means we take to become religious are one thing, the end we attain, being religious, is another. We, once

we are religious, can agree that the means we took in order to become religious were the wrong means. We can agree that we were self concerned and out for our own advantage. We would be seriously troubled by what we have done and we would ask God's forgiveness for seeking Him out of concern for our advantage. The end we have attained, though, being religious, is complete and noble in itself. Being religious as we now are, we are presently no more self concerned than our devotion to and love of God warrants. God judges us as we are; thus, should we die, we go to heaven.

4) *It is unethical to believe something in violation of one's epistemic standards.* We have come to the belief that God exists only by acting against our own standards of warranted belief. We have, that is, shirked the epistemic duty we have to collect all relevant evidence and to evaluate it fairly. Since violating one's epistemic duty puts people at risk of harm and it is always ethically wrong to put people at risk of harm, in violating our epistemic duty we have also violated our ethical duty to avoid putting people at risk of harm.

There are difficult and important issues in this objection. We discussed them at length in Part II of this book, "Believing Responsibly." Here we will revisit just a couple points. The first is that even if it is ethically wrong to violate one's epistemic standards (and whether it is is not clear), it is also wrong, prudentially wrong, not to violate them should it be wise for one to believe that God exists. Either way, then, one violates standards one should not violate. Unless it is always right all things considered to honour one's commitment to ethics when that commitment conflicts with one's commitment to one's well being, the decision to go with prudence rather than ethics is arbitrary from any perspective independent of either. One will simply go with one's stronger commitment. Given that the risk of serious or even any harm at which one puts others by believing on insufficient grounds is small, wisdom says to go with prudence.

The second point to make here has to do with the difference between something's having an element of ethical wrongness to it and its being overall ethically wrong. It is ethically wrong to believe something on insufficient evidence, for believing on insufficient evidence puts people at risk of harm. It might also, of course, be ethically sound to be optimistic or trusting, say, as one's having these qualities promotes the general welfare. Now believing that God exists might, for one or another of us, cause us to be optimistic or trusting. If so, then most likely all things considered it is ethically sound of us to believe that God exists, even though we violate our epistemic standards in doing so. The wrong we commit pales next to the good we thereby create. And so it is not, all things considered, ethically wrong of us to believe on insufficient evidence that God exists.

We will leave for the next set of objections an interesting third point. It is the point that God, by hiding Himself, by not constructing things such that His existence is determinable by reason, forces us to believe He exists only by violating our epistemic standards. But a being who forces others to violate their epistemic standards in seeking their good is certainly far from being perfectly loving or just.

### *3. A second set of objections*

We will now consider four objections to the wager that pose serious problems for it as a defence of the idea that it is imprudent not to believe that God exists. Perhaps one or more of these

objections undercuts the reasoning of the wager. If it does, then the wager argument gives us no good reason to think it prudentially required to believe that God exists, even if one deems it possible that God exists.

5) *Perhaps God does not assign reward and punishment on the basis of whether one believes He exists.* (This objection is often called the “many gods” objection.) God, as described in the wager, rewards all and only those who sincerely believe He exists and punishes all and only those who do not sincerely believe He exists. But God might well act very differently than that. Perhaps God rewards and punishes on the basis of how one has lived one’s life. Perhaps, though God exists, there is no afterlife. Perhaps God rewards those who don’t believe He exists (after all, one needs to violate one’s epistemic standards in order to believe God exists, and God might think that it is terribly wrong to violate one’s epistemic standards). Widespread though it may be, the idea that God cares whether we believe He exists is a very strange and shocking idea! So, the objection goes, the wager fails to show that it is foolish not to believe that God exists, at least as described in the wager, for God could be, and likely is, very different than He is described to be in the wager.

The solution to the problem whether or how God judges and assigns rewards and punishments might at first appear simple. Instead of considering just two options, 1) God rewards believers while punishing nonbelievers and 2) no such God exists, divide the second option into as many conceptions of God as one can fashion, from a God who blesses everyone with eternal paradise to no God at all. Assign each of these conceptions of God (and no God at all) whatever degree of likelihood one thinks appropriate. Now, having in mind the punishment and reward structure associated with each conception, figure out which God is the God one should bet exists. Remember that it can be wise to bet on a long-shot God if either the payoff for getting it right or the penalty for getting it wrong is extremely high.

There’s a good chance that the wisest thing to do will turn out to be to bet on the existence of God as Pascal (and as much of traditional monotheism) conceives Him. That is because one would be foolish to bet on a generous or uncaring or capricious God, for if such a God exists one will reap the same reward whether one believes or not. A person concerned to avoid a horribly bad end, should it be possible to avoid it, will do whatever might help to avoid that end. The God most fearsome of all, it would seem, is the God who punishes nonbelievers with eternal damnation. He’s the one to worry about and, thus, the one to bet on.

The problem with this response is that, independent of one’s having some epistemic reason for thinking that God exists and blesses and damns according to some specific principle, one can have no reason for assigning a higher likelihood to one conception of God than to its opposite. Of course, if one *has* an epistemic reason for thinking God exists, then one has no need to consider the wager. But if one lacks any epistemic reason, then one has equally good pragmatic reason to wager either on the God who punishes believers or on the God who punishes unbelievers. Now a critic of this response might say that Pascal’s conception of God is simply the more plausible conception. Likely, though, many people find this conception plausible just in virtue of the weight of tradition and, thereby, its familiarity to them. That one is comfortable thinking of God in one way rather than another does not speak to the likelihood of God’s being that way, though.

6) *A god who damns people is no god at all.* God is all loving. A loving being would not damn another being to hell for all eternity. So God, if He exists, could not damn people to

hell for all eternity. Thus, Pascal's conception of God is incoherent. Since nothing can answer to an incoherent concept, we cannot be wise to believe both that God exists and that He is prepared to damn people to hell for all eternity.

One might respond to this objection by noting that as well as all loving, God is perfectly just. Damnation, one might say, is the only just punishment for rejecting God. And, so, a perfectly good being will after all be prepared to damn a person to hell for all eternity, even a person that that being loves unreservedly. Alternatively, one might respond to this objection by allowing that it shows that God does not damn people to hell for all eternity, but that doesn't mean that no other supernatural being does. Call this other supernatural being "God." Wisdom counsels that we do what we have to in order to avoid the wrath of this being; thus, it is wise to believe that God exists and to worship him—even though, not being all loving, he is not worthy of worship.

Can these responses be answered? I think so, but only by inquiring into the coherence of the concept of God—or even into the coherence of the concept of the supernatural generally. If we determine that the concept of the supernatural is incoherent or that we can have no good reason to suppose anything about it, then either we would be foolish to bet that God exists, if betting that God exists would be betting against what we think is a sure thing, or we would be simply capricious.

7) *God could not damn a person for failing to believe that He exists.* Let us suppose that God, though all loving, is prepared to damn certain sinners to hell for all eternity. Let's suppose, that is, that some sins are so very heinous that only eternal damnation is an appropriate punishment for committing one or more of them. Since those who are damned have earned damnation, it is good that they are damned. What sin, we must now ask, could be so heinous as to require damnation as a punishment? Well, whatever it is, surely it is not failing to believe that God exists. After all (we might think), one can believe that God exists only by violating one's epistemic standards, and holding firm to one's standards is admirable. Being a critical, judicious thinker is a central part of living (one sort of) a good life. One would not be punished by a being perfectly good for having lived a good life.

The point here, of course, is not that it is *unlikely* that God rewards and punishes according to whether one believes He exists; it is, rather, that it is *impossible* that He does so on that basis. It is impossible that God rewards and punishes on the basis of whether one believes He exists, even if it is possible that God does reward good people with eternal bliss and punish bad people with eternal damnation, for failing to believe that He exists doesn't make one in the least bad. Since it is impossible that God holds not believing He exists to be a sin, we would be foolish to seek to avoid hell by trying to believe that God exists.

One of the responses to objection 6 was that even though God would not damn anyone, still perhaps another supernatural being exists who does damn people, and, so, wisdom counsels us to watch out for him. One might respond to the present objection that though God would not damn someone for failing to believe He exists, still perhaps another supernatural being exists who does damn people for failing to believe that he (or that God) exists. Your task now is to answer the present response to objection 7 by adapting to it the answer to the analogous response to objection 6.

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Objections 5, 6, and 7 raise the problem of our understanding of the supernatural. What reason can we have to think that a supernatural being has or does not have one or another characteristic?

If we were to have reason to think that if any supernatural being exists, then God does, then on the basis of our understanding of perfection we could, perhaps, answer, with some degree of confidence, the questions what God wants of us and on what principles he assigns reward and punishment. But, as it stands, we have no reason to suppose anything about the supernatural, even if we think it possible that a supernatural realm exists. But if the being or beings inhabiting a supernatural realm could, for all we know, be any way at all, then it makes no sense for us to seek their favour one way rather than another. Wagering that if we do this and don't do that, we will curry the favour of a supernatural being cannot but be arbitrary and silly.

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8) *Perhaps this life is all there is.* In the wager, the finite pleasures and pains of this world are said to be as nothing in face of the infinite pleasures and pains that await us in the next life, if a next life there be. And, indeed, any finite amount of pain is worth paying as the cost of receiving infinite pleasure—or even as the cost of avoiding infinite pain. But our lives here on this planet and their pleasures and pains can be judged finite in value only if for us there actually does exist an infinite life of which they are a bounded part. A person who suffers greatly in this life but thereby attains heaven forevermore has certainly done well. But should that same person instead simply perish with her death, then she has lost everything there is. There is nothing for her greater by which her loss can be measured as finite. Her earthly life is outwardly the same in the two cases, but its value or disvalue to her is not annihilated in the presence of infinity when there is no infinity. It is not wise for a person to wager absolutely everything that there is.

The point is that the value of your earthly life to you depends on whether there is anything more for you than your earthly life. And so just what its value is to you you cannot know, for you (let us suppose) cannot know whether you perish when you die or live everlastingly in another realm. The wager, though, treats the value of your life to you as finite in both cases, whether infinite life is yours or not. But if you perish with your earthly death, then your earthly life is as valuable to you as anything could be. (Your earthly life is as valuable to you as an immortal being's infinitely long life is to her.) You might as well say that your life finite in years is infinitely valuable to you.

What this means, then, is that to wager your life on the hope of heaven or the fear of hell and to lose (to perish with your death), is to wager everything there is and to lose it all. It is not to wager something of a particular quantity, a quantity that can be subtracted from a larger quantity.

Noting that the value of one's earthly life to oneself depends on whether one's earthly life is all of one's life does not, in itself, make it either unwise to bet on God's existence or prudentially neutral to do so. It does mean, though, that a person can assign a positive value to God's existence (to the existence of a God who rewards and punishes according to whether one believes He exists or not) and yet reasonably bet against God's existence. If a person's love of their godless life is deep and satisfying and, after thinking about it, they are loath to set that life aside, then—unless, perhaps, they judge the existence of God quite likely—, they are wise to bet that God does not exist. It might be difficult to determine with any justification just how deep one's love of one's present life is and how little one would like to give it up. It's quite possible

for a person to rationalize away the folly of their choice to bet against God by claiming that the cost of wagering that God exists is too much for them properly to bear. But it is also possible that a person is not rationalizing anything at all in citing the cost, but is instead explaining their wise decision.

“I am not entirely the same as the life I am currently living, though,” Sally may say. “I am not entirely this current life even should there be no I that survives my earthly death. My essence is not given by the particular set of values by which I now live, not even by those values I cannot imagine myself to be without. There are any number of different people I could be. I could live many different sorts of life, and honour many different constellations of values. Prudence, it is true, has to do with how best to realize those ends I now pursue; but it also has to do with understanding what ultimate ends I should pursue, with what sort of person I should be. I could come to be a different sort of person than I am now and enjoy being that sort of person more or less as much as I now enjoy being this sort of person. Suppose, then, that though I right now would hate to be a religious person, I could nonetheless become a religious person. Suppose also that I wouldn’t much mind being a religious person were I one. It’s possible, I think right now, that God exists and punishes nonbelievers by damning them to hell eternally—though it’s not bloody likely! Still, I right now would like to avoid going to hell. Thus, I am prudentially required to try to set aside most of my present values and ends in order to become a person of a sort I despise: a religious person. I, as I am right now, will have lost everything should I get religion and God not exist; but I, as I am as a religious person contentedly living a religious life, will lose little or nothing should God not exist. Therefore, it seems,” Sally concludes, “it is wise to wager on God with your life after all, even though a stretch of you loses everything if God does not exist.”

Sally, in effect, has decided it is better for her to become someone different than she is, to give up the life she likes and become someone she doesn’t want to be, than to risk going to hell.

#### *4. Putting the most serious objections together*

Sally thinks it is possible, though not likely, that God exists and that He rewards believers with heaven and punishes nonbelievers with hell. Pascal’s wager is supposed to show that it is foolish for Sally, and for anyone like her, not to try to acquire the sincere belief that God exists. In light of the objections in the second set above, we must conclude that the wager fails to do what it is supposed to do. Sally can, that is, hold that God could exist and yet wisely remain a nonbeliever.

Objections 5, 6, and 7 tell against the idea that anyone who believes it possible that a supernatural being exists should bet that God, as Pascal conceives of Him, exists. Sally has no reason to suppose that the supernatural being who doles out reward and punishment, if any such there be, doles out reward and punishment according to one scheme rather than another. Thus, for any two supposed supernatural beings who reward and punish equally but on opposed grounds, Sally can have no reason to bet on the existence of one rather than the existence of the other. But at least she should flip a coin, one might think, or a hundred coins, if that’s what it takes. Better she should at least give herself some chance of avoiding hell (or gaining heaven).

One supernatural being she will consider, though, is the one who rewards nonbelievers and punishes the religious. (Why is this preposterous when rewarding believers and punishing nonbelievers isn’t?) She might as well stop there and declare herself a nonbeliever.

Moreover, and this is to bring objection 8 into the discussion, there is for Sally a cost to betting on any supernatural being, at least the cost of trying to believe that that being exists. She has no reason to pay this cost, however low it is. She has good reason not to pay the cost if the cost is high. If the cost of betting on a supernatural being, God, for instance, is high, then if one loses one loses much. If the cost of betting on God is being a religious person, and one would almost rather die than be religious, then betting on God and losing is to lose everything. Sally would be unwise to put up everything for a chance at salvation when she can have no idea whether betting as she does will bring her salvation.

At most, the wager might show that one is not necessarily imprudent in believing that God exists—though it can show this only if one might not be imprudent to believe something against one’s epistemic standards. In any case, a person who holds that God might exist and might reward believers with heaven and punish unbelievers with hell can yet be foolish to try to become a believer. Or, at least, so we will propose, in the final chapter of this Part, Chapter 30, the chapter on atheism.

##### *5. Believing that God exists as prudent in this life*

The afterlife aside, perhaps for one or another of us the benefits of being religious are, right here and now, wonderful and well worth having. Such a person is prudent to believe that God exists, for were she not to believe that God exists, she would lose those benefits. And perhaps there are people presently lacking religion whose lives would be better were they to become religious. These people would be prudent to try to become religious. To the extent that they understand they would be better off were they religious, they are foolish for not attempting to become religious.

Again, consider Sally, who has investigated all the arguments that have come her way purporting to give reason (epistemic reason) to think that God exists. Sally has concluded that none of the arguments of which she is aware goes even the slightest distance toward showing that a being worthy of worship exists. And yet, let us suppose, Sally thinks that only if she were to believe that God exists and that He loves and understands her would she find that peace of mind and that purpose in life that she very much wants to find. Wouldn’t Sally be wise to try to become religious? Isn’t Sally foolish not to try?

We addressed in detail the philosophical issues regarding the prudence of wishful belief in Part II of this text, “Believing Responsibly.” Here let us just note that in attempting to come to believe that God exists, Sally would be shirking her epistemic duty to believe nothing in violation of her epistemic standards. Whether she acts well prudentially all things considered in violating her epistemic standards on this occasion depends on whether she properly appreciates the rewards and penalties of both failure and success, on whether she properly understands the costs of trying and of not trying, and on whether she properly estimates the chance she will succeed and the chance she will fail. In Part II we presented an argument in favour of being prepared to believe something wishfully, and we considered objections to that argument. If you wish to pursue the question whether Sally would be wise to try to acquire the sincere belief that God exists, or the question whether she wouldn’t, you will find it useful to return to Part II and to reacquaint yourself with the discussion there.